

Boycott Israel? Maybe So, But Certainly Not At The Request Of 'Palestine Solidarity Tilburg'

03-06-2024 ~ An open letter in my mailbox

On Thursday, February 29, an open letter ([General Open Letter to All Faculties – Boycott Israeli Universities](#)) from *Palestine Solidarity Tilburg* arrived in my university mailbox. The open letter came from a gmail account and was not signed by any person's name.

Nowhere does *Palestine Solidarity Tilburg* introduce itself in the letter; there was also no website; the only clue is that the letter talks about 'we as academics'. I therefore assumed that this concerns a group of people affiliated with Tilburg University. And the open letter also exudes that idea. It may be a number of my colleagues who took the initiative. The email is addressed to 'deans, faculty boards, program directors, professors, lecturers, PhD candidates, researchers, and staff members of Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences'; in short, everyone, except the support staff of TSHD, and the latter surprised me because those staff can also feel and feel involved in the events in Gaza.

Hamas, October 7, genocide

The running text of the open letter mentions the word Hamas only once, but not in the capacity of the terrorist organization responsible for the murder, rape and torture of 1,200 Israeli civilians on October 7, 2023. The word 'genocide' appears 32 times and the word 'genocidal' four times. The date of October 7 is only mentioned as a point in time from when Israelis are said to have killed 28,775 Palestinians in Gaza (until February 19, 2024). Not a word about the Hamas massacre on October 7; not a word of sympathy for the victims. And the more words about Israel's alleged genocide of the Palestinians. The open letter calls on Tilburg University to sever its partnerships with Israeli universities and institutions, especially because Israel would commit genocide against the Palestinian people.

My voice

In this piece I would like to voice a counterpoint and argue that if Tilburg

University were to initiate such a boycott, it would in any case not do so in response to the open letter but on the basis of its own considerations. Furthermore, I personally believe that a boycott makes no sense and finally I would like to indicate why I think the open letter is very one-sided and therefore academically speaking reprehensible.

The Hamas Charter

Anyone who reads the [Hamas](#) charter fears the worst for the state of Israel. The charter reads like an 'it is either us or them' battle and should Hamas win the battle against Israel, nothing will be left of the Jewish state. In that respect, Hamas showed its true colors on October 7 when it went on a rampage of murder and rape in the affected Israeli villages and towns. You shouldn't expect compassion from such an enemy. It is therefore not surprising that Israel wants to defend itself and do everything it can to destroy Hamas. For Israel goes as well that it is 'them or us'. The open letter does not in any way mention Israel's plight in this conflict and that is regrettable. The open letter gives me the impression that its authors do not even grant Israel a right to exist. Their ideas seem to fit into the discourse that stipulates that the establishment of the state of Israel was a neo-colonialist maneuver by the West to, among other things, maintain control in West Asia (the photo below the open letter depicts a banner on Tilburg University with the text 'Cut ties with Israeli colonizers'; *nomen est omen* I would say). I would really like to know from the authors of the letter whether Israel is allowed to exist as a state at all.

Genocide

As mentioned, the word genocide is often mentioned in the letter. The letter refers to authoritative scholars in the field of genocide who state that Israel is unequivocally engaged in genocide. Yet the International Court in The Hague stated in its ruling earlier this year that 'Israel is plausibly committing genocide'. It appears as if it is happening, the court says, but not that it is actually happening and Israel is called on to ensure that it does not happen. In the meantime, there are also scientists who argue that something more is needed to classify the current situation in Gaza as genocide. In no way does the open letter allow these voices to have their say, even though the senders of the letter give the impression of being academically trained. If that is the case, then you might expect them to show a really balanced analysis of whether Israel is actually committing a genocide. By the way, it is striking that the email contains the

symbol , a picture of Palestine, 'from the river to the sea', which is interpreted, among other things, as the wish of Hamas and other Palestinians to establish a 'Jew-free' state of Palestine . Here too, *nomen is omen*. The picture is not in the open letter.

Hamas in Gaza

Another aspect not mentioned is criticism of the way in which Hamas has victimized its own population in its ruthless fight against Israel. The movement has spared no effort to build underground passages, bunkers and warehouses, but has failed to build air-raid shelters for its own population. The movement is also said to have built (head)quarters under hospitals and schools. Gazans, when interviewed, often beg desperately for *both* sides to stop the violence. Hamas further appropriates food shipments intended for the Gazans and Hamas fighters mingle with the population as camouflage. The violence used by Israel is disproportionate, but that of Hamas shows great contempt for its own population. The open letter does not address this.

