

Essay & Perspectives

Talking Regions and Relations: Dialogues on Palestine/Israel with/in Asia

Abstract:

The war in Gaza and the preceding Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023, have been discussed in different contexts in Europe and Asia. The situation in the Middle East is accompanied by strong emotional reactions across the globe. While the discussions in Europe—and especially Germany—often stress the 7th October attack as the main cause of the current war and emphasize the Holocaust and antisemitism as reasons for Israel's right to exist and legitimizing Israel's warfare in the Middle East as self-defence, many debates in Asian countries rely on a different historical perspective and perceive the conflict as an issue of settler colonialism and occupation. The contrasting comprehensions of the conflict in Asia and Europe are often portrayed as mutually exclusive; legacies such as the Holocaust in Germany, for instance, are positioned against the experience of apartheid, which informed South Africa's interference at the United Nations. At the DGA Conference in Bonn in September 2025, several scholars from Germany discussed how we approach this issue with our colleagues and friends in Asia. Alongside abstract questions of the discursive pitfalls and indignation regimes we are embedded in, we also discussed which concrete actions and measures we should apply when it comes to severe human rights violations. In this "Essay & Perspectives" contribution, the panellists were invited to elaborate on some of their main arguments and to reflect on the panel discussion.

Change in Relations between Arab and German Academics

Stephan Milich

In my view, the Gaza war represents a profound rupture in the relationship between German and Arab speaking scholars, both those Arab colleagues working at Arab universities as well as those living in Germany. My impression is that prior to October 2023, perceptions of Germany and of German academia among Arab scholars and intellectuals were largely positive. There had long been an awareness that Western states such as the United States and Germany apply double standards when it comes to Middle Eastern politics and other regions of the Global South.

Nevertheless, the overall image of German academia remained favourable. There were, I believe, three main reasons for this: first, Germany's strong commitment to academic freedom; second, its critical engagement with its own past; and third, its governmental dedication to multilateralism, international law, international cooperation, and human and women's rights. This perception, however, has changed fundamentally.

The Gaza war has once again revealed that what politicians in European societies excel at is betraying their own principles—and denying this very betrayal. Such hypocrisy must not be allowed to constitute the moral core of Europe. Although I am not aware of empirical data or surveys on this issue, my personal impression—based on conversations with Arab colleagues—is that many are deeply disturbed by the reactions of German media, officials, and even representatives of funding institutions to the war crimes committed against civilians, and by the absence of meaningful responses to policies of expulsion that aim to conquer the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, as repeatedly confirmed by senior Israeli officials.

Some of my colleagues have described their experience as a culture shock. They are appalled that a great number of German officials, and public debate more generally, seem more preoccupied with allegedly antisemitic expressions—such as calling the war against Gaza a genocide—than with the war itself: mass bombardments, the more than 70,000 Palestinians killed (over 17,000 of them children), and the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Israeli army (Max Planck Institute Rostock 2025; Bax 2026).¹ The fact that voicing opposition to violence and killing is itself framed as problematic, while the violence and killing are sometimes not, has been profoundly disillusioning. Consequently, some Arab scholars—whether consciously or not—now view us and our academic institutions in a different light.

Another crucial issue must also be addressed. While public discussion in Germany often focuses on the dangers of boycotting Israeli institutions, from their perspective, there is comparatively little acknowledgment of what can be described as a *de facto* boycott of Palestinians and Palestinian institutions, a boycott of their perspectives, experiences, and presence in Germany. And indeed, one can describe this policy as a “zero-Palestinians policy”, put forward by the German Foreign Office and other institutions. One example of this is the Foreign Office's refusal to rescue severely injured Palestinian children from Gaza in order to provide them with treatment in German hospitals, as some big cities like Leipzig, Kiel, or Bonn have offered to do (NDR 2025). Another striking manifestation of this policy is the widespread

1 For figures on the number of victims, see e.g. Bax 2026, Max-Planck-Institut Rostock 2025. In October 2024, a UN commission found that the Israeli army had committed war crimes and crimes against humanity, especially targeting the health sector: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/10/un-commission-finds-war-crimes-and-crimes-against-humanity-israeli-attacks> (accessed: 2026-02-06). For more information, see also Timo Duile in this issue.

reluctance of high-ranking politicians to be seen expressing solidarity with Palestinians in public.

