



Engaged Anthropology: The AAA's Israel/Palestine Task Force Report

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On 8 October 2015, Israeli security forces brutally beat and arrested two students of Birzeit University, a major Palestinian university in the West Bank. In response, Birzeit issued an [appeal](#) to academic and human rights institutions to speak out against the crimes of the Israeli occupation.

The university's appeal is one of hundreds coming in the wake of Israeli actions that violate Palestinians' academic freedom and human rights inside the occupied territories, as well as in Israel, where Palestinians account for 20% of the citizenry. For decades, Palestinian academics and human rights advocates have asked their colleagues in the West and elsewhere to stand with them against Israel's systematic violations of Palestinian rights, which include the arrest and arbitrary imprisonment of students, preventing students from getting to school, violent [raids of university campuses](#), and censoring and repressing student political expression.

Now, an increasing number of academics, including anthropologists, have heard these calls and are deliberating over how to respond to their Palestinian colleagues' requests for support.

On 5 October 2015, the American Anthropological Association's Task Force on Israel/Palestine released the final [report](#) it had been tasked to undertake by the AAA Executive Board in 2014. The Task Force was charged with developing recommendations for addressing the issues raised by the situation in Israel/Palestine. Composed of scholars with expertise in a wide range of geographic and topical areas, Task Force members conducted some 120 interviews over the past year, many with anthropologists of the region. In



addition, three members undertook a fact-finding trip to Israel/Palestine in May 2015 and met with Palestinian and Israeli scholars throughout Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory (excluding the Gaza Strip, which is currently impossible to reach due to Israeli restrictions).

As a result of a year of careful and thorough research, the Task Force reached the unanimous conclusion that “there is a strong case for the Association to take action” on the situation in Israel/Palestine. “If there ever was a time when this was a fringe issue within the Association, that time has passed,” the report stated. The report identifies a number of possible actions that the Association can take, from financial support for Palestinian scholars, calling on the Israeli and US governments to take steps towards peace, to implementation of a boycott of Israeli academic institutions (not individuals).

What the Ethnographic Eye Can See

The Task Force report is a devastating account of systemic oppression: how people live with it, how its different parts fit together, the range of its effects, and the material and ideological infrastructures that work to preserve a status quo and thwart change. Particularly striking is its emphasis on the human rights dimension of the Israel/Palestine conflict, something that came into sharper view for the Task Force delegation when they visited the region. As a whole, the report is a testament to the power of ethnography to reveal aspects of lived experience that might be obscured at a distance.

The report also shows the power of cross-regional anthropological analyses. In this case, comparison reveals how domination through the law becomes normalized in the everyday functioning of bureaucracy and infrastructure.

In particular, Task Force members were struck by the resonances between the experiences of Palestinians and those of U.S. racialized minorities. The routinized, racist harassment of Palestinians by Israeli security forces reminded them “of



police treatment of urban minorities in the U.S.” They also observed some of the spatial techniques that enforce Palestinian socio-economic marginalization, from “public transport routes that serve Jewish communities better than Palestinian communities to mechanisms that keep Palestinians from living in some Jewish communities.” These were reminiscent of “the mix of formal and informal mechanisms that kept black Americans from living side-by-side with whites in many American cities before the Civil Rights era.”

Crucially, the report’s authors discovered at first hand the settler-colonial framework that scholars of Palestine have used to understand Israeli ethno-nationalism. Here again, comparisons are illuminating. The report likens Israeli control of ever-shrinking parcels of Palestinian territory, and the separation, marginalization, and expulsion of Palestinian people, to “the U.S. creation of Native American reservations.” Perhaps most shocking for some American readers, the Task Force found that even “centrist” Israelis recognize that all of Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory exists within “a single unified system” as “they are all ultimately part of a single settlement project.”



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What To Do?

The evidence compiled by the Task Force is damning. It shows that “the policies and practices of the Israeli government place significant limitations on academic freedom and have led to substantial deprivations in the health and welfare of Palestinians in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, as well as within Israel itself.” This body of evidence is corroborated by scholarship on the region, including a decades-long history of ethnographic work, and clarifies why consequential action must be taken by the AAA.



The Task Force report does not advocate a single course of action for the AAA. Instead, it develops a set of principles upon which any decision regarding Israel/Palestine should be made. Based on these, it offers some suggestions for action. The principles reflect values that have long been at the core of the AAA's orientation to public engagement: a commitment to human rights and academic freedom; a commitment to advocate for minorities, disadvantaged groups, and indigenous groups; and a critical awareness of how the U.S. has been implicated in global conflicts.

It is clear to us, however, that the report provides the basis for endorsing an academic boycott as the strongest and most efficacious action the AAA can take. The Task Force notes that a statement censuring Israel by itself would be an “insufficient course of action” given the gravity of the situation in Palestine.

While necessary, letters to relevant agencies, and even financial support for Palestinian academics, would also be inadequate to address the horrific realities of occupation and discrimination. Worse, they would simply add to the collection of piecemeal gestures that have done nothing to dismantle the existing status quo. If decades of condemnatory statements and resolutions by the U.N. have not shaken this system of repression, it is unlikely that a AAA declaration will have any effect.

