

Should statisticians boycott Israeli universities?

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This contribution is about statistics, but not only about statistics.

It is also, indeed mainly, about the ongoing campaign for an academic and cultural boycott of Israeli institutions, called for by the great mass of Palestinian civil society organisations. The boycott was not called for by the Palestinian Authority - which has very little room for manoeuvre given its dependence on Israel to let it function at all. But then the PA hasn't actually been elected since 2006 (and anyhow many of those elected are in Israeli prisons). Nor for that matter has Mahmoud Abbas been elected President of the state of Palestine since 2005. So this is an alternative universe. In these circumstances the civil society legitimisation for the boycott call is pretty good.

This boycott call is relevant to statisticians, since it applies to all academics, and also by extension to non-academics in the UK who might otherwise have dealings with Israeli universities. It is not especially relevant, just bog standard relevant. If there is a good case for boycotting Israeli universities, it applies equally to statisticians.

Statistical disputation

Most people know that Israel has the 5th (or 4th?) biggest army in the world, despite having a population of only 6 million. This is an army that is not reticent in applying itself - the assault this summer on Gaza, on a trapped population with nowhere to go, is probably still seared in most of our memories. That disparity in military strength, and the willingness to apply it, is only part of the justification for the boycott. I will come back to the general picture in a while. But first, is there a statistical angle?

Back in September/October 2011 there was a discussion on the RadStats email list sparked by some numbers posted that compared Israel and Palestine. The figures were of uneven quality, but uniformly tended to show the former in a poor light. There was discussion on the list in which some contributors concentrated on the lack of statistical rigour. They had some good points - for example, about how to define refugees in order to count them. There were also some not so good points: one message even seemed to suggest that Israel's 1500 large artillery pieces might be balanced off against the Hamas untargetable rockets.

But, generally speaking, the numbers were good enough, at least to the first significant figure, to permit comparisons. For example Tanks: Israel 3800, Palestine 0. The comparison of dead and wounded on the two sides over the then 63 years since the foundation of Israel were also so formidably skewed that discussing the second significant figure seemed, well, academic. From 2000 to the beginning of this July the number of Palestinian deaths at the hands of the Israeli Defence Force was 6766. The number of Israeli killed by Palestinians in the same period was 1091.

These figures were collected by the highly reputable Israeli NGO Btselem (<http://www.btselem.org/statistics>). Of course since then the figures have been swelled, and the disproportion magnified, by Operation Protective Edge. Btselem is still authenticating its figures, but the BBC (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-28439404>) estimated these at more than 2100 Palestinian, and 73 Israeli deaths.

Israeli policies as an integrated system

One thing that is striking about these figures is that the majority, many thousands, of the Palestinian deaths did not occur in set piece assaults. This is a regular almost daily attrition. It is part of the system.

In case I might be misunderstood, this is clearly not a deliberate genocidal policy designed to eliminate the Palestinians one by one. For one thing, it is not even keeping up with the birth rate. The 'system' is more general, and has as its aim the retention under Israeli control of as much of the land of Israel/Palestine as possible with as few Palestinians on it as possible. Since the Palestinians cling to the outmoded view that the land is actually theirs, the Israeli project can only be achieved by denying the Palestinians rights and voice, as well as land and occasionally life. Perhaps there is an view in ruling Israeli circles that if conditions are made bad enough for the Palestinians (eg a blockade of Gaza) they will be willing to go somewhere else.

Israeli apologists adopt a whole range of arguments meant to distract from this unpleasant truth. One line is to say that there never was such a thing as a Palestinian people, so how can they have rights to the land, especially compared with the 2000 year old rights of the Jews (even if they happen to have been largely absent for 1900 of those). And in case there should be any doubt, the Israeli state practices what the Israeli sociologist Baruch Kimmerling calls 'politicide' (Baruch Kimmeling, *Politicide: The Real Legacy of Ariel Sharon*, Verso, 2006) – "a gradual but systematic attempt to cause their annihilation as an independent political and social entity".

