



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

Headquarters & Secretariat

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19 March 2024

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Chancellor
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Dr. Jessica Harris
Vice Chancellor for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
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Dr. Eric Ruckh
Interim Dean of Library and Information Services
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
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Dear Drs. Minor, Harris and Ruckh:

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 Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) administration's decision to cancel a panel discussion titled "Understanding the Israel-Gaza Conflict: Causes, Conduct, Consequences" that was scheduled for 29 January 2024. The panel was to feature two distinguished scholars from UCLA, Professor David Myers and Professor James Gelvin. Emails obtained through the Freedom of Information Act process indicate that you and your colleagues succumbed to behind-the-scenes pressure from a small number of SIUE faculty members who falsely accused Professor Gelvin of antisemitism, among other things, and demanded that he be disinvited. Your action in this matter calls into question the avowed commitment of your administration to respect and uphold the principles of academic freedom and the constitutionally protected right to free speech, as well as the standards of academic life.

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.

Professors Myers and Gelvin are prolific and highly respected scholars in the fields of modern Jewish history and modern Middle Eastern history, respectively; we note that among his many publications, Professor Gelvin



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has written an acclaimed historical survey of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which is used widely in courses across the United States. Nonetheless, in emails to SIUE leaders Professor Gelvin was denounced as an antisemite, apparently based on allegations in the notoriously tendentious *Campus Watch* website, which is known to be a swamp of inaccuracies and misinformation, and which routinely conflates any and all criticism of Israel with antisemitism in order to disparage, delegitimize and silence scholars and students who hold the “wrong” views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One email message claimed Professor Gelvin was a racist, again without evidence. His detractors at SIUE also alleged that Professor Gelvin should be disinvited because he had expressed support for the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement. As we see it, whatever his actual position regarding BDS, it is completely unacceptable for a self-respecting institution of higher education to prevent someone from sharing their acknowledged scholarly expertise because of their opinions on an issue of public concern.

In its message to Professors Gelvin and Myers informing them that they had been disinvited, SIUE’s Interim Dean of Library and Information Services and its Vice Chancellor of Anti-Racism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion justified the decision to cancel the event by claiming: “We have, in the last day or two, been informed that faculty and students from both sides would protest and boycott this event. Moving forward, at this time, would sharpen the polarization of this campus, deepen divisions, and set back efforts to build a community which embodies civility.” The emails that the FOIA request surfaced tell a different story: a small group of faculty, determined to silence a respected scholar who they feared would express views with which they disagreed, organized to pressure the administration to cancel his appearance at SIUE, and they did so by circulating vicious and baseless allegations about him. Regrettably, your administration gave in to this campaign of vilification.

In these fraught times university leaders have a heightened responsibility to defend freedom of speech and academic freedom, and to respect scholars 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 and silence people with whom they disagree.

We therefore call on you to make public all records of the communications and meetings that led to the decision to cancel this event, and to initiate an open and transparent investigation, conducted by



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members of the SIUE faculty, of what happened. We further call on you to publicly express your firm commitment to free speech and academic freedom, and 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 '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