



BDS, Free Speech, and Professional Integrity

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I'd like to thank Mark G. Yudof [AEN Founder and Chair, AEN Advisory Board], Ken Waltzer [AEN Executive Director], and Michael Atkins [AEN Deputy Director] for all their hard work and effort in organizing this conference.

[In my remarks today] I want to make one point about where we are now—our present situation—and also note some of strategies that I've found effective and ineffective.

I'd also like to mention how my campus—Syracuse University (SU)—has been weathering this storm. I believe that we're in a better place than are other campuses. Anti-Semitic intimidation isn't breaking out at Syracuse University, but we haven't come out unscathed either.

Combating BDS: Successes and Failures

My first point is that we're (finally) moving beyond the debate over whether [BDS takes an anti-Semitic stance](#). It does. It's a [form of bigotry](#). Hostility to Israel is [frequently anti-Semitic](#).

Recently the University of California Board of Regents explicitly called out “anti-Semitic forms of anti-Zionism”. This is an incredibly important development. [In the [UC Regents Policy Against Intolerance](#)] BDS isn't banned. People are free to advocate for it. But the policy now stigmatizes BDS for its underlying message as [hate speech](#).

I'm an optimist, and I believe that we should point to the positives: I think that more people are now realizing that there's a crucial distinction between criticizing a country's policies and denying its right to exist. It took a long time to convince people of it, but I think more people are now being convinced.

BDS activists have helped to make our case.

When you have students aided and abetted by faculty [disrupting Israeli guest speakers](#) or [chasing Jewish students](#) out of Hillel; when you have faculty like Jasbir Puar (see [here](#) and [here](#)) and Joy Karega (see [here](#) and [here](#)) and Steven Salaita (see [here](#) and [here](#)) who trade in classic anti-Semitic tropes—or those like Stanford University’s David Palumbo-Liu who 24/7 denounce Israel for its apartheid character, its genocidal policies—and other such mythologies (see [here](#) and [here](#))—it just becomes a lot easier to convince our sane and reasonable colleagues that this is agitprop, pure propaganda masquerading as scholarship.

[It’s much easier to persuade colleagues] that what BDS is doing is basically perpetrating an academic fraud.

On my campus, I’m finding that more colleagues who once were supportive of BDS are coming to realize that this movement isn’t motivated by Israel’s policies.

So that’s the good news.

The bad news is that BDS has become, if anything, more entrenched and the consequences of speaking up against it—of taking even a mildly pro-Israel stance in one’s research, teaching or service—is to invite *tsoris*, [in Yiddish] trouble and a big headache.

A [recent study](#) noted that 1 in 6 Israeli academics are hiding their nationality for fear of that their “Israeliness” will hinder publication prospects and the like. We know that pro-Israel faculty in the U.S. are being targeted. Taking a stand against BDS is complicating career advancement.

One grad student at a meeting of the American Anthropological Association reportedly said: “I’m going to speak out against this boycott, but I know I’ll never get a job because I’m doing that.”

So Jewish faculty and graduate students are [paying a heavy price](#) for standing up for Israel. Most don’t do it at all, anticipating negative reactions. I’ve heard it from far too many junior faculty on my campus. Privately they tell me that they support what I’m doing, but won’t dare say so publicly. Or they won’t touch Israeli-Palestinian issues with a barge pole, as there’s just too many [career costs](#).

Stealth Boycotts

My second point is that what we have to do now is to encourage [university and college] administrators to move beyond their anodyne institutional statements and press releases of non-support for academic boycotts—the ones that [250+ presidents and chancellors signed](#), and routinely reissue—and get them to address what I call the “stealth boycotts” that are going on.

These are the boycotts that anti-Israel faculty have been implementing—even at schools where there’s an institutional policy on the books against BDS.¹

On my campus, and I’m sure we’re not an outlier, I’m finding that certain faculty are packing guest speaker series with anti-Israel propagandists; they’re [not assigning scholarship by Israeli academics](#) on their syllabi; they’re refusing to take on Israeli graduate students; they’re declining to review articles by Israeli academics.

