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# Yet Again: The American Historical Association Rejects a Resolution Denouncing Israel

JEFFREY HERF | JANUARY 13, 2016, 8:47 PM |

The international campaign to delegitimize the state of Israel to spread distortions about its policies and to support boycotts, divestment and sanctions against it is going to fail. A campaign that appeared to be part of an unstoppable wave possessed of global momentum and the conviction that history, morality and, yes, sheer numbers, were on its side suffered its second and decisive defeat in two years at the hands of historians assembled at the Business Meetings of the American Historical Association in New York in 2015 and this past weekend in Atlanta. These victories against the BDS and BDS like resolutions are themselves important events. It was in New York and even more so in Atlanta that the distortions that have accompanied this propaganda blitz ran up against a wall of careful attention to fact and evidence on the part of professional historians. The flaming rhetoric about Zionism as colonialism and racism, and assertions about seeming routine violations of human rights that had proven so successful since the 1970s in producing lopsided United Nations General Assembly resolutions denouncing Israel or that made their way through the lower standards of evidence in other academic professional organizations met with failure when confronted with the skeptical gaze of historians trained to weigh evidence with care.

On Saturday, January 9th, 2016 members of the American Historical Association meeting in Atlanta at the organization's Business Meeting voted 111 to 50 to reject a resolution denouncing Israel. It was proposed by the "Historians Against the War" (HAW), the same group of the radical left that had proposed an Israel boycott resolution a year ago. In New York, some grounds for defeat of that resolution lay in HAW's failure to follow proper procedure. The defeat in Atlanta was all about rejection of the substance of the resolution itself. Both defeats revealed a fact that Israel's diplomats have known for decades: it was politics, not the facts which led to the PLO's past victories at the UN and to the Palestinian Authority's success in the Western intellectual left.

The confidence of the Palestinians organizations and their supporters became a hubris fueled by many victories in the politicized arena of the United Nations or in academic associations that had already been taken over by the radical left. In the course of winning over faculty in American Studies, Anthropology, Women Studies and Asian Studies with a stance of righteous victimization and the conviction that morality and justice were obviously on their side, the BDS and BDS type advocates had become intellectually shoddy. The denunciation of Israel as a colonial and racist

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state had been successful in non-scholarly arenas of Western intellectual and political life since the 1960s. The hubris of the anti-Israeli radical left led its members to fail to understand that the American Historical Association was a scholarly, not a political organization and that therefore the displacement of evidence with propaganda that had been so successful in other contexts would fail if met with a serious intellectual and scholarly response.

In 2014, HAW missed the deadline for submission of items to be placed on the AHA Business Meeting agenda. Hence, some of the votes against its resolution in New York were due to procedural issues. This past fall, HAW submitted its resolution on time and gathered sufficient member signatures to place it on the agenda. Perhaps aware that calls for a boycott could lead to serious legal consequences for the organization and endanger its tax exempt status, and probably in hopes of winning more votes, the HAW resolution this time stopped short of a call for a boycott of Israeli universities. Rather it repeated accusations that have become familiar in the international BDS movement about Israel's alleged mistreatment of Palestinian universities on the West Bank and Gaza. In place of a boycott, it called for the AHA to serve as a monitor to oversee and presumably correct Israeli policies towards Palestinian universities. The resolution alleged that Israel violated the rights of Palestinian faculty and students to "pursue their education and research freely," restricted "freedom of movement, including denial of entry of foreign nationals," and engaged in "physical attacks on Palestinian educational institutions." As a result, it urged that "the AHA commits itself to monitoring Israeli actions restricting the right to education in the Occupied Palestinian Territories." The resolution was posted on the website of the AHA in November 2015.

It was a combination of the following arguments and presentations of fact that led to the resolution's defeat.

First, some members of the AHA opposed the resolution because they opposed the organization's politicization. For them an organization of professional historians is first and foremost a scholarly, not a political organization and thus has no business passing these kinds of resolutions. In a complex and free society such as ours, they argue historians as citizens have numerous opportunities to express political views either individually or in organizations outside the academic associations. As historians, however, they cannot bring to bear the deep research and careful weighing of evidence on political resolutions about contemporary events that as individuals they are expected to offer in our research and writing. To suggest otherwise would also imply an absurdity, namely that the AHA should have a foreign policy. Further, if the AHA as an organization were to be hijacked by a political group or tendency, the credibility of the American historical profession would be shattered in the eyes of many students, faculty, alumni and the general public. Doing so could also lend legitimacy to a slow motion purge of the discipline of those who did not agree. Given the focus on Israel, it could inaugurate an era of renewed discrimination against Jews who did not share the leftist denunciations of Israel.

