

Boycotts against Israel and the Question of Academic Freedom in American Universities in the Arab World

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How can we understand academic freedom in the Arab world today when it comes to the question of Palestine and Israel? What does the concept mean, practically speaking, for American universities in the region? And how should it be deployed? These universities operate, today, in the context of a colonial present¹ and serve to promote values not dissimilar to those imagined by American missionaries in the 1820s. Instead of an explicit resort to discourses of backwardness, or a mention of native defects,² American university presidents today speak of promoting values that are “uniquely American,” such as “a sense of mutual respect, tolerance for people of very diverse backgrounds” or solving problems “without recourse to violence.”³ One can only assume that this implies that such values do not exist where these universities are operating. What kind of agendas, then, does academic freedom promote when invoked by American universities in what we may call a neocolonial context? How might it be employed for or against collective struggle in the region? And what role can such universities play in advancing or being obstacles to an academic boycott of Israel?

The Arab-Israeli conflict has meant that, with few exceptions, most Arab countries have not had diplomatic relations with Israel. This state-imposed Arab boycott has provided legal

protection as one line of defense against the normalization of Israel's ongoing violations of international law against the Palestinian people, but underlying this is an even more crucial ethical claim against any dealing with Israel, whether economic, cultural, or, for our purposes, academic. It is an ethical claim that presidents of American universities in the region do not seem to consider when they describe the only obstacle to Arab-Israeli academic exchanges being visa issues, and "hope that in time that we can have exchange relationships," as, for example, Winfred Thompson, former chancellor of the University of Sharjah, remarked at a public forum at the Council for Foreign Relations.⁴

The ethical claim against dealing with Israel rests on the fact that Israel continues to occupy Arab land (Palestinian, Syrian, and Lebanese) since 1967, to deny Palestinians their right to return to their homes, as legally bound under UN Resolution 194, and to practice a system of institutionalized discrimination (also known as apartheid) against Palestinian citizens of Israel. As a more powerful line of defense, Palestinian civil society has come together in an overwhelming consensus to call for boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS); more important, it has defined the meaning of Arab normalization with Israel "as the participation in any project, initiative or activity, in Palestine or internationally, that aims (implicitly or explicitly) to bring together Palestinians (and/or Arabs) and Israelis (people or institutions) without placing as its goal resistance to and exposure of the Israeli occupation and all forms of discrimination and oppression against the Palestinian people."⁵ This is the minimum required to combat normalization, but people in other Arab countries, such as Lebanon, may opt, and indeed have done so, to define this along stricter lines. The BDS movement considers such normalization to be "a 'colonization of the mind,' whereby the oppressed subject comes to believe that the oppressor's reality is the only 'normal' reality that must be subscribed to, and that the oppression is a fact of life that must be coped with."⁶ A significant aspect of Palestinian and Arab nonviolent resistance, then, is to struggle against powerful influences attempting to normalize oppression and to force them to accept the occupier's terms of peace. It is within this context and through these ethical considerations that any notion of academic freedom operates in the Arab world.

The Case of the American University of Beirut (AUB)

The AUB offers a strong case to think through questions of academic freedom in the region's American institutions. In the last few years, the AUB has repeatedly invoked this principle to stifle or shut down protests against a series of administrative decisions serving, whether intentionally or not, to counteract the academic boycott of Israel. In 2011, campus activists successfully opposed an administration decision to grant an honorary doctorate to James Wolfensohn because of his involvements with complicit Israeli institutions.⁷ In 2012, a second petition was launched against the granting of an honorary doctorate to Donna Shalala,⁸ who has been a strong supporter of partnerships with Israeli universities, a strong opponent of the academic boycott, and who received three doctorate degrees from Israeli universities deeply enmeshed in discriminating against Palestinian students, supporting the Israeli military, and developing weaponry used against Palestinian and Lebanese civilians.⁹ In defending its position in each instance, the administration claimed that the AUB "is deeply committed to upholding the essential values,"¹⁰ of which academic freedom is one important node.

