

April 18, 2024

Prof. Marijke Breuning, ISA President, 2024-2025

Prof. Laura Shepherd, ISA President, 2023-2024

Prof. Siba N'Zatioula Grovogui, ISA President-Elect

Prof. Meera Sabaratnam, Head of Academic Freedom Committee, ISA

Prof. Mark Boyer, Executive Director, ISA

Members of the ISA Governing Board and Executive Committee

Ref: Violation of Academic Freedom and Professional Ethics at the Annual Meeting of the ISA, San Francisco, April 3-6, 2024

Dear colleagues,

We are writing to you on behalf of the Israeli Association of International Studies (IAIS), which represents about more than 100 active members including scholars, teachers, and graduate students. Many of them have participated in Annual Meetings at ISA for decades, contributing and benefitting enormously from the academic and scholastic opportunities offered by ISA. We want to bring to your urgent attention four different and interrelated issues, which in our opinion constitute a flagrant violation of academic freedom and professional ethics, undermining the norms and principles that underlie ISA as the most important professional and academic association for the study of international relations in the world. We expect ISA authorities and officials to take notice of these four issues, conduct a thorough investigation, issue a public statement on these issues, and take the necessary measures to uphold the norms of academic freedom and professional ethics at ISA. The issues include: 1) Cancellation of Panel TA 08 "Peace in the Middle East"; 2) the personal statement of the departing President of the ISA; 3) the implicit approval of a demonstration of BDS sympathizers at the end of the Presidential Address; and (4) the holding of Panel SD17, "Racial Hierarchies and Accountability: The Place of Palestine in the International," under the auspices of the BDS, which we deem illegal according to ISA bylaws.

1. Cancellation of Panel TA 08, "Peace in the Middle East":

In February 2024 Benjamin Miller and Arie M. Kacowicz e-mailed Mark Boyer with the idea of putting together a serious and candid academic panel about the Israel-Hamas War (there was not a single panel in the program on that issue). They volunteered Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Thomas Risse to participate in the panel. Subsequently, Mark Boyer and Laura Shepherd organized, coordinated, and set the 'rules of the game' for the panel, "Peace in the Middle East." Mark Boyer was very forthcoming and helpful, despite the difficulties, substantial and logistical, following many emails on February 20, 21, 23, 28, March 5, 20, getting the final confirmation for the panel, including the participation of Sarah Maddison (Chair), and Juliet Dryden, Yara Asi, Thomas Risse, Mohammed Abu-Nimer, and Arie Kacowicz as participants.

Sarah Maddison worked very hard to put together the panel, holding zoom sessions with all the five participants, and preparing a detailed memo with eighteen structured questions. On April 2nd, the panelists got this email from Mark Boyer: "It is with regret that ISA has decided to cancel the panel on "Peace in the Middle East." Unfortunately, increasing concerns about safety and security for panelists and attendees have been identified, particularly with recent developments in the conflict." On April 3rd, Arie Kacowicz, Mohammed Abu-Nimmer, and Thomas Risse complained by e-mail about the cancellation, regarding it as a violation of academic freedom. On April 3rd, they got this email from Laura Shepherd: "I understand that this is a disappointing outcome and I want to thank you all for your preparatory efforts. We are not able to go ahead with the event in any form and the room will be locked and unavailable. I appreciate your commitment to raising your voices for peace." In an email to Arie Kacowicz, Juliet Dryden invited the panelists to continue the discussion at BISA in June.

We would like to point out that these four panelists never got a word from neither Yara Asi nor Sarah Maddison, despite several attempts of Arie Kacowicz to contact them. There are rumors that the true reason for the cancellation of the panel was the withdrawal of the Chair Sarah Maddison and one of the participants, which precipitated the unfortunate decision of ISA to cancel the panel. As Arie Kacowicz told Laura Shepherd, "we surrendered to our own fears", and the formal explanation of "security concerns" has to be clarified in good faith and in a thorough way; it did not convince most of the panelists.

2. Personal Statement of President Laura Shepherd at the beginning of her Presidential Address (April 4th, 615 PM):

At the beginning of her presidential address, Prof. Shepherd issued a personal statement, emphasizing that this was not done as President of ISA, whereas she condemned the "Israeli genocide in Gaza" and called for the immediate acceptance of a ceasefire according to UNSC 2728 (2024), though she did not refer to the unconditional release of the 133 hostages held there (as stated in UNSC 2728). While we respect her personal opinion, we believe that the important issue to clarify here is whether presidents of important academic bodies such as ISA should be making such personal political statements at the most official gathering of the association, the Presidential Address. We do not recall such political statements, at least in the last thirty years of the ISA, and we believe that this was an improper professional conduct, since her personal opinion was aired at an official gathering, (ab)using the stage she received as president.

3. The Implicit Approval of the Demonstration of BDS Sympathizers at the Presidential Address (April 4, 655-715 PM):

At the end of the Presidential Address at the Hilton Ballroom on April 4th, around 655 PM, a group of about 20-30 BDS sympathizers, who waited patiently until the end of Prof. Shepherd's address, came to the podium with signs "Palestine Should Be Free", "Stop the Genocide in Gaza", and "BDS at ISA." For about fifteen minutes they addressed the public, and called the audience to stand up in solidarity with the tragedy of the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip (Nobody cared to show any sign about the hostages in the Gaza Strip, they did not exist in the BDS 'show'). The demonstrators also distributed flyers ("Support BDS at ISA") inviting the

public to attend Panel SD 17, under the sponsorship of the BDS. There were no security personnel in the room, it seems that the demonstration and protests were pre-planned and coordinated with ISA in advance, and for the Israeli members of ISA who were present at the Address, and many others, this was an unpleasant experience, to say the least.