For a short time, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) offered the scholarship programme *bridge* (RWTH Aachen University 2025) for Palestinian students from Gaza, but it was discontinued, and no comparable initiative currently exists, according to my knowledge, while some universities in other European countries like Italy have welcomed students from Gaza, supporting them with scholarships. Admittedly, bringing Palestinian students from Gaza to German universities is extremely difficult—given the numerous restrictions and obstacles. Nonetheless, more could and should be done. We bear a responsibility. German institutions such as the Max Planck Society have increased their funding for Israeli research, including research and development on facial recognition technologies that are allegedly being used in Gaza. At our institute at the University of Cologne, we are therefore particularly pleased to have established (together with the faculty of medicine) a new Erasmus+ partnership with An-Najah National University in Nablus (ANNU). It is my sincere hope that German academic and funding policies will shift again, and that the DAAD will renew its commitment to also supporting Palestinian individuals and institutions. To conclude, we urgently need more open, critical and honest dialogue between Arab speaking and German scholars. We should not, however, approach such discussions with a sense of moral superiority—for there is no basis for it.

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Regionalwissenschaften, Konfliktregionen und Medialisierung

Max Kramer

Asienwissenschaftler:innen können den Nahostkonflikt ähnlich angehen wie andere Konfliktregionen, indem sie über ein fundiertes kontextuelles Wissen der Region verfügen, wissenschaftliche Fragestellungen formulieren und mit Expert:innen aus der Region zusammenarbeiten. Da ich selbst kein Nahostexperte bin, mich jedoch in der Vergangenheit mit der Medialisierung von Konfliktregionen auseinandergesetzt habe, gehe ich das Thema von dieser Seite an und überlege, was die konfliktbezogene Medialisierung für uns als Asienwissenschaftler:innen bedeuten könnte.

Einige geopolitische Konflikte, wie Israel/Palästina oder Kaschmir, sind spektakularisiert und werden zum Teil jenseits spezifischer politischer Maßverhältnisse verhandelt (z. B. solche des internationalen Rechts oder des Verhältnisses zu politischen und zivilgesellschaftlichen Akteuren vor Ort). Dies kann dazu führen, dass andere, oft identitäre und moralistische Verfallsformen von Politik in Bezug auf diese Regionen die möglichen und realen Beziehungen der Menschen zu diesen Regionen überdecken – sowie deren institutionelle Einbettungen. Dies sollte uns als Regionalwissenschaftler:innen Anlass geben, über den Zusammenhang politischer und intellektueller Ethik nachzudenken. Schließlich können verhältnislose Formen der Politik auch innerhalb wissenschaftlicher Fachverbände zur Spektakularisierung des Konflikts beitragen und Polarisierung sowie gesellschaftliche Diskriminierungsprozesse in Deutschland, insbesondere Islamfeindlichkeit und Antisemitismus, Vorschub leisten.

Wenn man sich nicht als Expert:in politisch mit dem Nahen Osten beschäftigt, wird man wahrscheinlich in aktivistischen Zusammenhängen in das Thema einbezogen. Medialisierte Sichtbarkeit ist durchzogen von Widersprüchen, so stellt es sich für wissenschaftsaktivistische Akteure gelegentlich als schwierig dar, diese Sichtbarkeit in intendierten politischen Wandel zu übertragen. Eine solche Sichtbarkeit lässt sich oft leicht durch andere politische Lager aneignen, weil ihr oft ein unkritisches Bild von „Öffentlichkeit“ bzw. „Gegenöffentlichkeit“ zugrunde liegt. Dieses Bild der Öffentlichkeit verkennet in der Regel die algorithmischen und digital-kapitalistischen Vermittlungen der gegenwärtigen Informationskriegsinfrastruktur und idealisiert dabei politische Sprecherpositionen (oder Subjektpositionen). Zudem sind Spannungen zwischen politischer Subjektivierung und wissenschaftlicher Subjektivierung zu bedenken, die auf unterschiedlichen Zeitebenen operieren und nicht immer reibungslos übersetzt werden können. Während Aktivismus, Politik und politischer Journalismus eng an aktuelle Ereignisse gebunden sind – und sich teilweise der spektakularisierten Sichtbarkeit nicht entziehen können oder wollen – ist es wichtig, dass Regionalwissenschaftler:innen sich innerhalb der Zeitlichkeiten ihrer Problemstellungen bewegen, was auch für wissenschaftliche Verbände gilt. Wenn man nicht

