



## **AEN, AMCHA, LDB, and SPME Urge 12 Universities Receiving Millions from Federal Government for Middle East Studies Programs to Withdraw Membership from MESA**

**WASHINGTON, DC, APRIL 6, 2022** – Today, the Academic Engagement Network joined three other leading organizations that work to defend free speech and academic freedom, promote the study of Israel and the Middle East, and combat antisemitism on American campuses to urge a dozen universities whose Middle East Studies programs receive millions of dollars in federal grants to withdraw their institutional membership with the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) over the association’s recent endorsement of an academic boycott against Israel.

“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,” wrote the organizations in [personalized letters](#) to each of the 12 institutions.

The letters were sent by the Academic Engagement Network (AEN), the AMCHA Initiative, the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law (LDB), and Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (SPME) to Columbia University, George Washington University, Georgetown University, Indiana University, New York University, UC Berkeley, UCLA, the University of Chicago, the University of Michigan, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Washington, and Yale University, all of which have received four-year federal grants of between one and two million dollars to support their schools’ Middle East Studies programs and foreign language instruction. The letters were directed to senior campus officials, including the University President or Chancellor, the Director of the University’s Middle East Studies National Resource Center, and the Regents and Trustees of the University. U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona also received the letters.

In addition to the harm an academic boycott poses to students and faculty, the organizations noted in the letters that remaining in MESA could jeopardize the considerable federal funding each of these universities receives from the U.S. Department of Education under Title VI of the Higher Education Act. The purpose of this federal funding is to support international and foreign language studies, the exact opposite of what MESA’s resolution calls for its members to do with respect to Israel, a country in the region that they are being funded to study. Moreover, when applying for these coveted federal funds, each of the 12 schools touted its commitment to the study of Israel and Hebrew, including its numerous research partnerships with Israeli institutions of higher education and its popular study abroad programs in Israel. If these Middle East Studies programs retain their \$1,100 institutional memberships in MESA, they may be using taxpayer funds to help support an explicitly discriminatory organization.

The four organizations also emphasized that contrary to the mission of Title VI of the Higher Education Act, the guidelines of the Palestinian Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) endorsed by MESA urge faculty to work toward shutting down study abroad programs in Israel and to refuse to write recommendations for students who want to attend them; to scuttle their colleagues’ research collaborations with Israeli universities and scholars; and to 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,” the letters stated.

These pernicious efforts to curtail research and study opportunities in Israel are also detailed in AEN’s most recent publication, [\*Antisemitism, Jewish Identity, and Freedom of Expression on Campus: A Guide and Resource Book for Faculty and University Leaders\*](#), which was released in January 2022. The nearly 300-page *Guide and Resource Book* introduces, contextualizes, and analyzes the most pressing issues facing Jewish and Zionist students, faculty, and staff on U.S. campuses today, including Israel delegitimization, antisemitism, and threats to academic freedom and free expression. It urges campus administrators to “exercise moral leadership through their words and actions—promoting their institutions’ existing relationships with Israeli institutions, highlighting the importance of academic freedom and intercultural exchange, and condemning the discriminatory and counterproductive nature of BDS-inspired attacks on study abroad in Israel.”

Along with urging that the 12 universities sever ties with MESA, the organizations recommend that each school publicly acknowledge and denounce the direct harm that an academic boycott of Israel would cause students and faculty on their own campuses and provide assurances that they will not allow their faculty to implement academic BDS.

“The Middle East Studies centers and institutes at these 12 universities provide important educational opportunities for scores of students who are eager to engage with the Middle East region, including with Israeli scholars and at Israeli institutions of higher education,” said Miriam F. Elman, AEN’s Executive Director. “These centers and institutes should now act in a manner consistent with their mission, and with the intent and spirit of their multiyear federal grants, by disassociating from MESA and thereby reaffirming their firm and steadfast commitment to the bedrock principles of the academy: open inquiry and the free exchange of ideas.”

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