

Mixing science and politics: boycott of Israeli scientists sparks debate, dissent, and subtle unexpected effects.(Profession.

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Author(s): Catherine Zandonella .

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Joel Hirsch, an Israeli biochemist at Tel Aviv University, has one more thing to worry about when he submits a scientific paper for publication: the possibility that scientists who disagree with his country's policies will shun his work. "My nightmare scenario is that the paper gets sent to a reviewer who might have an axe to grind about Israeli scientists," Hirsch says. In the year since some British researchers called for a boycott of Israeli scientists, funding agencies have largely rejected such appeals. A subtler, possibly no less-damaging kind of boycott has surfaced, in which researchers express their outrage with the Israeli government by refusing to interact with Israeli scientists. As a result, when a talk is canceled, or a faculty member receives no reply from a European colleague, Israeli scientists can't help but think the worst. "I can't be sure if it was because I am Israeli," says Orly Reiner, a neuroscientist at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, about the cancellation of her invited talk at a research conference in France.

SENDING THE WRONG MESSAGE? No one knows how many quiet acts of protest Israeli scientists endure. Nevertheless, boycotts galvanize scientists into political camps and provide endless fodder for the debate over scientists' roles in politics. Boycotters say it is morally wrong to sit on the sidelines. Opponents say that science should sit above politics. "Any boycott that impedes the open flow of information is akin to book burning," says Susan Greenfield, director of the Royal Institution of Great Britain. Critics of the boycott, who nevertheless agree with its goals, say it is unlikely to change Israeli policies, and it may backfire. "The boycott sends the wrong message because it breeds resentment," says Idan Segev, the David & Inez Myers Chair in Computational Neuroscience at Hebrew University, Jerusalem. "We should be focusing our anger at the Israeli government." He says academics can be outspoken critics of the government. "Scientists are the last people you want to boycott." This is especially true in the current political climate, many Israelis say, because of what some describe as an antiintellectual bent to the government led by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. The Minister of Education, Limor Livnat, has been locked in a power...

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