

November 18, 2013

To Members of the National Council of the American Studies Association:

As members of the American Studies Association (ASA), including several former presidents, Council members, and ASA award winners, we are deeply committed to the values of academic freedom and the free exchange of ideas. **Given these priorities, we are troubled by the attempt of a vocal minority amongst the ASA's membership to force the entire association to enact a boycott of Israeli academic institutions.** The "Proposed Resolution on Academic Boycott of Israeli Academic Institutions" sponsored by the ASA Caucus on Academic and Community Activism does not further, but rather harms, the general interests of the association. If upheld, it would set a dangerous precedent by sponsoring an inequitable and discriminatory policy that would punish one nation's universities and scholars and restrict the free conduct of ASA members to engage with colleagues in Israel.

Collectively, we, the undersigned, represent a wide range of views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and how it should be resolved. While we can and should vigorously discuss these differences there is one issue on which we all agree; **We oppose all academic boycotts, including the idea of an association-imposed boycott against Israeli academic institutions.**

A fundamental principle of academia is academic freedom; the belief that scholars must be free to pursue ideas without being targeted for repression, discipline, or institutional censorship. The adoption of an academic boycott against Israel and Israelis would do violence to this bedrock principle. Scholars would be punished not because of what they believe – which would be bad enough – but simply because of who they are based on their nationality. **In no other context does the ASA discriminate on the basis of national origin – and for good reason.** This is discrimination pure and simple. Worse, it is also discrimination that inevitably diminishes the pursuit of knowledge, by discarding knowledge simply because it is produced by a certain group of people.

The notion of an academic boycott has been raised by ASA members in the past and was rejected by the ASA's Committee on Programs and Centers for this very reason. **The ASA should not set policies that would impose on or restrict our academic right to research, and collaborate with colleagues as we see fit.**

In 2005, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) issued a strong statement expressing [opposition to academic boycotts](#). AAUP maintained neutrality in a complex and multi-layered conflict by neither supporting nor opposing the policies of the Israeli government or the Palestinian Authority. In May 2013, AAUP released a [Statement on Academic Boycotts](#) saying, "In view of the association's longstanding commitment to the free exchange of ideas, we oppose academic boycotts. On the same grounds, we recommend that other academic associations oppose academic boycotts. We urge that they seek alternative means, less inimical to the principle of academic freedom, to pursue their concerns."

Academic boycotts are not only anathema to academic freedom, but they undercut the important role of academics as thought leaders in both critiquing and evaluating government policies. Similarly, the proposed boycott resolution unjustly holds Israeli academics responsible for policies put in place by the Israeli government. Israeli professors – just like professors in the U.S. or elsewhere -- are politically independent and enjoy the right to express opposition to their government and any of its policies. If an academic boycott were imposed, it would collectively punish every Israeli (Muslim, Christian, Druze, Jewish and Atheist) regardless of their political views including those Israeli academics who are instrumental thought leaders in the movement for a just peace. In 2006, Sari Nusseibeh, President of Al Quds University, the Arab university in Jerusalem, publicly condemned academic boycotts, telling [The Associated Press](#), "If we are to look at Israeli society, it is within the academic community that we've had the most progressive pro-peace views and views that have come out in favor of seeing us as equals. If you want to punish any sector, this is the last one to approach."

Healthy, constructive debate on the Middle East and other complex topics is most welcome within our association and the academy. We believe the ASA should permit its members to address these issues freely, including between ASA members and Israeli colleagues. **Squelching dialogue and cultural exchange through a boycott is not a constructive way to advance political concerns.**

Peace for both Israelis and Palestinians depends on both parties working together towards a negotiated, mutually agreeable solution. In contrast, an academic boycott is divisive and undermines this objective. We must instead encourage constructive efforts to bring Israeli and Palestinian academics together on joint projects, including those that foster reconciliation and promote understanding and trust--all critical factors that will enable Israelis and Palestinians to coexist in peace and security. The call for an academic boycott of Israel is a destructive attempt not only to silence, but also punish those involved in this important and potentially transformative academic work.

Since its founding, the objective of the ASA has been to promote "the study of American culture through the encouragement of research, teaching, publication, the strengthening of relations among persons and institutions in this country and abroad devoted to such studies." We urge the ASA to uphold these values by rejecting an academic boycott on a single group of people.

Sincerely,

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