

Opinion

Blowback: Academic boycott of Israel gives voice to peaceful protest

Wednesday 19 November 2014, by [DUGGAN Lisa](#) (Date first published: 13 November 2014).

Israel and the United States: The American Studies Assn. cites the intertwined histories of Israel and the U.S. as a reason for its academic boycott.

This past weekend, American Studies Assn. members held our annual conference in Los Angeles [1], with the theme “The Fun and the Fury.” Those familiar with the ASA mainly because of news about our year-old academic boycott of Israel might be surprised by our sessions ranging from “Vanguardist Jazz in the Seventies” to “Selfie Nation” — all engaging topics that are intrinsic to the field of American studies.

The conference, drawing 2,300 scholars, was the first to follow our resolution last December supporting the call from Palestinian civil society for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions [2]. The boycott is a form of nonviolent resistance that proved its value during the successful fight against South African apartheid.

Writing in *The Times* last week [3], Brandeis University American studies chairman Thomas Doherty charged that the ASA “ventured outside its natural borders” and wondered why Israel should be considered “singularly toxic.”

But if Israel’s horrific F-16 fighter jet attacks on Gaza Strip civilians this summer don’t make the boycott seem sufficiently urgent, consider Israel’s escalating destruction of Palestinian culture: settlement expansion, night raids, detentions without charges, home demolitions, forced Bedouin resettlement and the “explicitly jingoistic and racist elements” that the *New Yorker*’s David Remnick warns now “operate closer to the center of Israeli political life.” [4] Naftali Bennett, Israel’s economy minister and a key coalition partner, just outlined in the *New York Times* a program for permanent occupation that easily meets the legal definition of apartheid [5].

To condemn violence against Israel while opposing a nonviolent boycott is to say that the Palestinians, under endless occupation, should not resist at all.

As Doherty notes in his *Times* article, the ASA has evolved beyond its Cold War roots when it represented a “postwar atmosphere of national triumphalism,” with generous government subsidies for “scholars eager to propagate American ideals overseas.” He’s correct that American studies grew more critical during the Vietnam years and came to encompass America’s connection to the rest of the world.

The critics’ complaint that our stand is unfair to academicians who don’t agree with it is a recipe for never doing anything that might draw opposition.

Our field increasingly explores the American role in helping European empires dominate indigenous

populations from Latin America to the Middle East. As Doherty notes, the ASA long ago set aside American exceptionalism and no longer serves as a propaganda wing of the U.S. Department of State, changes that few scholars would regret.

To dispute the relevance of Israel to American studies is to ignore how intertwined Israel is with America. The story of Israel includes the story of Harry Truman, who fretted deeply over the endless war he foresaw as the consequence of his 1948 decision to recognize Israel.

America's story includes Israeli leaders like Golda Meir, Moshe Arens and Benjamin Netanyahu, who lived or grew up here. Ron Dermer, Israel's ambassador to the U.S., and his predecessor Michael Oren were products of the influential American Zionist movement — itself a topic worthy of study. Baruch Goldstein, the mass-murdering settler who killed 29 Palestinians at prayer in Hebron, had been an American Zionist too.

As Dahlia Scheindlin wrote on the Israeli site +972 [\[6\]](#), "It is America's U.N. veto, America's enormous global weight, American financial and military aid that props up Israel's standing and policies." This weekend at the Washington Hilton, political mega-donor Sheldon Adelson told Israeli American Council conferees, "Israel isn't going to be a democratic state — so what?" [\[7\]](#)

Doherty and Eugene Kontorovich of the *Washington Post*'s Volokh Conspiracy blog claim supporting the boycott has damaged the ASA. But with 1,000 new members since the resolution passed, record fundraising and robust conference attendance, it's hard to argue our association has suffered.

Academic freedom is a central concern for us; in fact, we fought the closure of Doherty's Brandeis program four years ago. In boycotting Israeli academic institutions — not individuals, as we made clear from the start — we target universities like the Technion, whose research helps carry out the occupation. Israel, of course, severely restricts the academic freedom of Palestinians under occupation [\[8\]](#).

In Los Angeles, we launched a new initiative called Scholars Under Attack, which highlights threats to academic freedom here in the U.S. One speaker was Steven Salaita, whose misrepresented Twitter posts critical of Israel's Gaza attacks cost him a tenured University of Illinois post after donors complained [\[9\]](#).

But threats to academic freedom can come from taking a stand on many issues: Our newly released digital map [\[10\]](#) also includes David Guth, a University of Kansas journalism professor placed on indefinite administrative leave for tweets blaming the National Rifle Assn. for the Washington Navy Yard shootings, and Suzanne A. Sisley, assistant psychiatry professor at the University of Arizona, fired under political pressure for her work on medical marijuana.

Because we support the boycott of Israeli academic institutions as a nonviolent means to secure Palestinian rights and freedom, we too find ourselves under attack. But the critics' complaint that our stand is unfair to academicians who don't agree with it is a recipe for never doing anything that might draw opposition.

Lisa Duggan

P.S.

* LA Times, November 13, 1.51 pm:

<http://www.latimes.com/opinion/opinion-la/la-ol-israel-boycott-american-studies-blowback-20141113-story.html#page=1>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://asa.press.jhu.edu/program14/sessions.html>

[2] http://www.theasa.net/what_does_the_academic_boycott_mean_for_the_asa/

[3] <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-doherty-american-studies-assn-israel-20141106-story.html>

[4] <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/11/17/one-state-reality>

[5] http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/06/opinion/naftali-bennett-for-israel-two-state-is-no-solution.html?_r=0

[6] <http://972mag.com/the-jerusalem-intifada-the-president-and-the-cliff/98454/>

[7] <http://blogs.forward.com/forward-thinking/208924/adelson-and-saban-try-to-out-hawk-each-other/>

[8] <http://imeu.org/article/israeli-violations-of-palestinian-academic-freedom-access-to-education>

[9] http://www.dailyillini.com/news/article_a2730e4e-33ec-11e4-bd55-0017a43b2370.html

[10] <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/map/index?t=1414182884346>