

"Is it a dead duck or a living campaign?": the Radstats "Academic Boycott of Israel Working Group"

"Is it a dead duck or is it a living campaign?": this thought must have hung over many of us in campaigns to which we are passionately committed but which sometimes seem to be going nowhere.

I was well past middle-age before I realised how important it is to conserve energy and time by focussing on enterprises that are going to "fly" (whether it is a duck or a supersonic airliner), while jettisoning others.

The thought has returned to haunt me regarding the Radstats *"Academic Boycott of Israel Working Group"* which was established in 2016 and has recently resolved, at the tender age of less than two, to "go into hibernation".

I report some anonymised contributions from members of the Committee, assembled by myself along with personal comments. A more formal version will be presented to the AGM in February, if hibernation can be postponed that long.

The group's summary timeline looks as follows:

- **2014:** Jonathan Rosenhead published a piece in *Radical Statistics 111* entitled "*Should statisticians boycott Israeli institutions?*"
- **2016:** A motion at the Radstats AGM was passed with the comment that it "does not imply support for the boycott but sets out a process by which Radical Statistics will explore the issue in order that a decision about whether to support the boycott can be made at the next AGM". The precise wording of the motion is given below. Its terms were to establish a time-limited ("no more than 12 months") working group which would:
 - assemble and disseminate information on the academic boycott of Israel's higher education institutions
 - promote discussion of the academic boycott within Rad Stats
 - prepare and propose a strategy to achieve a process of reflection, discussion and debate within the Royal Statistical Society with a view

to RSS adopting a considered position on the academic boycott of Israel.

- **2017:** After extensive further preliminary discussions regarding tactics, the group contacted the //ISI Advisory Board on Ethics// with a highly moderate request: to establish a working party at their meeting in Marrakech which would // "consider statisticians' ethical issues associated with Israel and the Palestinian call for academic boycott" //. This was signed by John Bibby, Roy Carr-Hill, Rachel Cohen, Jonathan Rosenhead, and Frank Thomas and accompanied by a 4-page document of argument (copy below).
- On **October 17 2017**, Stephen Penneck, Chair of the ISI Advisory Board, responded as follows:
 - "... We considered your paper at our meeting in Marrakech and came to the conclusion that a Working Group on the lines requested should not be set up, as the Radical Statistics Group has not presented evidence of a breach of the Declaration of Professional Ethics that would warrant such a step. We would like to add that in any case, ISI is a place for positive interaction between statisticians providing opportunities for cross communication including discussing Ethical issues. In coming to this view the Advisory Board on Ethics also consulted the ISI Executive Committee."
- **2018:** It was noted the Working Group should prepare a report for the AGM, and seemed to be running out of steam without even commencing several of the issues that were envisaged at the AGM in 2016. The consensus seems to be that while the Working Group may not be a dead duck, it should perhaps at least consider a period of hibernation.

I personally feel a great sadness in this, as the Palestine situation and especially Gaza remains one of the great injustices of our time - originally a legacy of British imperial history, now perhaps part of American imperial history. It dates back to before the Balfour Declaration of 100 years ago, and reflects the racism of British society which we might hope was of a bygone era, even if it is not.

The situation in Israel/Palestine continues to worsen. Ninety-seven percent of Gaza's drinking water is now contaminated, thanks to deliberate Israeli actions. A 16-year old girl whose cousin had just

been shot is handcuffed, imprisoned, for slapping a soldier. Israel. 20 organisations campaigning for Palestinian rights have been banned from going there (Israel controls entry and exit). That's just this month's news. Israel's government regards boycott as its most serious strategic challenge.

There remain important tasks here that need to be done. Is anyone interested in picking them up now?

JOHN BIBBY for the Working Group

****Wording of Motion****

The wording of the motion was:

“Radical Statistics

Notes that a number of significant academic associations in the United States have organize forums for discussion and debate of the 2005 Palestinian civil society call for boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) against Israel; and that several of these have proceeded after a period of discussion to hold membership votes on whether to endorse the BDS call and in particular the call for institutional academic boycott;

Believes that this issue should also be discussed and debated in professional and academic groupings in the UK, and specifically in the Royal Statistical Society as the organisation most representative of UK statisticians; and

Resolves to establish a time-limited Rad Stats working group with the objectives of:

- i) assembling and disseminating information to Rad Stats members on the origins, purposes and achievements of the academic boycott of Israel's higher education institutions
- ii) promoting discussion of the academic boycott within Rad Stats
- iii) preparing and proposing a strategy to achieve a process of reflection, discussion and debate within the Royal Statistical Society with a view to RSS adopting a considered position on the academic boycott of Israel.