Concerns about academic freedom have followed BDS campaigners in many countries, especially in the United States.¹¹ At least three issues arise when invoking claims of academic freedom to counter proponents of an academic boycott. First, what does the discourse of academic freedom sanction in such situations? Judith Butler calls on us to question "the classically liberal conception of academic freedom with a view that grasps the political realities at stake, and see that our struggles for academic freedom must work in concert with the opposition to state violence, ideological surveillance, and the systematic devastation of everyday life."¹² It seems that even John Waterbury, and other former presidents of American universities in the region, would concur, since they agree that such institutions "seek to encourage responsible, free speech [*sic*] and of course responsible academic freedom."¹³ What such responsibility entails becomes a matter of political debate rather than a question of an absolute decontextualized and depoliticized principle of academic freedom.

A second, and related, issue confronting supporters of the academic boycott of Israel around the world is whether academic freedom is being used as a defense to shut down dissent, silence controversy on campus, or promote one set of views or policies over others (i.e., administration views over faculty ones). As an example, at the 2011 AUB commencement, President Peter Dorman spoke about a commitment to academic freedom, claiming that it was a “defining principle,” that freedom of expression “is an obligation,” and that the AUB provides “the freedom and the intellectual space for young generations to imagine the unthinkable and debate the undebatable.”¹⁴ Yet this contrasted with how he himself responded to concerns over violation of the Lebanese boycott law¹⁵ by describing faculty as “deliberately slanted to serve narrow interests regardless of facts. [These faculty members were] co-opting the opinions of fellow faculty, students, and alumni by a pretext of authority.” Dorman dubbed the campaigns “fundamentally dishonest” and a diversion from the AUB’s “commitment to the pursuit of knowledge as grounded in intellectual integrity.”¹⁶ Rather than argue over the premise of the original concerns regarding Israel, based on both legal and ethical claims, the administration presented faculty members as dishonest and abusing their authority. It thereby shut down debate and offered its own position as the final word.

In the case of the AUB’s invocation of academic freedom, a third issue arises that has to do with the AUB’s status within Lebanon and the broader region. The AUB receives US federal funds, is run by an American leadership, and has close cultural, ideological, and political ties with a range of American institutions, including the US embassy in Lebanon. The expressed interest of its administration is to promote American values. All of this contrasts markedly with the typical situation of universities in the global North, which tend to be firmly embedded within their home and host nation-states. Hence, all the key questions that inevitably arise in conflicts over academic freedom in the global North—knowledge for what, and freedom for whom and from whom—take on another dimension in neocolonial contexts in the global South. Thus, while the AUB’s administration grounded its arguments in the AUB’s status as an “American” university that respects American traditions of academic freedom, critics of the administration responded by insisting that the

AUB is an American university “of Beirut,” and thus needs to respect the concerns of broader Lebanese and Arab society.

Invocation of academic freedom by the AUB administration served not only to promote the viewpoints and values of the administration and its supporters but also took on an air of cultural condescension, in which the administration purported to know the best interests of a people whose values and insights seemed subordinate. Thus, President Dorman explained that the AUB abided with the American notion of academic freedom, and that he knew who the Arabs’ friends were: “Let us acknowledge that ours is a complex region that is undergoing unprecedented change, and that it needs people, like James Wolfensohn . . . who has taken a courageous stance in defense of Palestinian rights. . . . The Arab world needs more friends like him.”¹⁷ Academic freedom was here used instrumentally to make a case for the decisions of the administration, which knew the best interests of the Arab world; those who did not agree with the administration could, thus, be said to be hindering academic freedom.

The appeal to academic freedom by the administrations of American universities in the region also distracts attention from their serving and supporting US foreign policy above the policies and interests of a broader Arab society. This supporting role has, at times, included university ties to the CIA.¹⁸ Today, the AUB works closely with the US embassy, the US Agency for International Development, the State Department’s Middle East Partnership Initiative, and the congressionally funded National Endowment for Democracy. The AUB administration’s indifference to the ethical concerns of normalization with Israel fits perfectly with the policies of the US government, but it conflicts with both Lebanese law and the moral commitments and political interests of broad swathes of Lebanese and Arab society. As soon as the principle of academic freedom is invoked, however, this basic conflict is obscured.

