



**Middle
East
Studies
Association**
of North America, Inc.

1957 E Street NW, Suite 401
Washington, DC 20052

Phone 520-333-2577

Fax 520-207-3166

caf@mesana.org

mesana.org



18 December 2023

Tomás D. Morales
President, California State University, San Bernardino
TMorales@csusb.edu

Rafik Mohamed
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
Rafik.Mohamed@csusb.edu

Kevin Grisham
Interim Associate Provost for Faculty Affairs and Development
KGrisham@csusb.edu

Robert C. Tenczar
Associate Vice President, Office of Strategic Communication
Robert.tenczar@csusb.edu

Dear President Morales 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 concern about the action of a senior administrator at California State University, San Bernadino (CSUSB) that infringed the free speech rights and academic freedom of Professor of Media Studies Ahlam Muhtaseb. The administrator's claim to have censored – and to have the right to censor – a public communication about Professor Muhtaseb's work contravenes California State University's [affirmation](#) that professors' "primary responsibility to their subject is to seek and to state the truth as they see it."

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.

By way of context: on 18 November 2023 Professor Muhtaseb was slated to deliver a [speech](#) before the annual convention of the National Communication Association (NCA) which included the phrase "Stop the genocide in Gaza now and free Palestine." However, she was prevented from doing so, apparently by NCA staff. Three days later the NCA leadership issued a public statement that extended "its deepest apologies to the seven performers who invested time, energy, and effort in preparing to

share their visions of the future of NCA and the communication discipline, especially to Dr. Ahlam Muhtaseb.”

Professor Muhtaseb is also a filmmaker, and her documentary, [*36 Seconds: Portrait of a Hate Crime*](#), premiered at the DOC NYC Film Festival on 11 November 2023. On 30 November 2023 CSUSB sent out a message to the campus and the media which included an item about the screening of Professor Muhtaseb’s documentary at the film festival. The next day Professor Muhtaseb contacted the university’s senior media relations specialist to ask why the news item had not linked to an article about the documentary and the premiere, as she had expected. On 5 December 2023, CSUSB Associate Vice President Robert Tenczar sent an email message to Professor Muhtaseb that read in part:

Words are currently being used as weapons, and they are resulting in even more deaths, injury and terror here in the United States. The term “genocide,” used as a descriptor for what is happening in Gaza right now, has become a flashpoint term, regardless of the user’s original intent, to imply and even provoke further violence. It is a word also viewed by many Jews around the world as anti-Semitic in this context. That is the reason why a link to your statement containing that word was not used in CSUSB’s publicity for your film. I also took this action with the intent of preventing a distraction from the actual film on which you have so ably served as co-producer and lead researcher.

Mr. Tenczar was apparently mistaken in claiming to have removed the word “genocide” from the publicity material for Professor Muhtaseb’s documentary, because that word does not seem to have actually appeared in that material. As far as we can tell, he confused Professor Muhtaseb’s planned remarks to the NCA with the material about her documentary. Nonetheless, whether or not he actually deleted anything containing the term “genocide,” his assertion that he had the right to do so constitutes a threat to the right to free speech and to the principles of academic freedom.

Moreover, Mr. Tenczar’s characterization of the term “genocide” is deeply uninformed. While the term is not uncontested, Professor Muhtaseb’s planned use of the term at the NCA is in keeping with the opinions of a wide range of scholars from different disciplines who have concluded that Israel’s assault on Gaza is an incipient or actual genocide. These include a [statement](#) signed by 800 scholars and practitioners of international law, conflict studies and genocide studies as well as analyses and statements by [UN experts](#), [legal analysts](#) and human rights [defenders](#). We are hard-pressed to see how these knowledgeable parties’ use of “genocide” to



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describe Israel’s military campaign in Gaza can be construed to “imply and even provoke further violence,” as Mr. Tenczar claims in his email.

Ominously, Mr. Tenczar concluded his message with a vow to continue exercising administrative control over speech: “At this time of heightened tensions, I am even more carefully reviewing all official campus messaging for any form of speech that might be termed anti-Semitic or xenophobic and lead to acts of violence against any specific group of persons who appear to be targets of such language.” We concur with the American Association of University Professors’ [rejection](#) of attempts to violate the right of free speech, including by framing advocacy for Palestinian rights and opposition to Israel’s war in Gaza as self-evidently antisemitic.

In these fraught times, university leaders have a heightened responsibility to withstand powerful external pressures and demands for political censorship, and to protect the rights of faculty and students to engage in free debate and contentious speech. The CSUSB [Faculty Administrative Manual](#) states clearly: “As citizens engaged in a profession that depends upon freedom for its health and integrity, professors have a particular obligation to promote conditions of free inquiry and to further public understanding of academic freedom.” Regrettably, the CSUSB leadership has failed to live up to its own avowed standards.

We therefore call on the CSUSB administration to issue an apology to Professor Muhtaseb for this incident. We further call on it to vigorously and publicly reiterate its commitment to uphold the university’s own robust articulations of academic freedom and uncensored speech.

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 Brand'.

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