



**Middle
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20 November 2023

Dr. Ellen M. Granberg
President, George Washington University
president@gwu.edu

Christopher Alan Bracey
Provost, George Washington University
gwprovost@gwu.edu

Colette Coleman
Associate Provost and Dean of Students, George Washington
University
gwprovost@gwu.edu

Dear President Granberg, Provost Bracey and Associate Provost
Coleman:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to request clarification of the basis on which your administration made its decision, announced on 13 November 2023, to suspend the George Washington University (GWU) chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) for at least 90 days. This decision prohibits SJP from organizing or sponsoring activities on GWU property and from using any university facilities, and the university will further bar SJP from posting communications on its property until 20 May 2024. We are not in any way endorsing what GWU's SJP chapter may have said or done; however, given GWU's avowed commitment to the free speech rights and academic freedom of all members of the university community, we consider it reasonable to ask you to explain which specific rules and policies you believe SJP's actions violated and the process by which the decision to suspend it was made.

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.

Your administration's decision to suspend GWU's SJP chapter was apparently taken in response to SJP's projection on 24 October 2023 of a number of images on the outer wall of GWU's Gelman Library. In a [statement](#) issued the following day, President Granberg declared that the "images included antisemitic phrases that have caused fear and



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anxiety for many members of our Jewish and broader GW community” and indicated that there would be an investigation of the incident. We note in this connection that scholars and others have [shown](#) that many of the phrases President Granberg deemed antisemitic can and should be understood in other ways, i.e. not as exclusively and self-evidently antisemitic hate speech but as expressions of criticism of Israel’s policies toward the Palestinians and of Zionism as the State of Israel’s official ideology.

It is not clear to us which established GWU policies and procedures regarding political activity by student groups prohibited SJP’s projection of images on the library wall; as far as we can tell, there seems to be no specific provision in university or library policies that would bar the projection of images on the outside wall of a university building. Nor is it entirely clear from reports on the incident itself how quickly the SJP activists involved in this incident, who seem to have believed that they were acting in conformity with university rules, complied when instructed to desist.

In these fraught times university leaders have a heightened responsibility to protect the freedom of speech and academic freedom of all members of the university community. As MESA’s Board of Directors put it in a statement dated 16 October 2023: “We call on university leaders and administrations to affirmatively assert and protect the rights to academic freedom and freedom of speech on their campuses. We reaffirm that there can be no compromise of the right and ability of students, faculty, and staff at universities across North America (and elsewhere) to express their viewpoints free of harassment, intimidation, and threats to their livelihoods and safety.”

We understand that some GWU students may have been offended or distressed by some or all of the phrases SJP members projected on 24 October 2023, and we certainly believe that this country’s colleges and universities must vigorously combat all forms of hate speech and racism, including antisemitism. At the same time, we are sure that GWU would not wish to be seen as compromising its commitment to free speech and academic freedom by silencing a student organization essentially because some segments of the university community, and perhaps some alumni and donors as well, disagree with the political perspective for which that organization advocates and the (admittedly sometimes ambiguous) phrases through which that perspective is expressed. Hence our request that you clarify the specific provisions of university and/or library rules which justified your decision to suspend GWU’s SJP chapter and the specific procedures embodied in university policy that you followed to reach that decision.



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We look forward to your response,

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ash Ü. Bâli'.

Ash 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