

To: Mr. Guillermo Chacón, President;

And: Jesus Aguais; Vincent Guilamo-Ramos; Isabel Bello de Navarro; Yvette Calderón; Alvaro Carrascal; Ernesto Loperena; Susana Morales; Claudia Moreno; Nilsa Olivero; Angélica Ramírez; Vanessa Ramos; Adrienne Rosell; and Justin Toro, Board Members

Latino Commission on AIDS
24 West 25th Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10010

15 October 2019

Dear Members of the Latino Commission on AIDS,

We write as constituents, former employees, community members, friends, and supporters of the Latino Commission on AIDS in response to the news that the Commission has chosen to participate in an educational trip to Israel. According to a recent media release circulated by the Commission dated July 7, 2019:

“Guillermo Chacón has joined a delegation to Israel from July 7-13. The international forum is hosted by Project Interchange, a unique program of the American Jewish Committee (AJC)...The trip to Israel will focus on covering a robust, nuanced, and up-to-date understanding of Israel’s political, religious, historical, social, cultural, and technological issues impacting Israel today” (Latino Commission on AIDS, Media Advisory, July 8, 2019.)

On the grounds of the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel—a call initiated in 2004 by Palestinian civil society in the tradition of nonviolent action to end Israel apartheid (see: <https://usacbi.org/>)—we strenuously object to this trip. In particular, the international campaign for Palestinian solidarity focuses on Israeli academic and cultural institutions because they are “deeply complicit in the Israeli system of oppression that has denied Palestinians their basic rights guaranteed by international law, or has hampered the exercise of these rights, including academic freedom and the right to education”. (For more information about the boycott please see: <https://usacbi.org/guidelines-for-applying-the-international-academic-boycott-of-israel>).

As in the case of the United States and elsewhere, the AIDS pandemic cannot be effectively addressed through public education and health initiatives without having those who remain the most structurally vulnerable leading the fight. The Latino Commission on AIDS’ own mission statement makes this clear:

“In response to the critical, unmet need for HIV prevention and care for Latinos, a coalition of Latino leaders founded the agency in 1990. **The Commission realizes its mission by spearheading health advocacy for Latinos**, promoting HIV education, developing model prevention programs for high-risk communities, and by building capacity in community organizations” (*emphases added*) (<https://www.latinoaids.org/about/about.php>).

The Latino Commission on AIDS was founded in the early years of the AIDS crisis precisely because those who held power, including U.S. and global leaders in the fight against HIV/AIDS, left the plight of Latinx peoples and HIV/AIDS unaddressed. Latinx peoples had to not only find a seat at the table; we had to create our own table, including positions of leadership, and the research and programming initiatives that took stock of and addressed the structural barriers and violence experienced by Latinx peoples. We cannot help but see a direct correlation with Palestinians living under Israeli apartheid as they are systemically denied rights and targeted with state violence, which—like people of color in the United States—has an ongoing and indelible impact not only on Palestinian self-determination, but also on the effective prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS.

According to published research, Palestinians living in the occupied territories of East Jerusalem and the West Bank and who access the Israeli medical facility, Hadassah University Hospital, are diagnosed much later with HIV/AIDS and experience a higher mortality rate than their non-Palestinian counterparts (Rosenthal, et al 2011).¹ After more than 47 years of the AIDS pandemic, it is far too late to wait for the occupying state of Israel to take action to address the impact of AIDS upon Palestinians. Instead, it is important that we honor the Palestinian civil society's own call to end the occupation, which includes its medical apartheid, so that Palestinians have the freedom and rights to **“respond to the critical, unmet need for HIV prevention and care”** and **“spearhead health advocacy”** for Palestinians.

Furthermore, we find that the Israeli military occupation of the Palestinian territories is entangled with the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border. While our people from Latin America are held in cages by the Trump administration for seeking a better life, Israel similarly holds people in what has been called an open-air concentration camp in Gaza. Palestinians are regularly detained, imprisoned, tortured, and murdered, much like people of color are routinely racially profiled, detained, tortured, and killed by U.S. law enforcement, border patrol agents, and military. These intertwined militarizations of peoples and borders are more than merely symbolic; they are also material.

