

69 Organizations Urge Department of Education to Ensure NRC Faculty Do Not Implement Academic Boycotts

November 13, 2018

Delivered via email

Dear Secretary DeVos,

We are contacting you about two recent events in support of the anti-Israel boycott, divestment, sanctions (BDS) movement, that were held at the [University of Michigan](#) and [New York University](#), respectively. Both of these events were organized and funded by their schools' Department of Education-designated Middle East Studies National Resource Centers (NRCs) – the Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies at U-M and the Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at NYU.

According to [the director](#) of U-M's CMENAS, the pro-BDS event was organized as a direct response to "the current crisis," a reference to the disciplinary actions that the U-M administration had recently taken against a faculty member who, in his attempt to implement an academic boycott of Israel at U-M, had refused to write a letter of recommendation for a student wanting to participate in a university-approved program at Tel Aviv University. The event hosted by NYU's Kevorkian Center, entitled "The Assault on the Right to Boycott," was explicitly intended to support faculty members' right to implement an academic boycott of Israel at NYU and elsewhere. Both directors of these two NRCs are themselves public supporters of BDS and the academic boycott of Israel. From these positions of authority, it would be easy to begin implementing the boycott at their centers if they so chose to do that.

As you know, NRCs were established by Title VI of the Higher Education Act in order to equip university students and faculty with a full and unbiased understanding of regions and countries vital to U.S. security. The federal legislation providing these NRCs with millions of taxpayer dollars stipulates that the funding is specifically intended **"to promote access to research and training overseas, including through linkages with overseas institutions."**

An academic boycott, however, calls for the exact opposite: it seeks to deny access to research, training and education in and about the targeted country, and to break linkages with the targeted country's educational institutions. And while faculty members certainly have the right to express support for BDS, including an academic boycott of Israel, were these NRC directors or any of their fellow faculty to implement the academic boycott at their centers in such a way as to restrict or limit the academic opportunities of their students or colleagues, their behavior would contravene the explicitly stated purpose of their federal funding.

Indeed, the official guidelines of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, which the U-M and NYU directors have endorsed, urge faculty to: work toward shutting down study abroad programs in Israel and refuse to write recommendations for students who want to attend them; scuttle their colleagues' research collaborations with Israeli universities and scholars; and cancel or shut down educational events organized by students or faculty featuring Israeli leaders or scholars, or that seek to "normalize" Israel by presenting it in anything but a negative light. All of these boycott-compliant activities directly subvert the purpose for which these centers received federal funding. (See [Appendix 1](#)).

Alarming, the U-M and NYU NRC directors are not alone in their support for the academic boycott of Israel. Six of the 15 Middle East studies programs receiving federal funds as NRCs and/or Foreign Language Area Studies (FLAS) [recipients](#) for 2018 –2022 are directed by faculty who have expressed public support for the academic boycott of Israel, and two other directors endorsed an academic boycott-compliant call to shut down their school's study abroad program in Israel. In addition, all but one of the NRCs have from 2 to 16 affiliated faculty members who have endorsed the academic boycott of Israel. (See [Appendix 2](#)).

It is also important to note that all of the current NRC directors who support the academic boycott of Israel submitted Title VI HEOA grant [applications](#) touting the numerous educational and research opportunities to study in and about Israel and the Hebrew language and the linkages with Israeli educational institutions offered by their programs. Were these same directors to implement the academic boycott they publicly espouse, they would be working to subvert the very opportunities and linkages they have promised their programs would provide, which would constitute a fraudulent misrepresentation of their programs on a federal grant application.

