

Academic freedom in Israel and Palestine

Many readers of this journal will, like me, have Israeli colleagues whose research we respect, with whom we have collaborated, and among whom we have friends. Yet, these relationships have been overshadowed by the human rights abuses inflicted against the Palestinians, Israel's flouting of UN resolutions and its indifference to international law. In 2002, this unease was given public expression with the call for European researchers to cease collaborating with Israeli academic institutions through the Framework Programme until Israel made serious moves towards a just and lasting peace. Hundreds of academics signed. Hanna Nasir, president of the leading West Bank university, Birzeit, sent a brief e-mail thanking the signatories: "We thought Europe had forgotten us." In the years that followed, and especially after Israel's invasion of Gaza, the academic boycott has become a small part of a growing movement of civil society who are angry, even despairing, at the failure of international institutions and governments to rein in Israel.

Some defenders of Israel oppose any suggestion of a boycott. Others are uneasy because it would threaten academic freedom. For supporters of the boycott, academic freedom is indeed precious, but they are unwilling to accept that it takes automatic precedence over human rights. Like an earlier generation of academics who boycotted apartheid South Africa, they choose human rights. How such a boycott is applied is a matter of personal ethics: it might, for instance, mean not participating in collaborative research programmes, shunning conferences in Israel and not refereeing grant applications.

Three arguments underlie the boycott: first, to support our Palestinian colleagues, whose academic freedom is infringed daily and who have called for a boycott; second, the complicity of many Israeli academics and institutions in Israel's breaches of international conventions on human rights, and the refusal by Israeli academic institutions to

recognize that the academic freedom of their Palestinian colleagues is curtailed; and third, a boycott and divestment campaign will help to put pressure on the Israeli government to negotiate a just peace.

Here are a few examples of the everyday denial of our Palestinian colleagues' freedom to research, travel and teach. An attempt to establish a collaborative research project with a colleague from Birzeit foundered when we were told that Israel would not permit the use of radioactive tracers. A physiology lecturer at Birzeit is routinely stopped at a military checkpoint and prevented from giving his lectures; on one occasion, a soldier decided that as an 'assistant professor' he wasn't qualified to lecture—only 'full professors' could cross. Sometimes only men over the age of 45 or female students are allowed to pass checkpoints. Such harassments with their bizarre and humiliating justifications render Palestinian academic life precarious. The fact that some scientists manage to keep strong biomedical research profiles beggars belief.

In Gaza, the situation is far worse. The Islamic University, Gaza's leading academic institution, was destroyed during Israel's incursion. Education at all levels has virtually collapsed under the blockade. Bringing in books and writing materials is prohibited, and Gazan students are prevented from travelling to the West Bank and from taking up studentships abroad.

Nor is the situation easy for Palestinians in Israel itself. Recently, the Carmel Centre at Haifa University cancelled an accountancy course because, its spokesman said, a majority of students were Arab (Anon, 2009).

One might expect Israeli academia to protest against the abrogation of the academic freedoms of their Palestinian colleagues. Yet, with a few heroic exceptions, the response is silence and passive or active complicity (Rose & Rose, 2008). In the aftermath of the Gaza invasion, evolutionary biologist Eva Jablonka of Tel-Aviv University and her colleagues asked some 9,000 Israeli academics for signatures on a statement defending Palestinian academic freedom; only 400 or so responded (Fisch *et al*, 2009). The same is true of Israel's supporters abroad; not one of the 450 presidents of American colleges, who

denounced the boycott call, protested against the destruction of the Islamic University in Gaza (Gordon & Halper, 2008). As the late Tanya Reinhart, professor of linguistics at Tel-Aviv University, wrote: "Never in its history did the Senate of any Israeli university pass a resolution protesting the frequent closure of Palestinian universities, let alone protest over the devastation sowed there.... If in extreme situations of violations of human rights and moral principles, the academia refuses to criticize and take a side, it collaborates with the oppressing system" (Reinhart, 2003).

The ultimate test of a boycott must be the role it has in changing the policies of those boycotted. The vociferousness of the opponents of the boycott, their *ad hominem* accusations against its signatories, and the mobilisation of the Israel lobby in the USA to challenge the legality of what is above all an individual moral decision, makes it clear that it has touched a sensitive nerve. For Israel, its academy is second only to the military in national prestige. Being part of the European Research Area symbolizes Israel's aspirations to be regarded more as a part of Europe than of the Middle East. But more than that, Israel's science is a major economic force. Where governments seem unwilling to help move Israel into achieving a just peace with the Palestinians whose land it occupies, actions by individuals as part of civil society might be the only way forward.

This article represents the opinion of the author and not necessarily those of EMBO or *EMBO reports*.

REFERENCES

- Anon (2009) The Carmel Academic Center in Haifa closes academic track as too many Palestinian students registered. *The Alternative Information Center* [online] May 27
- Fisch M, Falk R, Jablonka E, Gissis S (2009) Academic freedom for whom? <http://academic-access.weebly.com>
- Gordon N, Halper J (2008) Where's the academic outrage over the bombing of a university in Gaza? *Counterpunch* [online] Dec 31
- Reinhart T (2003) Academic boycott: in support of Paris VI. *ZNet* [online] Apr 4
- Rose H, Rose S (2008) Israel, Europe and the academic boycott. *Race Cl* **50**: 1–20

Steven Rose is a professor of biology and neurobiology at the Open University, UK.

E-mail: s.p.r.rose@open.ac.uk

doi:10.1038/embor.2009.229