The problem is that the administration hasn’t insisted that individual faculty comport themselves in ways that are consistent with the school’s anti-boycott policy.

So these faculty are in complete non-compliance with university policy and there are no consequences for it. They’re acting completely at odds with professional scholarly responsibility—but there are no downsides.

We end up with stealth BDS.

Administrators thought they did their job by making public statements, but what we need to get them to do is some serious micro-management of departments—Women’s Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, Anthropology—to name a few. This isn’t going to be popular. But faculty governance has to be earned, and [on many university and college campuses] these programs have forfeited their right to it.

We need to remind administrators who are quite willing to jump into the fray to protect so many other groups from micro-aggressions, that it’s unacceptable to go AWOL when it comes to the anti-Semitic macro-aggressions.

This is what Harvard University’s Larry Summers calls a “[hyper-insensitivity to anti-Semitism](#)”.

BDS: a Symptom of a Larger Problem of the Left

What I’ve learned from the past struggles on my campus with BDS is that it’s a symptom of something much larger, a troubling university culture: the new rules that seem to be governing Jewish participation on the progressive left.

To be a good leftist one has to be a Jew who denounces Israel, who loudly and proudly distances herself from Israel at every possible opportunity.

¹ Recently, the group *Anthropologists for the Boycott of Israeli Academic Institutions* issued a [statement](#) noting that despite the fact that their professional association’s general membership voted down an academic boycott resolution, 1300 anthropologists are nonetheless pledging to uphold the boycott of Israeli academia “through their own personal practice”.

This by the way bears no resemblance to the leftist politics within Israel—which is a Zionist Left, upon which the state was founded. It’s a leftist, progressive Zionism that used to be very visible within the American Left, in and outside academia.

It’s worth pointing out that there are no conservatives in the BDS movement. There are plenty of liberals opposed to BDS—most of them are here today in this room. But let’s face it: BDS is a movement of the left. That’s where BDS has taken root.

[Partly as a result], I see the conversation on BDS moving in interesting ways: how, by embracing BDS, [liberals are betraying their own ideals](#)—the ones that liberals used to fight for, like women’s rights, anti-racism, religious tolerance, gay rights, empathy for the disabled.

I’ve found this to be an effective way of engaging with my colleagues on BDS.

I’ve tried to move the conversation in ways that allow for a consideration of the “[apologetics](#)” of the Left—an apologetics where condemning the Islamic State, Hamas, or Hezbollah is deemed to be Islamophobic.

It’s an apologetics where brutally violent, intolerant, even genocidal groups that are anti-gay, anti-women, anti the rights of the disabled, anti-Christian, are depicted as “[my friends](#)” [i.e., UK Labour Party’s Jeremy Corbyn] or “[progressive movements of the Left](#)” [i.e., Professor Judith Butler] because they’re anti-West, or anti-white.

I’ve had colleagues literally tell me that they’ve had “ah ha” moments when we move the discussion in these directions, towards viewing [BDS as a symptom of something much larger](#), and much more pernicious, within the humanities and the soft social sciences.

And I think we find allies this way—among our conservative colleagues on campus, for example. We need to stop seeing [the fight against BDS] as an Israel Studies issue only.

Shifting the Focus from Free Speech to Pedagogy

BDS-promoting faculty tend to be very successful when they can keep the debate focused on academic freedom and free speech.²

Not long ago at my school, a group of faculty wanted to bring a [prominent BDS supporter](#) and [ADL-flagged hater](#) to campus on Holocaust Remembrance Day. A group of faculty, various

² Typically when BDS supporters are denied the opportunity to speak, they then “claim the mantle of free speech and portray themselves as victims”. The most effective course of action is to welcome BDS discourse, while also exercising one’s own free speech rights to condemn it and vigorously express outrage. On this point see “What You Need to Know About the Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions (BDS) Movement Against Israel,” Justus & Karin Rosenberg Foundation [here](#).

local Jewish community organizations, as well as Syracuse's interfaith organization [[InterFaith Works of Central NY](#)] tried unsuccessfully to get the talk moved to another day, or taken off-campus. I had students—the grandkids of Holocaust survivors—in my office in tears. It didn't matter. There are [no safe spaces for Jews](#) [on campus]. Academic freedom prevailed.

