

ABOUT THE 2014 MLA DEBATE

from Cary Nelson, “Introduction” to *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel*

What should no longer be in dispute is that BDS and other movements seeking to delegitimize the State of Israel gather anti-Semites into their fold. If you express solidarity with a large group of BDS advocates, you will likely be linking arms with some motivated by anti-Semitism. In a May 2014 piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Jonathan Marks quotes passages posted by Modern Language Association members on the website set up so they could comment on a resolution attacking Israel for the visa policies it has adopted to protect itself from terrorist violence.ⁱ Part of what is notable about the discussion is that all comments were automatically signed and that everyone was aware that 28,000 people could read what they said. Indeed much of the debate, with names included, was soon published on a publicly accessible web site.ⁱⁱ

Things took a turn for the worse after a recent Rutgers PhD opined that “This resolution rightly targets only Israel given the humongous influence that Jewish scholars have in the decision making process of Academia in general.” Meanwhile, MLA Members for Scholars’ Rights was concerned that MLA itself might not distribute the fact sheet opposing the resolution that Martin Shichtman had sent to his fellow Delegate Assembly members before their January 2014 vote. So we hired students to copy the 20,000 email addresses that members willing to receive email messages from other members had authorized the MLA to publish.ⁱⁱⁱ We emailed all 20,000 the fact sheet. That triggered a series of agitated online messages from Stanford University faculty member David Palumbo-Liu, demanding that MLA investigate the matter.^{iv} “I do wonder how a small group of scholars marshaled the funds to hire enough students” to do the job of

establishing “a shadow listserve.” MLA Executive Director Rosemary Feal wrote to us, insisting that we reveal our finances, and suggesting, in effect, that we should have emailed each of the 20,000 to ask permission to email them. She copied a lawyer on her emails to us to add a bit of intimidation to her warning about needing to decide “what steps to take next.” Echoing all-too-familiar accusations about Jewish money, Palumbo-Liu suggested “an outside organization wishing to protect Israel from censure may well have donated the funds.” At that point I was tempted to say Baron Rothschild had bankrolled the plot. After initially saying it was no one’s business how we had funded the effort, I went online to say it had cost \$670 to gather the emails and \$150 to send them out and that an MLA member had written the check. To complete this little drama, I’ll add that the person who wrote the check was me. As always, MLA sent its members the link to the discussion, along with the long anti-Israel memo the resolution’s proponents had cobbled together from Palestinian activist web sites. The only supporting “evidence” all 24,000 MLA members received was thus that deceptive cut and paste packet advocating that they vote for the resolution. We were very glad we had done the work to counteract the organization’s biased process and make sure that as many members as possible had access to evidence from the other side.^v In June of 2014, MLA announced that the resolution was not ratified by the membership.

With the email episode mostly put to rest, the discussion returned to its roots. Elizabeth J. Ordoñez, formerly of Metropolitan State University of Denver, chimed in to regret how “moves to seek justice and opportunity for Palestinians” are “countered by Zionist attack dogs.” Many members assumed that meant those of us who were criticizing the resolution. Not to worry. Basum L. Ra’ad of Al-Quds University came on board to

reassure us that “‘Zionist attack dogs’ was probably used metaphorically.” Exactly what Professor Ra’ad had in mind to suggest if the phrase were *not* metaphoric I cannot say. But that didn’t prevent him from bewailing the pressure “exercised on universities by Zionist funders and lobby groups to quell any dissent.” But the dissent facing silencing efforts here was all dissent *from* the resolution. Its supporters were free to indulge themselves in a series of fantasy accusations. Much like the ASA boycott resolution’s supporters, MLA’s BDS advocates were crying foul every time someone disagreed with them. That tactic is now used nationwide.

ⁱ Here is the text of MLA’s Resolution 2014-1:

Whereas Israel has denied academics of Palestinian ethnicity entry into the West Bank;
Whereas these restrictions violate international conventions on an occupying power’s obligation to protect the right to education;
Whereas the United States Department of State acknowledges on its Web site that Israel restricts the movements of American citizens of Palestinian descent;
Whereas the denials have disrupted instruction, research, and planning at Palestinian universities;
Whereas the denials have restricted the academic freedom of scholars and teachers who are United States citizens;
Be it resolved that the MLA urge the United States Department of State to contest Israel’s denials of entry to the West Bank by United States academics who have been invited to teach, confer, or do research at Palestinian universities.

After we pointed out that Egypt controlled the main access to Gaza, the resolution’s supporters deleted references to Gaza from the text. They also dropped the word “arbitrarily” as a modifier before “denied” in the first Whereas clause, after Martin Shichtman asked what “arbitrarily” meant in this context. But that deprived the resolution of any claim that Israel’s actions were not motivated by security concerns.

