



Prof. A. Mark Clarfield – Director

פרופ' א.מרק קלרפילד - מנהל

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Prof. Alisse Waterston

President,

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As Israeli academics we wish to approach you with our concerns regarding the resolution adopted by the American Anthropological Association (AAA), stemming from the Boycott Disinvestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign. BDS is a movement dedicated implicitly and explicitly to the destruction of Israel as a Jewish State, the very idea of which it considers fundamentally illegitimate, oppressive, and immoral. From the point of view of BDS there is only one party responsible for the conflict between Israel, the Palestinians, the Arab and Moslem world, and that is the Israeli government and the Zionist movement that led to its establishment. Furthermore, according to the BDS mantra there is only one solution for the conflict (and the end of BDS), and it is not confined to total Israeli withdrawal from the territories it occupied in 1967. BDS' stance includes the active promotion of the return to Israel proper of all Palestinian refugees of 1948 and their descendants, which under present circumstances is simply a code phrase, because it would mean the end of Israel's existence as a Jewish state. BDS masquerades as a human rights movement, and as such has convinced many people who are disturbed by Israeli actions and policies, but do not share the movement's fundamental goal, to sign on to its demands. We leave it up to you to decide whether a position that considers national self-determination to be a right given to all peoples *but* the Jews, and any defense by Jews of that right as illegitimate, to be anti-Semitic or not.

We had believed that the leadership of the AAA would not want genuine humanitarian concern and political disagreement to be used to hijack your professional association into adopting and promoting the agenda of a mendacious and fundamentally destructive political movement. We have stood by and watched with increasing concern and disbelief as our fears were substantiated, step by step, culminating in a resolution adopted by the AAA's membership, fully expressing BDS's language and ideology.

In initiating the process your members received a letter from your President calling for "conversation" and "dialogue" and stating that anthropologists "work at understanding multiple perspectives." And yet the background information to which AAA's members were referred was composed exclusively of websites and documents supporting BDS and boycotts of Israel; none offered any information opposing it. Among the courses of action proposed for the AAA were various forms of censure and condemnation of Israel, whereas the possibility that the AAA might take no action at all is mentioned only in passing. The idea that the AAA might actually find the BDS demands destructive and abhorrent is never entertained, even as an intellectual exercise. So much for "multiple perspectives". The path was set.



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A task force was charged to frame recommendations for the Association. For some reason it was thought to be appropriate to staff its membership exclusively with people without “a deep history of expertise in the region.” Presumably this was to assure some degree of objectivity, rather like a jury. This meant, of course, that none of them spoke either Hebrew or Arabic, and they were utterly dependent on, to use anthropological jargon, “informants and facilitators” whose reliability, knowledge, perspectives, biases, and yes, truthfulness they would need to assess. One would have expected, under the circumstances, given the task force’s impressive professional credentials and their purported naiveté about the region, that they would feel the need to be exposed, and would actually seek out, information on claims and counterclaims, “multiple perspectives”. But this was not to be.

They saw their task as understanding “current perspectives on and experiences of the Israeli occupation of Palestine.” The idea that there was a conflict -both sides of which needed to be understood - was anathema to them. It is telling that the three members of the Task Force who came here rejected the itinerary which had been set up by knowledgeable consultants with “expertise in conflict analysis and resolution techniques”(p.6). They accepted Palestinian rejection of conflict resolution as “normalizing occupation”, and therefore “adjusted” their itinerary, helped by their Palestinian facilitator. Again, the effort to understand “multiple perspectives” shines through, "multiple" only if vetted by Palestinians.

The perspective they chose to adopt, in line with the proponents of BDS, was that of Israel as an example of a “Settler Colonial State.” The principle function of the state apparatus, in such circumstances, is to repress the indigenous population and to further colonization and the rights of the colonizers. Thereby they assured the outcome of the visit, because such a state is by its nature illegitimate by any Human Rights principle. Thus, according to the report, any military research in Israeli universities is by its nature illegitimate, because it helps to maintain the “illegitimate” settler colonial state. They appear to be blind to the fact that such “framing” settles the outcome of their enquiry, and equally blind to the ideologically-based distortion it entails.