Politicide: Established ownership rights are removed by legal sleight of hand, Arab place names are eliminated from the map, destroyed Palestinian villages have forests planted over them, manifestations of Palestinian culture are obstructed... (For quite some time Palestinian artists were arrested for using the colours of the Palestinian flag in their work. "You couldn't paint a poppy" artist Vera Tamari has written "You'd be imprisoned for painting a watermelon"). A concert in 2012 by the Ramallah Orchestra in East Jerusalem organised with the help of the French Consulate was reduced to a string quartet when Israel denied access to Jerusalem to most of the orchestra members.

And of course there are the settlements. All illegal in the view of all governments in the world, even our own and that of the United States. They are illegal because it is a blatant violation of the Geneva conventions for a nation to undertake population movements into a territory occupied by force. Israel has now established 600,000 settlers in Jerusalem and the West Bank, cutting up the territory that could otherwise be a Palestinian state.

There are many other aspects of the system of which the assaults on Gaza are the most dramatic but not perhaps not the most shocking manifestation. I have not even touched on the systematic discrimination against the Palestinians who evaded the ethnic cleansing of 1948, and who make up 20% of Israel's own population (<http://adalah.org/eng/Articles/1771/Discriminatory-Laws>). The "Separation Wall" which separates Palestinian farmers on the one side from their land on the other. Roadblocks (literally) obstructing Palestinian access to higher education. And so on.

Impunity and Boycott

What some defenders of Israel say goes like this – OK, there are some things Israel has done that are disturbing. But there are many other countries that have done worse. China suppresses religious freedom, the United States bears prime responsibility for a whole series of aggressive acts (lets just mention Iraq), Uzbekistan's regime maintains itself through the systematic use of barbaric torture. So why pick on Israel? The unspoken, but actually quite often spoken, assumption is that the call to boycott Israel is anti-Semitism, simple and not very pure.

The first answer to this argument is that while there are indeed sadly many other countries round the world which offend egregiously against human rights, they do not generally (unless they are very big and powerful) get hailed and feted by our very own governments. Many of them indeed face 'punishment' by some or all of the international community for their human rights violations. Right now governmental sanctions against Iran have come close to crippling its economy. Syria has had its foreign assets frozen. Zimbabwe faces embargoes on international loans and on arms imports. Four other African countries have an arms import ban. Israel by contrast gets \$3bn of arms aid from the US every year, plus guaranteed impunity. Israel was actually re-provisioned with arms by the USA in the middle of Protective Edge. Is suffering from a citizen boycott being 'picked on'? Would its supporters rather have Israel treated in any of these other ways?

The second answer is that in this case, almost uniquely, we have a call for boycott from the victims of the oppressive treatment, the Palestinians. They are not asking for free fly zones, for supply of weapons, for armed Western intervention. They are asking for boycott, specifically including academic and cultural boycott.

But why *academic* boycott?

Once again there is more than one answer to this question. The broad brush one is that the call for academic boycott is part of a larger call for BDS, the acronym for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions. This also covers consumer goods, pharmaceuticals, investments by pension funds, cultural activities, the charitable status of collections for Israel by the JNF (Jewish National Fund) and so on. This is a non-violent strategy for simultaneously weakening Israel's position while strengthening general awareness of its policies and actions. From this perspective academic boycott needs no subject-specific justification.

There are some people, perhaps mainly academics, who feel it is patently obvious that intellectual activity falls into an entirely different category from all the other transactions covered by boycott. The free flow of ideas ought to be privileged as the highest form of human endeavour on which progress and liberty depend.

This idealisation of what academics actually get up to is striking for its motherhood and apple pie qualities. If only that were so. But in any case it is a defence that somehow misses the arrow. The boycott is an *institutional* one. There is no request for any of us to desist from talking to, disputing with, collaborating with individual Israeli academics. The fact that they are based at an Israeli institution does not make them liable to boycott. As individuals they would only be targeted if they held senior campus-wide positions at their institution, or were officially representing it at some meeting or conference.

Respecting an institutional boycott, some of the things that I will not do are

- referee job applications or promotion proposals at an Israeli university
- attend conferences held in Israel; and I will campaign against the conferences of my discipline being located there
- referee papers submitted to journals based there
- participate in quality assessments of any unit of an Israeli university
- take part in collaborative ventures in which there is an Israeli university partner
- undertake funded joint research when the project is administratively based at an Israeli university

Of course there are more.