While expressing support for an academic boycott does not necessarily mean that an NRC director or faculty member will carry out its guidelines, the recent NRC-hosted pro-BDS events at U-M and NYU are cause for serious concern. So, too, are the following: a 2014 [letter](#) stating, "we pledge not to collaborate on projects and events involving Israeli academic institutions," signed by the directors of six Title VI-funded Middle East Studies NRCs; a [2016 study](#) of the 15 Middle East Studies NRCs, which found that those directors who had endorsed BDS were more than twice as likely to host federally-funded outreach events with pro-boycott speakers; and a [2017 study](#), which found that American Middle East studies departments with one or more faculty members who had endorsed an academic boycott of Israel were five times more likely to sponsor public outreach events with pro-boycott speakers, and many of those events included the promotion of BDS.

We want to emphasize that we do not intend in any way to impede or suppress a faculty member's freedom of speech or right to engage in a personal boycott. But were a faculty member to take steps to obstruct or prevent others from accessing opportunities to engage with overseas institutions through research or training, it would clearly violate the stated purpose of the law.

No area studies program should receive federal funding if its director or faculty members engage in behavior that thwarts the very purpose of that funding. Although at the present time Israel is the only country in the world that is being boycotted by some Middle East Studies NRC directors and faculty, in theory it would be possible to advocate for and implement an academic boycott of any country within the purview of an NRC (e.g. in Latin America Studies, Russia/East Europe/Eurasia Studies, Southeast Asia Studies, etc.), similarly contravening the law's intent. We therefore offer the following recommendations for addressing the serious threat that academic boycotts pose to all Title VI-funded area studies programs:

- **The Department of Education should issue a statement warning NRC directors and affiliated faculty that implementing an academic boycott of one of the countries in the NRC's purview would be a direct subversion of the stated purpose of Title VI funding.**
- **Area studies program directors applying for or renewing NRC or FLAS funding should be required to sign a statement affirming that neither they nor any of their program's affiliated faculty will, as part of their academic responsibilities, implement an academic boycott of any of the countries within the purview of their program in such a way as to restrict or limit the academic opportunities of their students or colleagues.**

Thank you for your consideration,

Academic Council for Israel
Accuracy in Academia
Alpha Epsilon Pi Fraternity (AEPi)
Alums for Campus Fairness - National
Alums for Campus Fairness - Swarthmore
Alums for Campus Fairness - UC Davis
Alums for Campus Fairness - UC Riverside
Alums for Campus Fairness - UCLA
AMCHA Initiative
American Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists
American Council of Trustees and Alumni
American Institute for Jewish Research
American Jewish International Relations Institute
American Truth Project
Americans for Peace and Tolerance
Americans United with Israel
Association of Reform Zionists of America (ARZA)
B'nai B'rith International
BEAR: Bias Education, Advocacy & Resources
Boston Israel Action Committee
Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law
California Association of Scholars
Campus Anti-Semitism Task Force of the North Shore

Christians and Jews United for Israel
Club Z
Coalition for Jewish Values
Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA)
CUFI on Campus
Davis Faculty for Israel
Eagles Wings
Endowment for Middle East Truth (EMET)
Facts and Logic About the Middle East (FLAME)
Hasbara Fellowships
Institute for Black Solidarity with Israel
Iranian American Jewish Federation
Iranian Jewish Women's Organization
Israel Matters
Israel Peace Initiative (IPI)
Israeli-American Civic Action Network
Israeli-American Civic Education Institute
JAM
Jerusalem U
Jewish War Veterans of the USA
Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa (JIMENA)
Middle East Forum
Middle East Political and Information Network (MEPIN)
National Conference on Jewish Affairs
National Council of Young Israel
NCSY
NH4Israel
Proclaiming Justice to the Nations
Rabbinical Alliance of America
Rhode Island Coalition for Israel
Roc4Israel
Russian Jewish Community Foundation
Scholars for Peace in the Middle East
Simon Wiesenthal Center
StandWithUs
StandWithUs Saidoff Legal Department
Stop BDS on Campus
Students and Parents Against Campus Anti-Semitism
Students Supporting Israel National
The Israel Christian Nexus
The Israel Group
The Israel Project
The Lawfare Project
The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America
Zionist Organization of America
ZOA's Fuel for Truth