



**Middle
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3 January 2024

Linda Mills
President, New York University
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Georgina Dopico
Interim Provost, New York University
georgina.dopico@nyu.edu

Dear President Mills and Interim Provost Dopico:

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 a number of New York University's recent actions that put into question its adherence to its avowed commitment to protecting the right to free speech and the academic freedom of its faculty, students and staff.

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.

According to media reports, New York University (NYU) has suspended Hafiza Khalique, a first-year undergraduate student, until the start of the fall 2024 semester for tearing down posters depicting people abducted from Israel and held as hostages in Gaza by Hamas or other organizations. Khalique was accused of violating the provision of the [University Student Conduct Policy](#) that prohibits “*Vandalizing, damaging, destroying, defacing, or tampering with University property or the property of others*” and of “*Engaging in behavior prohibited under the [NYU Non-Discrimination and Anti-Harassment Policy for Students](#).*” Whatever one thinks of Khalique's actions, the [assertion](#) by the university's Office of Student Conduct that “the act of tearing down the posters is inherently based on the actual or perceived national origin, ethnicity and/or shared ancestry of Israelis and individuals of Jewish ancestry,” and therefore a violation of NYU's non-discrimination policy, is arguable. Moreover, as faculty and student groups at NYU have reasonably pointed out, a suspension of this length, which also entails expulsion from university housing, is a severe penalty to impose on a student.

We note that NYU has acknowledged that Khalique was initially told that a significantly milder disciplinary sanction would be imposed; however, as the Office of Student Conduct's decision put it, “the University is taking a strong stance with respect to violations of the Non-Discrimination and Anti-

Harassment Policy, as well as related policy violations, particularly conduct involving calls for violence and offensive or intimidating conduct. Notwithstanding preliminary comments as to the sanctions that were initially contemplated, given the nature of your conduct in light of the circumstances and in consultation with relevant University stakeholders, this level of sanction reflects that approach.” It would seem that NYU decided, arbitrarily and improperly, to make an example of Hafiza Khalique.

We have also been informed that someone else at NYU – Darren King, a Post-Doctoral Associate at NYU’s Courant Institute of Mathematical Sciences – is facing disciplinary action for removing posters, which may result in his termination. In his case as well, the university is alleging that he “engaged in harassment...on the basis of national origin by removing posters of Israeli hostages on University property.” As with Khalique, whatever one thinks of King’s action it is not by no means obvious that it constitutes harassment on the basis of national origin.

NYU faculty have also reported instances in which university administrators have interfered with efforts to secure space for events relating to the current crisis in Palestine/Israel, employed email filters that have restricted the free flow of information, and increased surveillance on campus. These actions have, as a [statement](#) issued on 18 December 2023 by the NYU chapter of the American Association of University Professors put it, “narrowed the space of free and open inquiry at our global university located in the most diverse city in the world.”

This country’s institutions of higher education should be places in which all members of the campus community can express their views freely. In these fraught times university leaders have a heightened responsibility to protect the freedom of speech and academic freedom of all members of the campus community. This is all the more important now, when violence is raging in the Middle East, our own government is so deeply involved in what is happening, and various individuals and organizations with a political agenda are seeking to vilify and silence faculty and students with whom they disagree.

We therefore call on the leadership of New York University to reconsider the disciplinary sanction imposed on Hafiza Khalique as well as its proceedings against Darren King. We further call on NYU to refrain from adopting any policy, or taking any measure, which is likely to exert a chilling effect on teaching and learning on campus. Finally, we urge NYU to publicly and forcefully reaffirm its commitment to protecting the free speech rights and academic freedom, as well as the safety and well-being, of all members of the campus community.



Re: Hafiza Khalique and Darren King

3 January 2024

Page 3

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

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

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