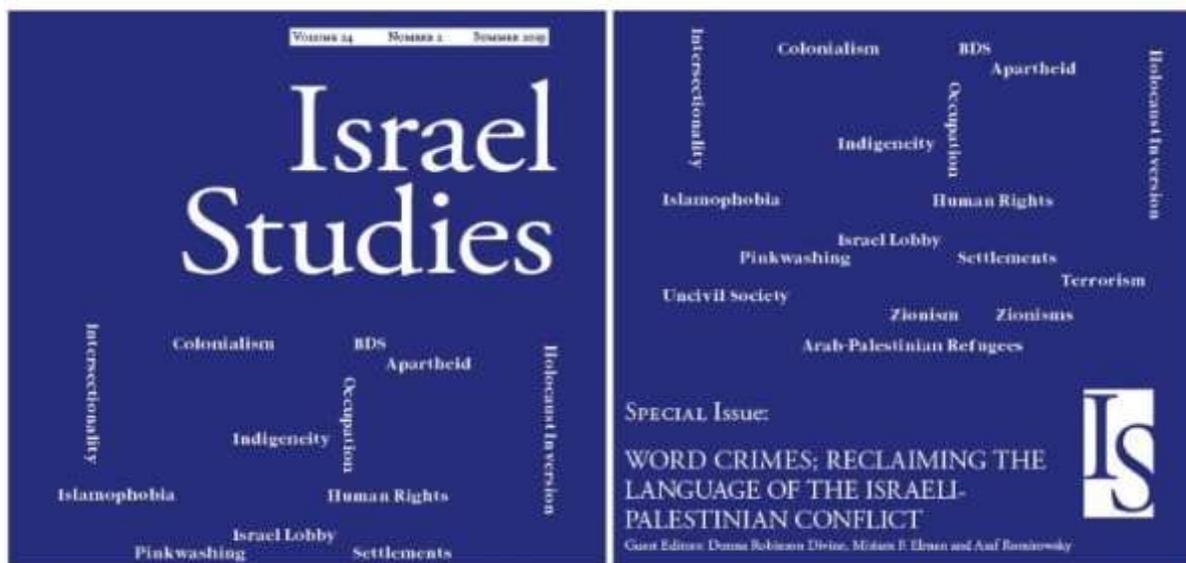


Opinion

After the Apology: The Truth About Our Special Israel Studies Issue

The academic journal's 'Word Crimes' issue caused controversy for having 'an anti-BDS, pro-Israel' bias. Its editors claim they're being silenced

Donna Robinson Divine, Miriam F. Elman, Asaf Romirowsky Aug 06, 2019 12:11 PM



The Israel Studies 'Word Crimes' issue

Published back in April, the most recent special issue of [Israel Studies](#) hit a nerve so raw that it is still reverberating in the pages of [online journals](#) and [newspapers](#). As co-editors of this publication, who conceived of the project “Word Crimes: Reclaiming the Language of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” came up with the admittedly “[stark and provocative](#)” title, and solicited the contributing essays – we are flattered by the attention but dismayed by how many readers continue to prefer uncivil denunciations of the volume’s editors and contributors over rigorous analysis and engaging with the substance of the essays themselves.

Let us begin with the so-called [public apology](#) issued by the journal’s general editors, Ilan Troen and Natan Aridan, in the newly released [autumn issue](#). Troen and Aridan acknowledge that the “Word Crimes” project “drew severe criticism” and that the “decision-making process regarding its publication were flawed.” We are disappointed that they felt the need to express any regrets over the response to our work, which many have

deemed excessive and censorious. Indeed, writing several weeks ago in *Fathom*, Cary Nelson, former president of the Association of American University Presidents, [stated](#) that the “attack on the special issue is unfounded and unwarranted; the attempt to slander its editors deplorable.” Nelson recommended that *Israel Studies* publish rejoinders but insisted that “no other formal action” would be appropriate.

Still, because it focuses solely on minor procedural reforms and not on the substance of “Word Crimes,” Troen and Aridan’s recent statement shouldn’t be misconstrued as a capitulation to the detractors’ demands for a “serious overhaul” of the journal. In fact, Troen and Aridan have repeatedly [defended](#) the value of “Word Crimes.” A lengthy “[editor’s response](#)” issued in May also castigated critics for their “surprisingly furious rush to judgement,” for issuing “harsh and uncompromising demands” on the journal and “resorting to external manipulation,” and for casting “scurrilous” aspersions on the volume’s authors.

Moving to the “[letter of dissent](#)” signed by those who resigned from the journal’s editorial board to register their protest, in our view this sharply worded statement is more an illustration of the passion of those who object to the special issue than any argument about its presumed conceptual or logical flaws. This letter, and the simultaneously released [online petitions](#), [manufactured a hysterical outrage](#) in place of what would have normally occasioned routine scholarly debate and argumentation. They also unfortunately spread misinformation about the special issue’s production.

