



**Middle  
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1 December 2023

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Dear President Magill and colleagues:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our dismay about your administration's decision to prevent the screening by Penn students of *Israelism*, an award-winning documentary that explores the changing relationship of American Jews with Israel and has been screened at many venues, including numerous campuses. This action manifests a disregard for your students' constitutionally protected right of free speech and a violation of 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 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.

Penn Chavurah, which describes itself as an "independent student-run space for progressive Jews at Penn," began planning a screening of *Israelism* in the summer of 2023. A screening was scheduled for 24 October 2023, but after the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel and the onset of the Israeli military campaign in Gaza, Penn Chavurah decided to



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postpone the screening. In late October 2023 Penn Chavurah submitted a request for university approval of a screening to take place on 28 November 2023; that request was denied on 21 November 2023, with the university citing its concern for “the safety and well-being of the Penn community,” though it has not prohibited campus events advocating for Israel. Your administration reportedly pressured Penn’s Middle East Center, which had reserved a room for the screening, to withdraw its support and cancel the screening; it also apparently threatened to rescind Penn Chavurah’s funding and status as a student organization if it proceeded with the screening. The documentary was nonetheless screened as planned on 28 November 2023. Media reports indicate that the university is now threatening to initiate disciplinary proceedings against the students who organized the screening.

As the Executive Committee of the Penn chapter of the American Association of University Professors put it clearly in a [statement](#) issued on 28 November 2023: “The administration’s refusal to allow students to screen a documentary film on campus is one more expression of our university leadership’s failure to uphold the principles of academic freedom – principles enshrined in Penn’s policies and essential to the mission of a university. Academic freedom entails the freedom of students to learn, and to encounter and critically examine multiple interpretations of the world. Students’ freedom to learn also entails their right to political speech and association, which are essential aspects of education and learning. In denying students these freedoms, the university administration violates its own policies and endangers the principles of academic freedom that are essential to the research and teaching mission of a university.”

We note as well that the director of Penn’s Middle East Center, Professor Harun Küçük, has submitted his resignation in response to inappropriate administration pressures. As the Penn AAUP statement highlighted: “His resignation underlines the gravity of the crisis, and the responsibility the President and Provost have for creating and exacerbating it.... It is the right of faculty members to make academic programming decisions. We are particularly concerned that the Middle East Center has already lost its federal funding because the university failed to provide adequate support for its activities. Any further threats to the Center’s ability to fulfill its academic mission will only hurt our university, our faculty, and our students.”

In these fraught times university leaders have a heightened responsibility to protect the freedom of speech, academic freedom and physical safety of all members of the campus community. This country’s institutions of higher education should be places in which a broad range of perspectives can be expressed, debated and criticized. Your administration’s actions in



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this matter are thus an abdication of professional, academic and civic responsibility.

We therefore call on you to immediately rescind the egregious decision to prohibit the screening of *Israelism*. We further call on you to ask Professor Küçük to resume his directorship of Penn's Middle East Center, with the apologies from the administration that are his due, and to desist from threats against Penn Chavurah and from disciplinary action against students involved in screening the documentary. Finally, we call on you to initiate an open discussion involving the entire university community – faculty, students and staff – of what the First Amendment and the principles of academic freedom mean, and how best to uphold and protect them at the University of Pennsylvania.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Asli U. Bali'.

Aslı Ü. Bâli  
MESA President  
Professor, Yale Law School

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laurie A. Brand'.

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