Nahostforscher:in ist, kann es hier gelegentlich schwerfallen – aufgrund fehlender Expertise – angemessen zu antworten und die strukturellen Bedingungen der Sichtbarkeit einzuschätzen (das Letzte gilt natürlich auch für Nahostforscher:innen selbst). Asienwissenschaftler:innen mit anderweitiger Regionalexpertise können durchaus auch als Regionalwissenschaftler:innen politisch sein, sollten jedoch ein zeitlich-räumliches und affektives Maß einhalten, um entweder eine Hyperpolitisierung zu vermeiden oder eine Depolitisierung, bei der – in beiden Fällen – die Bedingungen der wissenschaftlichen Praxis nicht mehr angemessen reflektiert werden. Angesichts des Nahostkonflikts scheint es mir besonders wichtig, nicht zu imaginären Verfestigungen dieser Konfliktregionen beizutragen, wie es gelegentlich in den Sozialwissenschaften geschieht, wo wissenschaftliche Gesellschaften sich in die Temporalitäten des Spektakels einbeziehen lassen. Hyperpolitisierung und Moralisierung sind komplementäre politische Verfallsformen – u.a. vermittelt durch die Geschäftsmodelle des digitalen Kapitalismus – von denen rechtsextreme Akteure wesentlich mehr profitieren und sich diese mit großer Einfachheit aneignen können, da sie nur die profitträchtigen negativen Emotionen bedienen müssen.

Schließlich ist aus asienwissenschaftlicher Perspektive die Kritik an „Model-Cases“ von Monika Krause (2021) zu beachten, wobei es problematisch ist, bestimmte Staaten und Gruppen als Paradebeispiele für globale Prozesse heranzuziehen und auf diese Weise zur Spektakularisierung, Eurozentrik und Polarisierung beizutragen, ohne das historische Verständnis (trans-)regionaler Geschichten zu erweitern. Dies muss umso mehr für Wissenschaftler:innen gelten, die keine Regionalexpertise zu Israel und Palästina aufweisen können und sich dennoch – oft schematisch – mit globalen Erklärungen auf die Region beziehen.

Kurz gesagt, ohne ein Verständnis von Maßverhältnissen und einer intellektuellen sowie politischen Ethik, die es ermöglicht, sich in ein handlungsfähiges Verhältnis zu setzen (zum Beispiel durch Kooperation mit Friedensaktivist:innen in Palästina und Israel oder Asienwissenschaftler:innen in der Region), ist es schwierig, politischen Erfolg an moralischer Empörung zu messen, die sich allzu leicht in autoritäre Forderungen in Deutschland (und anderswo) übersetzen lässt. Maßverhältnisse haben nichts mit einer „Mitte“ oder einer „Balance“ zu tun, sondern beziehen sich auf das Verständnis möglicher Handlungsfelder, ihrer affektiven Bedingungen, der potenziellen Wirkungen unserer Handlungen und der Verhältnisse, die durch ein solches Verständnis nachhaltig gestaltet werden können. Gerade wenn es darum geht, Machtverhältnisse kritisch zu hinterfragen, müssen wir auch immer unsere eigene Position innerhalb komplexer Vermittlungen von Sichtbarkeit bedenken, denn ohne solche kritischen Subjektivierungsformen können wir keine langfristigen Verbindungen und Solidaritäten mit Menschen aus der Region knüpfen, die von dem Konflikt dort betroffen sind.