For those who think, all the same, that Israeli universities are unlucky and blameless victims suffering collateral damage on behalf of a system they have no part in - think again.

What roles do Israel's universities play?

Israel's universities are rich, successful, a jewel in Israel's crown. It would be good to think that they are, amid this gloom, centres of enlightenment.

Consider, by comparison, the Palestinian experience of higher education. It is hard for Palestinian citizens of Israel to gain access to higher education, on account of their economic disadvantage, the special treatment Israeli universities give to students who have completed their military training - a category that generally excludes 'Israeli Arabs' - and other institutional obstacles. But it is harder still for Palestinians within the occupied territories to gain that access. Israeli authorities

- repeatedly close Palestinian colleges and universities, sometimes for weeks at a time,
- place roadblocks in the way of access,
- refuse faculty and students permission to travel abroad,
- deny foreign academics the right to visit or remain in teaching posts,
- bar all exchange between West Bank and Gaza universities,

- indirectly starve the Palestinian education system of funds by undermining the local economy and withholding tax revenues they collect on behalf of the occupied territories.

So - how have Israeli universities campaigned against this very real assault on higher education?

I have left a blank line. No staff association, no council of a university, no committee of University Presidents has ever made any public statement to say "This is a real violation of academic freedom. It should stop".

Lets look at another part of the universities' balance sheet. The Hebrew University has built on 800 acres of land expropriated from its Palestinian owners. Tel Aviv University is built over the site of the demolished Palestinian village of Sheikh Muwanis. That same university headlined its Annual Review for Winter2008/9 with the proud assertion that it had 50 ongoing research projects for the Israeli military. Yes, and that same university in July 2014, with slaughter and destruction gathering pace in Gaza, sent a letter to staff saying TAU 'embraces and strengthens the hands of the security forces', and threatening disciplinary action against staff and students voicing criticism on social media.

Perhaps the concentration on one university seems unfair. The picture could indeed be replicated with differences of detail for the Technion, Hebrew University, Haifa University... For example virtually all universities in Israel run special courses tailored for Israel's internal security service Shin Beth or for other branches of the security services. And it is standard to offer advantages such as preferred entry or accelerated progress to IDF veterans.

All this goes to reinforce what should perhaps have been obvious: that when a military occupation has continued for 47 years, the 2 elements (Israel before 1967, and the territory seized then) have in essential senses become one unit. It is not just that Israel has permeated the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The Occupation has also penetrated everywhere within Israel.

Organising for the boycott

For a number of years the academic boycott was hotly disputed within our union UCU. Increasingly there has come to be a settled view, so that the issue is no longer an active one at Annual Congresses. The union's policy is to ask its members to consider carefully their academic links with Israel. UCU cannot instruct its members to boycott - and it should not anyhow. But the sentiment in favour of boycott is palpable.

Recent developments in the United States have opened up a new set of possibilities. Over the winter of 2013/4 a string of academic associations passed resolutions in support of academic boycott. The largest of these was the American Studies Association, with about 4000 members. It went through a very thorough process, lasting more than a year, of discussion, formation of a working party to draft a motion, and discussion of that motion at its annual conference, where the session to do this attracted over 700 members. Finally it went to a postal ballot, where the vote supported academic boycott by more than two to one.

Is there scope for such a process in the UK? There are clusters of activity of this kind now being generated in a range of disciplines here. Could statistics be one of them? Maybe that is something that could be discussed further by Radical Statistics.

In conclusion

In Summer 2013 the scientist Stephen Hawking withdrew from Israel's Presidential Conference convened by President Shimon Peres. Here's what he said in his message of withdrawal:

I accepted the invitation to the Presidential Conference with the intention that this would not only allow me to express my opinions on the prospects for a Peace Settlement but also because it would allow me to lecture on the West Bank. However I have received a number of emails from Palestinian academics. They are unanimous that I should respect the boycott. In view of this, I must withdraw from the conference. Had I attended, I would have stated my opinion that the policy of the present Israeli government is likely to lead to disaster.

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