In this regard, first and foremost it’s worth noting that “Word Crimes” is the 18th special issue of *Israel Studies*, and – as Troen and Aridan emphasized in May – was subjected to the same criteria (e.g., word length and style) and publication process (e.g., vetting and peer review) as all the others, none of which raised objections. In particular, no member of the journal’s editorial board has previously complained about not being consulted about planned or published special issues. In addition, the new academic editorial board of *Israel Studies* – appointed in the aftermath of the resignations – consists of eminent and prize-winning scholars, a clear indication of the continued scholarly esteem for the journal. “Word Crimes” has also received praise – see an extended review essay in [Fathom](#) and elsewhere, for example [here](#) and [here](#) – from highly regarded scholars for its courageous and bold contribution to the field.

The role of Arie Dubnov, George Washington University’s Max Ticktin Chair of *Israel Studies*, in “[sparking the crisis](#)” is also worth examining. Dubnov refused to accept a prestigious prize awarded jointly by the Association for *Israel Studies* and the Israel Institute, and also rejected an invitation to serve on the association’s board [full disclosure: Dubnov was nominated for

this position by “Word Crimes” co-editor and former association president Donna Robinson Divine]. He then began inciting opposition to “Word Crimes” through multiple postings on Facebook, and gathered names for petitions as poorly written as they were inaccurate – all sent spinning through cyberspace for maximum humiliation.

Contributors were [denounced](#) as having produced subpar work; the editors smeared as having practiced deception in the review process and selecting contributors based on a political litmus test. There were even allegations that we may have paid to ensure publication! That these accusations are damaging to a group of scholars – including people in the junior ranks – is as obvious as it is shameful. There are established ways to launch critiques in peer-reviewed journals. Sadly, the kind of rhetoric on display over this special issue was not even close to following established norms of collegial exchange and open intellectual inquiry.

“Word Crimes” emphasizes how a delegitimizing lexicon of terms and concepts is often used in highly politicized anti-Zionist scholarship. We focused on this linkage between language and thought partly because it is long a staple focus for political theory and philosophy (consider how significant this topic is in the works of Plato, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, for starters). That a vocabulary of historical explanation has dissolved into today’s crude value judgments and “[unhinged polemics](#)” distorts the academic study of Israel, of Palestinians, of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and not incidentally, of politics.

The special issue struck a chord – sales have been brisk and it’s now in a second printing – not only because it raised questions about the conventional discourse but also because it challenged the right of an increasingly politicized academy to serve as gatekeepers, determining what can and cannot be said about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“Word Crimes” includes essays from academics as well as from seasoned practitioners who come from across the political spectrum. Something unknown to us at the time we gathered contributors – because we never asked about political affiliations – is that the volume in fact includes authors who are well-known progressives and prominent left-wing activists (as well as those who embrace a more conservative politics). Our intention was to widen, not narrow, the discussion by bringing together different voices. Some essays present fully researched arguments; some gesture toward the larger critical narrative. Denouncing the essays as “failing to meet academic standards” rather than engaging with the arguments themselves violates what is a foundational educational value: A central purpose of scholarship is to investigate that which is taken for granted.

These essays do not comprise a “dictionary of acceptable terms” as Dubnov and other critics have charged. There is a distinction between arguing that certain words channel thoughts in one direction, on the one hand, and calling for a ban on their use, on the other. Rather than stipulate a set of standard terms, the essays weave a cautionary tale about how certain words now deployed routinely in discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are more polemical than accurately reflective of the past ways in which they were used. “Word Crimes” shows the ways in which a kind of linguistic alchemy has erased the many meanings of these concepts in order for Israel to be demonized and Zionists demoralized, held to account for whatever evil can be imagined.

The [uproar](#) over “Word Crimes” was unleashed and driven primarily by those who were unnerved by our challenge to an academic dogma and panic-stricken that we had somehow “crossed the lines between academic scholarship and political advocacy.” But criticizing a vocabulary isn’t “serving Israel’s public diplomacy” or hasbara, nor does it “compromise professional integrity,” as detractors put it. “Word Crimes” is, in fact, essential to a serious examination of the politicized nature of contemporary scholarship on Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That a group of prominent academics preferred a knee-jerk denouncement of our work over the normal scholarly process of debate and rebuttal is [all too common](#) a rhetorical strategy in today’s academia, where intellectual freedom and open scholarly inquiry is increasingly under threat.

Let us be clear: Over the last few months there has been a concerted effort to silence those who are calling for debate and discussion in the field of Israel Studies. It’s commendable that the editors of the field’s leading journal have stood firm against this relentless pressure and onslaught.

Donna Robinson Divine is Morningstar Family Professor of Jewish Studies and Professor of Government, Smith College, Emerita.

Miriam F. Elman is Associate Professor of Political Science, Robert D. McClure Professor of Teaching Excellence, Syracuse University (on leave), and executive director, Academic Engagement Network.

Asaf Romirowsky is executive director of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (SPME) and a senior non-resident fellow at the BESA Center.