

ASA's Proposed Resolution
on Academic Boycott of Israeli Academic Institutions:

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is being proposed in the Academic Boycott Resolution?

The ASA Caucus on Academic and Community Activism is proposing a boycott of Israeli academic institutions. This ill-advised resolution undermines academic freedom, the free exchange of ideas, and stifles debate, evaluation, and critique of the policies of concern. It singles out one nation's universities and scholars regardless of their views and sets a dangerous precedent in restricting research and discourse on political grounds. The resolution calls for a boycott of all universities and colleges in Israel, private and public. It makes sweeping, vague allegations of "complicity" of academic institutions in government policy. The authors of the proposed resolution provide contradictory reasoning in calling for an academic boycott in the name of academic freedom by curtailing academic freedom. They neither address the negative ramifications such action would have on academic freedom generally nor its impact on the Israeli academy and its scholars specifically. Further, they do not address the consequences for the membership of the ASA. Concern about the threat to academic freedom has led over 50 members of the ASA, including seven former presidents, to speak out in opposition to the proposed resolution.

2. Does the proposed Academic Boycott Resolution threaten academic freedom?

Yes. Ernst Benjamin, formerly of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), highlighted his group's opposition to boycotts by stating that if academic freedom is extended only to those "'found worthy' by a political measure, we shall have lost our grip on academic freedom altogether, for '[p]olitically qualified academic freedom is not really academic freedom at all.'"¹ As an association committed to upholding academic freedom, passing a resolution intended to curtail and diminish academic freedom, and singling out academic institutions purely on the basis of nationality, would threaten our academic integrity.

As Stanley Fish, Distinguished Professor of Humanities and Law at Florida International University, explains: "While it is easy to understand how academics, among others, might find Israeli treatment of Palestinians objectionable and reprehensible, it is not so easy to understand how moral outrage at a political action can be so quickly translated into an obligation to deny professional courtesies to people whose responsibility for that action is at best attenuated and in many instances non-existent. And it absolutely defies understanding that the concept of academic freedom could be used to defend a policy of academic boycott that so cavalierly throws academic freedom under the bus."²

3. Isn't there a significant distinction between boycotting Israeli academic institutions versus boycotting individual Israeli academics?

Simply stated, the answer is **no**. Proponents of the proposed resolution argue that such action would target "institutional behavior rather than the individual right to opinion," but there is nothing to that effect written in the resolution. Even if there were, the distinction is meaningless. For a boycott to be meaningful, it would have to be binding for its membership. Although enforcement mechanisms remain unarticulated in the proposed resolution, ASA members would theoretically be prevented from speaking or teaching at universities and conferences in Israel. They would also not be able to collaborate on research funded by those universities or facilitate study tours and exchanges for their students. Those who nevertheless chose to collaborate with Israeli institutions or individuals in the name of advancing peace and inclusion would not be eligible for ASA awards or grants. And the ASA could not participate in any initiatives with Israeli universities. Such inhibitions to international initiatives and exchanges would counter the goals of globalization and open dialogue of many ASA members' own institutions.

Proponents of the Boycott Resolution argue that it "aims at the practice of institutions and their representatives, not at individual scholars," but what about Israeli scholars of American Studies who are Program Chairs, Department Heads, and Program Directors? They represent both their individual opinions and also the prestige of their institutions. Their participation in ASA programs, conferences publications and grants would be put into question. The academic freedom of all potential participants would be hindered. Drawing a distinction between individuals and institutions within a sweeping boycott action is disingenuous.

See over

¹ <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/28/academic-freedom-against-itself-boycotting-israeli-universities/>

² Ibid.

4. Are Israeli academic institutions complicit in the negative treatment of Palestinians?

Although the resolution's proponents have generalized that all Israeli academic institutions are complicit in the alleged negative treatment of Palestinians, the reality is far different. The University of Haifa's Jewish Arab Center offers programs in conflict resolution and reconciliation. Ben-Gurion University's business school runs a yearlong 'Business for Peace' contest to support Israeli-Palestinian coexistence. Hebrew University's public health school collaborates extensively with Palestinians in order to improve health in the region for both parties. The reality is far more complex than what is portrayed in the resolution language. The ASA should permit its members to address issues of concern freely, including between ASA members and Israeli colleagues, even under the auspices of university-funded programs.

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."³

5. Should the ASA be taking a position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

The ASA carries a strong record of taking principled positions on pressing social issues. Should its elected representatives choose to take a position with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such a position should ultimately have the best interests of both Israelis and Palestinians in mind and encourage constructive peace efforts between them. However, boycotting Israeli academic institutions affects faculty members and their students, all of whom come from a wide range of backgrounds (Muslim, Christian, Druze, Jewish and Atheist). Furthermore, it unjustly holds them culpable for the actions and policies of their government, regardless of their own individual opinions.

The resolution itself does not further, but rather harms, the general interests of the ASA. 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. In no other context does the ASA discriminate on the basis of national origin.

Should the ASA wish to express itself with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or other issues, it should seek alternative, constructive means less inimical to the principle of academic freedom, and ones that aim to bring Israelis and Palestinians together for the purpose of constructive dialogue, rather than adopting a destructive boycott that risks driving them further apart. The resolution's supporters propose that a boycott policy represents the views of the membership. But the evidence suggests that a significant portion of ASA members is opposed to a boycott. The ASA should not set policies that would impose on, or restrict, its members' academic right to research and to collaborate with colleagues as they see fit.

6. The Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) adopted a boycott resolution.

Why shouldn't ASA do the same?

The AAAS boycott resolution against Israeli academic institutions was passed with no objections or abstentions by a small fraction of the association's membership. While those few members present may have had no qualms about endorsing such a divisive resolution, it met with clear objection from the AAUP, which reaffirmed its opposition to academic boycotts.⁴ Indeed, **AAUP Chair Henry Reichman specifically wrote the ASA National Council advising them not to enact a similar boycott**: "I write to urge you to inform your members fully of AAUP's statements on this issue. I would also urge those who may be voting on this resolution to reject it. Members of the ASA who oppose Israeli policies are, of course, entitled to their views and to act on them, but they should find other means than an academic boycott to register that opposition."⁵

The ASA's deliberative process provides an opportunity to discuss how, if at all, the ASA should address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We need to take into consideration the diversity of views and consider constructive options for engaging the academic community in using its resources to advance peace and security for all the parties, rather than adopt a destructive and divisive resolution that undermines academic freedom and the integrity of the ASA. No purpose is served in attacking a group's academic freedom in order to protect the allegedly threatened freedom of another. Many options exist that would not harm academic freedom. A divisive, sweeping boycott is not one of them.

³ <http://tinyurl.com/oauxrre>

⁴ <http://www.aaup.org/news/aaup-statement-academic-boycotts>

⁵ Hank Reichman, "ASA Proposed Resolution on Academic Boycott of Israel" [e-mail], 11/15/2013.