



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

**Headquarters & Secretariat**

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15 April 2024

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Dear President Shafik 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 Columbia University's harsh and ill-advised response to a student-organized event that took place on 24 March 2024. Your administration's excessive actions manifest a distressing disregard for your students' right to free speech and for the principles of 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 3 April 2024 Columbia University suspended four students and ordered them evicted from university housing within twenty-four hours as a consequence of their alleged involvement in a 24 March 2024 event titled "[Resistance 101](#)." In a [statement](#) issued on 5 April 2024 President Shafik justified the suspensions by claiming that the university had twice barred the event from taking place on campus and that it had "featured speakers known to support terrorism and promote violence." We note that



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President Shafik’s statement offered no evidence that the event actually featured such speakers, nor did it specify which university policies the students had allegedly violated.

Media reports indicate that the four students ultimately suspended and evicted from campus housing began receiving email messages from the administration on the morning of 2 April 2024 identifying them as “an individual involved in organizing, planning, promoting, hosting and/or attending” the event in question. The messages demanded that the students contact private investigators working for a firm hired by the university by 5 p.m. that same day “to be interviewed in connection with this matter” or else “face immediate disciplinary action.”

It is distressing that Columbia chose to outsource its preliminary investigation of an alleged violation of university policies to a private company whose employees are unlikely to have any experience in dealing with students, may not be knowledgeable about academic standards and may not be adequately respectful of due process or of students’ right to freedom of expression and to privacy. Requiring your students to subject themselves to such a flawed investigative process constitutes a denial of the rights properly afforded them through commonly accepted disciplinary processes developed and approved by faculty. These include the right to choose an advisor before a disciplinary hearing, the enumeration of the specific charges brought against them, sufficient time to review and respond to charges, and the right to appeal the findings of an investigative and/or disciplinary body. We are aware of reports that other students have been, and continue to be, subjected to this highly irregular investigative and disciplinary process.

Your arbitrary creation of an ad hoc disciplinary procedure in this case thus strikes at the heart of due process. It is all the more distressing that this was done in response to students’ exercising their right to freedom of speech and assembly in order to express their viewpoints about developments in the Middle East and beyond, thereby not only violating their rights but creating a hostile environment on campus for anyone else contemplating advocacy for a position of which your administration disapproves. Your administration’s conduct in this regard comes in the wake of several prior policy changes that have significantly restricted the freedom of speech and assembly, and the academic freedom, of Columbia University’s students, faculty, and staff.

We have also been informed that several of the students subjected to this investigative and disciplinary process were coerced into surrendering their personal cellphones to employees of this firm, who were also given access to the students’ university email accounts. This raises serious

concerns about potential violations of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) as well as the chilling effect it will have on the use of electronic means of communication to exercise freedom of speech and assembly, whether on campus or outside it. We note too that the suspension and eviction from campus of students without fair and transparent investigative and disciplinary processes, in conformity with commonly accepted standards, not only denies these students the right to reasonable due process but effectively deprives them of both housing and food.

We recognize that Columbia's administration is under a great deal of pressure in the run-up to President Shafik's appearance on 17 April 2024 before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce. We are concerned that the harsh and arbitrary actions taken against these students may have been intended to demonstrate to the committee that Columbia – presumably in contrast to the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard and MIT, whose presidents testified in December 2023 – is cracking down on student activism with regard to Palestinian rights, which Republican members of that committee have opportunistically and tendentiously framed as manifestations of antisemitism and calls for genocide. We echo the sentiments expressed in the 5 April 2024 [letter](#) signed by 23 Jewish faculty members at Columbia in which they characterized the real purpose of the hearings as “falsely to caricature and demonize universities as supposed hotbeds of ‘woke indoctrination’” and urged you to resist “decades-long bad-faith efforts to undermine universities as sites of learning, critical thinking, and knowledge production.”

This country's institutions of higher education should be places in which all members of the campus community can express their views and seek knowledge 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 you, as the leadership of Columbia University, to rescind the suspension and eviction from university housing of the four students allegedly involved with the 24 March 2024 event until a fair, open and transparent investigation of this incident can be conducted, in conformity with reasonable disciplinary procedures and the right to due process. We also call on Columbia to refrain from adopting any policy, or taking any measure, which is likely to exert a further chilling effect on teaching, learning and freedom of expression on campus. Finally, we



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urge Columbia 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.

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