



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

**Headquarters & Secretariat**

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16 January 2024

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Dear Provost Shrivastav 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 alarm at Indiana University's suspension of Associate Professor of Political Science and Middle Eastern Studies Abdulkader Sinno as well as its abrupt cancellation of a retrospective of the work of renowned Palestinian artist Samia Halaby. These actions constitute a clear and egregious violation of the principles of academic freedom and a betrayal of the mission of our institutions of higher education.

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.

Professor Sinno has served as faculty advisor to several IU student organizations, including the Palestine Solidarity Committee, which invited Miko Peled, an Israeli-American veteran of the Israel Defense Forces and a peace activist, to speak on campus on 17 November 2023. The administration sought to have the event cancelled, but it was held without incident as planned. The next day Associate Vice President for Public Safety Benjamin Hunter filed a complaint against Professor Sinno. The subsequent investigation by Vice Provost Carrie Docherty focused on errors allegedly made by Professor Sinno in filling out the room reservation form for the event at which Peled spoke. Almost a month later, the university suspended Professor Sinno from all teaching and mentoring duties for the spring and summer terms. In a 15 December 2023 [letter](#) to Professor Sinno informing him of the suspension, Vice Provost Docherty asserted that she had "serious



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concerns about the effect your behavior may have on members of the campus community. These concerns are enhanced by the potential impact that your inattention to university compliance requirements has on the students you influence in the classroom and in your role as a student organization faculty advisor.”

Suspending a tenured faculty member for alleged errors in routine paperwork is an absurdly harsh sanction; but it also appears that in suspending Professor Sinno, who by all accounts has been an exemplary scholar, teacher and member of the IU community, administration officials ignored or violated the university's own procedures. According to university policies on [Academic Appointee Responsibilities and Conduct](#) and the [Policy on Faculty Disciplinary Procedures](#), Vice Provost Docherty was obligated to file a complaint against Professor Sinno with the Faculty Misconduct Review Committee, which would then recommend whether to sanction him, rather than acting on her own. According to a statement by the university's AAUP chapter, both Docherty and IU Senior Associate General Counsel Andrea Newsom failed to follow proper procedure even after they had been called upon to do so. By choosing to ignore proper procedure and acting arbitrarily, not only were faculty rights violated but university leadership made it impossible to have a serious discussion about how to balance campus security with the protection of free speech and academic freedom. Indiana University has thereby made a mockery of its avowed commitment to faculty governance and due process.

We are equally dismayed by the decision of IU’s Eskenazi Museum of Art to cancel the first American retrospective survey of the work of Samia Halaby. Though the event had been planned for three years, the director of the museum informed Halaby in December 2023 that her social media posts expressing support for Palestinians subjected to Israeli violence in Gaza and elsewhere had caused concern among some museum employees. A university spokesman offered the incoherent and implausible claim that “academic leaders and campus officials canceled the exhibit due to concerns about guaranteeing the integrity of the exhibit for its duration.”

Indiana University's justifications for its arbitrary actions in both these instances are not convincing. We understand that the university may feel under pressure from outside forces seeking to silence the expression of opinions with which they do not agree, including a threat by Representative Jim Bank (R-IN 3<sup>rd</sup> District) in November 2023 to cut the university's federal funding if it did not deal with alleged incidents of antisemitism, by which he seems to have meant criticism of Israel's actions and policies. We believe that the proper response to such threats and pressures, especially in these fraught times, is to resolutely defend the free speech and academic freedom of faculty, students and staff. Your university has not only signally



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failed to do this, but has also inexcusably violated its own procedures for addressing alleged infractions by faculty.

We therefore call upon you to immediately rescind Professor Sinno's suspension and express your administration's intention to adhere to university disciplinary policies and to the shared governance they require. We further call on you to do everything possible to ensure that the retrospective survey of Samia Halaby's art open as originally planned in February 2024. Finally, we call on you to publicly and vigorously reiterate your commitment to protect the constitutionally protected right to free speech as well as the academic freedom of all members of the Indiana University community.

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