



President Mark S. Wrighton, Ph.D.
George Washington University
1918 F Street NW
Washington, DC 20052

April 6, 2022

Dear President Wrighton,

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 George Washington University's Institute for Middle East Studies (IMES) 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As of today, several colleges and universities have withdrawn their institutional membership with MESA over the association's endorsement of the academic boycott against Israel.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 George Washington 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 George Washington University would also violate the intent and spirit of the one-million-dollar, four-year Title VI FLAS grant that IMES received in 2018 for training students in four regional languages — Arabic, Hebrew, Persian and Turkish — and related area or international studies. In its federal grant [application](#), the university showcased its Hebrew program, claiming that it was “one of the largest in the Washington DC area,” and touted its “extensive study abroad offerings [that] expose students to diverse perspectives on the Middle East allowing them to consider a wide range of views on the region.”

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 IMES 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 IMES Director and affiliated George Washington University faculty (several of whom have expressed public support for an 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 George Washington 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 IMES'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,



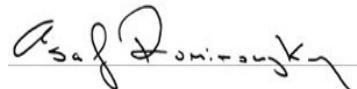
Tammi Rossman-Benjamin, Executive Director, AMCHA Initiative



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