



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

Headquarters & Secretariat

Georgetown University
Center for Contemporary Arab
Studies

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12 March 2024

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Kathryn A. Sloan
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Dear Chancellor Robinson, Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor
Martin, Vice Provost Gigantino, and Dean Sloan:

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 your administration's failure to uphold academic freedom at the University of Arkansas by responding vigorously to the defamation to which several of your faculty members, and one of your major academic units, have been subjected. At least three faculty – Professor Mohja Kahf, Professor Joel Gordon, and Professor Emeritus Ted Swedenburg – as well as the King Fahd Center for Middle East Studies with which they are all affiliated, have been attacked by another faculty member, in apparent violation of university policies. This inaction on the part of your administration constitutes an abdication of professional and academic responsibility; it also, intentionally or not, sends the message that your administration countenances the defamation to which these faculty and this academic program have been subjected. Your administration also cancelled an event which two of these faculty had organized, calling into question its avowed commitment to 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.

On 8 November 2023, the university postponed (and later [cancelled](#)) a panel discussion about Israel’s war in Gaza that was to take place that evening organized by Professors Gordon and Swedenburg, both of whom are highly respected Middle East experts, at the behest of the Dean of the Honors College. The last-minute cancellation came after the university received multiple messages criticizing the event’s organizers, including [a letter](#) from a faculty member accusing Gordon and Swedenburg of inciting antisemitism. The day before the cancellation, the local alt-right *Conduit News* outlet ran an episode on YouTube during which Jay Greene, a Senior Fellow at the Heritage Foundation, attacked these faculty members and called on the state legislature to shut down the university’s Center for Middle East Studies.

We note as well that since December 2023, Robert Steinbuch, a professor at the university’s William H. Bowen School of Law, has published at least four [opinion pieces](#) in the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* attacking Professors Gordon, Swedenburg and Kahf. For example, on 12 January 2024, Steinbuch’s column referred to them repeatedly as “[Fahdians](#)” – meant as a disparaging reference to the Center for Middle East Studies’ name and funding source – and called for it to be “shuttered.” These columns also disparaged these professors for objecting in 2017 to inviting a speaker who had been widely criticized for repeatedly denouncing all Muslims as inherently violent. We note that the University of Arkansas’ own [policy on academic freedom](#) requires it to uphold and defend academic freedom and the right to free speech, and to take action when “speech falsely defames a specific individual, constitutes a genuine threat or actual harassment, or invades legally recognized privacy interests.”

Steinbuch has focused many of his attacks on Professor Kahf, a feminist scholar of color, [insinuating](#) that she is antisemitic based on materials hung on her office door that include a comic critical of Zionism and of colonial feminism, as well as the phrase “Palestine from the river to the sea.” It is worth noting that Professor Kahf hung these materials on her door after a colleague who does not have the protection of tenure was pressured to remove them from their office door, suggesting that the university has not been fostering a climate in which faculty can exercise their free speech rights.

We understand that the University of Arkansas, along with colleges and universities across the country, is facing heightened pressure from donors, politicians, and organizations pursuing a political agenda that seeks to silence opinions with which they disagree. The University of



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Arkansas has already apparently succumbed to such pressure by cancelling the 8 November 2023 panel discussion. The university's continuing silence as its faculty and one of its major academic centers are subjected to vituperation is another indication that it is failing to live up to its responsibilities. We find it important to note that, to date, no public events discussing current events in Gaza have taken place at the flagship campus of the University of Arkansas.

In these fraught times university leaders have a heightened responsibility to protect the freedom of speech and academic freedom of members of the campus community and to safeguard faculty members as they fulfill the university's mission of academic inquiry and education. This country's institutions of higher education should be places in which a broad range of perspectives can be expressed, debated, and criticized without fear of defamation and harassment. These values are increasingly important to uphold now, as individuals, organizations, and legislatures weaponize allegations of antisemitism to vilify people with whom they disagree.

We therefore call upon you to publicly denounce the defamation to which Professors Kahf, Gordon and Swedenburg, and the King Fahd Center for Middle East Studies, have been subjected, and to vigorously and publicly reiterate your commitment to defend the right to free speech and academic freedom of all University of Arkansas faculty, students, and staff. We further call on you to actively foster an atmosphere of free academic inquiry and discussion on your campus, including with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

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