4. Panel SD 17: “Racial Hierarchies and Accountability: The Place of Palestine in the International” (Saturday, April 6, 400 PM, Continental 8 Union Square Hilton):

Regarding the composition of the panel and its contents, which included the participation of Lana Tatour (Chair), Catherine Charrett, Timothy Seidel, and Malaka Shwaikh, it was conceived a priori not as a ‘balanced panel’ (unlike the truncated TA 08 “Peace in the Middle East”). It reflected only one particular narrative of the Palestinian issue. During the addresses of the panelists, there was no mention at all of the events of October 7, 2023, including the massacre of Israeli civilians (Jews and Palestinians) and foreigners, the sexual atrocities, the word ‘Hamas’ was not mentioned nor the hostages in the Gaza Strip and the need to release them. Conversely, the panelists concurred that Israel is conducting genocide in the Gaza Strip based on assertions. Of course panelists at ISA are free to express their opinion, even if it is not based upon clear scientific criteria. But at least one should expect that they could include the presence of scholars with different opinions and views. This is particularly harming, when comparing the cancellation of TA 08 that was designed as a very ‘balanced’ panel, although it was cancelled for reasons that have yet to be clarified.

During the presentations of the panelists, we found the argument that the Jewish presence among the Western elites might be one of the reasons for the discriminatory approach towards Israel and the Palestinians particularly troubling. We believe that such a statement contains at least an undertone of Antisemitism. When one of the Israeli scholars in the audience mentioned the Israeli victims and hostages and asked the panelists for their candid opinion regarding the actions of Hamas on October 7, 2023, Lana Tatour retorted aggressively (that is of course, her right, but she could have done that in a polite way). Moreover, she added that the comment by the Israeli scholar was another example of the existing racial hierarchy between Israeli Jews and Palestinians, indicating that the Israeli scholar was racist. In our opinion, her statement attests to a clear violation of the ethical code of ISA that forbids to insult members of the organization, and that should not happen in a normal academic panel.

Lastly, and in our assessment, the most serious distortion of this panel, referred to its last 30 minutes, as it was pre-planned and stated in the flyer. That time was spent in explicit ‘activism’ and not in an academic discussion, deliberating about ways how to boycott and expel the Israeli academics from the ISA. For instance, the panelists encouraged the numerous people in the audience to join the different sections in ISA in order to enhance the chances for boycotting the Israeli universities and institutions, and by default, the Israeli members at ISA who study and work in these institutions. The fact that within the framework of an ‘academic’ panel approved by the Program Chairs, some members of the ISA explicitly deliberate how to promote the expulsion of other members of the ISA is an aberration, which in our view represents a clear violation of the ethical code of the association and its bylaws. Paradoxically, most of the Israeli scholars and students at ISA are in favor of peace and a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but that is not an issue of concern for the BDS sympathizers.

We thus consider the actions of BDS **illegal** according to ISA bylaws. In 2017 the following bylaw was passed:

“The International Studies Association does not condone discrimination based on any real or perceived affiliation or group membership, including those based on citizenship, color, gender, gender identity, marital status, national origin, physical ability, race, religion, or sexual orientation. Such discrimination is antithetical to the spirit and purpose of this organization.”

This is the ISA’s “Policy on Non-Discrimination.” In our assessment, BDS falls afoul of the citizenship rule, the national origin rule, and the religion rule (since it de facto never discriminated against Muslim or Christian Palestinian Israelis, in contrast to Israeli Jews). Hence, there is no room to hold an academic panel to be hijacked for political activism by BDS, with the connivance of ISA.

In sum, we believe that these four issues raised here present a very somber picture of academic freedom and ethics at ISA. To quote Marijke Breuing, Laura Shepherd, Siba N’Zatioula Grovogui, and Mark A. Boyer in their April 15, 2024 email to the ISA members, “None of what we write here is aimed at silencing discussion or protest, as protest is a fundamental right, especially cherished within academic associations. Rather, we only want to reinforce the high standards of generosity, professional conduct, and respect that have been (and should continue to be) signatures of ISA interactions.” We call the ISA leadership to stand to these principles, to address the four issues in explicit terms, and to provide clear answers. We call ISA to respect the principles of academic freedom and professional ethics that we all cherish; both in normal times, and especially against the tragic events that are unfolding in the Middle East.

We thank you in advance for your attention in these important, urgent issues, which are relevant for the identity and academic integrity of the ISA.

Best regards,

Prof. Sharon Pardo, IAIS President
Dr. Hila Zahavi, IAIS Secretary General
Prof. Arie Kacowicz, IAIS President Emeritus
Dr. Wajner Daniel, IAIS Secretary General Emeritus
Prof. Guy Ben-Porat, IAIS Board Member
Prof. Asif Efrat, IAIS Board Member
Dr. Ariel Kabiri, IAIS Board Member
Prof. Sara Kahn-Nisser, IAIS Board Member
Dr. Chen Kertcher, IAIS Board Member
Prof. Arie Krampf, IAIS Board Member
Dr. Amir Lupovici, IAIS Board Member
Dr. Carmela Lutmar, IAIS Board Member
Dr. Mor Mitrani, IAIS Board Member
Dr. Daniel Sobelman, IAIS Board Member