The administration seems to have insisted that AUB faculty, staff, and students act solely as university personnel and leave their other identities at the campus gate; in this sense, BDS campaigns were seen as “campaigns to ruin the reputation of AUB.”¹⁹ In response to such campaigns, one could hear such statements as, “I care for the AUB, and we should protect

our university." In such discourse, there is a sort of radical disembedding of the university from the concerns of the surrounding society. Hence, rather than being part of the larger society and serving it, the AUB, and we argue other American universities in the region as well, stands outside and against it. Lebanese community groups who have backed BDS campaigns, as well as the AUB's own faculty and students who supported these campaigns, were positioned as outside agitators. In a letter addressed to the AUB community in response to BDS campaigns, Dorman stated that he defended the freedom of speech of those who criticized the administration for awarding honorary degrees to individuals who did not adhere to academic boycott guidelines.²⁰ "It is a principled stance," he wrote, "and one that many feel passionate about. Yet institutional decisions cannot be subordinated to an absolute litmus test imposed by the demands of outside groups."²¹ While this is a tension in all university-state-community relationships, it becomes particularly problematic when the university itself is quite literally a foreign body, not embedded in the society it claims to serve.

The AUB administration seems to operate with an understanding that academic freedom is a concept alien to much of the Arab world. The American administrators of the AUB and other universities in the region describe them as "ambassadors of the U.S. system of higher education and academic freedom."²² These university administrators ignore the prevalent notion that in the region the support and protection for rigorous, committed, and independent academic scholarship tends to be framed by a concern for freedom of speech and expression, which is extended to all members of society, not just academics. One can argue that imposing the notion of academic freedom in the region is part of a longer colonial discourse of bringing light and freedom to the natives.²³ In the early days of the AUB, Butrus al-Bustani, a major figure in Arab intellectual and cultural life in the second half of the nineteenth century, proposed the concept of freedom of conscience, instead of the intellectual freedom proposed by the Protestant missionaries, because for him it was a "way of life," a means for humans to "overcome their temporary differences and unite around their essential sameness."²⁴ In the twentieth century, several academic personalities such as Kamal Nasser and Constantine Zurayk insisted that recognizing the principle of "freedom of

thought does not negate the organic relation that ties the university to the society it serves," and these leaders tried, unsuccessfully, to present more socially engaged and integrated ideas of freedom, not the simple academic freedom as we have come to know the concept today.²⁵

The AUB's isolation from the society it serves is not new, and this case may be an indication of how other American institutions relate to their surroundings. As Betty S. Anderson argues, in the early history of the AUB, "conflicts arose repeatedly over the level of authority students could actually wield over their campus and curricular lives," but for the students and the community the AUB serves, this meant precisely bringing the world of Arab politics into the university, for this is how they could make their university and education useful to their broader society.²⁶ Succeeding generations of AUB faculty found themselves struggling to bring the politics of the Arab world inside the main gates, while succeeding American leaders of the administration tried to keep regional politics, especially those that conflicted with US policy interests, outside those gates: "In this administrative perspective politics had to be kept outside of the campus walls because they could only disrupt the education process."²⁷ Hence, it seems that the notion of academic freedom advocated by the AUB administration does not include AUB students' freedom of involvement in the politics of the region. Is it not about time to move from the notion of academic freedom to the notion of freedom of thought that integrates universities into the larger struggles of their communities?

Conclusion

The broader role of US universities in the Arab world can be examined through the lens of the AUB's experience with academic freedom and active boycott campaigns against Israel. The considerations of these universities and their constituents in the pursuit of academic inquiry will necessarily be different from those of universities in the United States. What this highlights, however, is that academic freedom cannot be regarded as absolute; it is highly contextual and contestable. In the Arab world today, it cannot be divorced from other ethical

claims of the right to live and the right to live free of various forms of oppression, whether by Israel, US neocolonialism, or local dictators.

However, the way academic freedom has been deployed by current and past university presidents to counter people's legitimate, nonviolent, and ethical resistance in the form of the boycott leads us to conclude that this concept is serving US interests rather than those of local people's struggles, that it is supporting power rather than speaking truth to power.

As we see academic freedom being used in US universities abroad to support US hegemony, and specifically to soften Arab-Israeli normalization of relations and force this normalization by means other than a comprehensive peace treaty, we return to the crucial moral question of how anyone should relate to Israel so long as it continues its violations of international law against the Palestinian people. In this sense, whether it is legal or not to collaborate with Israel should not be of concern; rather, the question should be whether this collaboration should exist on moral grounds. And if we agree that it should not take place, and there is such agreement in many quarters in the Arab world, then, in such contexts, is it an attack on academic freedom to speak out against such collaboration, or are we merely placing such freedom within a responsible framework, which, if we want to follow American university leadership and American values, is part of Waterbury's own philosophy of encouraging "responsible academic freedom." We take this to mean, at a minimum, a responsibility not to infringe on a people's right to struggle for a better world and against forms of colonialism, occupation, and apartheid.

