

Editor's Closing Statement

A Response to the [AAUP Journal of Academic Freedom, Volume 4](#)

By Ashley Dawson

The 2013 issue of *Journal of Academic Freedom* has drawn substantial fire for publishing a series of articles laying out the logic of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel. Recent events have, however, confirmed the timeliness of this issue. As many readers of this site will know, the National Council of the American Studies Association voted on December 4th in support of a boycott resolution submitted by the Academic and Community Activism Caucus. In an unprecedented step, the council has asked the entire membership of the ASA to vote for or against this resolution by December 15.

As editor of *JAF*, I believe that the journal has fulfilled its mission of supporting academic freedom by providing a venue for thoughtful discussion of the Boycott campaign at a time when such discussion was necessary but marginalized. In doing so, the journal broke significant taboos. Critics of Israeli policies have long been subjected to various forms of intimidation. Support for the Boycott movement is often smeared as a form of anti-Semitism. Campaigns have been launched against professors, such as Columbia University's Joseph Massad, who expressed dissenting perspectives about Israel's behavior. Edward Said's office at Columbia was even firebombed in response to his unflinching championing of the Palestinian cause.

One of the favorite tactics of these smear campaigns has been to level a charge of bias against those who articulate criticism of Israeli policies. Accusations of bigotry follow quickly on the heels of such charges. At Columbia, for instance, Massad was attacked for failing to give a pro-Israeli viewpoint in his courses on Palestinian and Israeli politics and society. Such attacks conveniently ignored the fact that Columbia had long offered many courses on Israeli society and politics, on Zionism, on conflict resolution in the Middle East, on Israeli literature, as well as on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict itself, all taught from an Israel-friendly angle. Yet Massad's critical course was indicted for its lack of "balance."

Similar arguments were made against *JAF* following the publication of the BDS dossier in September. This despite the fact that we circulated a CFP a year earlier that invited submissions related to the question of academic boycotts, that we subjected the papers submitted to peer review, and that we printed all of these submitted papers following a revision process.

In fact, the issue featured a lead article by Marjorie Heins that clearly laid out and supported the AAUP's policy rejecting academic boycotts, a policy which remains in place. A series of articles then followed that questioned this policy from a variety of angles. These articles were *dissenting*; they were a form of *critique* of a dominant perspective. We did not see the need to seek out and publish a whole series of additional articles that supported the official policy of the AAUP in this initial publication. Yet we were predictably impugned for failing to provide a balanced perspective.

I am in favor of the boycott. As someone born in South Africa during the darkest days of apartheid, I simply cannot cleave to an abstract notion of academic freedom that ignores the material inequalities that structure people's rights to speak and to be heard. As Robin D. G. Kelley and Erica Lorraine Williams remind us in [their eloquent commemoration of Nelson Mandela](#), Israel's settler colonial policies have created conditions for Palestinians that bear close comparison with those meted out by the apartheid regime in my homeland. These conditions directly impinge on the academic freedom, as well as the life possibilities, of Palestinian intellectuals. The BDS campaign is a non-violent response to these conditions, with a lineage that goes back to the struggle against apartheid. As Salim Vally, director of the Centre for Education Rights and Transformation at the University of Johannesburg has argued, the academic boycott against South Africa's racist regime

actually opened up space for discussion by making a stance of neutrality impossible, and thereby pushed South Africans into open debate over inequality and social justice.

My stance is not shared by the AAUP. Many, but not all, of the organization's leadership are against the boycott, and have contributed letters to that effect to *JAF* and other venues.

One thing I hope we can agree on, however: the key component of academic freedom is the right to articulate dissenting viewpoints. Academic freedom is insignificant if one only reiterates what most people already believe. In giving space to a movement that, in [Judith Butler's words](#), builds ties “of solidarity in a struggle against damaged rights, occupation, and dispossession,” and in helping to foster a critical debate where there was a prevailing atmosphere of silence and intimidation, *JAF* has fulfilled its mission to support academic freedom and the struggle against injustice more broadly.