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Enabling Dialogue: Talking and Learning about Israel, Palestine, Antisemitism, and Coloniality

Timo Duile

In Indonesia, pro-Palestine attitudes often originate in anti-colonial solidarity. Contrary to the common claim of Muslim antisemitism as the basis of anti-Israeli sentiments, many Indonesians—including secular and leftist people—frame the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a colonial one. While not denying the Holocaust, many Indonesians put a stronger emphasis on the point of view of displaced and occupied Palestinians. Moreover, different legal regimes for Jewish settlers and Palestinians in the West Bank (Jewish settlers enjoy Israeli civil law while Palestinians are subject to martial law due to their ethnic/religious identity) evoke memories of colonial legal pluralism in the Dutch East Indies when European and autochthonous populations were the subjects of racialized legal regimes. As a German who has debated these issues and argued for Israel's right to exist with Indonesian friends, activists, and academic colleagues, I often feel that the issue of antisemitism and the Holocaust as a reason for the founding of Israel is downplayed in Indonesia. However, that does not make the arguments of my Indonesian colleagues and friends unreasonable.

The debates, both in Indonesia and in Germany, are often centred around a narrative that one has to take sides: either subscribe to engagement against antisemitism and defend Israel, or support decolonial claims of Palestinian liberation. This very discursive formation is, to my mind, deeply problematic. A closer look at decolonial arguments, for instance, reveals that it is often highly misleading to think of decolonial academics or activists as Jew-haters whose aim is to ethnically cleanse Palestine of Jews. Often, leftist and decolonial scholars or activists in Indonesia argue for a secular and inclusive state (one-state solution) in which Jewish and Palestinian people simply enjoy equal rights. This is surprisingly close to concepts formulated by progressive Israelis like Omri Boehm (2021). Having said that, antisemitism can become an issue, as antisemitic narratives occasionally enter decolonial and Muslim discourses in Indonesia (Hadler 2004; Duile 2025: 153–158). Therefore, talking about these issues is our duty as German scholars, but such a dialogue can only bear fruit if our partners in countries like Indonesia are convinced that we do not apply double standards and also that we take their arguments seriously. From my engagement with decolonial activists and scholars in Indonesia, my academic work regarding antisemitism and the *documenta fifteen* controversy in 2022, as well as my engagement with critical scholars in the “Decolonization in Dialogue” group in Bonn, I came to the conclusion that the either-or logic in both the German and Indonesian mainstream discourses is the main obstacle for a meaningful dialogue. I suggest discussing Zionism both as a liberation movement—

as it provides a safe place for an often-threatened minority—and, simultaneously, as a colonial ideology that has often led to the exclusion, eviction, and even the killing of Palestinians. In a similar vein, we should be able to discuss the Palestinian liberation movements as both an anticolonial force and, at the same time, as deeply problematic when they regress into dangerous identity politics, religious fanaticism, and antisemitism.

In light of severe human rights violations termed genocide by the United Nations Human Rights Council, human rights NGOs like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, and renowned genocide scholars like Omer Bartov, I think that one can only make the case for Israel by not only fully acknowledging the current atrocities but also by addressing deeper injustices, such as the killings and forced evictions of Palestinians before, during, and after the founding of Israel. Only then will our partners in countries like Indonesia listen to us when we talk about the necessity of a safe place for Jews as a consequence of the Holocaust and antisemitism as a global problem. In countries like Indonesia, many scholars and activists argue for sanctions against Israeli state and academic institutions. In Germany, such sanctions are often deemed problematic as they may be motivated by antisemitism. Crucial here is, however, whether or not such calls are sanctioning Israeli institutions as Jewish institutions or solely as institutions involved in severe human rights violations. While the first possibility is indeed a potential problem that should be taken seriously, in my experience, most calls for sanctions are not based upon antisemitic ideologies, as they are calls for taking international law seriously. They recognize Israel and Israeli institutions as members of an international community to which equal standards apply. They are a means to urge Israel and Israeli academic institutions to comply with international law and to abandon a dangerous path to an increasingly ethno-nationalist political outlook. The call for sanctions is also a form of solidarity with critical Jewish scholars and public figures who recently demanded sanctions in an open letter (Gedeon 2025). In a similar vein, the Jewish Holocaust scholar Omer Bartov argued that the Israeli government effectively undermines the very basis of Zionism as the basis of the state of Israel (NPR 2025). Sanctions, in this regard, are a reaction also to those internal threats that currently transform the Israeli state and society.