The working group should conclude its deliberations in no more than 12 months, and preferably sooner. Its report should include practical recommendations for the implementation of its proposals.”

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**Proposal for discussion at the Marrakesh meeting
of the ISI Advisory Board on Ethics**

The ISI Declaration on Professional Ethics (2010) and zones of war, military occupation etc.: Proposal with respect to Israel/Palestine

Summary: This paper asks the Board to establish a working party to consider statisticians' ethical issues associated with Israel and the Palestinian call for academic boycott.

Preamble

In situations of war, military occupation and entrenched conflict, it is particularly important that individuals and professions should be conscious of their ethical obligations. The ISI Declaration on Professional Ethics (2010) was prepared for situations such as this.

The Declaration recognises that statisticians may face conflicts from “Employers, Clients and Funders”, and urges them “not (to be) influenced by pressure from politicians or funders”. In times of tension, statisticians may also feel pressure from other social actors (for example pressure groups, media, and civil society generally), not only from politicians and funders.

The situation in Israel/Palestine has remained unresolved for decades. One factor now potentially destabilising the balance, or imbalance, of forces between the two sides is the mounting worldwide pressure for “Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions” (BDS), which includes an academic boycott of Israeli state institutions. This is broadly similar, though different in detail, to that which was applied to apartheid South Africa.

Palestinian Call for Academic Boycott

The call for an academic and cultural boycott of Israel dates back to 2004. The following year, 170 Palestinian unions, professional associations, and other civil society bodies called for a more general “Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions” (BDS) campaign as a form of non-violent pressure on Israel. This followed decades of attempts to end the Israeli military occupation which has now existed for over half a century with little effective action from the international community to hold Israel to account.

The aims of BDS and of the academic boycott are that Israel should:

- end its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantle the Wall
- recognise the fundamental rights of all Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and
- recognise, protect and promote the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties or receive compensation as stipulated in UN resolution 194.

It should be emphasised that, unlike the South African equivalent, the academic boycott of Israel is purely institutional. It is not targeted at individual Israeli academics in their teaching, research, attendance at conferences etc. although indirect effects may be felt through impacts on the institutions at which they work.

People may express support for the academic boycott for example by refusing to

- participate in conferences held at Israeli universities
- take part in funded collaborations where there is an Israeli partner
- provide references for Israeli universities' appointment and promotion procedures.

For more information on the academic boycott see
www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=1108

Some details of Israeli universities which explain the call for boycott and its support from prominent academics including Professor Stephen Hawking, are given in Appendix 1 below.

Relevance to the international statistical profession

The ISI Declaration's [Ethical Principles](#) state:

- “[Statisticians’] findings should be communicated for the benefit of the widest possible community, yet attempt to ensure no harm to any population group.”
- “In collaborating with colleagues and others in the same or other disciplines, it is necessary and important to ensure that the ethical principles of all participants are clear, understood, respected, and reflected in the undertaking.”

We call upon the ISI Advisory Board on Ethics to take note of the above and to establish forthwith an independent working-group to receive submissions, examine and report back on ethical aspects of:

- Israeli statistical policy and practice in so far as they affect Palestinians wherever they may be
- Israeli policy and practice as they relate to the spirit and wording of the ISI Declaration, particularly the requirements that statisticians should “respect the communities where data is collected and guard against harm coming to them by misuse of the results” and “protect subjects, individually and collectively … against potentially harmful effects of participating”
- Israeli professional practice going beyond those identified in the ISI Declaration in relation to entrenched conflict situations
- Applications in Israel of the professional values of “Independence, objectivity and transparency”, as stated in the ISI Declaration and in consequence of the above
- the case for promoting a debate within the statistics profession regarding support for the academic boycott of the Israeli government and government institutions.

