



**Middle  
East  
Studies  
Association**  
of North America, Inc.

1219 N Santa Rita Ave  
The University of Arizona  
Tucson AZ 85721 USA

520 621-5850  
520 626-9095 fax  
caf@mesana.org  
www.mesana.org



February 12, 2014

The Honorable Sheldon Silver  
Speaker of the New York State Assembly  
LOB 932  
Albany, NY 12248  
via email: Speaker@assembly.state.ny.us

Dear Speaker Silver:

I write to you on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express our grave concern about New York State Assembly bill A8392A, which you re-introduced on February 6, 2014 and which would prohibit the use of state funds to colleges and universities to “fund an academic entity, provide funds for membership in an academic entity or fund travel or lodging for any employee to attend any meeting of such academic entity if such entity has issued a public resolution or other official statement or undertaken an official action boycotting a host country or higher education institutions located in such country.”

As you know, the New York State Senate has already passed a similar bill, S.6438. Because A8392A would, if enacted into law, impose political restrictions on the use of public funds by institutions of higher education in New York and by members of their faculties, we believe that it constitutes a very serious threat to academic freedom and to the autonomy and integrity of the state’s publicly-supported colleges and universities.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 3000 members worldwide. MESA is committed to defending academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere. MESA’s Committee on Academic Freedom has repeatedly protested actions by governments in the Middle East and North Africa, including Iran, Israel, Turkey, several of the Arab states and the Palestinian Authority, that we regard as infringing or violating the academic freedom of faculty, students and institutions of higher education. It has also regularly criticized infringements of, and threats to, academic freedom by colleges, universities, government agencies, legislative bodies and other entities in the United States and Canada. All of the committee’s letters since 2001 can be found at <http://www.mesa.arizona.edu/committees/academic-freedom/intervention/index.html>.

MESA has not expressed a position on the resolutions adopted by the American Studies Association and several other academic organizations regarding relations with Israeli institutions of higher education. However, it is clear to us that whatever one’s opinion of the campaign to boycott Israeli academic institutions or of the resolutions regarding that issue adopted by these academic organizations in this country, the principles of academic freedom protect the right of faculty to advocate for, as well as against, such boycotts. We

February 12, 2014

Page 2

therefore believe that, if enacted, A8392A would violate the academic freedom of faculty at state-supported institutions of higher education in New York State by effectively preventing those institutions from holding institutional memberships in certain academic organizations and by making it impossible for faculty at those institutions to secure funds from their college or university to support their travel to meetings sponsored by such organizations.

Decisions about institutional memberships in academic organizations and funding for travel to those organizations' professional meetings should be made by the appropriate faculty bodies in keeping with the accepted standards and practices of the academic community, not by elected or other government officials based on their political views of the moment. Faculty in New York as elsewhere should therefore not be subjected to the threat that their home institution's membership in certain academic organizations might be terminated or that they might be deprived of the funds they need to travel to academic meetings – an essential component of their professional lives as scholars and teachers – just because elected officials deem certain perspectives on the boycott issue beyond the pale.

Accompanying the text of A8392A is a section titled "Justification," which states that "Academic freedom is a cornerstone of our academic community in New York State's colleges and universities. Professors and students should be able to teach, study, and pursue research without unreasonable interference." We agree, and we therefore call on you to withdraw A8392A and to use your position and influence as Speaker of the New York State Assembly to see to it that no similar legislation threatening the academic freedom of faculty in New York State is introduced or adopted by the state legislature. We further call on you to reiterate your firm and unequivocal support for the principles of academic freedom, including the right of faculty to discuss and, if they so choose, advocate for a boycott of Israel academic institutions. Finally, we urge you to speak out consistently and vigorously against all threats to and violations of academic freedom, wherever they occur.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nathan Brown". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Nathan Brown  
President