

Critique of the Special Issue of *Israel Studies*: The Editors' Response

Statement of concern

The stringent criticism of *Word Crimes: Reclaiming the Language of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* was initiated at the beginning of April 2019 and broadly disseminated along with petitions anyone could sign through listserv and social media postings to members of the Association for Israel Studies, the Editorial Board of the journal, *Israel Studies*, and a host of others with no connection to either the Association or the journal. It was also reported to the press.

The inauguration of this campaign is telling. In perhaps the first listserv posting, Ian Lustick claimed that *Word Crimes* criminalized populations and individuals and engaged in “demonization.” He was responding to the title, as he admitted he had not yet read the articles. He did not mention that he himself was publicly challenged recently for manipulation of language for polemical effect, specifically for his use of Holocaust, a topic treated in *Word Crimes*.¹ More measured and specific criticism came from scholars who read the volume and faulted some of the essays for arguments that were not grounded in scholarship and read like opinion pieces.

The Editors of the journal publicly acknowledged that the essays were uneven and invited a scholarly critical response. Among steps they proposed was to begin the next issue with a Letter of Dissent and to post it on the journal’s website; a detailed plan for consultation with the editorial board leading to an agenda prior to the AIS annual conference at the end of June; and the stipulation that acknowledged scholars would shape and fully develop the section on “Zionist Dialectics” over as many issues as required to critically address the topics raised in *Word Crimes*, and more.

The proposal was dismissed as charges posted to the web and elsewhere became more extreme. There was fulsome praise for the editors, the unquestioned contribution of the journal to the field, and the academic standards and openness to diverse opinions it has championed over a quarter of a century, followed by increasingly harsh and uncompromising demands that the only way to avoid irreparable damage to the journal’s sterling reputation was for the editors to resign and for the editorial board to be restructured. Some members of the current editorial board did resign to register their protest. More troubling are reports of pressure exerted on individuals, such as a warning that association with the journal could jeopardize promotion.

The claim that is being loudly trumpeted and broadly advertised is this: the publication of one special issue of *Israel Studies* that includes some essays whose scholarship has been faulted puts the future of the journal and with it the entire field of Israel Studies at risk. The only acceptable way to forestall the damage is if the demands of the critics are met—and now. This is a canard.

The role of social and mass media in rapidly exacerbating a critique that would normally have occasioned scholarly debate and argumentation is worthy of study by experts in media and politics. There are preferred means in the academy for voicing complaints and criticism.

Both AIS institutions, preparing to consider the situation at the annual June meeting, and the journal's institutions have been entirely disregarded. Both were bypassed in a surprisingly furious rush to judgment and a unilateral demand to dictate outcomes.

This campaign to enlist members and non-members to bypass legitimate and authorized bodies – the AIS Board, Executive Committee, and General Assembly – and to impose decisions without a normal deliberative process vitiates the very values it claims to represent. This is an episode of enormous consequence for the AIS. A similar effort last year was overruled, but only apparently contained. Resorting to external manipulation of an association of scholars bespeaks a fundamental disregard for its members and institutions.

Background

At its founding and during the early years of the journal, there were only a few dedicated centers, institutes or study programs in Israel Studies in Israel and none beyond. Few academic courses were offered abroad beyond Zionism and later the conflict. In the following years of rapid growth, the journal provided a crucial scholarly platform that stimulated and developed a growing field.

During nearly a quarter century, *Israel Studies* has been a prime venue, publishing the work of more than 600 different scholars who have contributed at least one article in 67 issues. Within this extensive compass there have been special issues, collections of papers around a special theme, and a department for “Zionist Dialectics.” Currently more than three thousand university libraries, research institutes and individuals subscribe to the journal. It is widely disseminated through JSTOR, Project Muse, EBSCO and others. Down-loadings are ubiquitous, including by scholars from countries with no formal relations with Israel, but wanting to know more about the country.

Sponsors and the Affiliation with the AIS

Israel Studies is sponsored by Ben-Gurion University's Ben-Gurion Research Institute for the Study of Zionism and Brandeis University's Schusterman Center for Israel Studies. It is affiliated with the AIS.

The terms of affiliation, as distinct from sponsorship, involve no financial or any other substantial obligation. Affiliation means members of the AIS participate in the editorial board and they enjoy a reduced subscription rate. AIS adverts may appear gratis in the journal. And the editors report to the Board of the AIS at its annual meeting. In other words, the AIS bears no financial responsibility for the journal and, importantly, does not have any role in its operations, including the appointment of editors. This arrangement has apparently been deemed satisfactory since it has never been questioned; only appreciation has ever been voiced at Board meetings.

