



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

Headquarters & Secretariat

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8 April 2024

Daniel Diermeier
Chancellor, Vanderbilt University
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C. Cybele Raver
Provost, Vanderbilt University
cybele.raver@vanderbilt.edu

Dear Chancellor Diermeier and Provost Raver:

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 several of your administration's recent actions with respect to student activism in support of Palestinian rights. These actions contradict Vanderbilt's avowed commitment to respect your students' constitutionally protected right to free speech and their academic freedom, as well as the democratic procedures of student self-government.

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 23 February 2024 a student group, the Vanderbilt Divest Coalition, submitted a petition to the Vanderbilt Student Government (VSG) calling for the addition to its constitution of an amendment stating that "None of the expenditures from the VSG Budget may be spent on the BDS [Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions] movement's consumer and organic boycott targets or spent in collaboration with organizations who spend student service funds on BDS movement's consumer and organic boycott targets." The petition was signed by a much larger number of students than is required to initiate the holding of a referendum on the proposed amendment. VSG scheduled a vote on the amendment for 25 March 2024. However, on 12 March 2024, the Vanderbilt administration cancelled the referendum, claiming that "under federal and state laws, boycotts by U.S. organizations of countries friendly to the United States can result in fines, penalties, or disbarment from contractor status."



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While your administration did not justify its decision by citing any specific legislation, it seems to have been primarily concerned about SB 1993, a Tennessee law which prohibits the awarding of state contracts with a value in excess of \$250,000 to entities, including nonprofits, that boycott Israel or its settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, which are of course illegal under international law. However, in a [letter](#) to Vanderbilt University dated 18 March 2024, Palestine Legal provided a convincing explanation of why this law does not apply to VSG and cannot plausibly be used to justify canceling the student vote. We must therefore conclude that Vanderbilt has behaved in a discriminatory manner by preventing a group of its students from advocating for a particular political position (support for Palestinian rights and an end to Israel’s war on Gaza) and violated their freedom of speech.

Students associated with the Vanderbilt Divest Coalition responded to your administration’s arbitrary and discriminatory decision to cancel the referendum by constructing an “Apartheid Wall” exhibit on campus – something the university had initially approved and subsequently disallowed – and by staging a sit-in in a university building. Presumably at your direction, campus police forcibly evicted the students, arresting several of them; in addition, twenty-seven of those who participated in the sit-in were “interimly suspended,” a sanction which entails being barred from campus and which cannot be appealed. Your administration subsequently expelled three students (though they can appeal that decision), suspended another and imposed disciplinary probation on all but one of the rest.

Institutions of higher education should be places in which scholars and students can express their views freely. Especially 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. Students, faculty and staff should have the right to express and share their perspectives on all facets of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and (if they so choose) to advocate for Palestinian rights without fear of intimidation or disciplinary action. Your administration’s cancellation of the referendum prevented your students from utilizing a democratic process to express their views on an issue of public concern, and the university’s harsh treatment of those who participated in the sit-in constitutes yet another blow to freedom of speech and assembly on your campus. We note that over one hundred Vanderbilt faculty and staff have signed a [statement](#) protesting your administration’s actions and expressing support for the students involved in these protests.

We therefore call on you to immediately rescind your cancellation of the student vote on the amendment to the VSG constitution and allow it to



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proceed unhindered. We also call on you to ensure that the harsh sanctions imposed on the students who participated in the sit-in are reviewed in a fair, independent and transparent manner, in strict conformity to reasonable disciplinary policies and procedures and to the right to due process. Finally, we urge you to publicly and vigorously reaffirm Vanderbilt University's commitment to respecting the right of your students and all other members of the university community to freedom of speech and to academic freedom, 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