13 April 2023

Dr. Lynn Mahoney
President,
San Francisco State University
president@sfsu.edu

Dear President Mahoney:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our concern over the decision by San Francisco State University’s Office of Equity Programs and Compliance to open an investigation of Professor Maziar Behrooz for showing an image of the Prophet Muhammad in his class. Investigating the content and form of a professor’s pedagogy should not be the mandate of a university equity office, and such investigations constitute a serious violation of the right to free expression and the principles of academic freedom.

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 *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 2,400 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.

In the context of a fall 2022 History Department course entitled “The Islamic World: 1500-1700,” Professor Behrooz showed an image of the Prophet Muhammad. According to media reports, one student in the class protested to Professor Behrooz that such portrayals are forbidden in Islam. The student then complained to the department head and to university administrators, which led to the investigation by the university’s Office of Equity Programs and Compliance.

We note that Professor Behrooz has been showing such images in this course for some twenty years and that similar depictions are regularly shown and discussed in courses at colleges and universities across the country. Moreover, as we noted in a recent letter to the president of Hamline University, distinguished scholars of Islamic art and history have pointed out that it is historically inaccurate to presume that depicting the Prophet has always been prohibited in Islam. Such claims erase the diversity of Islamic practice, which in many times and places has included the commissioning and viewing of figurative depictions of Muhammad as a form of veneration. There is therefore no justification for launching an investigation of a faculty member for using such pedagogically valuable depictions.
San Francisco State University and other institutions of higher education have an obligation to vigorously uphold the academic freedom of their faculty, and investigating a professor for what and how they teach is in direct violation of this obligation. While offices responsible for ensuring compliance with equity and antidiscrimination legislation and regulations have an important role to play at colleges and universities, their work must always be in keeping with the principles of academic freedom.

We therefore call on you to immediately terminate the investigation of Professor Behrooz and publicly reaffirm SFSU’s firm commitment to academic freedom. We further urge your administration to develop better ways of responding to student complaints and to engage with SFSU’s faculty in a thorough discussion of how to teach topics that some may deem controversial while upholding the right to free speech and the principles of academic freedom.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Eve Troutt Powell
MESA President
Professor, University of Pennsylvania

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