



**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

Kenneth L. Marcus
President and General Counsel
Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law
via fax: 202-756-1301

Dear Mr. Marcus:

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 contents and apparent intent of the report released by your organization in September 2014 titled "The Morass of Middle East Studies: Title VI of the Higher Education Act and Federally Funded Area Studies." This highly tendentious document, which we believe to be replete with false or misleading assertions regarding the Title VI program and the university-based Middle East studies centers which it supports, insinuates that many Title VI-supported Middle East studies centers are "ideologically politicized institutions notorious for one-sided approaches hostile to the United States, the West and Israel." Its real goal seems to be to restrict or even stifle the free and open discussion of, and the vigorous exchange of opinions on, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on college and university campuses, thereby threatening the principles of academic freedom and the autonomy 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 organization's report claims that "some Title VI programs reportedly continue to provide one-sided, politicized public outreach programs instead of educationally meaningful programming," particularly with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, despite a 2008 Congressional mandate that such programs foster diverse perspectives and a wide range of views so as to generate debate on world regions and international affairs. Yet your report fails to provide real evidence to support that allegation or its claim that some Title

VI-funded Middle East centers are guilty of what you term anti-Israel bias. Your report never bothers to define this term; instead, it cites one-sided and unsupported allegations made by critics of the Title VI program along with statements allegedly made by a number of speakers at panels on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict sponsored by just one single Middle East studies center, UCLA's Center for Near Eastern Studies (CNES).

The quotations from speakers at CNES-sponsored events in your organization's report have clearly been wrenched out of context and construed in ways that have little or nothing to do with what those who uttered them actually meant. As far as we can tell, these quotes seem to have been taken from "research" contained in a report released by the Amcha Initiative at the same time your document was issued, suggesting a degree of coordination between the two organizations. In its report the Amcha Initiative claimed that 93 percent of the public events concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict organized by CNES "exhibited bias against Israel." As we discuss in a separate letter addressed to the Amcha Initiative, the methodology of its "study" of CNES' public events is deeply flawed: it essentially defines any and all criticism of Zionism and of Israel's policies and actions to be antisemitic. That report's findings must therefore be deemed unreliable, and the same applies to the evidence of bias supposedly provided in your organization's report, which relies so heavily on the Amcha Initiative's defective and tendentious study.

In this connection we call your attention to a statement issued by forty professors of Jewish studies at American universities, including some of the most distinguished and respected scholars in that field, which characterized the Amcha Initiative's assault on CNES as "deplorable" and declared that its "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 wholeheartedly agree with these statements and believe that they also apply to the contents and apparent intent of your organization's report, whose real goal seems to be to silence faculty and others at Title VI-supported centers whose views on Israel differ from your own.

Your report concludes by calling on Congress to either amend Title VI so as to eliminate what you claim are "heterogeneous (*sic*) and discriminatory presentations in Middle East Studies" or terminate the program altogether. As we have seen, your report fails to demonstrate that all or even some Title VI-supported Middle East studies centers have failed to meet the mandates of that



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program. At the same time, your demand that Title VI be defunded, apparently in order to serve your political agenda of stifling open discussion of an issue of critical national concern, not only threatens the academic freedom rights of the scholars and teachers at those centers but also does a grave disservice to the United States. Since 1958 the Title VI program has made it possible for many thousands of Americans to receive training in the languages, cultures, religions, politics and histories of the Middle East and other world regions and has thereby greatly enhanced this country's understanding of places around the world in which the United States is deeply engaged. This country continues to have an urgent need for citizens who possess a substantive knowledge of the Middle East, and thus for the Title VI program which for over half a century has done an outstanding job of training them. Attacking this program, and even advocating its termination, as your report does, thus threatens the ability of the United States to understand the world and act effectively in it.

We therefore call on you to withdraw your deeply flawed report on Title VI-supported Middle East studies centers and to reiterate your commitment to academic freedom and the open discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on college and university campuses. We also urge you to join MESA in advocating for the reauthorization of Title VI as a nonpolitical educational program of national importance, especially in this period of grave crisis in the Middle East.

Sincerely,

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

Nathan Brown
MESA President