



**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



October 23, 2014

Amcha Initiative
via email administrator@amchainitiative.org

To whom it may concern:

I am writing on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express our grave concern about the content and apparent intent of the report released by the Amcha Initiative in September 2014 titled "Antisemitic Activity and Anti-Israel Bias at the Center for Near East Studies, University of California at Los Angeles, 2010-2013." After careful scrutiny of this document, we believe that it is based on a deeply flawed and highly tendentious methodology, yielding a grossly inaccurate picture of public events sponsored by UCLA's Center for Near Eastern Studies (CNES). We are compelled to conclude that the Amcha Initiative's real goal in producing and disseminating this report is to stifle the free and open discussion of, and the vigorous exchange of opinions on, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on college and university campuses. We regard your pursuit of this political agenda as a serious threat to free speech, to the principles of academic freedom and to the autonomy and integrity of our institutions of higher education.

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 some 3000 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring 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 since 1990 protested actions by governments in the Middle East and North Africa, including many of the Arab states, the Palestinian Authority, Iran, Israel and Turkey, 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>.

Your study and its findings are purportedly based on your review of available podcasts of CNES-sponsored public events related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict between 2010 and 2013, and of the writings, utterances and actions of those who participated in them. Appendix D of your report, "Procedures and Worksheet for Identifying Antisemitic Activity," lists ten forms of what you define as "antisemitic activity" and thereby makes clear how you conducted your assessment. The appendix reasonably asserts that such things as "Using Symbols and Images Associated with Historical Antisemitism" and "Accusing Jews and Israel of Inventing or Exaggerating the Holocaust" can legitimately be

construed as antisemitic. But it then goes on to expand the definition of antisemitism to include many forms of perfectly legitimate criticism of Zionism and of Israel.

For example, by your definition the simple assertion that the Israel Defense Forces have committed “crimes against humanity,” or that some Israeli Jews have engaged in persecuting Palestinians, or that there are ways in which Israel can be compared to apartheid South Africa, are all inherently antisemitic; whether or not any of these statements might have a factual basis is deemed irrelevant. Your definition also alleges that advocacy of any form of boycott, divestment or sanctions directed at Israel, support for the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their pre-1948 homes, and questioning of the Zionist character of the State of Israel are also defined as intrinsically antisemitic. Such a broad and vague definition of antisemitism is clearly absurd: among other things, it means that a good many Jews past and present, in Israel and elsewhere, must be deemed antisemites, along with, for example, Secretary of State John Kerry who in April 2014 warned that if Israel continued on its present course it could become an “apartheid state” like South Africa once was.

In addition to deploying this extremely broad definition of antisemitism, your report employs highly tendentious research methods. It repeatedly finds speakers at CNES-sponsored events guilty of “demonization,” “delegitimization,” “denying Jews the right to self-determination,” and so on – all categories of opinion that you have previously defined as inherently antisemitic – by wrenching quotations out of their contexts and construing them in ways that appear to have little or nothing to do with what those who uttered or wrote these words actually meant. In short, though your report pretends to be a serious academic study that uses accepted social-scientific research methods, it is in fact a hatchet job. Its real goal appears to be the delegitimization and suppression of perspectives critical of Israel, at UCLA and at campuses around the country, by tarring them with the brush of antisemitism. At the same time, this report, and similar Amcha Initiative campaigns elsewhere, also apparently seek to suppress open discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by threatening the external funding on which CNES and other centers and programs rely.

We believe that colleges and universities must vigorously combat antisemitism and all other forms of racism. But conflating criticism of Israel with antisemitism, as your report does, can only undermine that effort while also threatening constitutionally-protected free speech rights, the principles of academic freedom and the pedagogical mission of our institutions of higher education. This point was recently made very effectively in a statement issued by forty professors of Jewish studies at American universities, including some of the most distinguished and respected scholars in that field, in direct response to your report. It characterized your allegations of pervasive anti-Israel bias at CNES as “deplorable” and declared that your “technique of monitoring lectures, symposia and conferences strains the basic principle of academic freedom on which the American university is built. Moreover, its definition of antisemitism

is so indiscriminating as to be meaningless. Instead of encouraging openness through its efforts, AMCHA's approach closes off all but the most narrow intellectual directions and has a chilling effect on research and teaching." The statement went on to say that "AMCHA's tactics are designed to stifle debate on issues debated in Israel and around the world, and the presumption that students must be protected from their own universities is misguided and destructive. Efforts such as these do not promote academic integrity, but rather serve to deaden the kind of spirited academic exchange that is the lifeblood of the university."

We fully share these concerns, and we are especially alarmed by your report's demonization of the extraordinary community of scholars of the Middle East who work at CNES. We therefore welcome the recent statement, approved by UCLA's Chancellor, reiterating that "UCLA, like any public research university, remains dedicated to complying with all federal laws and respecting the free and open exchange of ideas representing diverse viewpoints.... We recognize many subjects may engender passionate debate and difficult conversations and we encourage civil dialogue that appreciates the paramount importance of free expression, academic freedom and a respectful exchange of ideas."

By accusing respected scholars and teachers of antisemitism simply because their views on Israel differ from yours, your report constitutes a vicious assault on free speech, on academic freedom and on the ability of our institutions of higher education to foster open discussion of even the most contentious issues. We therefore call on you to withdraw this report and to apologize to all those whom it falsely and tendentiously accuses of antisemitism. We also call upon you to renounce your organization's campaign of surveillance and harassment of scholars, teachers and others who are sincerely striving to enhance public understanding of a region of the world in which the United States is so deeply engaged.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nathan Brown', written in a cursive style.

Nathan Brown
MESA President