ⁱⁱ Comments from MLA members through March 23 are available at <http://pastebin.com/index/HyJtnBeC>. Comments continued to appear online at MLA’s website through April 15. Although I only provide names for comments in the portion of the debate that was copied onto the pastebin web site, it is more than a little unrealistic for MLA members to assume confidentiality will apply to a site available to 28,000 people.

ⁱⁱⁱ The MLA member list used to be printed, sent to all members, and included in library subscriptions to the organization's lead journal, *PMLA*. It has thus traditionally been a public document. Now it is made available online instead. Members, however, can still buy a paperbound version for \$20. It is an opt-in list; members can withdraw their information if they so choose. Notably, only 20,000 of MLA's 28,000 members provide their email addresses for this purpose. We had no way to reach MLA's other 8,000 members, but Feal likely did. Members have always been free to assemble group email lists from the Directory to notify people about professional opportunities or provide information of potential interest. We did so on a larger scale, but there are no organizational rules prohibiting that. On April 9, 2014, Rosemary Feal wrote to us to quote the policy of the email distribution service we used, which was to "only use permission based lists." Instead of simply neutrally requesting information, she then leveled a hostile accusation: "MLA members deserve to know why you violated the terms of the company you used to send your message." As it happened, we had told the company how the MLA list was compiled, and they had no problem with its use. It is a permission-based list. We also included an opt-out button when we sent our email. Of the 20,000 MLA members, 55 opted out, including one of the resolution's cosponsors and Rosemary herself. For the record, though RF always referred in anonymous, neutral terms to "member" requests for information, we assumed that MLA leaders like its anti-Israel 2013 and 2014 presidents, Marianne Hirsh and Margaret Ferguson, might well be advising the staff, especially since it would both unusual and unwise for an Executive Director to take such aggressive actions against members without consulting the top elected leaders. If MLA has taken any further "steps" regarding our effort to educate its members, they must be treading lightly, since we've not heard of them. No MLA leader or staff member has expressed any thanks for our work in sending out a fact sheet that gave some balance to the MLA's information packet. It would seem that the MLA needs to rethink and reform its procedures for informing members about the issues at stake in resolutions distributed for a vote so that both pro and anti positions are represented. In this case not even the Israeli government was given the opportunity to respond to accusations made against it. Feal repeatedly sent out the anti-Israel packet, always referring to it as "the" background information for the resolution.

Because MLA rigidly adhered to its rules about what documents were required to be distributed to the membership, it gave the impression it was urging a vote to approve the resolution. Looking back on more than six months of MLA executive decisions, all of them siding with the BDS constituency, it becomes difficult to ignore what has changed in an organization that now has a significant presence of BDS advocates in its leadership. Years ago, when MLA's Radical Caucus proposed boycotts of Israel, Feal and the rest of the MLA staff made multiple special efforts to help me defeat the proposals—from providing me with open-ended free photocopying at the annual meeting to helping reword alternative resolutions and interpreting the rules to get them considered. Now, with the political climate in the leadership having changed, the staff was working the other side of the issue. The Radical Caucus was considered an unreliable fringe group; now MLA presidents were BDS advocates. Thus the "rules" were rigidly applied to deny us an anti-BDS session because the application deadline had passed. Notably, the anthropologists' association staff waived its deadlines to get us an alternative session in

2014 because they realized the Association would present a more neutral political profile that way. Not MLA. Then two reporters likely to be critical of BDS were denied press credentials to cover the January 2014 annual MLA meeting because they didn't personally evidence a history of writing about higher education. The record of the publications they represented was deemed irrelevant. Then Margaret Ferguson, incoming MLA president, was allowed to chair the discussion of the resolution without revealing that she had signed a public pro-BDS petition. The staff knew, but chose to keep the news to itself. Feal would later make the absurd argument that Ferguson's bias was irrelevant because she had signed the petition before taking office. Ferguson proceeded to rule as "out of order" exactly the sort of alternative resolution the staff would have facilitated only a few years earlier. Given the amount of time Feal, Ferguson, and others spent consulting with one another in onstage huddles, there was plenty of opportunity to advise Ferguson to rule differently, but Feal knows what side of the political bread her salary is buttered on. That said, both then and now the advantage of alternative resolutions was that they gave the members of the Delegate Assembly more options and more flexibility, thereby enhancing the Association's posture of neutrality. For Feal, so I believe, the only calculation to be made was narrowly political.

^{iv} For Palumbo-Liu's detailed BDS advocacy see his *Los Angeles Review of Books* essay "Why an Academic Boycott?" (<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/why-an-academic-boycott/>). Deprived of his conspiracy-theory funding complaint, Palumbo-Liu then decided to express his grave concern over whether we had paid the student workers a sufficient hourly wage.

^v On April 22, 2014, Feal wrote to Shichtman turning down his request to send our critique of the resolution to MLA's members: "I do not see any justification for privileging your comments over those from other members in the way you have requested." Of course our fact sheet was signed by several of us and was an express product of our new coalition, plus, unlike any other "comments," it had been distributed to the Delegate Assembly prior to their vote on the resolution.