

Israel Boycott Movement Comes to U.S.

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The movement to boycott Israeli academic institutions has largely been centered in Britain (where in 2007 [the University and College Union dropped the call](#)). In response to the conflict in Gaza, calls for academic boycotts have crossed the Atlantic, [surfacing first in Ontario](#), and now in the United States.

[The U.S. Campaign for the Academic & Cultural Boycott of Israel](#), launched last week, enumerates five goals. These include: "Refraining from participation in any form of academic and cultural cooperation, collaboration or joint projects with Israeli institutions that do not vocally oppose Israeli state policies against Palestine," "promoting divestment and disinvestment from Israel by international academic institutions," and "supporting Palestinian academic and cultural institutions directly without requiring them to partner with Israeli counterparts as an explicit or implicit condition for such support."

The group's press release continues, "We believe that non-violent external pressure on Israel, in the form of an academic, cultural and economic boycott of Israel, can help bring an end to the ongoing massacres of civilians and an end [to] the occupation of Gaza and Palestine" — with "Palestine" referring to the West Bank land occupied by Israel since the 1967 war, explained David Lloyd, a professor of English at the University of Southern California who's involved with the campaign. "We are actually literally following [the call of the Palestinian civil society groups](#) that call for a boycott, and what they ask for is a return to 1967 borders."

As of Saturday afternoon, two days after the campaign's press release went out, Lloyd reported that the campaign had received more than 70 endorsements by individuals, and two by organizations.

"Many universities in the United States have direct involvement with Israeli institutions, ranging from study abroad programs to collaborative research. And we believe that should be suspended until such time that Israel respects international and humanitarian law," said Lloyd.

In the United States, opposition to academic boycotts is strong. [A 2007 statement signed by nearly 300 university presidents sums up why](#): "In seeking to quarantine Israeli universities and scholars, this vote threatens every university committed to fostering scholarly and cultural exchanges that lead to enlightenment, empathy, and a much-needed international marketplace of ideas."

[The statement](#) was issued in response to the boycott movement then afoot in Britain, and was written by Columbia University's president, Lee Bollinger. "At my institution, our president, Lee Bollinger, has said publicly that if you boycott Israeli academics you boycott

us at Columbia,” said Andrew R. Marks, president and founder of [International Academic Friends of Israel](#) and chair of Columbia’s physiology department. “He’s taken a stand against academic boycotts which I’m proud of, and I think that would be the norm among the better universities in the United States. That doesn’t mean it couldn’t affect our students and others who are impressionable and looking for a cause to pick up, that sort of thing, so it certainly concerns me.”

Beyond the argument in favor of exchange and dialogue, “You go to the question of whether or not this [an academic boycott] could possibly ever help the Palestinian people. And that’s quite doubtful, since the academics in Israel, as in many countries, tend to be pretty left-wing and actually are some of the most forceful voices in favor of peace and fair treatment of Palestinians,” Marks continued. “So I tend to think this whole movement, which originated in the U.K., was very much an anti-Israel movement and not really honestly designed to help the Palestinians. And I think it’s very unfortunate it’s spreading to the United States, but not surprising.”

Marks said the boycott call seems to be an extension of the divestiture movement, which focuses on university investments and endowments – “so it’s not entirely new but it’s taking it a step further.”

Lloyd in fact said, of the campaign’s plans, “Our effort is not so much to initiate as to connect with already existing, scattered divestment movements around the country.” Asked about the argument that academic boycotts fly in the face of academic freedom, Lloyd responded, “Israeli institutions are complicit in immense infringement on Palestinian academic freedom, so it’s really hard, it seems to me, for Israeli institutions to claim the rights of academic freedom that they are so systematically denying to their Palestinian counterparts.”

The campaign’s press release cites “Israel’s ongoing scholasticide” – a reference to its attacks on educational facilities during the war in Gaza, but also to what the writers describe as systematic, 40-year-long restrictions on Palestinian access to schools and universities in the West Bank and Gaza.

“We feel that we should not collaborate with Israel as long as it is refusing academic freedom to Palestinians. It is really a profoundly moral issue,” Lloyd said.

“Presidents of universities have spoken out against the boycott of Israeli academics in the past. They are not speaking out against the systematic and gradual destruction of Palestinian institutions by Israel.”

The American Association of University Professors in 2006 [issued a statement opposing academic boycotts](#), “in view of the Association’s long-standing commitment to the free exchange of ideas.” The AAUP particularly opposes boycotts such as the one being proposed here, in which institutions would be boycotted unless they “vocally oppose” Israeli policies. “We especially oppose selective academic boycotts that entail an ideological litmus test,” the AAUP statement says. “We understand that such selective boycotts may be intended to preserve academic exchange with those more open to the views of boycott proponents, but we cannot endorse the use of political or religious views as a test of eligibility for participation in the academic community.”

Cary Nelson, president of the AAUP and a professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, added that, practically speaking, "I think it's inappropriate to expect institutions to take positions on a nation state's policy.... How would an institution in the United States take a stand on national policy? Would the Faculty Senate vote, would the administration impose a policy, would the entire campus vote, would the students have an equal vote?"

In Britain, student protesters in support of Gaza [have held sit-ins at 16 universities](#), as the *Guardian* has reported. [At the London School of Economics and Political Science](#), the director refused to issue a university statement condemning Israel's attacks on Gaza, but supported a fund-raising drive for scholarships for Palestinian students.

Nelson said the scholarship approach seemed to him a creative and "specifically academic" idea. "A scholarship program for Palestinian students is a very straight-forward contribution that American academics can make and I think it's a wonderful suggestion."

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at <http://insidehighered.com/news/2009/01/26/boycott>.

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