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Committee on
Academic Freedom

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Statement on Professor Richard Falk and Academic Freedom

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express our deep dismay at the treatment of Richard Falk, Albert G. Milbank Professor of International Law and Practice Emeritus at Princeton University, the cancellation of two scheduled talks and the obstruction of scholarly debate during his recent tour of U.K. university campuses to present his new book.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, MESA publishes the International Journal of Middle East Studies and has nearly 3,000 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

Professor Falk is a world-renowned scholar of international law and global politics, emeritus professor at Princeton University, former UN Special Rapporteur on Palestinian Human Rights, and author of numerous books. In mid-March 2017, he began a 10-day tour of speaking engagements, arranged by his publisher, Pluto Press, to launch his new book, *Palestine's Horizon: Towards a Just Peace*. The talks he held in Scotland during the first half of his tour went smoothly and focused on the main themes of his book. However, the last part of his tour coincided with the release of a report that Professor Falk had co-authored with Virginia Tilley, Professor of Political Science at Southern Illinois University.

The United Nation's Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) had commissioned this report at the request of its eighteen member governments. The report examined the applicability of the international criminal law concept of apartheid to Israel's policies and practices toward the Palestinian people. This was an academic study that investigated the various issues from the perspective of international law. It was vetted by blind reviewers and suggestions made by them were incorporated into the report. Nonetheless, upon its release on 15 March, the U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., Nikki Haley, denounced the report and shortly thereafter, U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres insisted that it be removed from the ESCWA website. The head of ESCWA, Rima Khalaf, resisted this demand and resigned in opposition to what she regarded as the U.N.'s submitting to politically motivated "bullying."

The following week, on 24 March, Professor Falk was scheduled to talk about his new book, *Palestine's Horizon: Towards a Just Peace*, at several universities in London. At his first engagement, at the London School of



Economics (LSE), opponents of the U.N.-commissioned report disrupted the question and answer period, preventing discussion and shouting insults. Following that, Middlesex University cancelled Professor Falk's previously scheduled lecture, citing "safety concerns." The University of East London also cancelled his talk, on the grounds that "it became clear, the day before the event, that the University's External Speakers Policy had not been adequately followed." Falk has also been demonized as an anti-Semite in many online venues.

The obstruction and cancellation of Professor Falk's scheduled lectures constitute an infringement on academic freedom and prevent open discussion and debate about important issues of public concern. The efforts to silence and publicly insult scholars who express criticism of Israel's policies and practices toward the Palestinian people are an assault on freedom of speech and academic freedom. They are defamatory and a form of bullying. Such tactics are also employed to disrupt lectures and intimidate university administrators.

The Middle East Studies Association (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom take no position on whether or not Israel can or should be characterized as an apartheid state. However, we uphold the basic principles of informed debate and the free exchange of ideas and opinions. Debates that are inspired by the UN-commissioned report and other peer-reviewed research remain crucial to the process of knowledge production. We strongly condemn the violations of academic freedom and the smear tactics to which Professor Falk has been subjected. In addition, we call upon British universities to vigorously protect and defend academic freedom, and to refrain from capitulating to pressure that would undermine the integrity, autonomy and educational mission of institutions of higher education.