In Germany, such sanctions are often contrasted with what is called *Staatsräson* (*raison d'état*), namely, the security of Israel. But do ethno-nationalism, genocide, and systematic human rights violations really make Israel safer in the long run? Contrary to what *Staatsräson* often means in hegemonic discourse (an uncritical support of the Israeli right-wing government), I am convinced that *Staatsräson*, if taken seriously, urges us to force Israel to comply with international law and to engage in reconciliation based on truth-finding processes. While I find it crucial to condemn Hamas, I have learned in my discussions with Indonesian activists and scholars that this is not enough if one wants a sustainable peace and safety for Jews in Israel. For us as academics, this is not an abstract problem, and we should be brave enough to demand consequences. To mention a concrete case, I am disappointed that

the University of Bonn did not investigate claims that its partner university, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, has parts of its campus on illegally occupied land. Such allegations should be investigated by an independent committee. The University of Bonn suspended cooperation with Russian institutions instantly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine but has stayed silent when it comes to Israel's violations of international law. Not surprisingly, academic partners in countries like Indonesia accuse us of double standards.

As scholars, we are part of an international academic community that should be based upon fundamental humanist values, mutual respect, and equal rights. As German scholars, we can and, indeed, should talk about Israel with our fellow academics in the Global South, even though this can be hard at times. For instance, when I critically examined the lack of empathy for Israeli victims of the October 7 terror attack in Indonesian media at a conference in Jakarta, the panel chair suddenly restricted the amount of time for my talk from 20 to 10 minutes, as he obviously felt provoked by my analysis. However, such dialogues can also be fruitful, and I have seen that new perspectives can emerge in such conversations. After evaluating my experiences of discussions with Indonesian academics and activists, I think that there is a fundamental condition for a controversial yet successful dialogue: instead of taking the fight against antisemitism on the one hand and engagement against (neo)colonialism on the other as ends in themselves, we should rather treat both as means for a common aim: to strive for a more inclusive and just world where those who are marginalized—because of antisemitism and of what, in decolonial approaches, is termed *coloniality*—become equal as subjects who enjoy the same human rights. Such a perspective makes it possible to explore the common ground of political stances that are seemingly exclusive. Antisemitism exists in the Palestinian solidarity movement and, more broadly, also in anti-colonial discourses, mostly in what Peter Ullrich (2014) has called “gray zones of ambiguity”. A respectful dialogue can counter antisemitic stereotypes, and in the past, leftist movements have, as Ullrich already noted in 2014, engaged in learning processes. It is now to us to continue these dialogues by emphasizing that we discuss these issues within, not against, the context of coloniality and the recognition of Palestinians' experiences. In doing so, we can make possible what Michael Rothberg (2009) has termed “multidirectional memory”, a form of memory that goes beyond the comparison of historic traumata and genocides, and may enable us to think, feel, and cultivate in new forms of empathy.

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Academic (Un-)Freedom in Analysing the Gaza War

Claudia Derichs

As a scholar of Southeast Asia who began working in and on Malaysia and Indonesia when both countries were still considered (semi-)authoritarian regimes in the political science nomenclature, I would like to reflect on the repercussions of the Gaza war for my current and future work as an area studies scholar. Critiques of Western universalism, originally formulated by post-structuralist and postcolonial scholars with emancipatory intent, have during the 1990s often been co-opted by authoritarian regimes, particularly in Asia, to deflect external criticism—especially concerning human rights violations. The first current of such instrumentalization took shape under the banner of “Asian Values”, championed by Malaysia and Singapore and seconded by others as a culturalist rebuttal to liberal democratic norms (Mols and Derichs 1995; Thompson 2004).