To point out just one of many facts that this “framing” cannot accommodate: most of the Jewish population of Israel is composed of refugees and their descendants, and fifty percent are themselves or are descendants of migrants and refugees from neighbouring middle eastern countries. These refugees have nowhere to return to, since the option of returning to their abandoned homes in Arab countries is nonexistent. These are hardly colonizers from across the oceans. And although they were a minority, Jews have always been “indigenous” to Palestine. Need we mention the historical, spiritual, genetic and archaeological evidence that links the Jews with the country for the past few thousand years?

In what is, for anthropologists, an astonishingly condescending stance, nowhere are Palestinians credited with the agency they actually have and the way in which they exercise it: the choice of many to perform or approve of violence against civilians as a tactic of conflict. Nowhere, not once, does the report mention (as in BDS documents



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generally) the continuous violence against Israeli civilians, Jews and Arabs, conducted by Palestinian organizations over the last 20 years. The report is blind to the possibility that any fair-minded observer would raise, that this Palestinian violence, rather than “Settler Colonialism”, may be the underlying reason for the security barrier, restriction of movement and organization, of imagined and yes, real injustices. Yes, civilians are mentioned as “victims” in a chapter on health. But these victims appear out of the blue, with no historical context or explanation. And so it is no surprise that in the brief historical outline appended to the report, Arab rejection of the UN partition plan on today's date in 1947 and of the idea of a Jewish State is ignored, the PLO and its Charter is never mentioned, nor Fatah, let alone Hamas and its racist charter. The shelling of civilians by Fatah and Hamas? The bus bombs? The suicide bombers? Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza? Perhaps they occurred on another planet?

With the exception of the discussion of the pros and cons of boycott, nowhere, not even in one line, does the report present contrary positions on the “facts” it presents. Of the 66 “interlocutors” named in the appendix only 16 are from Israeli universities, and, because Israel is, despite the image this report presents, a pluralistic and relatively open society, some of these Israelis are Arabs and some even supporters of BDS. Thus the “space” for “multiple perspectives”, even if we suspend our disbelief and imagine that it was honestly intended, was never opened.

We will not go through the report with a fine-toothed comb, although this may need to be done lest its “findings” be accepted as uncontested facts. Indeed, there are instances where the report refers to real instances of hardship, oppression, or denial of rights. Because as Israeli citizens we deplore these, we have sought to expose them, have actively fought them, and would welcome allies in this fight. Many of the “facts” it assembles are:

*exaggerations* (the comparison between “Palestinian space” and US policy towards Native Americans: anyone who has been to a native America reservation knows that these have been the settings of real genocide, subjugation and neglect, much more awful than even the worst conditions in the autonomous areas of the West Bank);

*distortions* (“Israel blocks enough books from coming into Palestine that it has created a situation where books are falling out of Palestinian culture because they are not accessible”) – a falsehood simply too astonishing even to attempt to counter;

and *outright fabrications* (“the Task Force does want to take note of the fact that the Mizrahi and Ethiopian Jews ...within the army are more likely to be assigned the tasks of direct, sometimes violent policing of Palestinians, while the more prestigious and sanitized roles of gathering intelligence on Palestinians tend to be reserved to Ashkenazis”. Several Israeli Chiefs of Staff, many of its generals, and all positions in the army have been and are held by so-called “Mizrahim”).

All these “facts” are designed to portray a uniform picture of uninterrupted and systematic oppression and denial of rights, delegitimizing the State of Israel itself, and



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justifying the resolution which the AAA eventually passed. The preamble of this resolution makes it crystal clear: the plight of the Palestinians is and always has been solely the result of their dispossession by the illegitimate Settler Colonial State.

