

Secretary of Education Dr. Miguel Cardona
United States Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202

April 20, 2022

Dear Secretary Cardona,

We are 87 education, civil rights and religious organizations, representing hundreds of thousands of members and supporters. We are deeply concerned that in the wake of the recent Middle East Studies Association (MESA) vote endorsing an academic boycott of Israel, some directors and affiliated faculty in federally-funded Middle East Studies National Resource Centers (NRCs), most of which are institutional MESA members, may feel emboldened to implement the boycott in ways that will substantively hurt U.S. students and faculty and directly violate the legislative intent of Title VI of the Higher Education Act. We therefore urge you to establish safeguards to ensure that an academic boycott of Israel, or of any country within the academic purview of a federally funded area studies program, may never be implemented by the program's affiliated personnel.

As you know, NRCs were established by Title VI HEOA in order to equip university students and faculty with a full and unbiased understanding of regions and countries vital to U.S. national 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.

Indeed, the official guidelines of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) endorsed by MESA 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 PACBI-compliant activities not only thwart the Israel-related educational and research opportunities of U.S. students and faculty, they directly subvert the purpose for which these centers receive federal funds. Every one of the 15 [recipients](#) of 2018 – 2022 NRC/FLAS funding in the area of Middle East Studies submitted an application touting its school's numerous educational and research opportunities to study in and about Israel and the Hebrew language, as well as the linkages with Israeli educational institutions. For example, in its [application](#) for NRC and FLAS funding, New York University's Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near East Studies touted its commitment to the study of Israel (mentioned 272 times) and Hebrew (mentioned 445 times), highlighting its robust course offerings and

outreach events involving Israel-related topics and Hebrew language instruction, the university's study abroad programs to areas in the Middle East, including Israel, and the Israel and Hebrew-related scholarship of many Kevorkian Center-affiliated faculty members. Were the MESA-recommended PACBI guidelines to be implemented at the Kevorkian Center, it would clearly violate the intent and spirit of the \$2.2 million that the center received in response to its 2018 application for federal funding.

Amplifying our concern about the impact of the recent MESA vote is the fact that several Middle East Studies NRC directors and dozens of NRC-affiliated faculty have publicly expressed their personal support for an academic boycott of Israel, with many signing a 2014 [letter](#) stating, “[W]e pledge not to collaborate on projects and events involving Israeli academic institutions.”

In addition, recent studies have shown that Middle East Studies faculty who support an academic boycott of Israel are likely to bring their support for the boycott into academic spaces: a [2016 study](#) of the 15 Middle East Studies NRCs found that those directors who had endorsed BDS were more than twice as likely to host federally-funded outreach events with pro-boycott speakers; a [2017 study](#) found that 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; and a [2020 study](#) of 50 syllabi of courses on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that were taught at 40 schools across the country found that courses whose instructors had been signatories to one or more petitions calling for an academic boycott of Israel assigned, on average, four times more readings authored by BDS-supporters than instructors who do not support any form of BDS.

While acknowledging that a faculty member's right to express support for an academic boycott of Israel is protected by academic freedom, it is unacceptable that federal funds could be used to implement an academic boycott that directly contravenes the purposes for which these funds have been granted. Area studies programs whose directors or affiliated faculty engage in such behavior should be ineligible to receive or renew Title VI funding. We therefore recommend:

- **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.**
- **The Department of Education should include language in current and future NRC or FLAS applications that requires applicants to establish safeguards to prohibit their program's employees from using their positions to implement an academic boycott of any of the countries within the program's purview.**

Thank you for your consideration,

The undersigned **87** organizations:

Academic Council for Israel
Aggies for Israel
Alums for Campus Fairness - National
Alums for Campus Fairness - Tufts
Alums for Campus Fairness - UC Davis
Alums for Campus Fairness - UC Riverside
Alums for Campus Fairness - UCLA
AMCHA Initiative
America Israel Cooperative Enterprise
American Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists
American Council of Trustees and Alumni
American Friends of Tel Aviv University
American Jewish Congress
American Society of the University of Haifa
American Truth Project
American Values
Americans Fighting Antisemitism
Americans for Peace and Tolerance
B'nai B'rith International
BEAR: Bias Education, Advocacy & Resources
Boston Israel Action Committee
Bulldogs for Israel (Brooklyn College)
California Association of Scholars
CAMERA Education Institute
CAMERA on Campus
Campus Anti-Semitism Task Force of the North Shore
Christians and Jews United for Israel
Club Z
Coalition for Jewish Values
Combat Anti-Semitism Movement
Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting and Analysis (CAMERA)
Conference of Jewish Affairs
Creative Community for Peace
Dartmouth Students for Israel
Davis Faculty for Israel
Eagles Wings
Education Without Indoctrination
Endowment for Middle East Truth (EMET)
Facts and Logic About the Middle East (FLAME)
Fight Back Now
Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors

Hillel at the University of New Mexico
Hillel of Silicon Valley
Institute for Black Solidarity with Israel
Iranian American Jewish Federation
Iranian Jewish Women's Organization
Israel in NYC
Israel Matters
Israel on Campus Coalition
Israel Peace Initiative (IPI)
Israeli-American Civic Action Network
Israeli-American Civic Education Institute
Ithaca Area United Jewish Community
JAM
Jerusalem Education Fund
Jewish American Affairs Committee of Indiana
Jewish War Veterans of the USA
Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa (JIMENA)
Legal Insurrection Foundation
Michigan Jewish Action Council
Middle East Forum
Middle East Political and Information Network (MEPIN)
National Christian Leadership Conference for Israel
National Council of Young Israel
NH4Israel
North Carolina Coalition for Israel
Proclaiming Justice to the Nations
Rabbinical Alliance of America
Rhode Island Coalition for Israel
Russian Jewish Community Foundation
Scholars for Peace in the Middle East
Simon Wiesenthal Center
StandWithUs
StandWithUs Center for Combating Antisemitism
StandWithUs Saidoff Legal Department
Stop Anti-Semitism Now
Stop BDS on Campus
Students and Parents Against Campus Anti-Semitism
Students Supporting Israel at City College of New York
Students Supporting Israel National
Swarthmore Alumni Against Antisemitism on Campus
The Israel Christian Nexus
The Lawfare Project
The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America

World Jewish Congress North America
Zachor Legal Institute
Zionist Organization of America

Cc: Deputy Secretary of Education Cindy Marten
Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education Michelle Asha Cooper
House Education and Labor Committee Chairman Bobby Scott
House Education and Labor Committee Ranking Member Virginia Foxx
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions Chair Patty Murray
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions Ranking Member Richard Burr