



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

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7 March 2024

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John Sharp
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Francisco J. Marmolejo
President of Higher Education at Qatar Foundation (QF)
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Dear Chancellor Sharp, President Welsh and Dr. Marmolejo,

We write to you on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our profound concern regarding the recently announced closure of Texas A&M University at Qatar (TAMUQ) in 2028. This decision, which abruptly terminates a partnership established in 2003, appears to be influenced by geopolitical dynamics far removed from the academic and educational mission of TAMUQ. Such a decision adversely impacts the rights of instructors to teach and the rights of students to learn unhampered by external political interference.

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.

The closure of TAMUQ not only disrupts the education and careers of hundreds of students and faculty, but also signals a worrisome disregard for core academic values. The decision seems to have been influenced by a broad disinformation campaign, one that Texas A&M's President Mark Welsh [described as](#) 'irresponsible' and 'insanity'. The fact that the university voted to close the campus so suddenly, and so soon after the [disinformation campaign](#) began in January 2024, raises questions about the impact of lobbying on Texas A&M's decisions. Alarming, the same organisation that released the disinformation about Qatar has suggested in its 2023 report on the topic that [donations from the](#) Middle East to American universities encourage the "corruption of the American mind." In late February 2024, they published [another report](#) singling out individual faculty members at TAMUQ with false, scurrilous and harmful



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accusations. Such external pressures should not dictate the operations of academic institutions whose mission requires independence and the unimpeded pursuit of knowledge.

Attempts to justify the closing have been far from convincing. The reasons provided, including concerns about “regional instability,” do not justify the dismantling of an academic venture that has already weathered geopolitical turbulence and several periods of intense conflict in the Middle East and especially the Gulf region. Most notably, TAMUQ was established in 2003, when former President George W. Bush, himself a Texan, presided over the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Another justification for the closure [was that](#) “it’s a long way from Texas,” a disturbingly trite reason for such a disruptive move, especially in light of the fact that its distance from the main campus had not changed since its founding and had not presented any new challenges of note.

In addition, it is disheartening to observe that the decision-making process lacked transparency and meaningful dialogue with the affected academic community. Despite President Mark Welsh’s noting that the [closure decision](#) was made after “thoughtful discussion,” the minutes of the Board of Regents’ meetings in the months leading up to the announcement do not contain any mention of the Qatar campus, raising concerns that the decision was a reactive one. Indeed, the Qatar Foundation, which works with several American universities in Doha, was [taken by surprise](#) as it had renewed TAMUQ’s contract in 2021 to run [until 2033](#). This lack of transparency, along with the abruptness of the decision and unconvincing justifications, suggests that the decision was an injudicious response to political interference.

Indeed, the closure appears to be the product of political fears of US campus politics rather than a response to the actual needs and aspirations of the TAMUQ community. This action undermines the global mission of Texas A&M University by restricting the free exchange of ideas and the ability of students and faculty to engage with diverse perspectives. Furthermore, the closure challenges the university’s own [stated mission](#) of serving “persons of all racial, ethnic, and geographic groups,” which is critical for addressing “the needs of an increasingly diverse population and a global economy.” Thus, the decision to close TAMUQ also raises questions about the university’s adherence to its own stated goals of global engagement and educational excellence in the 21st century.

In light of these concerns, we urge the leadership of Texas A&M University to reconsider the decision to close TAMUQ. We advocate for a process that is inclusive, transparent, and grounded in the academic values that Texas A&M has long espoused. We also call upon the



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university to reaffirm its commitment to academic freedom and to the importance of international academic engagements that foster mutual understanding and respect across cultures, to ensure that its global academic partnerships continue to thrive, free from undue and inappropriate external influence.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Asli U. Bali'.

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