



President Lee C. Bollinger
Columbia University
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MC 4309
New York, NY 10027

April 6, 2022

Dear President Bollinger,

We are contacting you following the recent membership-wide vote of the Middle Eastern Studies Association (MESA) to ratify a [resolution](#) endorsing the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement's call for an academic boycott of Israel.

As non-partisan and non-profit educational and civil rights organizations that have long worked to defend campus free speech and academic freedom and combat antisemitism at American universities and colleges, which is often the result of student and faculty efforts to promote BDS, we write to alert you to the fact that Columbia University's Middle East Institute (MEI) remains [listed](#) on MESA's website as an institutional member.

As of today, several colleges and universities have withdrawn their institutional membership with MESA over the association's endorsement of the academic boycott against Israel. We urge Columbia University to follow suit and similarly withdraw its institutional membership, to reaffirm your commitment to open inquiry and the free expression of ideas, and to take additional steps to ensure that an academic boycott of Israel is never implemented at your university.

An academic boycott of Israel, if implemented, would seek to derail the academic opportunities of students and faculty who desire to study in and about Israel, end the many formal partnerships your university has with educational and training institutions in Israel, and thwart extensive faculty research initiatives and collaborations at Israeli institutions and with Israeli scholars. All of these boycott-compliant actions would directly and substantively harm your university's students and faculty.

Importantly, implementing an academic boycott of Israel at Columbia University would also violate the intent and spirit of the \$2.4-million, four-year Title VI NRC and FLAS funding that MEI received in 2018. In its federal grant [application](#), MEI touted its commitment to the study of Israel (mentioned 96 times) and Hebrew (mentioned 104 times); described the university's robust course offerings and outreach events involving Israel-related topics and its numerous courses in Hebrew language instruction; underscored the critical importance of the university's study abroad programs to areas in the Middle

East, including Israel; and noted the Israel and Hebrew-related scholarship of many MEI-affiliated faculty members.

BDS, which aims to delegitimize and isolate Israel and Israelis through diplomatic, financial, academic and cultural means, and the official guidelines of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) 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, including those that promote coexistence and mutual understanding or that seek to "normalize" Israel by presenting it in anything but a negative light. At a transformational time in the Middle East region, when there is ever-more potential for new academic partnerships and exchanges between Israel and its neighbors, BDS/PACBI undercuts opportunities for collaboration and dialogue across national, religious, and cultural divides.

Furthermore, if MEI faculty, and especially its current Director, who has publicly endorsed an academic boycott of Israel, were to allow or encourage the implementation of these PACBI guidelines, it would thwart your own students' ability and opportunity to use these Title VI NRC and FLAS funds in the way they were intended. Moreover, allowing or encouraging a boycott that seeks to cut off access to Israeli educational and training programs and sever linkages with Israeli academic institutions cynically flouts the clearly articulated [purpose](#) of Title VI HEOA funding -- "to promote access to research and training overseas, including through linkages with overseas institutions" — and could result in the university's loss of such funding in the future.

While the MEI Director and affiliated Columbia University faculty (several of whom have expressed public support for academic BDS) have a right to express their support for an academic boycott of Israel, they do not have the right to violate the academic freedom of their colleagues, to undermine and seek to withhold educational opportunities from students, or to sabotage essential federal funding by implementing such a boycott.

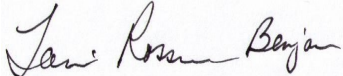
It's also important to point out that the PACBI guidelines' rejection of the normalization of Israel in the academy not only calls on its faculty endorsers to work towards boycotting educational programs and research opportunities in or about Israel and canceling or shutting down pro-Israel events and activities on campus, it also encourages the censuring, denigration, protest and exclusion of pro-Israel individuals. Recent [studies](#) have shown that these PACBI-compliant behaviors are strongly linked to acts targeting Jewish and pro-Israel students for harm – including assault, vandalism, harassment and suppression of speech -- and that the presence and number of faculty who support academic BDS are strongly correlated with every measure of campus antisemitism.

The harms of implementing an academic boycott extend to any Columbia University faculty member or administrator who, in the absence of institutional safeguards prohibiting such behavior, may feel entitled, especially on the heels of MESA's misguided vote, to bring his or her political activism to campus in a way that directly harms students, faculty, and the reputation of your university. Therefore, we respectfully ask that you take the following steps to address this critically important matter:

1. Immediately sever MEI's institutional affiliation with MESA;
2. Publicly acknowledge the direct harm that an academic boycott of Israel would cause students and faculty at your university and unambiguously denounce it; and

3. Provide assurances that your administration will not allow any faculty member or administrator to implement academic BDS on your campus.

Thank you for your consideration,



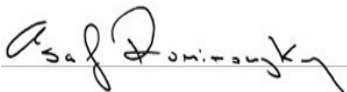
Tammi Rossman-Benjamin, Executive Director, AMCHA Initiative



Miriam F. Elman, Executive Director, Academic Engagement Network



Kenneth L. Marcus, Founder & Chairman, The Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law



Asaf Romirowsky, Executive Director, Scholars for Peace in the Middle East