



## RESEARCH

# MLA Delegates Narrowly Approve Controversial Resolution on Israel

By *Jennifer Howard* | JANUARY 13, 2014

**CHICAGO**

By a slim margin, the Modern Language Association's Delegate Assembly approved a controversial resolution here on Saturday concerning Israel and academic freedom.

The measure urges the U.S. State Department to challenge what the document says are travel restrictions imposed by Israel on some American academics, especially those of Palestinian descent, who want to teach or do research at Palestinian universities. Those "denials of entry" have impeded American scholars' ability to work and travel, the resolution says. It passed, 60 to 53, after a charged and sometimes unruly debate.

Supporters hailed the measure as a defense of academic freedom. Opponents questioned why Israel had been singled out, and attacked the resolution as based on flimsy evidence.

The debate and vote took place at the MLA's annual conference here, after a news-media buildup that pulled the association into the controversy swirling around the American Studies Association's recent decision to boycott Israeli institutions of higher education over Israel's treatment of Palestinians.

The just-passed MLA resolution does not call for a boycott; it focuses only on travel restrictions. It will not become official association policy until the MLA's executive council puts it through legal review and until the full MLA membership votes on it.

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The adopted version was slightly altered from the original proposal: Supporters removed a reference to Gaza and the words "arbitrary" and "arbitrarily" in descriptions of the travel restrictions. LOG IN

An emergency resolution was also proposed by Grover C. Furr, a professor of English at Montclair State University, on behalf of the MLA's Radical Caucus; it would have condemned the attacks on the ASA for its boycott action and expressed support for individual academics and scholarly groups' right "to take solidarity with the Palestinian struggle against racism." That resolution did not get enough support from the assembly to be voted on.

Delegates and members also spent an hour talking about "strengthening humanities education as a public good" and what the MLA and its members could do to aid that cause.

## Consulting the Rule Book

During the resolution debate, numerous supporters and opponents of the main resolution lined up at microphones to make the case for and against. Several complained that they had not received enough time for a full hearing, and *Robert's Rules of Order* was repeatedly invoked.

David C. Lloyd, a professor of literature at the University of California at Riverside who is active in the BDS movement, an international campaign for boycotts, divestment, and sanctions against Israel, rejected the claim that the resolution was not supported by enough evidence.

"The facts on which it is based are not dreamed up by the proposers but are based on a U.S. State Department warning to travelers to Israel," he told the assembly. Students as well as scholars with Arabic names or backgrounds have been affected, Mr. Lloyd said. It's "a form of racial profiling that we know all too well."

Other supporters described the measure as a reasonable step for the MLA to take. "We owe it to our membership to do this much so that they are not affected in terms of their ability to travel," said Cynthia Franklin, a professor of English at the University of Hawaii-Manoa. "We should be able to do at least that much as an organization."

Another commenter, Peggy Shapiro of the City Colleges of Chicago, was skeptical. "We are asked to make decisions with very one-sided information," she told the assembly. "I think it will be an embarrassment to make a decision without allowing information and representation from both sides."

Confusion and controversy dogged the discussion, as MLA delegates and members sparred over parliamentary procedure and politics. The MLA officer who was chair of the session, Margaret W. Ferguson, a professor of English at the University of California at Davis, had her hands full trying to keep order and allow commenters on both sides of the issue to speak their piece. Several times she asked people to "stand at ease" while MLA officials conferred about how to proceed. "Please don't shout," she said at one point.

## Personal Exchanges

At times the debate took on a highly personal tone. Richard M. Ohmann, an emeritus professor of English at Wesleyan University, originally proposed the resolution, along with Bruce W. Robbins, a professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University. Cary Nelson, a professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a past president of the American Association of University Professors, has been one of the resolution's most vocal critics.

During the meeting, Mr. Ohmann upbraided Mr. Nelson for suggesting that the resolution's sponsors wanted to deceive their fellow MLA members and open the door to a boycott of Israel.

"This is false, this is insulting, this is damaging to our professional reputations, and I would like an apology," Mr. Ohmann said.

**Mr.** Nelson was disinclined to give the emergency resolution, and I do believe it's part of a biased agenda, which is why I'm not going to apologize to Dick," he said. (He also used the phrase "not in this lifetime.")

Afterward, opponents of the resolution said they were disappointed by the vote but emphasized how close it had been—"effectively a split vote," said Russell Berman, a professor in the humanities at Stanford University and a former president of the MLA.

But he praised what he called "a robust decision by the Delegate Assembly to refrain from expressing support for the ASA." If the emergency resolution concerning the ASA had been put before the assembly and had passed, he said, it would have placed the MLA "outside the mainstream of American higher education."

Mr. Furr, who proposed the emergency resolution, told a reporter that it would probably be reintroduced in some form, in time to be considered as a regular resolution next year.

And Mr. Robbins, who cosponsored the measure that was adopted, said he would have liked it to have passed as originally proposed. But "I don't think the resolution will be without effect," he said. "I think it will be taken as an important statement."

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