



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

Headquarters & Secretariat

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Rene Van Acker
President and Vice-Chancellor,
University of Guelph
president@uoguelph.ca

Bill Rosehart
Provost and Vice-President (Academic),
University of Guelph
rosehart@uoguelph.ca

Dear President Van Acker and Provost Rosehart:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our grave concern about the University of Guelph's last-minute decision to cancel the second annual People's Conference for Palestinian Solidarity which was to convene at your institution on 29 November 2025. There is reason to believe that this decision was made on political grounds and therefore constitutes an egregious violation of the principles of academic freedom and of the right to freedom of expression.

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 prestigious *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 2,800 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 outside of North America.

Some 400 participants were slated to participate in this conference, which was held last year without incident. As we understand it, a day or two before the conference was due to take place the University of Guelph administration told the organizers that it had not had adequate time to conduct a risk assessment and therefore was cancelling the conference. In fact, all required paperwork had been submitted well in advance, and there are indications that political pressure was exerted on the university. The organizers' request for an urgent meeting with the administration to address any gaps in their application went unanswered, so they secured an alternative space off-campus and the conference took place on the originally scheduled date. This does not, however, absolve the university of responsibility for its actions.

In these fraught times university leaders have a heightened responsibility to protect the freedom of speech, academic freedom, and physical safety of all members of the campus community. We call your attention to the [statement](#) issued by MESA's board of directors and its Committee on Academic Freedom on 6 May 2024 which denounced actions by university leaders to delegitimize and repress campus advocacy opposing Israel's war in Gaza. We also remind you of the [statement](#) on "Academic Freedom in Times of War" issued by the American Association of University Professors on 24 October 2023.

We therefore call on you to offer a full and accurate account of why the university chose to cancel the conference. We further call on you to operate transparently and in full conformity with the [University of Guelph Policy Statement on Freedom of Expression](#) with respect to the hosting of future events. We also urge you to publicly apologize for any negative consequences caused by your decision and, because the organizers were forced to relocate the conference off campus at the last minute, we ask you to consider compensating the organizers for any additional expenses they may have incurred. Finally, we call on you to publicly reiterate your commitment to protect the academic freedom and the free speech rights of all members of the University of Guelph community.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Ussama Makdisi
MESA President
Professor, University of California, Berkeley



Judith E. Tucker
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom
Professor Emerita, Georgetown University

Cc
Farida Shaheed
United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education