Second, as an organization of historians, members of the AHA were compelled to examine if the accusations were true or false. It was essential that a profession devoted to seeking the truth about the past should devote careful attention to fact and evidence. Hence, a number of us concluded that it was necessary to spend time and effort to refuting HAW's claims. As HAW had made an indictment, I sought out the views of the defendant, the government of Israel. I asked officials at the Embassy of Israel in Washington, DC to respond to this and other kinds of resolutions. The Embassy did so in a statement of December 18, 2015, I posted it at the website of the AHA on January 2, 2016, a week before the AHA Business Meeting.

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I wrote that “it is fair to insist that where there is an indictment, we must pay attention to the case for the defense.” It too had a right to be heard and to have its arguments and evidence carefully and fairly taken into consideration. The Embassy memo asserted that Israel does not as a matter of routine policy restrict the movement of faculty, staff and visitors in the West Bank. To the extent to which movements are restricted or Israeli military forces enter Palestinian universities (as in Tul-karm), it is because “Palestinian universities periodically serve as sites of violence and incitement.” “There are no restrictions on foreign academics teaching in the West Bank.” They are “free to enter, unless there are exceptional security concerns.” Israel does not routinely refuse to allow students from Gaza to travel to pursue education abroad and at West Bank universities but permission may be restricted if members of Hamas seek to continue their activities in the West Bank. In the war of 2014, Israel bombed the Islamic University not because it was a university but because it was used by the terrorist organization Hamas to manufacture and fire rockets at Israeli civilians.

The Embassy statement included stunning figures about the remarkable growth of the Palestinian universities on the West Bank and Gaza. “The number of undergraduates in the last ten years at Palestinian universities doubled from 129,000 in 2005 to 209,000 in 2015, the number of graduate students in that period tripled from 14,000 to 36,800 and the faculty increased from 3,700 to 6,880.” I added that the Israeli government would not support this remarkable expansion if it were adopting the policies alleged in the HAW resolution. It also bears mentioning that almost all of the universities in the West Bank and Gaza were founded after 1967. AHA members do not need to accept the, in my view, plausible case that Israel presents in order to vote against this resolution. All they need to do is acknowledge the limits of our ability as historians to reach a judgment about the facts in dispute.

With the posting of the statement from the Israeli Embassy in Washington and my summary of it on the AHA website, AHA members now had sufficient evidence to establish reasonable doubt about the truth of the accusations being made and repeated by the HAW members. Faced with facts in dispute, the only reason for a historian qua historian to vote for the HAW resolution was to make a political not a scholarly decision in favor of one set of factual assertions as opposed to another. To support the resolution would amount to accepting the case for the prosecution while ignoring the case for the defense, something that would violate the professional standards of historians trained to examine evidence from a variety of sources.

The efforts of the Alliance for Academic Freedom, a group of self-described liberals and progressives opposed to the BDS campaign was of great importance. At the Atlanta meeting itself, the debate about the resolution began with five minute statements in favor and in opposition to the resolution followed by two minute statements for and against. Professor Sharon Musher, of Stockton University in New Jersey made the opening statement in opposition. She had worked with David Greenberg at Rutgers University, in New Brunswick and with other members of the Executive Committee of the Alliance for Academic Freedom (AAF). On January 7, 2017, two days before the Business Meeting, Musher posted a statement composed by the AAF at the AHA member online site by the AAF group.

The AAF statement informed AHA members that “HAW’s resolution is driven by its leadership’s commitment to a full academic and cultural boycott of Israel, which HAW endorsed more than a year and a half ago and has been working to promote since ... Endorsing this resolution represents a first step toward BDS for the AHA.” It described the HAW resolution as “factually flawed to such an extent that it cannot credibly serve as a basis for the AHA to act.” It includes a

document ([found here](#)) that described “many of these errors, omissions, and distortions that render the resolution unfit as a basis for action by the AHA.” (emphasis in the original). Musher and her co-author Greenberg also stressed the way Israel was being singled out even though the world’s leading human rights organizations agree that other countries have worse records on issues relating to access to education. The Scholars at Risk Network compiles violations around the world, only a tiny fraction of which concern Israel (The AHA is an institutional member of the Scholars at Risk Network.). This additional document ([found at this link](#)), describes a range of academic freedom violations around the world, calling into question why one country alone should be monitored by the AHA.

In the AAF text “A Flawed Resolution: Errors, Misrepresentations, and Omissions in the Resolution Before the AHA,” the authors included detailed discussions of entry to and from Gaza, and challenged the HAW assertions about Israel’s supposed “routine” invasions of Palestinian university campuses. The wrote that the resolution ignored “evidence that runs contrary to its claims” and pointed to evidence confirming Hamas’ use of Islamic University campus in Gaza in firing rockets at Israel I the war of 2014.