How is the situation today? In the wake of the response of Israel’s Defense Forces to the massacre of October 7th, 2023, numerous universities across the globe have discontinued their institutional cooperation with Israel, terminating higher education partnerships between domestic and Israeli universities. The Malaysian government under the leadership of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim exposed its close alliance with Palestine in general and the Hamas leadership in particular, prohibiting Israeli companies from operating in Malaysia or entering the country for the discharge of cargo (Malaysiakini, May 7, 2024). Following the media coverage of Malaysia’s official statements regarding its stance towards Israel and Palestine since October 8th, 2023, the commitment to partnership and solidarity with the Palestinian people was predominant and appeared to meet compliance across all ethnic and religious communities in the country. The explicit solidarity and support for the Palestinian liberation struggle dates back to pre-independent Malaysia. Pro-active attempts in the mid- to end-1950s by the Israeli government to have the state of Israel recognized by Malaysia failed. In 1959, then-Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman explained to Israeli cabinet minister Moshe Yovel “that Malaysia could not recognize the state of Israel since it would be impossible to overcome the opposing voices from the Islamic party and Islamic NGOs” (Musa 2024: 1). Malaysia’s support for Palestinian independence was primarily based on religion but nurtured also through the strong impact of Third Worldism in the second half of the 20th century (Derichs 2022). During the administration of Najib Razak (2009–2018), the cordial relationship with Palestinian leaders shifted from the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to Hamas. Anwar Ibrahim, Prime Minister since November 2022, met the late Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh in May 2024 in Qatar. There, he declared that “Malaysia appreciates Hamas’ willingness to free hostages, particularly women and children, and to accept the peace plan by the Arab world, OIC (Organisation of

Islamic Cooperation), and the international community” (Malaysiakini, May 14, 2024).

Against the backdrop of Malaysia’s explicit positioning in the Gaza war, it is obvious that the terminology of official statements and media reports thereof aligns with the intended message. Terms like “genocide”, the designation of Israel’s war in Gaza as “barbarism”, or the honouring of Hamas’ late leader Yahya Sinwar as “fighter and defender of the Palestinian people” are commonplace. In Malaysia’s view, the Israeli government embodies a Zionist regime that commits settler colonialism. Jewish religious authorities who visit Malaysia and express support of the Palestinian struggle are featured with great respect and appreciation, an example being the Rabbi Yisroel Dovid Weiss who walked the city of Kuala Lumpur with a *keffiyeh* (today often identified as Palestinian scarf) around his neck and “a sticker on his right chest with the message ‘A Jew (is) Not a Zionist’” (Malaysiakini, July 25, 2024).

Turning the gaze and sketching German media coverage of the same conflict in the same period of time, almost the exact mirror image appears. The usage of pro-Palestinian terminology and slogans in public is risky, and uttering phrases such as “From the River to the Sea” causes sanctioning even when no reference to Palestine is following the phrase. Criticism of Israel’s military modus operandi is possible to a limited extent and requires the accompanying recognition of Israel’s right to self-defence which is at stake in Gaza (and the West Bank). Anti-Zionist Jewish scholars and artists in Germany are ‘dis-invited’ as guest speakers, as fellows in academic institutions, and are hardly acknowledged as representatives of the Jewish community. The German parliament endorsed the definition of antisemitism by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), i.e., a definition that almost equals critique of Israel with antisemitism, in its resolution to protect Jewish life. This move became criticized by numerous figures of the art and academic world. The definition of antisemitism formulated by a group of prominent intellectuals in the Jerusalem Declaration (JDA) was adopted by several organizations in higher education but did not resonate in Parliament. The close relationship and solidarity with Israel are based on Germany’s legacy of the Holocaust and the government’s declaration that responsibility for Israel’s security is Germany’s reason of state (*Staatsräson*).

