



**Middle
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6 November 2020

Martha E. Pollack
President, Cornell University
president@cornell.edu

J. Meejin Yoon
Dean, College of Architecture, Art and Planning
Cornell University
aapdean@cornell.edu

Dear President Pollack and Dean Yoon:

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 recent events at Cornell University's College of Architecture, Art and Planning. On 5 October 2020 Professor Andrea Simitch, chair of the Department of Architecture, inappropriately and disrespectfully interrupted the Preston Thomas Memorial lecture being delivered by Professor Ariella Azoulay, Professor of Comparative Literature and Modern Culture and Media at Brown University. In the wake of this incident both Professor Azoulay and the curator of the lecture series, Professor Samia Henni of Cornell's Department of Architecture, were subjected to abuse and threats on social media. We regard Cornell's inadequate response to these events as undermining of academic freedom at your university.

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 2,800 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.

Professor Azoulay had been invited to deliver the inaugural lecture in the Cornell Department of Architecture's annual Preston H. Thomas Memorial Lecture Series, whose theme for the year is "Into the Desert: Questions of Coloniality and Toxicity." The nine distinguished scholars invited to deliver these lectures were asked to address "the ways in which politicians, scientists, and architects developed, exploited, colonized, transformed, urbanized, militarized, or polluted the underground or overground territories of a number of deserts in the aftermath of the Second World War." The series was curated by Assistant Professor Samia Henni. The featured speakers and the topics of their lectures were well-known in advance to the chair of the Architecture Department and the dean of the College of Architecture, Art and Planning. Professor Azoulay's lecture, broadcast via Zoom, was entitled "Palestine Is There, Where It Has Always Been."

Soon after Professor Azoulay began her lecture, Professor Simitch directed that a message be disseminated through Zoom's chat function announcing that the department looked forward to hosting a lecture that offered "other viewpoints than those offered here today and in subsequent talks." Professor Simitch apparently took this action, which manifested an egregious lack of



Re: Upholding standards of conduct for Prof. Ariella Azoulay

6 November 2020

Page 2

professionalism and respect for Professors Azoulay and Henni, after the college received complaints from the executive director of Cornell's Hillel chapter and from a Cornell alumnus about inviting Professor Azoulay. Professors Azoulay and Henni were subsequently subjected to abuse on social media, apparently from individuals and organizations based outside of academia who seek to silence the expression of views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with which they disagree.

As you no doubt know, there has been widespread criticism at Cornell and beyond of Professor Simitch's decision to succumb to external pressure by in effect delegitimizing Professor Azoulay even as she was speaking. While Professor Simitch and Dean Yoon have offered apologies internally for what happened, as far as we know neither the College of Architecture, Art and Planning nor Cornell University have issued any official public statements about this incident. This raises serious concerns about the university's commitment to defend academic freedom, especially for potentially vulnerable untenured faculty, as well as its willingness to ensure that Zoom and other platforms not be used for inappropriate and invidious purposes.

We therefore call on you to publicly apologize to Professors Azoulay and Henni for this violation of the university's avowed standards of conduct and to vigorously reaffirm Cornell's commitment to protecting the academic freedom and freedom of expression of all faculty on its campus.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Dina Rizk Khoury'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Dina Rizk Khoury
MESA President
Professor, George Washington University

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Laurie A. Brand'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a distinct, sharp hook at the end of the last name.

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