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Notes

¹ Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).

² For example, Howard Bliss, president of the Syrian Protestant College, remarked in 1919 that the natives "lack balance; they are easily discouraged; they lack political fairness, they do not easily

recognize the limitations of their own rights"; quoted in Hisham Shirabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 78.

³ See Council on Foreign Relations, "American Universities in the Middle East: Agents of Change in the Arab World" (transcript), March 29, 2007, <http://www.cfr.org/education/american-universities-middle-east-agents-change-arab-world/p12981>.

⁴ See *ibid.*

⁵ See PACBI, "Israel's Exceptionalism: Normalizing the Abnormal," October 31, 2011, <http://pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=1749>.

⁶ See *ibid.*

⁷ For the original petition by the AUB community, see Youth against Normalization, "#BDS: 'Not in Our Name': #AUB Faculty, Staff, and Students Object to Honoring James Wolfensohn," June 7, 2011, <http://youthanormalization.blogspot.com/2011/06/bds-not-in-our-name-aub-faculty-staff.html?spref=tw>.

⁸ For details about the incident, see Yazan al-Saadi, "Beirut Honors Friend of Israel, Again," *Al-Akhbar*, June 21, 2012, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/beirut-honors-friend-israel-again>.

⁹ For a breakdown of Israeli academic institutional ties to the Israeli military, see Alternative Information Center, August 2007, "The Case for Academic Boycott against Israel: Reference Material in Support of Palestinian and International Boycott Campaigns," http://www.alternativenews.org/images/stories/downloads/other/The_Case_for_Academic_Boycott_against_Israel.pdf.

¹⁰ Internal communication sent from the provost to the AUB community, March 10, 2010.

¹¹ See AAUP 2006 as well as articles by Barghouti, Mullen, and Lloyd and Schueller in this dossier.

¹² Judith Butler, "Israel/Palestine and the Paradoxes of Academic Freedom," in *Radical Philosophy* 135 (January–February 2006), <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/judith-butler/articles/israel-palestine-paradoxes-of-academic-freedom/>.

¹³ See Council on Foreign Relations, "American Universities in the Middle East."

¹⁴ For Dorman's commencement speech, see Maha Al Azar and Firas Talhouk, "Dorman to the Graduating Class of 2011: You Will Have a Voice in Shaping Tomorrow's Societies," *American University of Beirut News*, June 27, 2011, <http://www.aub.edu.lb/news/Pages/commencement-2011.aspx>.

¹⁵ See "Lebanese Boycott Law 1955" (in Arabic),

http://boycottmonitor.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2&Itemid=8.

¹⁶ Internal communication from President Dorman to the AUB community, June 10, 2011.

¹⁷ "Message from the President on James Wolfensohn," *American University of Beirut News*, June 11, 2011, <http://www.aub.edu.lb/news/Pages/wolfensohn.aspx>.

¹⁸ For details of AUB and CIA relations, see Richard Harris Smith, *OSS: The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency* (Guilford, CT: Lyons, 2005 [1972])

¹⁹ "Thank You Mr. President, Al-Akhbar Will Remain at the Frontline!," *Al-Akhbar* (Arabic), July 5, 2012, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/97003>.

²⁰ Message on honorary degrees addressed to AUB community by President Dorman, July 3, 2012.

²¹ *Al-Akhbar* (Arabic), July 5, 2012, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/97003>.

²² See Office of Information and Public Relations, "AUB Joins Other Academic Institutions in Agreement to Foster US-Style Education Abroad," *American University of Beirut News*, May 27, 2008, <http://www.aub.edu.lb/news/Pages/83960.aspx>.

²³ See Ussama Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

²⁴ See Butrus al-Bustani, *The Story of As'ad Shidyak* (Beirut: Hamra, 1992), 213.

²⁵ See Constantine Zurayk, "The University and Society," *International Association of Universities Newsletter* 6.1 (2000).

²⁶ See Betty S. Anderson, "Liberal Education and the American University of Beirut," *Middle East Institute*, February 12, 2012 (originally posted July 2010), <http://www.mei.edu/content/liberal-education-and-american-university-beirut-aub>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*