As Israeli citizens and academics we have always believed it our duty to advance peace between us and our Arab neighbours and fellow citizens. We have never denied Palestinian suffering, nor our moral obligation to do what is in our power to alleviate it. We and many others like us have always campaigned to end the occupation of the territories we seized in 1967 within the framework of a peace settlement. We have, as a group and as individuals, stood up for civil rights for Palestinians, served on the Boards of Civil Rights organizations, advocated for improved access to health care, mentored Palestinian students, and promoted research cooperation with Palestinian colleagues. But we cannot and do not hide from our eyes, and from Palestinians, their own (and their allies and friends) substantial responsibility for their circumstances. The explanatory filter in which very real (and sometimes imaginary) suffering is explained exclusively as the result of Israeli evil is convenient for those who do not wish to examine their own actions, and distances us from any possibility of peace and the end of occupation. Moreover, actions such as the AAA resolution, supporting the de-legitimization of Israel itself, convince the general Israeli public that they are not faced with a popular national movement which only wants to obtain independence and self-determination, but with a nationalist and religious ideology which is bent on Israel's destruction by any means, which would make any showing of compromise or weakness as simply suicidal.

We in Israel know that many supporters of BDS are motivated by genuine humanitarian concerns, are not anti-Semitic, but are unfortunately apparently blind to the movement's real goals. But since these goals are clear and apparent to any Israeli (who unlike the Task Force's members do have some "deep history of expertise in the region"), we must contend with accusations by our own fellow citizens that our so-called allies abroad are simply enemies of the very idea of a Jewish State. And thus, weakening us, and Israeli academia, the bastion of debate and free thought in Israel, your Association has helped perpetuate the very evils you claim you wish to fight.

One is forced to ask why the AAA has sought to single out Israel for condemnation when it is silent on so many continuing violent and acute instances of cultural repression in the Middle East and throughout the world?

The flaws we find in the AAA report should have been obvious to any trained anthropologist. Here is Myth in the old fashioned sense, a sacred tale which recounts and explains creation and thereby the present as well. Anthropology is threatened by its roots in Colonialism, and it must protect itself. Of course this protection can only be achieved by ritual action, a rite in which the community assembles "evidence" that will support the Myth and then performs a collective symbolic action, a ritual which is designed to make sense of the present in terms of the creation myth, and to cleanse the community of the pollution by which it is perpetually threatened. Here, our priests have identified Israel, the settler COLONIAL state. The resolution has (enthusiastically) passed, we have testified to our right-mindedness and we can



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congratulate ourselves that we are clean,<sup>1</sup> no longer tainted with association with Colonialism.

The AAA has now decided to boycott the institutions in which we and thousands like us teach and work, from which some of us have graduated, and of which we are proud. These institutions have always been, and will continue to be, in the forefront of creating and preserving Israel's moral conscience, whatever actions the AAA takes. It is because of the inherent freedom and political and social criticism arising from these institutions that many of the real blemishes on Israel's human rights record are known (blemishes that are not excusable but are no worse, and no better, than those of other nations, certainly no worse than those of other nations in permanent military conflict with real enemies) and it is from them, that much of the leadership in correcting them has sprung.

We ask to engage with us openly, on the issues themselves, on the manner in which your organization's report was compiled, on its framing position, on its content. We ask that in a spirit of open dialogue and fairness to your process that you find a way to distribute our views to your membership so that before the final vote is tallied there can truly be both a proper "conversation" and open "dialogue" among academic colleagues .

Yours sincerely,

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<sup>1</sup> "A Historic Night for the AAA:

*As heirs to a long tradition of scholarship on colonialism, anthropologists affirm, through this resolution, that the core problem is Israel's maintenance of a settler colonial regime based on Jewish supremacy and Palestinian dispossession backed by the US government. By supporting the boycott, anthropologists are taking a stand for justice through action in solidarity with Palestinians."*

<https://anthroboycott.wordpress.com> posted November 24, 2015; accessed November 28, 2015.