

WHY WE HOPE YOU WILL JOIN US IN VOTING AGAINST THE PROPOSED AAA BOYCOTT

We urge our colleagues to protect the academic integrity of the American Anthropological Association and, as we did in 2016, vote to defeat the resolution. Our reasons follow:

(1) The boycott resolution is aimed at the wrong target, Israeli academics, and will have absolutely no impact upon resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Whether intended or not the main effects of a pro-boycott vote will be to blacklist our Israeli colleagues and do serious damage to the American Anthropological Association as a community of scholars.

(2) A boycott of Israeli universities and thereby Israeli anthropologists violates academic freedom and free speech and will discredit the American Anthropological Association. A boycott means that the American Anthropological Association will be participating in an assault on the fundamental principles of open discourse, exchange of ideas, and free argumentation -- principles that lie at the very foundation of the academy. The AAA will be party to efforts to undermine the free flow of ideas and the free movement of scholars in violation of the highest principles of the world-wide academy. What sense does it make to boycott the academics of any country? They are often among the people most likely to criticize the repressive and anti-democratic policies of their governments, and as such they need the support of like-minded intellectuals throughout the world.

(3) The resolution will do serious and lasting damage to the American Anthropological Association as an academic institution. It is hazardously ill-conceived for the Association to formally adopt a controversial partisan political position that many members do not share. The divisiveness and ill will created will be permanent. The membership of the AAA is not a homogeneous block, and political attachments, causal analyses of the situation, assignments of blame, and proposed political solutions are far from uniform. Clearly, many of those who agonize over the conflict are motivated by deep sympathies for one side or the other and are eager to express their feelings of solidarity with one side or the other. It does not follow however that seeking a vote of support from individual members of the AAA and then turning it into the unitary voice of the institution is an appropriate, legitimate, constructive or wise avenue for such expression. On controversial issues in a community of free thinking scholars one should not expect others to share one's own political convictions; and in this instance those others are one's peers in a professional academic association who may and do hold convictions of their own.

(4) It is corrosive of core academic values to insist that an institution such as a professional association (or a university) can legitimately adopt a single stance on a contentious political issue and speak on behalf of the community as a whole. An attempt to do so violates the intellectual autonomy of those members of the institution who disagree. A professional scholarly association should be committed to free thought, not collective political action. If the AAA throws its institutional weight behind the political views of one subset (even a majority) of its members, it will violate basic principles of academic freedom. Principles of academic freedom and free speech should be cherished, prized, and defended against the impulse to enlist the brand of our scholarly professional association as a means to promote the political views favored by any sub-set of its members, whether in the majority or the minority.

(5) A pro-boycott vote creates risks to the American Anthropological Association. The AAA would potentially pay a price for a boycott in the following ways: (a) The AAA will be subject to sanctions imposed by 35 states in the United States, including Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, New York, and New Jersey, which have passed legislation, executive orders or resolutions against boycotts of Israel. This may preclude meetings and other activities in these States. (b) Large numbers of current members are likely to leave the AAA. Recall that a slight majority voted against a boycott in 2016 and signed letters in opposition. (c) Many of the biggest donors and financial supporters of the Association and its subsections will withdraw their philanthropy, which will severely weaken the Association and its activities and ability to support scholars and students.

(6) Whatever the political intent of the resolution, it misses its intended target. The actual effect of the resolution will be felt in Israel most profoundly by the very academics who are working hard to build a more fair and just democratic society. They need our support, not our condemnation. A boycott means that the American Anthropological Association will turn its back on a leading force in Israel in opposition to current government actions and policies. Israeli academics are demonstrating and protesting to promote democracy and equality for Israelis, Palestinians, LGBTQ+ individuals, and immigrants from Eritrea, the Sudan and elsewhere. We should be engaging with them and supporting their struggle to promote human rights and social justice.

(7) The Israeli Anthropological Association and its members are among the most progressive elements in Israeli society. Israeli universities have a long history of being at the forefront of progress and innovation in science, technology, and culture. This is true even for those which receive partial funding from the Israeli government or military, as do many Universities around the world, including those in the USA. While there are many valid reasons why people protest the current government and its policies, boycotting or divesting from these universities does nothing to further peace, but only alienate and shun our colleagues in Israel with whom we should be working with to promote justice in Israel and the occupied territories.

(8) Whether intended or not, a boycott of this sort by the American Anthropological Association will be associated by many significant actors outside the association (government officials, patrons, colleagues, students) with the rising tide of global antisemitism and perceived as a singling out of Israel among many flawed democracies. Introducing partisan declarations into the structure and heart of the Association will undermine anthropology's credibility and legitimacy as an academic discipline. It will stigmatize the Association and its members.

(9) Some proponents of the boycott say that the AAA should vote for the boycott because "Palestinian Civil Society" wants us to do so. Aside from the difficulty of determining what "Palestinian Civil Society" wants in our particular academic situation, the weakness of that admonition as a reason for us to support a boycott should be addressed. The AAA is not meant to be a political extension of "Palestinian civil society."

Respectfully submitted by:

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