



# Boycott Me. Please.

Why the American Studies Association's boycott of Israeli academic institutions -- and my small liberal arts college -- is so utterly ridiculous.

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I am now subject to a boycott by the American Studies Association (ASA), an organization of professors that includes roughly 5,000 members.

The resolution, passed by the organization's rank-and-file on Dec. 15, supposedly doesn't apply to individuals, but it applies to me. The ASA explains:

"The American Studies Association understands boycott as limited to a refusal on the part of the ASA in its official capacities to enter into formal collaborations with Israeli academic institutions, or with scholars who are expressly serving as representatives or ambassadors of those institutions (such as deans, rectors, presidents and others) ... until Israel ceases to violate human rights and international law."

Since I am the president of Shalem College in Jerusalem, an accredited Israeli academic institution, I'm clearly subject to the ASA boycott. And while my fledgling liberal arts college doesn't have any "formal collaborations" with the ASA, it's the thought that counts.

So just what was the ASA thinking? I don't follow American studies -- my field is the Middle East -- and until this episode, I hadn't heard of the organization. What I know about such associations comes from the Middle East Studies Association (MESA), an organization of scholars who study the region. Needless to say, MESA has had plenty of boycott advocates among its leadership and rank-and-file. A few years back, they tried to pull MESA onto the boycott cart, but they failed.

Boycott advocates haven't tried since, and for good reason: There are just too many people in MESA who know something about the Middle East. And by those standards, it's not self-evident that Israel should be singled out and boycotted for its supposed transgressions. All you have to do is peruse the "intervention letters" sent by MESA's Committee on Academic Freedom. These letters-in-a-bottle to the likes of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan protesting dismissals and show trials of scholars and police violence on campuses are a pretty good indicator of where academic freedom in the Middle East is truly imperiled.

ASA president Curtis Marez acknowledged that some countries in the region have worse human rights records than Israel. However, he then justified the boycott with the unforgettable claim that "one has to start somewhere."

If you know nothing about the Middle East, and have made a studied effort *not* to know more, you might think that "somewhere" is Israel. That's because Israel and the Palestinians get outsized attention -- in America. The crimes of others are ignored: What Syrians do to Syrians, Egyptians do to Egyptians, and Iranians do to Iranians -- especially to professors -- just isn't compelling news, no matter how horrific. In that sense, the boycott resolution perfectly mirrors the U.S.-centric bias of the ASA: Everything over the horizon, beyond the continental scope of "American studies," is just a vague blur of media caricatures.

One of the ASA's central ideological prisms appears to be that the United States is an aggressive empire. Just scan the program of last year's annual conference, titled "Dimensions of Empire and Resistance," which was billed as a reflection "on indigeneity and dispossession," the "course of U.S. empire."

The United States has a range of allies and clients in the Middle East -- but only Israel is viewed positively by a large majority of Americans, while Israelis themselves are overwhelmingly pro-American. For the ASA, that appears to be the bill of indictment right there. The surly Saudis are deeply ambivalent about America, but they've spread hush money across the American academic landscape, so don't expect them to be boycotted. No, it will be Israel -- as punishment not for its offenses, which aren't the worst by any means, but for its "special relationship" with the United States.

I'm not exactly sure what I should do to get myself off the ASA's blacklist. The organization posed this very question in an explainer about its decision, and could only conclude: "This is a difficult question to answer. The boycott is designed to put real and symbolic pressure on universities to take an active role in ending the Israeli occupation and in extending equal rights to Palestinians."

Although this isn't an answer at all, it suggests that I should abandon what I believe under pressure -- acting not out of conviction, but out of fear for the fate of my institution. Instead of speaking truth, I am supposed to distort my truth. The boycott presumes that I am akin to a widget exporter, so focused on my bottom line that I can be turned into a lobby for just about any cause with the sufficient application of "pressure."

Here is the fatal flaw in the boycott's design: If I, as a scholar, were to change my tune under "pressure," my credibility would be rightly destroyed, and I would lose my power to convince anyone of anything.

Let's say that I'm on a first-name basis with a few Israeli cabinet ministers (I am). According to the boycott's strategy, I should request a meeting with each of them, and tell them it is time to "end the occupation and extend equal rights to Palestinians." "Why?" they would ask. What has changed since the last time we had a conversation?

In the past, I spoke out of conviction, in terms of what would best serve the interests of the State of Israel and the Jewish people. So why should they give a whit if, now, I tell them I speak out of fear for the standing of one institution, cherished though it may be? I would not only be unconvincing, I would become contemptible in the eyes of others and, above all, myself.

So I regret to inform the ASA that I will not knuckle under. I would sooner resign my presidency than alter, by one iota, my considered view of what is best for Israel. I may not be right (especially by the standards of the ASA resolution, which, if Peter Beinart's assessment is correct, implies that the best thing for Israel would be its total dissolution). But it is my truth, arrived at freely, and the suggestion that I might be pressured into distorting it presumes that I, and my fellow heads of Israeli universities, lack all intellectual integrity. To which my reply is: Boycott me. Please.

While we languish under boycott, Shalem College will continue to do our best to bring to Israel the benefits of an American-style education. Ours is the first institution in Israel to find inspiration in the American tradition of the small liberal arts college. Shalem Press, our scholarly imprint, has commissioned and published outstanding Hebrew translations of *The Federalist Papers*, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, and Alexis de Toqueville's *Democracy in America*. These works are now assigned in dozens of university courses throughout Israel. We will

continue to bring the most important American ideas to Israeli readers in Hebrew. And we will continue to teach our Israeli undergraduates the fundamental ideals behind the world's greatest democracy, and their origins and resonance in the Jewish tradition. Boycott or not.

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