We believe “affiliation” has benefited both parties. However, there are no impediments to disaffiliation should one or both sides determine that is desirable.

Academic Standards

As even critics of this special issue acknowledge, *Israel Studies* is highly respected for its academic standards. In the two years prior to the publication of *Word Crimes*, from 4 to 7

reviews were solicited for each article that passed scrutiny for potential acceptance. 120 different reviewers, among them members of the Editorial Board, have contributed to this process for at least one essay. After receiving the reviews, authors revised to an acceptable standard, explained why all or a portion of the reviews would be accommodated, or turned elsewhere to publish. Note that there has never been an instance of non-consideration or acceptance because of political views – and that includes articles for special issues.

Special issues:

18 of the 67 issues published to date have been entirely or substantially devoted to special topics. Some have been expanded into separate volumes published in association with the journal.

Special issues have been initiated by the journal's editors and members of its editorial committee. Editors of special issues have primary responsibility for reviewing and soliciting additional external reviewers. This process is common and until the present has never been questioned. In fact, special issues have elicited appreciation.

The most recent Special issue, *Word Crimes: Reclaiming the Language of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*:

The term “Word Crimes” has aroused serious objections and is subject to misinformation. It is not new to the AIS. A panel with that title was submitted and accepted after inspection of full abstracts by the program committee at last year's AIS conference at UC/Berkeley. A large room was packed with AIS members. There was great interest; no one raised an objection. A session with this title will soon take place at another major academic conference. The initiating editor describes the rationale for the term and the issue:

Donna Robinson Divine:

We used the term *Word Crimes* to point to the way terminology is being used to lead and mislead in what is increasingly the conventional language for discussing Israel and its conflict with the Palestinians. The link between language and thought, a problem that reaches back to Plato who addresses the confusion of language in democracy in the *Republic*, is a staple of at least a century of Anglo-American philosophical studies. The crime of the title is the politicization of the discourse and the attendant disposition to cast Israel into a rhetorical zone once reserved for brutal regimes committing ghastly crimes. The issue does not compile a dictionary of acceptable terms nor does it proclaim any one approach to the study of the Conflict sovereign. Instead, it argues for good old-fashioned research where evidence informs narrative rather than narrative determining what acquires the status of fact. The special issue of *Israel Studies* focuses on words because the terms, themselves, distort the dynamics of the Conflict and obscure changing Israeli, Palestinian, regional and global developments.

Neither ideology nor politics informed the selection of contributors. In fact, I have no idea what political positions are held by the various contributors since I never asked. Nor did I list myself as AIS President in the description of contributors. I wrote the introduction as a Smith College Professor, Emerita. I sought scholars willing to interrogate what has become the conventional wisdom on how to study the Conflict and who could put their ideas into a short readable essay. The contributors come from several different countries and possess

different kinds of expertise—some work in think tanks and are active in formulating policies—one, in fact, is a graduate student. We wanted to reach outside of the campus gates because we believe the university is not the only residence of people with creative ideas on this topic.

I submitted the proposal to *Israel Studies* because I believed the project had scholarly merit and could be sustained by logic and evidence. That the uproar was unleashed and driven before people had read any of the essays suggests that the issue not only struck a chord--and hit a nerve--but that it, perhaps, was also a useful blow for diversity.

The problem of narratives about Israel and the Conflict is that they angrily feed off one another, as symbols grasped by partisans for one cause or another. WORD CRIMES is arguing for an alternative--not a consensus on causes or resolutions--but rather for a reasoned dialogue about these differences and a serious probing of concrete evidence.

I have profound respect for scholarship on Israel and have expressed that admiration in almost all I have ever put in print on the country: Here is what I wrote in the Introduction about research on Israel:

“More importantly, joining scholarly revisionism to political activism has produced no insights not disclosed through old fashioned research methods and access to archives holding newly declassified records. Traditional academic work had already liberated Israeli scholars from subscribing to a simple narrative of their country's state-building experience as fulfilling only a progressive national mission. Many newly minted Israeli academicians—some calling themselves new historians, others critical sociologists—probed the Zionist nation-building project by examining its impact on Palestine's Arab population, Middle Eastern immigrants, and on the lives and experiences of women long before the new vocabulary commanded serious attention. In fact, the generation that witnessed Israel's founding debated almost every aspect of the country's public policy even if these heated discussions were not always translated into English or incorporated into the published material reaching bookstores in the West.”

In a genuine academic community, intellectuals do not try to silence or ‘troll’ one another but rather to talk despite their differences even with no other aim than to display the grounds of their diversity. If AIS cannot stand for that kind of academic integrity, it may not be able to stand at all.