In 2017, *The Times of Israel* reported that the Israeli defense manufacturer, Elta, was selected by the United States government to build a prototype of Trump's border wall: “Elta manufactures radar systems and components for branches of the American military. It also provides radar components for the Israeli military, which purchases them using US military aid and must be spent in the United States.”² An investment in relations with and defense of Israel is an investment in relations with and defense of the United States, and their joint military profits and build-up.

¹ Rosenthal, Ayelet; Hila Elinav; As'ad Ramlawi; David Shasha; Karen Olshtain-Pops; Maya Korem; Iyad Arafeh; Shlomo Maayan (2011) “HIV/AIDS among Palestinians: detection, clinical presentation, prognosis and HIV testing patterns, 1994–2010.” *International Journal of Infectious Diseases*, Volume 15, Issue 6, June 2011, Pages e377-e381.

² [2] JTA (2017) “Israeli firm chosen to build prototype of US border wall with Mexico.” *The Times of Israel*, Sep 13. URL: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-firm-chosen-to-build-prototype-of-us-border-wall-with-mexico/>

The American Jewish Committee (AJC), which extended the invitation to collaborate with Mr. Chacón, is a leading organization in pro-Israel lobbies that intervene into U.S. government to strengthen U.S.-Israel defense ties. Legislative efforts by pro-Israel lobbies include the criminalization of the international boycott against Israel. In an attempt to censor U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar's criticism of the financial power of the pro-Israel lobbies, the AJC demanded an apology from Rep. Omar by maligning her critique (and anyone's critique) of Israel and Israel apartheid as automatically anti-Semitic.³

To end Israeli apartheid, U.S. organizations, including the Latino Commission on AIDS, must end the support provided by the U.S. government and institutions of the political, military, and financial power that maintains Israeli apartheid. While the impulse for the Commission to connect across borders is powerful and commendable, the violent conditions of Israeli occupation cannot be separated or ignored. In the occupied territories, medical personnel, supply chains, and hospitals serving Palestinians are routinely targeted and destroyed by the Israeli military, undermining Palestinian survival and autonomy. Just as the San Francisco Health Commission declared incarceration a public health issue that disproportionately affects people of color, it is imperative that we recognize Israel's occupation of Palestine as a threat to public health.

Israel is in violation of dozens of United Nations resolutions against its illegal settlement activities. The cultural and academic boycott against Israel follows the historical precedent set by the boycott that led to the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa. We are deeply disappointed that Mr. Chacón, whom we have held in great esteem, has chosen to participate in a trip whose aim is to justify the genocidal policies of the Israeli state by using the AIDS crisis as a means for "pinkwashing" it (see: <https://jewishvoiceforpeace.org/pinkwashing/>). We understand that these trips sponsored by the AJC and the Israeli government act as forms of propaganda that seek to normalize and even justify Israeli apartheid policies. We believe that no amount of progressive policy towards HIV-positive or LGBTQ+ people justifies the abuses committed against the Palestinian people in Gaza and the West Bank.

In the tradition of AIDS activists who have long protested the use of public funds for war instead of health care, Latinxs and people of good conscience around the world should rebuke these abuses by refusing to participate in Israeli propaganda trips like this one. We call upon Mr. Chacón and the Commission to reconsider this misguided commitment in favor of supporting freedom and the Palestinian right of return. We instead encourage the Latino Commission on AIDS to seek ways to directly connect and work with Palestinian civil society groups to address the global crisis of AIDS.

