

Boycotting Israel

Targeting academics is a stupid and futile gesture

Gesture politics are rarely edifying. At times, though, they are downright stupid. Yesterday's decision by Britain's University and College Union (UCU) of academics, to boycott their counterparts in Israel because of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, is a good example.

No reader of these columns would be in any doubt about the Financial Times' view of the occupation and the continuing and expanding colonisation of Palestinian land: illegal, immoral, self-defeating for Israel and incendiary for the Middle East.

Yet there are five solid reasons why this is a fatuous move, of no use to Palestinians struggling for an independent state or to Israelis opposing the occupation, fighting the moral corrosion it causes their society and – against all odds – holding out for a resolution to the conflict offering security to Israel and justice to the Palestinians.

First, the very notion of an academic boycott is intrinsically absurd. The academy is, by definition, the arena for debate and enquiry, indeed for controversy. The sharper that is, the more likely that truth is what will emerge.

Second, Israeli academics have, on the whole, an honourable record of opposing the occupation. It is from the universities that army conscripts have campaigned against serving in the occupied territories.

Only yesterday leading academics demanded the government allow students from Gaza to travel to study in West Bank universities.

Third, there is an issue of selective double standards: why not target Russian academics over Chechnya, Chinese lecturers over Tibet, Indian academics over Kashmir?

Fourth, the timing of this ill-thought through initiative could hardly be worse. For the first time in more than a generation, the pro-Israel lobby in the US, where informed debate on the Middle East is far less vigorous than it is in Israel, is being openly challenged and can no longer rely on bullying Americans into a consensus that is bad for Israel and makes it impossible for the US to articulate its own national interest in the region.

Fifth, and directly related to that, this meaningless boycott is a political gift to Israel's irredentist right, which can now resume its facile equation of criticism of Israeli policy with anti-Semitism – and pin the blame for both on Europe.

For this futile gesture reinforces the sense of siege and existential threat that has been the essential tool of the Israeli right going back a century to Ze'ev Jabotinsky and the Revisionist Zionists. Benjamin Netanyahu, their modern paladin who is already well set to return to power, must be positively ecstatic.