



**Middle  
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of North America, Inc.

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14 May 2014

Professor Joseph Klafter  
President  
Tel Aviv University  
P.O. Box 39040  
Tel Aviv 6997801, Israel  
via email [office.president@tauex.tau.ac.il](mailto:office.president@tauex.tau.ac.il)

Dear President Klafter,

I write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express our grave concern regarding the recent decision by the administration at Tel Aviv University (TAU) to cancel an invitation to Palestinian activist Muhammad Kanaaneh. MESA calls upon TAU to reinstate the invitation to Mr. Kanaaneh, to reject the politics of silencing and intimidation, and affirm the principles and norms of academic freedom.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. It is the preeminent organization in the field. The Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 3,000 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.

Muhammad Kanaaneh is a Palestinian citizen of Israel and a prominent activist in Abnaa al-Balad (People of the Land), a Palestinian political movement inside of Israel. Mr. Kanaaneh had been invited to speak at a public event on Monday, April 7, commemorating Palestinian Land Day as part of a conference at Tel Aviv University organized by the student groups Hadash and Al-Awda.

During the week prior to the Tel Aviv University event, there were increasingly strident calls from student chapters of such right-wing nationalist organizations as Bayit Yehudi (Jewish Home), Im Tirtzu (If You Will It), Likud and Yesh Atid (There Is a Future) demanding that Tel Aviv University cancel the invitation. Not only did the representatives of these student organizations call for the cancellation of Kanaaneh's lecture; there were also those who expressed the opinion that student activists involved with al-Awda and other "Arab political movements" should be suspended from the university.

These opinions were duly heard and roundly rejected by the non-partisan Student Union as well as the university administration on the grounds that such an action would be a violation of academic freedom. The university administration also

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released a statement affirming student rights to freedom of speech as well as to engage in public activity that is lawful, respectful and non-disruptive of “public order and the proper order of the teaching, research and work on campus.”

In response, the coalition of right-wing opposition student groups held a protest Sunday morning on campus, and then threatened to take further action by staging a student strike on Monday that would coincide with and intentionally disrupt the conference unless the invitation to Kanaaneh was rescinded. At this point, the administration reversed its opinion, and released the following statement, which directly contradicted the earlier one: “In light of concerns of disrupting the public order, and since the explicit request to have Mohammed Kanaaneh participate was only recently submitted, without time for evaluation, the university does not approve his participation at the event.”

By acceding to the demands of a loud coalition of individuals and organizations that were clearly acting in order to intimidate fellow students, Tel Aviv University has set an ominous precedent that could be referenced in the future as support for other acts of censorship, which could obstruct the free flow of ideas on Israeli campuses.

In order to live up to its democratic aspirations, Israel must ensure that the university stands as a space where the rights of students to freely air a broad spectrum of political opinions as well as the right to protest are equally protected. These tactics of silencing, intimidation and libelous accusation should have no place in the academic and political discourse of the university; they certainly should not be validated by the university administration. MESA therefore calls upon Tel Aviv University to reinstate its invitation to Mr. Kanaaneh, to reject the politics of silencing and intimidation, and to affirm its commitment to the principles and norms of academic freedom.

Sincerely,

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

Nathan Brown  
MESA President

cc:

Shai Piron, Minister of Education  
Professor Aron Shai, Rector, Tel Aviv University