

Letter to the AAA in response to IAA's letter of 28 August 2014

10 September 2014

Dear colleagues,

As anthropologists and citizens of Israel, we are writing to express our thorough opposition to the letter sent to the American Anthropological Association (AAA) by the Israeli Anthropological Association (IAA) on 28 August 2014 with regard to the scheduled discussion of the Palestinian call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) at this year's AAA Annual Meeting.

In our opinion, the letter contains misleading statements regarding what BDS sets out to achieve and the manner in which it does so. Moreover, the letter misrepresents the structural position held by anthropologists in Israeli society, as well as the responsibility of the practitioners of anthropology in Israel as elsewhere towards the Palestinian people and other victims of Israel's policies. One does not have to be a supporter of BDS in order to believe, as the undersigned do, that discussion of the academic boycott and other measures of censure of the State of Israel is an ethical prerogative for the AAA.

The letter you received from the IAA purports to speak on behalf of Israeli anthropologists, claiming that the adoption of an academic boycott (and by extension, its very discussion) would "render ... impossible any discussion, exchange of views, dialogue." The letter impugns "the call for considering a boycott" as "misleading – to the point of dishonesty – in providing an apologetic attempt to separate Israeli institutions from individual anthropologists." Yet the undersigned, as anthropologists and citizens of Israel, have faith in the AAA and the manner in which its Executive Committee has prepared the coming Annual Meeting. Specifically, we support the AAA Executive Committee's call for an open, transparent, and productive process and discussion of the position that the AAA should take with respect to Israel/Palestine. The IAA letter aims to prevent this discussion, finding fault with the AAA for hosting panels and talks that have yet to take place. Perhaps unlike the IAA, we do not expect that only BDS supporters will participate in the debate. Indeed, we welcome the participation of individuals and organizations that oppose BDS, question it or are simply curious to learn more about BDS, including the IAA of course. We do not expect this to be a placid, easy process; but then, true dialogue never is.

The IAA letter suggests that the distinction between individuals and institutions, which the call for boycott makes, is misleading, and further, that boycotting the latter “would stigmatize and cause concrete harm” to the former. But in conflating Israeli anthropologists with the institutions that employ them and the associations they join, the authors of the IAA letter set a bar they themselves can hardly reach. First, despite implications to the contrary in the letter, Israeli anthropologists have never as a body declared their opposition to the occupation and oppression of the Palestinian people. Second, contrary to the claims of the IAA letter, and as the proponents of BDS claim, the Israeli academy is a central pillar of the state, playing a key part in its repressive policies. Israeli academic institutions cooperate in myriad ways with the security establishment, including intelligence agencies. These institutions partake in the structural restriction of access to higher education for Palestinian citizens of Israel and other oppressed groups, such as Mizrahi Jews. At the same time, the right to education of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories continues to be violated outright by Israel’s military occupation, and some anthropologists have been employed by the Israeli Army for their “cultural expertise” or methodological research skills. The IAA has never collectively repudiated these practices, nor has it ever publicly questioned the legitimacy of the “University” of Ariel, a higher education institution recently established on confiscated Palestinian land in the post-1967 occupied Palestinian territories. *De facto*, the IAA - like all other academic associations in Israel - recognizes Ariel as an Israeli academic institution, and counts academics affiliated with it among its members.

Unlike the AAA, which has over the years made efforts to protest civil and human rights violations, the IAA has never, as a body, dissociated itself from the Israeli society-military complex. It is true that a substantial number of individual anthropologists in Israel have been involved in various initiatives to widen access to higher education. Moreover, In the past, a number of anthropologists promoted discussions on issuing IAA statements on political issues, but the results of these relatively rare attempts oscillated between protection of human and civil rights to protesting AAA's interventions on similar topics. Thus, in 1980, the IAA issued a statement in support of “the rights of the Bedouin in the Negev.” However, in 1983, following AAA's condemnation of the Israeli occupation in Lebanon, the IAA issued a statement condemning AAA's condemnation. Then, in 1988, the IAA Plenary decided to publish a statement in the national press regarding the

Palestinian Intifada (however, this statement was sponsored only by those who supported it). Ever since, the IAA as a body has not taken a position on these issues.