Since that defeat, I've tried to keep the conversation about BDS focused on the issue of sound pedagogy, and the evidentiary standards required of critical inquiry.

The American Historical Association (AHA) [rejected BDS](#) because people like [University of Maryland] Prof. Jeffrey Herf forced his colleagues to go through the resolution before them sentence by sentence. Doing that made it clear that it's a document that reduces a complex situation like the Arab-Israeli conflict into a simplistic misrepresentation.

It would've sullied the institutional reputation of the AHA to adopt such a document. This was a smart strategy, and it's a [tactic that's worked on my campus](#) too.

However, sometimes [adopting this strategy] will be difficult because faculty won't have enough knowledge to evaluate the evidence cited in a pro-BDS resolution. So, instead of arguing the details of the Middle East conflict, you would work on showing that a small group of BDS-promoting faculty have hijacked a vocabulary of human rights—and have then hijacked the agenda. No one likes to be manipulated, no matter what their thoughts are about Israel or the Palestinians. This seems to be the [tactic](#) that some members of the American Studies Association are now taking in their [lawsuit](#).

Conclusion

Let me conclude with one last point about free speech. Our BDS-promoting colleagues have the academic freedom to stack a speaker series with propaganda and agitprop—bringing in one speaker after another who says:

- Israel behaves like the Nazis did;
- Israel is an apartheid state;
- Israel harvests the organs of Palestinians and deliberately tries to disable Gazans;
- Terrorist violence against Israelis is permissible and understandable.

At my university, over the last two years there've been several speaker series packed with guest lecturers who have made these claims. And it's always the same academic units sponsoring or co-sponsoring these talks.

Now too, through various outreach programs, faculty are bringing this misinformation and false narrative into [middle schools and high schools](#), and into mainline progressive churches. I've

written on BDS inroads in America's liberal Protestant churches [see, for example, [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)]. This is a neglected arena in anti-BDS activism. It's important for us in AEN to consider because we're referring here to students who will come to our campuses as freshmen already softened up and primed for a BDS pitch.

These are the questions that we should be asking of faculty who decide to bring guest speakers like Rutgers University Prof. Jasbir Puar to campus: How is her work pedagogically sound? Is it scholarly work? Does it help us to better understand the complicated topic of Israel-Palestine, or does it detract from our understanding? What educational purpose does it serve to give her a podium? How does it fit with the university's mission statement and the Title VI requirement of fostering a diversity of opinion? Shouldn't we have a complex reading of the longstanding Israeli-Palestinian situation—not a simplistic, one-sided account?

What do people like Prof. Puar really have to add? Exactly what are we missing by not listening more to her point of view?

All this is not to silence unwelcome views. It is rather to say that BDS proponents are the ones doing the silencing by seeking to eliminate Zionist and Jewish nationalist voices [from the campus conversation on Israel and the Middle East].

As academics we should all agree: the essence of free speech is a diversity of voices in a marketplace of ideas. BDS undermines that. In suppressing Zionist speech that it finds offensive, BDS is really not so very different from all the many speech codes on campus, the safe spaces, the retractions of invitations to controversial speakers, the critical thought subjected to censorship and trigger warnings.³

How can we best reach our liberal, progressive colleagues on campus and convince them to reject BDS? We'll win our BDS battles when we bring the conversation back to sound pedagogy, rigorous research design, and evidence-based scholarship. But we'll also win by continuing to demonstrate how BDS is the very antithesis of free speech and academic freedom.

³ For helpful discussions of the various ways in which free speech is “under fire” on American university and college campuses see the recent symposium in *Moment*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (May/June 2016): 35-43 [here](#); and Susan Gonzalez, “Is Free Speech Threatened on College Campuses? An Audience Casts its Vote,” *Yale News*, March 2, 2016 [here](#).