The process applied by the American Anthropological Association, is suggested as a possible model for the ISI to build on. This is summarised in Appendix 2.

It is also worth remembering that the European Union has helped the Israeli Bureau of Statistics but not, apparently, the Palestinian CBS (see Appendix 3).

Origins of this proposal

This proposal stems from a working group established at the Annual General Meeting of Radical Statistics in York in February 2016

(signed)

John Bibby

Roy Carr-Hill

Rachel Cohen

Jonathan Rosenhead

Frank Thomas

APPENDIX 1

Israeli universities and the case for boycott

Israeli universities are not ivory towers isolated from the activities of the state. A [Human Rights Watch study](#) revealed institutionalized racial discrimination against Palestinians by universities, and indeed throughout Israel's education system. And the universities maintain a uniquely close relationship with the Israeli military. Tel Aviv University, for example, has developed dozens of weapon systems, as well as the "Dahiya doctrine" of disproportionate force employed by the Israeli military in its operations against both Palestinian and Lebanese civilians.

Universities also continue to play a key role in planning, implementing and justifying Israel's occupation and apartheid policies, Demographers have problematised the higher Palestinian birth rate as a demographic danger or even a 'demographic time bomb'. It was geographers who proposed and developed the 'Separation Wall'. There are many more [examples](#).

The boycott campaign has achieved considerable impact, and is still growing in strength. Thousands of academics in the UK, Ireland, Italy,

South Africa, US and Brazil have signed national pledges to boycott Israeli academic institutions. National bodies promoting academic boycott of Israel exist in most European countries as well as in the US, Canada, India and indeed on every continent.

The most prominent individual adherent to the boycott was Professor Stephen Hawking, who publicly withdrew his agreement to attend a conference in Israel. In the United States a considerable number of professional associations have adopted academic boycott, most notably the American Studies Association. In 2016 the American Anthropological Association rejected boycott – but by a margin of only 39 out of 4500 votes. The AAA is nevertheless taking a number of other steps recommended by its task force which [reported](#) on the situation of Palestinian anthropologists and archaeologists arising from Israeli actions and policies.

It is appropriate, perhaps even incumbent, on the statistical profession to consider whether its current practice is adequate to deal appropriately with the very challenging situations which entrenched conflicts such as that in Israel/Palestine throw up. In these circumstances simply falling back on the notion that ‘we are apolitical’ is less than adequate. There is no politically neutral stance available between boycott and no boycott. Opting for ‘no boycott’ when those on the disadvantaged end of a power relationship have asked for one, and when it is their main strategy and hope for ending their oppression, is to take the side of the powerful. The deep involvement of Israeli universities in the oppression of the Palestinians suggests that statisticians ought to consider whether it is ethical to collaborate with such institutions.

APPENDIX 2

Summary of procedure used by the American Anthropological Association (AAA)

The AAA established a Task Force to:

- enumerate the issues embedded in the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine that directly concern the Association;

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- develop principles to be used to assess whether the AAA has an interest in taking a stand on these issues;
 - provide such an assessment; and
 - on the basis of that assessment, make recommendations to the Executive Board about actions the AAA could undertake

See <http://s3.amazonaws.com/rdcms-aaa/files/production/public/FileDownloads/151001-AAA-Task-Force-Israel-Palestine.pdf> for the full Report.

Appendix 3: European Union Twinning Project On Statistics

The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (ICBS) has partnered with Statistics Denmark to implement a 24-month Twinning project with the assistance of experts at Statistics Netherlands, the Central Statistical Office of Poland, and the Office of National Statistics in the UK. The overall objective of the Twinning Project is for the ICBS to align official Israeli statistics with standards, guidelines, and best practices from the European Union and from international organizations.

The objectives of the Twinning project are:

- The project purpose is to support the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (ICBS) in aligning official statistics with the EU and other international organizations standards, guidelines, and best practices.
- To support ICBS in setting up an organisational unit responsible for quality management as an overarching process toward the production of statistics in the National Statistics System (NSS), and capacity building of the staff;
- To support ICBS in improving its Micro data services to the research community;
- To support ICBS in establishing infrastructures suitable for the production of agricultural statistics;
- To support ICBS in developing a methodology based on an extensive use of geo-spatial tools in survey management