

This academic boycott is an empty gesture

THIS WEEK sees the 40th anniversary of the Six Day War between Israel and an alliance of Arab states. It was the ultimate Pyrrhic victory. Israel saved itself from annihilation, but condemned itself to decades of further conflict by seizing land from its neighbours. It also condemned millions of Palestinians to a life in exile or under military occupation.

By coincidence, British academics, as represented by the University and College Union, last week passed their judgment on the Six Day War. They voted to recommend a boycott of Israeli universities in protest at the occupation of Palestinian land. The union will now debate the matter over a year.

Apart from the fact that the timing was quite good, there is nothing positive to be said about this decision. It will not ease the

suffering of Palestinians and it will not soften Israeli policy. In fact, by snubbing even liberal Israeli academics, a boycott strengthens the case of hard-line politicians who prefer isolation since it justifies unilateralism and disengagement from the peace process.

This is not the first such vote by a British trade union. University lecturers debated a similar move last year. Last month, the National Union of Journalists voted for a boycott of everything Israeli, an absurd gesture since, if implemented, it would make reporting from Jerusalem impossible. All that motion achieved was to send a signal worldwide that, collectively, British journalists take a partisan view of Middle East news. Likewise, British universities have shown that they cannot distinguish between the

policies of a state and the opinions of individuals within that state. They believe in the collective punishment of academics simply for being Israeli.

That would be sad enough, were it not that Israeli universities and media are among the freest in the Middle East. If British unions are in the business of solidarity, they might consider flinging gestures at Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria or Egypt where journalists and academics are imprisoned and tortured for expressing dissent. But they target only Israel.

Forty years after the Six Day War, the prospects for lasting peace in the Middle East are bleak. It is depressing that, for what paltry influence they carry, British trade unions have done what little they can to make matters worse.