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Chomsky attacks boycott of Israel

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The academic boycott of Israel is wrong, says linguistics professor and political dissident Noam Chomsky. Academics angered by the failure to resolve the Palestine issue should instead focus on their own national governments in supporting oppression.

Professor Chomsky, a long-term critic of US military aid to Israel, reveals in an email to *The THES* his objections to the dismissal of two Israeli scholars from the editorial board of translation journals owned by University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology professor Mona Baker.

"I think the action is wrong in principle," he says. "I understand and appreciate the motives of those who initiated and support the academic boycott, some of them old and very close friends."

Nevertheless, he says, the effects of the boycott run counter to the intentions of those pursuing these means.

Professor Chomsky believes there are many alternatives for western academics seeking to voice opposition to Israeli policy. "Academics in the West are uniquely privileged. Unlike their counterparts in much of the world, they have innumerable ways to oppose crimes and atrocities, without fear of repression or worse," he says.

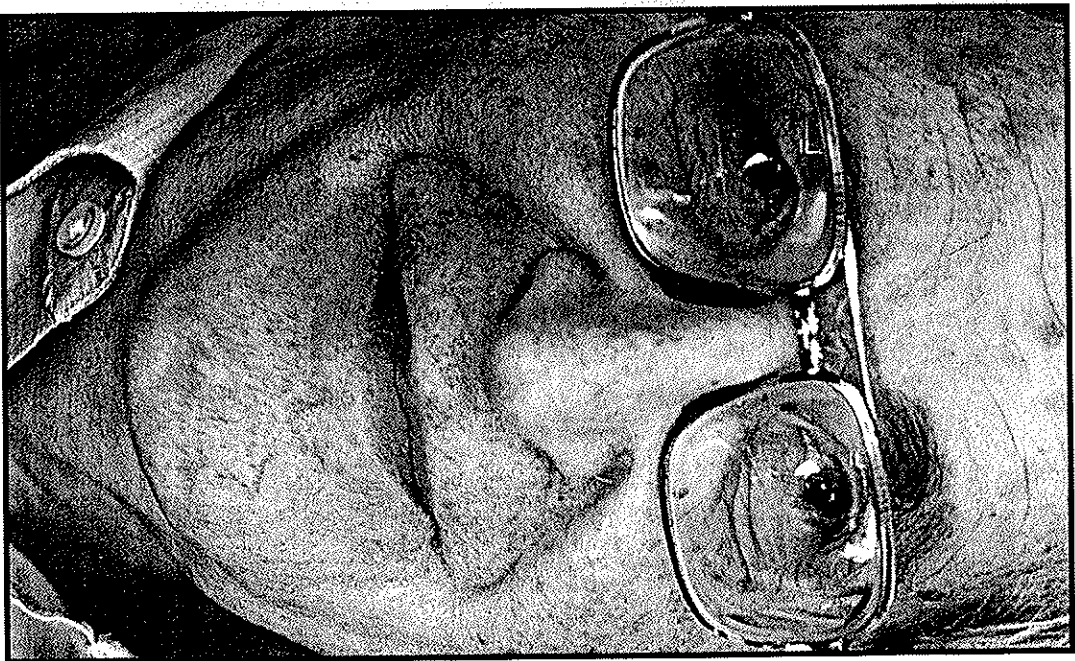
Professor Chomsky, professor of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was a prime mover behind last May's petition to the US to stop sending military aid to Israel, and he has campaigned for American universities to disinvest from companies doing business in Israel.

Critics could concentrate on cases where their actions can make the most significant difference, such as "crimes and atrocities to which their own state makes a crucial contribution," he says. "That is very definitely true in the case of Israel, particularly in the US but also among its allies."

Hostility to the boycott by such a leftwing icon, combined with the backlash at Paris 6 University and denunciation by senior figures in Unesco and the Council of Europe, were the main reasons why the academic boycott of Israel had failed to make headway, said University of Toronto professor Derek Penslar.

Professor Penslar, who is co-editor of the *Journal of Israeli History*, told a Toronto conference on anti-Semitism that targeting Israeli academics, many of whom hold critical views of the Sharon government, was misguided.

Stanford University history professor Steven Zipperstein criticised those who wanted to make Israel "this decade's South Africa". He said Israel differed from those countries he characterised as "too filthy to touch" in the strength of its internal debates, vocal professoriate and critical press. "Doesn't that say something about the moral, political character of a country?"



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Noam Chomsky: 'I think the action is wrong in principle'