



The Gaza Solidarity Encampment at Columbia University. Photo by [عباد ديرانية](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

The AAUP Has Done the Right Thing. It Should Go Further

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Post

Committee A, the policy arm of the national AAUP (American Association of University Professors), rarely gets it wrong. Its membership is made up of wise minds, conscious of the weight of more than 100 years of careful deliberation and action on the part of an organization which has served as the national steward of academic freedom since its founding in 1915. In 2006, however, the committee took an unfortunate turn when it issued a statement of opposition to academic boycotts. This position was at odds with the organization's mission, since it appeared to be a restriction of academic freedom, inviting censure for an act of solidarity in which the AAUP should be offering speech protections.

I did a six-year stint on Committee A shortly thereafter, and it was clear to me that many committee members informally disagreed with the anti-boycott policy. In the intervening years, no AAUP policy statement has been more controversial among the membership at large. It was with a great sense of commitment to its membership that Committee A rectified the initial misstep and reversed the policy in July of this year, judging "that individual faculty members and students should be free to weigh, assess, and debate the specific circumstances giving rise to calls for systematic academic boycotts and to make their own choices regarding their participation in them." Committee members reaffirmed the integrity of

the association by acknowledging that the 2006 statement had actually been “used to compromise academic freedom.”

The original decision caused no end of problems for AAUP advocacy chapters. When I was president of the NYU chapter, our executive officers frequently had to take the administration to task for persistent singling out of pro-Palestinian voices on campus for censure. This was long before October 7, after which the practice became a knee-jerk institutional response to campus protest, accompanied by the harshest policies of discipline, suspension, and termination we have seen since the McCarthy era. On the topic of BDS, the officers of our chapter took the position that the letter and spirit of academic freedom was better served by encouraging our members to make their own decisions about whether to join the boycott of Israeli higher ed institutions. In response, the NYU administration regularly pointed out that we were out of line with the national AAUP position against boycotts. On one occasion, the voice of Cary Nelson, former AAUP president and prime mover of the 2006 statement, was informally solicited by NYU to ordain that we must be a “rogue chapter,” operating outside of the authority of the AAUP. Nelson, it should be noted, has played an outsized role over the years in organizing pushback against any association or group that has developed a critique of Israel and its apartheid policies.

To illustrate how damaging the 2006 statement has been, let me cite one specific example. In 2019, NYU’s Department of Social and Cultural Analysis (of which I am a member), debated a student proposal of non-cooperation with the university’s study-abroad program in Tel Aviv. The resolution in support of the proposal, which passed by a large majority, was based on the need to abide by the university’s own campus codes of ethics, which prohibits discrimination of any kind. Because of their Palestinian, or Arab, background, many students and faculty have great difficulty entering Israel. In 2017, Israel’s government amended the law to prohibit entry to individuals on the basis of their political opinions (i.e. if they were BDS advocates) or on their membership in groups like Jewish Voice for Peace and Students for Justice in Palestine. Those conditions of entry are clear violations of NYU’s nondiscrimination policies, and those in effect on most American campuses. Our resolution was followed, in 2021, by a similar university-wide pledge by the Faculty of Color for an Anti-Racist NYU and their allies, which garnered hundreds of signatures. In response, our senior administrators labelled these measures as “boycotts,” at odds with the national AAUP position. They made no effort at all to respond directly to the allegations about campus code violations. Ironically, these same anti-discrimination codes have most recently been invoked, with no small degree of hypocrisy, to label pro-Palestinian speech as anti-Semitic.

The recent AAUP statement on boycotts does not mention Israel; it references the Association’s nuanced history of supporting causes like “divestiture during the anti-apartheid campaigns in South Africa.” Yet the policy change has been attacked as evidence of anti-Semitism; a cynical reaction that has become all too routine. This willful misinterpretation is also redolent of one of the most common responses to BDS;

why single Israel out, when there are so many other countries with wretched human rights records? There are many reasonable answers to that question--no other country has regularly violated so many international laws -- but the most succinct is that Israel consistently singles itself out. Just to cite one example, relevant to the discussion above, NYU has branch campuses in countries like Abu Dhabi and China, where basic speech protections are non-existent, and about which our AAUP chapter has long been vocal. But neither of them has the arrogance to declare in writing, as Israel does, that they will deny entry on the basis of one's political views.

As a result of the July reversal, university presidents will no longer be able to weaponize AAUP policy to squelch the voices of their students and faculty. Of course, there are other ways to strengthen the current crackdown; even more repressive rules are being introduced at many institutions on the eve of new academic

year. On August 22, the NYU administration rolled out its new guidance on student conduct that, among other things, cites the use of Zionism as a "code word" that can trigger disciplinary procedures. Our FSJP chapter has responded in the strongest terms to this alarming interpretation of speech protections.

Under its new, and more pro-active, leadership, the AAUP is already fighting back against the far-right assault on universities. Could the association go further and adopt BDS? That will be up to the members to push for in the coming months, but there has never been a stronger case. Not one Israeli university has spoken out against the barbaric assault on Gaza, not even about the war on education itself, manifest as the international obliteration of every university, and almost every school, library and museum in the Gaza Strip. These assaults are not new—the repression of the Palestinian academy has been ongoing for decades—but the scale and degree of violence poured down on Gaza was unimaginable just a year ago. If not now, when? The AAUP should respond, as it always has done, to changing conditions within higher education, with appropriate action. Let us also remember that, in accord with the July ruling of the ICJ, "participating in boycotts, divestment, and sanctions against Israeli occupation, colonization, and apartheid is not only a moral imperative and constitutional and human right, but also an international legal obligation."

But there is another important avenue that the AAUP could pursue. Committee A places universities that are in violation of the association's principles on a censured list. In that spirit, Israeli universities, which have long played a central role in devising and propping up the country's apartheid's policies, surely merit the ultimate censure. Yet the AAUP's principles only apply to US universities. When I served on Committee A, we drafted and approved a 2009 policy statement that extended coverage to overseas

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programs and branches of American institutions. To my knowledge, this policy has never been seriously implemented. In 2011, Israel launched a well-funded campaign to entice American universities to start study-abroad programs there. The goal was to cement ties and improve Israel's image while diverting attention from its repression of Palestinian universities and second-class treatment of Palestinian students. Hundreds of colleges now have study abroad programs at Israeli universities, and so the letter and spirit of the AAUP protections already extends to their operations. As I earlier noted, Israel's law of entry places these programs in violation of most campus codes of ethics. It is also at odds with the AAUP's own principles of non-discrimination.

Having cleared the way for academic boycotts, the AAUP should adopt BDS as a principled act of its own, in solidarity with the call from Palestinian academics, before there are none of them left. Failing that, there are adequate grounds, within the body of the association's own policy, for holding American universities responsible for operating programs in Israel that are not accessible to entire classes of faculty and students. It is the AAUP's job to remind universities of their pledge to respect the association's principles, and, in this case, their own. If these rules cannot be observed, the study abroad programs should be dismantled.