The AAF statement also noted the ahistorical aspect of the HAW resolution. Historians seek to place events in a context in time and place. The AAF authors described part of the obvious historical context of Israeli policies towards Palestinian universities as follows:

After the breakdown of peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, the rise of suicide bombers and other terrorist threats to civilians led Israel to introduce measures to protect its population. The resolution does not mention this vital historical context. Nor does it mention that Hamas, which has governed Gaza for ten years, has a hostile relationship with not only Israel but also Egypt. Its borders are not the equivalent of those between friendly countries and cannot be viewed as such.

For historians these were crucial arguments. No historian can ignore the call to place an event into a temporal causal sequence. To do otherwise is to think in an ahistorical manner and to take events out of a context of time and place. That, according to the AAF criticism, was exactly what the HAW historians were doing.

The HAW advocates in Atlanta responded by revealing that they were indeed part of a political project that seeks to delegitimize the state of Israel. They said they had singled out Israel because they opposed colonialism and racism everywhere, thus indicating that they viewed Israel as a colonial and racist state. To justify why the AHA should support this resolution, they appealed to the “moral responsibility of intellectuals” to “oppose injustice,” thus assuming that Israel perpetrated injustices and deserved moral condemnation. They assumed what remained to be proven. One of the younger faculty members supporting the HAW resolution revealed his limited understanding of the role of professional organizations when he blurted out that he wanted the AHA to be a progressive but not a conservative organization. He dug himself into a deeper hole when he asked why we shouldn’t support a resolution that reflected what he taught in his classes. In short, faced with a combined assault on its assertion, the HAW advocates made an abysmally poor case for themselves, one that could only convince those who agreed with them on political grounds. It did not pass unnoticed that some of the more well-known historians who had supported the HAW resolution declined to speak up in front of their peers at the Business Meeting.

On January 4, 2016, Robert Zaller, Distinguished University Professor of Drexel University in Philadelphia independently posted a powerful statement of opposition to the HAW resolution at the

AHA website in which he explicitly referred to anti-Semitism and “the world’s oldest hatred.” Professor Zaller voiced his “strong opposition to this statement and the purposes behind it, (a) as singling out one nation, Israel, as uniquely deserving of criticism and condemnation; and (b) in ignoring the abysmal human rights records, including those of educational opportunity and scholarly expression, both in the territories currently administered by the Palestinian Authority and by Hamas, notoriously in most of the states that border Israel, and in many others worldwide.” Zaller noted that the accusations of 2016 were familiar.

Vilifications of Israel or discriminatory actions directed against it in international forums have been a commonplace for half a century. They are well understood as a code word for anti-Semitism, and the present resolution bears the same stamp. It is of a piece, too, with similar resolutions presented to other scholarly organizations of late, and regrettably in some instances passed. Those organizations embarrass only themselves, and betray the values and objectives for which they profess to exist. The AHA must not join them.

He did not mince words about the intentions he saw in “frivolous and tendentious nature” of the HAW proposal. Its “underlying intention” was “the continuing attempt to defame and delegitimize the State of Israel, to discourage contact and collaboration with Israeli scholars, and to range the AHA, the most important organization in the world dedicated to the promotion of historical awareness and scholarship, on the side of the world’s oldest hatred.”

In defeating the HAW resolutions twice, in New York in 2015 and in Atlanta in 2016, the members of the AHA at its Business Meetings have themselves made history. We who take pride in defeating this “tendentious” but unfortunately not frivolous resolution will look back on these events as moments when scholars asserted that facts are indeed stubborn things and that the American Historical Association is not the circus that the UN General Assembly has become whenever the issue of Israel comes up. Other academic organizations may refuse to follow our lead and may support the wretched texts that are filled with distortions about Israel. Yet if they do so, many historians will conclude that their standards of evidence and verification are not rigorous and that their scholarly claims about other matters should be taken with a large grain of salt. But at least for now, at least for this year, the most important organization of historians in the United States has opted to defend the best traditions of our profession and our discipline. The votes in New York and Atlanta were not only votes against the unfairness and biases of the BDS campaign. They were also the voices of historians proud of their craft and determined to defend its finest traditions.

The emergence of the modern discipline of history was inseparable from the age of democratic revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries. Not politics or authority, but reference to evidence became its anti-authoritarian watchword. It was that tradition the triumphed in the AHA. Yet isn’t the search for truth and respect for evidence supposed to guide scholarly work in all disciplines? I hope our fellow scholars in other disciplines follow our lead and stand up against efforts against the politicization of the academy.

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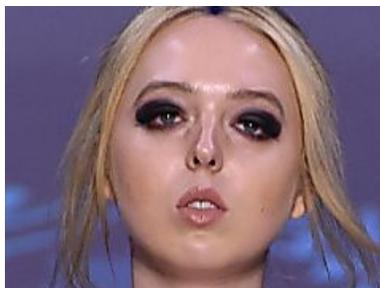
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