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Historian Group Rejects a Resolution Condemning Israel

By **Jennifer Schuessler** January 9, 2016 10:12 pm

ATLANTA — The movement among some scholars to condemn Israel suffered a setback on Saturday, when members of the American Historical Association, the nation's largest organization for professional historians, rejected a resolution condemning what was characterized as Israel's interference with the right to education for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

The resolution, which was debated at the business meeting of the group's annual convention, was rejected by a strong margin, with 51 voting for the resolution and 111 voting against. The measure had been submitted by the group Historians Against the War, after two similar measures failed to gain support last year.

The progress of the broader Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, known as BDS, among academic organizations has been steady, if mixed, since the American Studies Association voted in 2013 to boycott Israeli universities, causing a furor here and in Israel.

More than a half-dozen American scholarly groups have passed resolutions condemning Israel, including the American Anthropological Association, which endorsed a boycott resolution in November (it will now be submitted to the full membership), and the National Women's Studies Association, whose membership approved a boycott in December.

Compiled by the Faculty Action Network

While the historical association's more limited measure was defeated, Van E. Gosse, an associate professor at Franklin and Marshall College and a member of Historians Against the War, called the outcome "a complete moral victory," and hardly the end of the campaign.

"The American Historical Association has just spent a serious amount of time discussing the Israeli government's violation of Palestinians' right to education," Mr. Gosse said. "This debate is not going away."

The resolution prompted hot argument even before the convention, with supporters and opponents publishing dueling advertisements and other statements debating both its appropriateness and factual claims, as well as the measure's singular focus on Israel. The four-day convention also featured several scholarly panels devoted to the issue organized by Vicki L. Ruiz, the group's outgoing president and a professor at University of California, Irvine, aimed at putting the issue in historical context.

Discussion at the business meeting was contentious but civil. In an opening statement on behalf of Historians Against the War, Margaret Power, a professor at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, said that the resolution fell squarely into the group's mission.

"I don't see how we as educators could possibly oppose a resolution supporting Palestinians' right to academic freedom," she said.

But in the opening statement on behalf of Alliance for Academic Freedom, a group that submitted a formal objection to the resolution, Sharon Ann Musher, an associate professor at Stockton University in New Jersey, said that the resolution rested on "dubious claims" and that passage would tarnish the reputation of the association.

The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians "has been dividing thoughtful people of good will for as long as I've been alive," she said. She added: "The A.H.A. should not be turned into a vehicle for one group's Middle East agenda."

After the vote, James Grossman, the group's executive director, said he did not think the debate had damaged the group. The discussion "exemplified the way scholars ought to talk about historical issues" he said.

But David Hollinger, a historian at the University of California, Berkeley, said he wished less attention had been paid to "the goodness or badness of Israel" than to defining what he called "the very high threshold" for the association taking a stand on contentious political matters.

One young scholar in support of the resolution, Mr. Hollinger noted, had said he wanted the association to stand up and say what kind of group it was, "progressive or conservative."

"I'm glad this is an organization that does not define itself by how progressive it is," Mr. Hollinger said. "The A.H.A. isn't a progressive organization or a conservative organization. It's a professional organization."

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