Sincerely,

The Undersigned

1. Dr. Adriana Garriga-López, Kalamazoo College, Michigan

³ [3] Grim, Ryan (2019) "PRO-ISRAEL LOBBY CAUGHT ON TAPE BOASTING THAT ITS MONEY INFLUENCES WASHINGTON." *The Intercept*, Feb 11, <https://theintercept.com/2019/02/11/ilhan-omar-israel-lobby-documentary/>

2. Dr. Edgar Rivera Colón, Columbia University, New York
3. Dr. Claudia Sofía Garriga López, California State University, Chico
4. Dr. Joanna Camacho Escobar, Independent Scholar
5. Dr. Ana Y Ramos-Zayas, Yale University
6. C. Rivera-Jones, queer of color
7. Dr. Carlos E. Rodríguez-Díaz, Washington, DC
8. Dr. Joseph M. Pierce, Stony Brook University
9. Samí Haiman-Marrero, URBANDER (headquartered in Orlando)
10. Dr. Anjana Cruz
11. Jorge Estrella
12. Aldo Lauria Santiago
13. Dr. a de la maza Pérez Tamayo, Universidad de Sonora, Mexico
14. Sebastián J Colón-Otero, LCSW
15. Dr. David Auerbach, University of Puerto Rico
16. Ricardo Vargas Molina, MA, University of Puerto Rico
17. José Santini, Puerto Rico
18. Natasha Lychia Ora Bannan, John Jay College of Criminal Justice
19. Alexi Diaz Leon, Puerto Rico
20. Miguel A. Cruz Díaz, Indiana University
21. Jorge Irizarry Vizcarrondo, Human Rights activist
22. Dr. Marcia Ochoa, University of California, Santa Cruz and El/La Para Translatinas
23. Dr. Patricia Noboa Ortega, University of Puerto Rico
24. Pablo Delano, Trinity College, Hartford, CT
25. Dr. Robert (Bobby) Rivera, St. John's University, NY.
26. Dr. Sandy Plácido, Bronx, NY
27. Carmelina E Price-Buskey
28. Nayda Collazo-Llorens
29. Christopher Viñales, Bronx, NY
30. Dr. Jessica N. Pabón, SUNY New Paltz
31. Edwin Figueroa, South Bronx, NY
32. Lissette T. Olivares, NJ
33. Dr. Daniel Nevárez, Independent Scholar
34. Dr. Alexa S. Dietrich, Wagner College
35. Verónica Sousa, Brooklyn, NY
36. Lisa Figueroa-Jahn, CUNY Graduate Center
37. Dr. Jih-Fei Cheng, Scripps College
38. Dr. Hoang Tan Nguyen, UC San Diego
39. Dr. Armando García, UC Riverside
40. Dr. Daniel A. Segal, Pitzer College
41. Dr. Umayyah Cable, SUNY Purchase
42. Dr. Nishant Shahani, Washington State University
43. Dr. Crystal Mun-hye Baik, UC Riverside
44. Dr. Gladys Nubla

45. Sarah Schulman, CUNY College of Staten Island
46. Dr. Nic John Ramos, Brown University
47. R. Benedito Ferrão, The College of William and Mary
48. Ricardo A. Bracho, Writer
49. Suchi Branfman, Choreographer, Scripps College
50. Lara Deeb, Scripps College
51. Kevin Wiliamson, Scripps College
52. Iris Morales, Activist, Author, and Independent Scholar
53. Cynthia Franklin, University of Hawai'i
54. Ricardo Dominguez, UCSD
55. Zayn Kassam, Pomona College
56. Dr. Salvador Vidal-Ortiz, American University
57. Caren Kaplan, UC Davis
58. Marisol LeBrón, University of Texas at Austin
59. Sayak Valencia, El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF/CONACYT).
60. Dr. Joseph Shahadi, New York University
61. Dr. Yadira Perez Hazel, University of Melbourne
62. Piya Chatterjee, Scripps College
63. Arnaldo M. Cruz-Malave, Fordham University
64. Priya Kandaswamy, Mills College
65. Stephanie Maria Peña, LMSW
66. Dr. Karen Tongson, University of Southern California
67. Marisol Negrón, UMass Boston
68. Heather Ferguson, Claremont McKenna College
69. Ora Batashvili
70. Dr. Kimberly Drake, Scripps College
71. Suyapa Portillo, Pitzer College