Future

Let's do a thought experiment. Let us assume that at some point in the future Israel loses a war against its opponents, not necessarily Hamas, and is occupied. What will her fate be? Let me present the least serious scenario and then I'll start by asking which country besides Israel is a democracy in the Arab-Islamic world. I can't really name any. Tunisia was on the right track, but the country has taken an autocratic path under President Kais Saied. Turkey is formally a democracy, but President Erdoğan is known as a hardliner and has already sent many opponents to prison. President Sisi of Egypt is an old-fashioned dictator. Syria is in chaos, Lebanon very shaky. My point is that if the State of Israel were to cease to exist and the Israelis were to come under 'Arab' rule, democracy would be over and if, in the worst case, Hamas would come to power, then the worst would be to fear for the Israelis. The authors of the open letter do not discuss these scenarios while they are very relevant, would the entire world come to a boycott and would a situation one day arise in which Israel is overrun.

The state of Israel

But is the current state of Israel still the democracy it once was? The government consists of right-wing and fanatically religious hardliners, some of whom dream out loud of a Gazans-free Gaza. Before the Gaza war, the government led by Prime Minister Netanyahu tried to limit the power of the Supreme Court and thus

weaken democracy in the eyes of many. Moreover, Israel is increasingly violating the rights of Palestinians in the West Bank. I can only agree that things seem to be going in the wrong direction for Israeli democracy and I also recognize that the country has been violating the rights of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank for many years. What I mean by this is that as an academic and opinion maker I try to look at the matter from both sides and do not shy away from criticizing Israel. However, I think the writers of the open letter are very one-sided and thus place themselves outside their academic profession.

The writers of the open letter

I can imagine that the writers of the open letter are committed scientists such as legal colleague Michael Bot who has regularly expressed himself on the subject in the same terms as the letter. But there will also be writers with an Arab-Christian or Arab-Islamic background. Some may have family or friends in Gaza. I understand that the latter can only look at the matter through one lens; they are very much emotionally involved. But I am critical of the mainstream scientists who co-wrote the letter. They should have ensured that the open letter was more balanced, as befits scientists. Of course you can still argue for a boycott, but you can also do so by putting forward arguments that may not directly be in your favor. One of these is the expected effect of the boycott instrument.

Boycott effective?

The boycott of Russia by the West does not seem very effective, partly because Russia can also do business with non-boycott countries. Iran has been boycotted by the West for years, but that country is not backing down either. South Africa was heavily boycotted at the time, but oil company Shell continued to supply oil to the country. An academic boycott is mainly symbolic. We better discuss issues with Israeli institutes with which Tilburg University collaborates. Let us try to discuss the Gaza conflict with them in our exchanges and projects with them. Let us try to influence public opinion in Israel through our academic contacts and persuade influential colleagues there to speak out against the war. We have an arsenal of opportunities to exert influence. Sources of resistance to the government can be found precisely at Israeli universities and there are all kinds of Palestinian-Israeli cooperation and peace initiatives. Not always at an institutional level, but at an individual level. A boycott would destroy all of this and leave Tilburg University powerless. Moreover, the far right in Israel would not be interested in the fact that universities and other cultural institutions would

be boycotted by the West. It only strengthens their position: they can play the victim card even more while their opponents on the universities are eliminated. The open letter writers do not discuss the pros and cons of a boycott.

Conclusion

Based on the above, I come to the following conclusions:

The open letter does not contain any names of senders;

- The open letter was not sent to support staff;
- The open letter makes no mention of the October 7 massacre;
- The open letter does not address the violent character of Hamas;
- The open letter does not address the question of why Israel reacts the way it does;
- The open letter writers do not seem to grant Israel its right to exist;
- The open letter does not quote scientists who believe that Israel is not committing genocide;
- The open letter says nothing about Hamas's contempt for its own population and the resulting suffering;
- The accompanying email of the open letter contains the questionable symbol ("from the river to the sea");
- The open letter does not address the state of democracy in the Arab world;
- The scientists who drafted the open letter failed to provide a balanced picture of the conflict;
- The open letter does not mention the pros and cons of a boycott;
- I try to be as balanced as possible in my response to the letter.

It makes no sense to boycott Israel

I conclude that the open letter's call for a boycott by Tilburg University of its Israeli sister institutions makes little sense. If Tilburg University would proceed to a boycott, then certainly not in response to the open letter. I would think that Tilburg University should use all its influence to call on its colleagues in Israel to stop the bloodshed and see how they can contribute to a Two-State solution, because the latter, as far as I am concerned, would be the ultimate solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

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