An academic boycott, however, would require the Israeli government to take notice. As the actions of peer academic associations have demonstrated, academic boycotts are particularly effective in pressuring Israeli politicians to recognize the growing costs of maintaining their oppressive policies towards Palestinians. Such boycotts can put needed pressure on Israeli institutions in order to force systemic change where none has been forthcoming for decades.

Addressing Concerns About the Boycott

There will be members of the AAA wary of an academic boycott because of the



possible risks involved. Some might ask whether the effects of a boycott will be positive and significant enough to warrant courting controversy. An alternative question might be: are we anthropologists willing to remain silent in the face of repression when [our academic colleagues in Palestine are addressing us directly](#) and asking for public, active solidarity?

One direct answer is: boycotts can and do work. The boycott of South Africa's apartheid regime, as Thomas Blom Hansen observes, "gradually, symbolically, and indirectly isolated South African academics and undermined the credibility of the regime." Boycotting Israeli academic institutions has increased global awareness of the inhumane conditions of life for Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories. The heavy investment in quashing the BDS movement is evidence of the boycott's efficacy; the movement's growing strength in the US and across Europe has put Israel and its U.S. supporters on high alert, prompting the Israeli government, as well as members of the U.S. government and Zionist groups, to lash out in an attempt to silence voices speaking out on behalf of Palestinian rights. Attempts to [stifle and intimidate BDS advocates](#) include the legalization of censorship and McCarthyite black-listing.

The Task Force report raises two additional concerns about the boycott. First, that it could contradict the AAA's commitment to the "dissemination of anthropological knowledge," and second, that it potentially violates the principle of academic freedom. But as the report itself clearly identifies, in Israel/Palestine, Israeli Jews have academic freedom while Palestinians and, to a lesser degree, Jewish critics of the state, are systematically denied it. It is meaningless-even perverse-to elevate academic freedom as an abstract ideal in a context where Palestinians' most basic rights are consistently violated. As the report itself notes, "[t]he distinction American academics tend to make between issues of academic freedom and those of social justice was not as salient to the Palestinian academics we interviewed because they experience their difficulties as academics as a symptom of their social and political subordination as Palestinians."

By arguing against the boycott on the grounds of academic freedom, then, anti-



boycott advocates seek to preserve the current status quo of academic freedom for those who already have it. This blinkered vision privileges the rights of those who have rights while, in the name of freedom, refuses to address the condition of those denied such rights. In contrast, the boycott seeks to make academic freedom truly inclusive. The principle is and must be a universal one.



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Similarly, a AAA endorsement of the boycott will help produce conditions in which its commitment to the “dissemination of anthropological knowledge” can be fulfilled in a broader way. That studying anthropology is a luxury afforded only to the few is evident in this statement by an Israeli academic to the Task Force: “Gaza is a prison. Two million people live there. Some of them would like to study anthropology, but they can’t because they can’t exit.”

Not only is studying anthropology a privilege of the few, anthropological knowledge itself has been mobilized in the service of the occupation. While the report maintains that “the most obvious and clear-cut instances of active academic participation in Israel’s colonial project do not involve anthropology,” the [complicity of archaeology](#) in the annexation of Palestinian land suggests otherwise. Indeed, when it comes to the Israeli occupation, there is no separating the university from the state, as argued by political sociologist [Hilla Dayan](#) in her powerful speech at Tel Aviv University. For full and critical knowledge dissemination, arguably a cornerstone of academic freedom, the settler-colonial apparatus must be dismantled, both outside and within the universities.

The proposed boycott has been designed to ensure that *individual* Israeli scholars can sustain their professional activities. Despite boycott opponents’ claims, the academic boycott only prohibits engagement with Israeli academic *institutions* that are complicit in the denial of Palestinian rights. It in no way prevents



continued engagement with Israeli scholars. This includes anthropologists who are critical of their government's policies. If anything, the boycott highlights the scapegoating of these internal critics and links their marginalization within their institutions to the wider, systemic repression of dissent.

A final question that the report poses concerns the timeframe of the boycott. It points to the BDS movement's three principles for ending boycott — an end to the occupation, ending discrimination against Palestinians, and implementation of the right of return for Palestinian refugees — and expresses concern that the “AAA lacks the in-house capacity to monitor and assess the extent to which such conditions are met, and in the absence of further clarity concerning what these conditions entail, it is not possible to determine whether such a boycott could ever be ended.” While these are the stated principles of BDS, the [academic boycott](#) only demands an end to *Israeli academic complicity* with policies and actions that maintain the military occupation, discriminate against Palestinians, and prevent Palestinian refugees from exercising the right of return (as enshrined in [UN General Assembly Resolution 194](#)). The lack of an expiration date on the proposed boycott cannot be a reason for inaction. We should be much more concerned about reaching an expiration date for this colonial occupation.

We all look forward to the day when the injustices to which the boycott responds are in the past.

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