How do the two juxtaposed political positions affect area studies? As scholars of Southeast Asian Studies who use to work with trusted colleagues in the region, the roles have revolved. When Malaysian civil society actors engaged in advocacy work for free speech, the right to assembly and other core elements of liberal democracy in the 1990s and 2000s, scholars in and from the West were strongly inclined to study the former’s modes of organization and embrace them as cases in point for social movement research. In the early days of digitization in Malaysia (mid-1990s), the brave media initiative Malaysiakini—then an online-only daily covering news that did not make it into the mainstream media—was the role model for studying the liberating impact of the Internet in the country (Steele 2023). The Internet was seen

as a “subversive medium” in the interest of the transition from authoritarianism to democracy (Derichs 2002). Western political scientists labelled Malaysia’s political system as “quasi-democratic” or “pseudo-democratic” (Case 1993; 2004) and would put forward a number of reasons to classify Malaysia’s democracy as defunct and its government as (semi-)authoritarian. Malaysiakini’s co-founder Steven Gan was a welcome guest on panels and roundtables organized by European funding organizations in the early 2000s; one of his famous proverbs would be that in Malaysia “you have freedom of speech but no freedom after speech”. The sentence may become quoted nowadays by Western scholars who are speaking on panels and roundtables in Southeast Asia about their home countries. In reverse direction, it is now the scholars from Western democracies who can rely on activists in Southeast Asia in their effort to learn how to cope with an increasingly authoritarian political climate. The political opportunity structures in, for instance, today’s Germany are highly unfavourable towards scholarship on the Palestinian question. For area studies scholars, this means forging alliances for academic freedom across the globe has become a form of implementing a decoloniality. New Area Studies put the study of academic freedom in Europe by scholars from Asia into practice, and acknowledge the fact that human, civil, and political rights are anywhere at stake. The specific space-time configuration of the current geopolitical polarization calls to capture “the interconnections between events, actors, and developments on several scales” (Houben 2022: 3). But how are the actors and their stories interconnected across scales? I propose that scholars of Southeast Asia constitute a group of concerned scholars who struggle for the defence of academic freedom and un-censored research environments—forming a process geography that stretches across regions.

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Will Boycotts Really Have the Desired Effects?

Mirjam Lücking

Within the polarizing debates about Israel/Palestine, one key issue concerns the contested question of boycott. While calls for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions are rather loud, the lack of institutional support for Palestinian academics and institutions could be seen as a “silent boycott” (see the contribution by Milich in this issue). So, while there is very little debate about the support (or lack of support) of Palestinian academic institutions, the volume and emotionality of demands to cut ties with Israeli academic institutions—or, conversely, the outrage about such demands—have caused ruptures within our academic communities: in academic associations, in departments, among colleagues and cooperation partners as well as between academics and students. In several cases, we face a boycott of boycotters or a boycott of non-boycotters, when, for instance, collaboration with colleagues is terminated because they do or do not support boycott demands. The result of these toxic debates is a fearful atmosphere, marked by ruptures, cancellations, and silencing—in all directions. Little willingness remains to leave one’s comfort zone and listen to what others have to say. At this point, regardless of whether we deem institutional academic boycotts a useful tool or not, we need to reflect on our academic cultures. What do we understand by freedom of expression, how do we define the essence of academia, what role does reflexivity play, how can we ensure evidence-based argumentation, and how is sensitive communication with one another and with the broader public possible?

While the urge to “do” something rather than to engage in discussions may be understandable, I see at least three problems with the idea of severing academic ties as a means of creating international pressure, without engaging with these questions first: (1) the institutional nature of universities, in particular their internal complexities, (2) the repercussions that boycotts entail for individuals and consequently also for the research and in many cases activism that they establish, and (3) intellectual ethics for internationally working people like academics, thus our academic community more broadly. These three problems cast doubt on whether the termination of institutional ties in academia would have the desired effects (e.g., creating international pressure on the Israeli government, exposing complicity of academic institutions, ending human rights violations and occupation, etc.)