The current halfhearted expressions of opposition to the occupation in the letter you have received, with its calls for “balance” and “complexity,” are as far as the IAA has gone in the past 26 years. Importantly, even these gestures were not made of the IAA’s own initiative, but rather under the pressure of the Palestinian call for BDS. Yet in this move, the IAA letter forecloses any public debate. Instead, the letter invites “American and other anthropologists” to “contact their ‘local’ colleagues and hear about our opinions regarding boycotting academia.” AAA members are enjoined to contend themselves with calling their *individual* Israeli colleagues, hear that they are personally against the actions of their government, universities, and perhaps even against those of the IAA. What is true of Israeli anthropology as a corporate association is not true of all Israeli anthropologists as individuals, some of whom have come out publicly against the occupation as well as in support of BDS. They have done so in the name of academic freedom - the same principle that has led advocates of academic boycott to explicitly rule out the boycott of individual academics for simply being citizens of Israel or affiliated with its academic institutions. Of course, as individuals Israeli anthropologists stand to lose from the imposition of boycott on institutions that employ them. However, in opposition to the IAA’s claims, this potential risk is not inimical to dialogue. It is its condition of possibility.

We therefore encourage an open and public discussion of BDS, along with other possible measures. We wish the American Anthropological Association success in pursuing this debate at the coming Annual Meeting, whether its end result is adoption of the boycott or other measures of censure, or simply a productive professional exchange. We are confident that this critical discussion in no way makes the AAA an unsafe space for us as citizens of Israel opposed to its policies. At the same time, we urge the IAA to condemn the oppression of the Palestinian people, and especially the recent murderous war in Gaza. In taking such a stance, the IAA would take a first step towards dissociating itself as a body from policies and values that anthropologists cannot support in good faith. Until the IAA does so, its call to avoid discussion of boycott in the name of “dialogue” evades the cause it claims to uphold.

Signatories*:

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| Dr. Hanna Aviram | Dr. Yeela Raanan, Sapir College, Sderot |
| Eliran Bar-El, PhD Student | Michal Ran-Rubin, PhD Student, |
| Dr. Naor Ben-Yehoyada, Academy Scholar, | University of Chicago |
| Harvard University | Noa Shaindinger, PhD student, |
| Dr. Uri Davis, Erstwhile Associate Professor, | Department of Near and Middle |
| Israel Studies Track, Institute of Area | Eastern Civilizations, University of |
| Studies, AL-QUDS University, | Toronto |
| Jerusalem/Abu Dis, Palestinian Authority, | Dr. Nitzan Shoshan, Assistant Professor, |
| Palestine & Honorary University Fellow, | Centro de Estudios Sociológicos at |
| College of Social Sciences and | El Colegio de México |
| International Studies, Institute of Arab & | Dr. Dalit Simchai, Lecturer, Tel-Hai |
| Islamic Studies (IAIS)/European Centre | College |
| for Palestine Studies (ECPS), University | Dr. Hadas Weiss, Junior Research |
| of Exeter, UK | Fellow, Central European University |
| Dr. Hilla Dayan, Social Science department, | Institute for Advanced Studies |
| Amsterdam University College | X, PhD, Adjunct |
| Dr. Khaled Furani, Department of Sociology | X, PhD, Post-doc |
| and Anthropology, Tel Aviv University | X, PhD Student |
| Dr. Erella Grassiani, University of | X, PhD Student |
| Amsterdam | X, PhD Student |
| Dr. Dafna Hirsch, Lecturer, Department of | X, PhD Student |
| Sociology, Political Science and | X, PhD Student |
| Communication, The Open University of | X, PhD Student |
| Israel | X, PhD Student |
| Dr. Barak Kalir, Associate Professor, | X, PhD Student |
| University of Amsterdam | X, PhD Student |
| Matan Kaminer, PhD student, University of | X, PhD Student |
| Michigan | X, PhD Student |
| Eilat Maoz, PhD Student, University of | X, PhD Student |
| Chicago | X, PhD Student |
| Dr. Danniell Montereescu, Associate | X, PhD Student |
| Professor, Department of Sociology and | X, PhD Student |
| Social Anthropology, Central European | X, MA |
| University | X, MA Student |
| Adi Moreno, PhD student, the University of | X, MA Student |
| Manchester | X, MA Student |

* Due to fears regarding the possible repercussions of signing this letter, some signatories (particularly early career academics) have chosen to sign anonymously.