Additional observations: (Troen and Aridan continued)

The credentials and political affiliations of the editors and contributors: Aspersion cast on the issue's authors cross the line to the scurrilous. We also do not know the politics of the authors, and would never ask.

The blanket indictment that all are members of pro-Israel and anti-BDS groups, especially SPME (Scholars for Peace in the Middle East) and working on its behalf is false. Some examples.

The article on colonialism received much attention. The author, **John Strawson**, is a Professor of Law at the University of East London where he directs the Centre on Human Rights in Conflict. He is also a certified critic of Israel, prominently associated with Jews for Justice for Palestinians, a network of Jews who are British or live in Britain, practicing and secular, Zionist and not. They describe themselves as opposing “Israeli policies that undermine the livelihoods, human, civil and political rights of the Palestinian people.” He is also a prominent member of Machsom (Checkpoint) Watch. See: <http://www.israelcampus.com/third%20level%20pages/Petitions%20-%20Israeli%20Academics%20in%20Jews%20for%20Justice%20for%20Palestinians.htm>

Ilan Troen is an established scholar. He is openly opposed to BDS and officially represented the AIS at a plenary session of a MESA conference where BDS was the key agenda item. He has engaged in similar events at the MLA, AAA, and AHA on his own and on behalf of various groups. His commitment to opposing academic boycotts extends to public opposition to acts taken by the Israeli government. His article on indigeneity was extensively reviewed and revised twice, in a far more extended form that will be published this coming winter and again, for *Word Crimes*.

Asaf Romirofsky, one of the editors of the special issue, wrote on “Arab-Palestinian Refugees.” Romirofsky recently published a book on the subject (Palgrave Macmillan) after immersing himself in the topic for two decades, since he was a graduate student. He was faulted for not referencing well-known scholars although his footnotes are replete with references to UN, US and other archival materials. His decision to refer to primary sources rather than to the works of other scholars has been derided.

Donna Robinson Divine is the Morningstar Family Professor of Jewish Studies and a professor of government emerita at Smith College, a well-published expert, and award-winning teacher. Her election as president of the Association for Israel Studies testifies to the high regard with which she is held. Moreover, she is constantly requested to review for leading scholarly journals and to review applications for grants for the NEH, Fulbright, and the Israel Science Foundation. She, too, fails to meet the scholarly standards of the listserv.

Miriam Elman, the third editor of the special volume and one of its contributors, is a highly regarded and well-published political scientist positioned at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. Her experience in reviewing manuscripts and grant proposals is extensive. In fact, Troen and Elman first met during years of service for the Fulbright program where they served as two of the three expert referees for selecting and prioritizing grant applications for scholarship on Israel.

Short bios of other contributors are found in the volume. Donna Divine has already explained the logic of choosing them.

The tone of the critique of these scholars and their scholarship suggests that there is some unidentified rancor mixed in with valid criticism. Opposition to (some of) the topics, disagreement with the perspectives and scholarship of (some of) the authors, and a judgment that the editors failed to exercise sufficient oversight in this one instance do not

explain the uncompromising position and wholesale condemnation of the journal, and the special issue.

Next steps

The editors acknowledge that the special issue is imperfect and should have been improved. Because as editors of a long-running journal we are, and have been, dedicated to balance. We will carry on this debate through subsequent issues, opening “Zionist Dialectics” as a forum and soliciting submissions by scholars with opposing positions on these topics.

It is worth noting that no past or present member of the Editorial Board has ever complained about not being consulted about planned or published issues. In light of the serious indictment of the special issue, we will inaugurate full and transparent consultations with all members of the board on the forthcoming “Zionist Dialectics” segments. We require and appreciate members’ active participation to formulate subjects, designate potential authors, and review essays. The value of this section depends on the participation of the editorial board.

Israel Studies will continue with or without the members of the current Board. The sponsors of the journal have the authority to effect all necessary changes. Both have distinguished publishing records and produce significant scholarship in Hebrew and in English.

The next issue of *Israel Studies* will be published around the time of the AIS Annual Conference in June. The following two issues are in advanced planning. *Israel Studies* will continue to lead in producing scholarship based on diversity of perspectives and the highest academic standards.

Ilan Troen and Natan Aridan
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ⁱ Scholars often contest the use of language. The essays in the special issue of *Israel Studies* is not exceptional. See, for example, a recent example:

https://www.sas.upenn.edu/polisci/sites/www.sas.upenn.edu.polisci/files/Lustick_Michman%20et%20al%20response%20to%20Lustick_Four%20Constructions%20of%20the%20Holocaust.pdf