



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

1957 E Street NW, Suite 401  
Washington, DC 20052

Phone 520-333-2577  
Fax 520-207-3166  
caf@mesana.org  
mesana.org



17 August 2020

Carol L. Folt  
President, University of Southern California  
University Park Campus  
Los Angeles, California 90089-0012  
[president@usc.edu](mailto:president@usc.edu)

Dear President Folt,

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 serious concern regarding your 6 August 2020 communication to the USC community in which you appear to equate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism.

We are of course deeply disturbed by the rising tide of racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism in the United States, and we firmly believe that combatting anti-Semitism and all other forms of racism, bigotry and discrimination is an essential duty for colleges and universities. However, we regard this part of your letter as a threat to academic freedom and to the constitutionally protected right of free speech.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, MESA publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has over 2500 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

We are aware that your message was issued in response to and against the background of a series of complex developments related to the comportment of and social media exchanges between some members of the USC student government and their critics. It is not our intent here to weigh in on the many serious and difficult issues these developments raise nor to condone bullying or harassment of any type. Rather, our concern is that, in the one public document you have issued to date on these complex matters, you have conflated anti-Zionism -- criticism of Israeli actions and policies, and of Zionism as a political ideology -- with anti-Semitism. In so doing, you potentially threaten the constitutionally protected free speech rights as well as the academic freedom of faculty and students at the University of Southern California.

There have been numerous attempts in recent years by various advocacy organizations, state governments and most recently by the Trump administration to equate criticism of Israel and anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism. As we have noted in previous letters outlining the problematic arguments behind such positions, even Kenneth Stern, the lead author of the State Department's definition of anti-Semitism, has, in testimony before Congress and elsewhere, opposed legislation or policies that conflate criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism; see for example <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/12/opinion/will-campus-criticism-of-israel-violate-federal-law.html>. He has further argued that such conflation is particularly



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inappropriate in college and university settings where it may threaten free speech rights and academic freedom and undermine the mission of such institutions to foster the free and open exchange of ideas and opinions, however controversial.

Your 6 August message's conflation of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism has already caused significant consternation and distress among USC student activists as well as faculty who understand the real threat to academic freedom and constitutionally protected freedom of speech that it represents. As the leader of an academic community, you have a responsibility to uphold the freedoms that are necessary for a diverse and vibrant learning environment. You have made clear your firm commitment to combating anti-Semitism. We now call upon you to publicly reaffirm your belief that all political speech, including criticism of any government, country or ideology and advocacy for any group's rights, is constitutionally protected. We further call on you to reaffirm that at USC this constitutional protection will always be accompanied by rigorous adherence to the standards and traditions of academic freedom and the rejection of all efforts to weaponize allegations of anti-Semitism in order to advance a political agenda and suppress the expression of certain political opinions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dina Rizk Khoury', with a long, sweeping underline.

Dina Rizk Khoury  
MESA President  
Professor, George Washington University

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Zachary Lockman', with a long, sweeping underline.

Zachary Lockman  
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom -- North America wing  
Professor, New York University

Cc:

Charles Zukoski, Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs, University of Southern California, [uscprovost@usc.edu](mailto:uscprovost@usc.edu)

Winston B. Crisp, Vice-President for Student Affairs, University of Southern California, [wcrisp@usc.edu](mailto:wcrisp@usc.edu)