

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

3542 N Geronimo Ave
Tucson AZ 85705 USA

tel 520-333-2577
fax 520-207-3166
caf@mesana.org
www.mesana.org



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Amb. Francis J. Ricciardone
President, American University in Cairo
president@aucegypt.edu

Dr. Ehab Abdel Rahman
Provost, American University in Cairo
provost@aucegypt.edu, ehab_ab@aucegypt.edu

Dr. Robert Switzer
Interim Dean, School of Humanities and Social Sciences,
American University in Cairo
switzer@aucegypt.edu

Dear President Ricciardone, Provost Abdel Rahman and Interim Dean Switzer,

We write to you on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express our concerns over the circumstances surrounding the cancellation of the Abdulhadi H. Taher Chair in Comparative Religion in the Department of History in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at AUC.

MESA was founded in 1966 to support 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 over 2500 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.

According to an AUC webpage (<http://aucegypt.edu/giving/endedowed-professorships>), the Abdulhadi H. Taher Chair in Comparative Religion was created in 2002. Since its creation and until 2016, four different scholars had held this chair. In February 2016, Adam Duker was offered the position of tenure-track Assistant Professor and Abdulhadi H. Taher Chair, beginning 1 July 2016. He took up his position as assistant professor and Taher Chair in the fall 2016 semester.

On 11 July 2017, by e-mail, AUC Provost Ehab Abdel Rahman informed Professor Duker and others that, following numerous conversations with Mr. Tarek Taher, the son of the donor of the original funds for the Taher chair, Mr. Taher "has requested that he no longer wants the Abdul Hadi Taher Endowed Professorship in Comparative Religions. To honor his request we will stop funding of that professorship as of July 1, 2017." In another email to Professor Duker later that day, the Provost included the following: "As of your contract, you will remain a faculty member in AUC but you are no longer the Abdulhadi H. Taher Chair of Comparative Religions as this Professorship no longer exists."

We are aware that gift agreements between universities and donors are generally confidential, and hence we cannot claim to know the terms of the original gift that established the Abdulhadi H. Taher Chair. Nonetheless, the timing of the termination of the chair, following what we understand were concerns expressed by the donor's

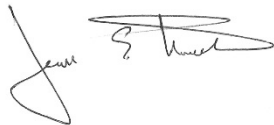
son to Prof. Duker as well as to high-level AUC administrators about the content of Duker's courses, among other matters, raises serious questions. Our concerns are heightened by the finding of the Grievance Committee of the AUC Senate (SGC), in its report dated 6 April 2019 in response to a petition filed by Dr. Duker: that "...the donor was allowed to interfere in academic matters and influence the Provost's decision to strip Dr. Duker of his title." The protection of both academic freedom and university professional standards demands a separation between the basic framing of the intention of a gift creating an endowed chair agreed upon by a donor and the university, and the process and requirements involved in the actual hiring and academic performance of the chair holder. To put it simply, donors should have no say in who is chosen to fill a chair or what they teach, nor should a donor have the right to terminate a chair once endowed. Whatever the terms of the original Taher chair agreement, the cancellation of the Abdulhadi H. Taher Chair by the donor's son and the subsequent repurposing of the donation appear highly irregular.

In addition, while it is certainly appropriate that the elimination of the Taher Chair did not lead AUC to change any other elements of Prof. Duker's appointment as a tenure-track assistant professor in the History Department, we find it problematic that there does not appear to have been an effort by AUC, from the outset, to promptly issue Prof. Duker a revised contract, given the change in his status with the termination of the chair. Instead, university administrators, beginning with the provost in his 11 July 2017 e-mail, simply continued to instruct Prof. Duker to refrain from using the title of Taher Chair.

We therefore feel compelled to express our deep concern regarding both the peculiar circumstances surrounding the cancellation of the Abdulhadi H. Taher Chair and the university administration's failure to offer Professor Adam Duker a revised contract. We call on AUC to publicly affirm its commitment to adhere to generally accepted standards with regard to donations that result in the creation of endowed chairs and to vigorously respect and defend the academic freedom of its faculty.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Judith E. Tucker
MESA President
Professor, Georgetown University



Laurie Brand
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom
Professor, University of Southern California