



**Middle
East
Studies
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2 September 2022

Dr. Jeremy Haefner
Chancellor,
University of Denver
chancellor@du.edu

Dear Dr. Haefner:

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 the statement that the University of Denver issued on 23 August 2022 concerning Professor Nader Hashemi, director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the university's Joseph Korbel School of International Studies. We believe that this poorly formulated statement can plausibly be read as damaging to Professor Hashemi's personal and scholarly reputation, and as a violation of his academic freedom.

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 almost 2800 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.

On 20 August 2022 Spotify's Iran Podcast featured an [interview](#) with Professor Hashemi on the attempt to assassinate Salman Rushdie a week or so earlier. In that interview Professor Hashemi was asked to speculate about the motives of the accused attacker and about whether any government or organization might have been involved. Professor Hashemi responded by suggesting several possible scenarios, including the attacker's self-radicalization online, a connection with an official or rogue Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps agent, and a connection with a Mossad agent posing as an Iranian. These scenarios were all obviously entirely speculative, as to our knowledge no evidence has thus far emerged about the attacker's motivation or connections.

The very suggestion that the Mossad could have been involved quickly led to Professor Hashemi's being subjected to abuse and attacks on various websites and media outlets. These included accusations of antisemitism, which as we know all too well have not infrequently been weaponized by organizations and media outlets seeking to suppress the expression of opinions with which they disagree. Apparently in response to complaints from several Jewish organizations in Colorado, the University of Denver issued a statement without first informing or consulting Professor Hashemi. Because the university has, as far as we know, not seen fit to make its statement publicly available on its own website, we provide it here in full:

Professor Hashemi spoke as an individual faculty member and does not speak for the university. While we wholeheartedly respect academic freedom and freedom of speech, his comments do not reflect the point of view of the university, nor are we aware of any facts that support his view. The safety of every speaker and every student on our campus, and



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all campuses, is critical to our society. We condemn the stabbing of Salman Rushdie. And it goes without saying that we remain committed to assuring that the experience of our Jewish students, faculty and staff is safe, supportive, respectful and welcoming.

In formulating the statement the way it did, the university publicly distanced itself from one of its own faculty members for having engaged in legitimate speculation about the politics surrounding the attempted assassination of Salman Rushdie. But the statement also seems to imply that Professor Hashemi had condoned or sought to justify the attack on Salman Rushdie (which of course he had not) and that he somehow constituted a threat to campus safety and to the university's Jewish students, faculty and staff. It thereby appears to validate the attacks to which Professor Hashemi has been subjected while also compromising his academic freedom.

We welcome the University of Denver's professed commitment to academic freedom and free speech. But by singling out a faculty member for expressing an opinion, however speculative, and by issuing a statement that suggests agreement with the vicious attacks launched against him and implies that he is a threat to the university community and to its Jewish members in particular, your university has failed to live up to that commitment. We therefore urge you to promptly and publicly withdraw this statement, apologize to Professor Hashemi and reaffirm your commitment to vigorously defend the academic freedom and free speech rights of your faculty, students and staff.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Eve M. Troutt Powell'.

Eve Troutt Powell
MESA President
Professor, University of Pennsylvania

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Laurie A. Brand'.

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