



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

**Headquarters & Secretariat**

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16 February 2024

Rhona Lenton  
President, York University  
[president@yorku.ca](mailto:president@yorku.ca)

Lisa Philipps  
Provost, York University  
[provost@yorku.ca](mailto:provost@yorku.ca)

Dear President Lenton and Provost Philipps:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our concern about a recent incident involving police disruption of an academic lecture at York University. There are grounds to believe that the university's role in this incident calls its avowed commitment to protecting academic freedom and the right to free speech into serious question.

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.

According to media reports and eyewitness accounts, on 2 February 2024 Toronto Police Service (TPS) officers disrupted a lecture by Dr. Muhannad Ayyash, Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Mount Royal University. The invited lecture was organized by York's Anthropology Department and titled "The Palestinian Struggle for Liberation: Aspirations for a Decolonial Life." The police arrived at the campus classroom while Dr. Ayyash was in the midst of delivering his lecture to an audience of 20-30 people, primarily York faculty and students. There had been no disruptions or incidents whatsoever leading up to the arrival of the police; in fact, it was the arrival of the police that disrupted a scholarly event that was part of a regularly occurring university speakers series. When asked why they were there, the TPS officers stated that they were acting on behalf of York University, which had contacted them to report "a major event."

Your administration now seems to be denying that it asked the police to come to campus, though it has failed to engage with the issue in a transparent manner or even issue a public statement about it. Whatever actually happened, the disruption by police of a lecture is a blatant

violation of York’s own policy on academic freedom, established in the [collective agreement](#) with York University’s Faculty Association (YUFA), which states that the university must uphold, protect and promote academic freedom “without interference and reprisal.” It is also counter to the mandate of the university’s own Community Safety Department, as outlined in the [Safer Together](#) strategic plan, to offer social safety to the York community by ensuring a campus environment “that supports a sense of feeling safe with other people, and free to express individual identities, thoughts and beliefs without censure or reprisal.”

In the absence of an independent and transparent investigation, it is plausible to see this incident as a disturbing example of the increasing use of police to create an atmosphere of surveillance, fear, intimidation and repression on university campuses and to silence Palestinian voices and scholarly critiques of Israel. It is unfortunately in line with many other instances of repression and intimidation by university administrations at campuses across North America which have contributed to an atmosphere of anti-Palestinian bias and racism.

Institutions of higher education should be places in which scholars and students can express their views freely. In these fraught times, university leaders have a heightened responsibility to protect the freedom of speech and academic freedom of all members of the campus community. This is all the more important now, when violence is raging in the Middle East and various individuals and organizations with a political agenda are seeking to vilify and silence faculty and students with whom they disagree. Students, faculty and community members should have the right to express and share their perspectives on all facets of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and (if they so choose) to advocate for Palestinian rights without fear of surveillance, intimidation or retaliation, by the police or anyone else.

We therefore urge York University’s leadership to promptly accept the demands circulated by Faculty for Palestine, including the issuing of an immediate public apology to Dr. Ayyash and the launching of an independent investigation into who contacted the TPS regarding the 2 February 2024 lecture and why they did so, with those responsible to be held accountable. We further urge York University to publicly and forcefully reaffirm its commitment to protecting the academic freedom and free speech rights of all members of the campus community.

Sincerely,



Re: Police disruption

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Aslı Ü. Bâli'.

Aslı Ü. Bâli

MESA President

Professor, Yale Law School

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laurie Brand'.

Laurie Brand

Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom

Professor Emerita, University of Southern California