Regarding the first problem, the question arises whether institutional boycotts that are discussed at the level of disciplines will have an impact on the institution as a whole, or only on the disciplines in question. What happens when academics in anthropology or Asian studies are isolated by their international colleagues, unable to apply for collaborative third-party funding or unable to publish with their

institutional affiliation? In the neoliberal logic of our world, these departments will probably face cuts in internal funding (and thus also in national funding), their members, who are already pressured because of their political opinions and their activism, will be weakened, and in some cases, departments, which are places of encouraging critical discourse in Israeli society, might even be closed down and people, who are fostering such discourse, are being fired—which already happens for quite some time.¹

Regarding the second problem, the online mob culture of our time and the spectacularization of geopolitical crises (see Kramer in this issue) have shown how individuals are perceived as representatives of their institutions and are disinvited, silenced, and confronted with hate speech. The cancellation of sociologist Eva Illouz as a speaker at a lecture organized by the Erasmus Love Lab is just one of many examples (Smaling 2025).

Thirdly, internationally working people like academics are not only representatives of their national academic institutions, but they are also part of an international academic community—and so are their projects, including projects that are being accused of complicity in human rights violations.² Therefore, it is questionable if singling out one specific nationality would enhance a general critique of academic complicity—worldwide.

Without analysing these issues in excessive detail, the examples make it clear that boycotts can carry far-reaching—and often difficult to anticipate—consequences for academic cultures and for academic freedom, and for ways of opposing war, human rights violations, and occupation. Moreover, these effects are not confined to a clearly defined regional or national academic context.

As an attempt to ease some of the tensions in domestic and international debates about whether there should be sanctions or the termination of collaborative ties with Israeli academic institutions, I want to raise some points for reflection:

- What is the aim of “boycotts” and how likely is it that these aims will be reached through the termination of institutional academic collaborations? In what ways will boycott have the desired (or undesired) effects?
- Is “boycott” a useful tool to pressure a political regime, based on historical evidence? And if yes, which kind of boycott? What should be the criteria³ and the evidence to decide on the termination of institutional academic relations? And what mechanisms ensure that the cutting of institutional academic ties has the desired effects on an institutional level rather than causing repercussions on individual and disciplinary/departmental levels?

¹ See Skop 2014, Schejter et al. 2025.

² As an example, see the report on Dutch-Israeli academic ties: <https://academicitiesisrael.nl/storage/report-israeli-ties-v-2-20250626-gZEz.pdf>.

³ As an example for general criteria see the statement of the ethics commission of the University of Göttingen: <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/534983.html>

- What or who is the target of cutting ties with public academic institutions in Israel? What are the differences and commonalities of different academic institutions in Israel? Are semi-independent institutions, which are not officially part of a political regime, included in these boycotts or not? What are the differences between the termination of institutional collaborations with different departments (e.g., economy, anthropology, biology) and in different places (e.g., Haifa, Ariel, Jerusalem)?
- What kind of language becomes an end in itself? Which terminologies hinder room for exchange and critical debate? What results from elections on boycotts within academic associations? What does a boycott mean for freedom of opinion and for academic freedom?
- What are the differences between political and economic sanctions, boycotts in the field of arts and culture, and boycotts in academia?
- What are general criteria for the ethics of collaboration? What are the complicities of academic institutions in other contexts (especially in our own academic institutions)?
- What forms of academic (dis-)engagement are actually helpful for people on the ground in Israel/Palestine?

At a time when some Israeli colleagues are asking us to “boycott” them (Cassen and Pappé 2024), we need to engage attentively, carefully, and critically with these demands and avoid making merely affective decisions—such as raising our hands in a vote and then moving on with business as usual. Instead, we need to strive to understand the mechanisms of cutting institutional ties with Israeli institutions and elsewhere, including the risk of a backlash that affects academic cultures everywhere. Last but not least, I wish to promote the willingness to think through complexities and continuously reflect on our own complicities and those of our collaboration partners. Engaging in such reflections about complicity in a constructive manner might help identify productive ways of creating lasting networks of solidarity.⁴

4 I sincerely thank members of the German Association for Asian Studies (DGA) and the German Association of Social and Cultural Anthropology (DGSKA) for inspiring my reflection on this topic and for their willingness to engage in critical discussions. For further insights see the DGSKA-webinar series on “The Ethics of Academic Cooperation in Contexts of Human Rights Violations” (<https://www.dgska.de/en/webinar-series-the-ethics-of-academic-cooperation-in-contexts-of-human-rights-violations-starts-now/>).

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