



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

**Headquarters & Secretariat**

Georgetown University  
Center for Contemporary Arab  
Studies

3700 O St. NW, ICC STE 241  
Washington DC 20057

Phone 520-333-2577  
Fax 520-207-3166  
secretariat@mesana.org  
mesana.org



7 May 2024

Representative Virginia Foxx  
Chair, House Committee on Education and the Work Force  
fax: 202-225-2995

Representative Robert C. “Bobby” Scott  
Ranking Member, House Committee on Education and the Work Force  
fax: 202-225-8354

Dear Representatives Foxx and Scott:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our grave concern at on-going efforts by the Committee on Education and the Workforce to interfere with and radically reshape higher education across the country. Through its recent investigations and public hearings, the committee has threatened the freedoms essential to university life and learning, including academic freedom, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly. As a result of this campaign, the committee has made our campuses less safe for students, faculty and staff alike. These efforts shock the conscience and violate the First Amendment in ways that are reminiscent of the now-disgraced House Un-American Activities Committee hearings in the late 1940s and 1950s.

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.

The Education and Workforce Committee began targeting American universities in the fall of 2023. It held its first public [hearing](#) with university presidents on 5 December 2023, featuring the presidents of Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania and MIT. The committee held its second [hearing](#) on 17 April 2024, featuring the president of Columbia University. The committee has already [announced](#) another hearing scheduled for 23 May 2024 with the presidents of Yale University, UCLA and the University of Michigan.

The committee’s leadership has described these hearings as necessary to combat an alleged explosion in antisemitism on U.S. campuses, which the committee blames on a burgeoning nation-wide student movement

opposing Israel's war on Gaza. Antisemitism is undoubtedly a serious issue. However, the framing and content of these hearings make it clear that many committee members are less concerned with combatting invidious discrimination than with suppressing and punishing pro-Palestine speech. Some of the committee's members also seem intent on exploiting this moment to further their own long-held partisan agenda: dismantling the culture of critical inquiry that has long been central to the mission of this country's institutions of higher education, and refashioning our colleges and universities to serve their party's interests.

The two public hearings with university presidents held so far reflect these motivations and the threats they pose to the First Amendment. During both hearings, various committee members repeatedly characterized pro-Palestine advocacy as inherently antisemitic and smeared pro-Palestine students *en masse* as antisemites and even terrorists. Specific professors were attacked by name for protected pro-Palestinian speech acts. Some committee members demanded that university presidents offer courses and events that present Israel in a favorable light; review academic course offerings and university events to eliminate perspectives critical of Israel; and commit to adopting specific disciplinary measures against professors and students who express support for Palestinian rights, including terminations and suspensions. It goes without saying that these kinds of inquiries do nothing to remedy antisemitism. Instead, they erode and stifle academic freedom, free speech and freedom of assembly by exerting and normalizing political control over higher education and subverting the bedrock principle that universities are autonomous sites of critical debate and free inquiry.

The committee's actions have also significantly contributed to ongoing insecurity on campuses across the United States. During the hearings, members of the committee demanded that universities quash all pro-Palestine protests. Only a few days after the committee hearing with Columbia University's president, Representative Virginia Foxx – the committee's chair – participated in a [press conference](#) at Columbia with other members of Congress at which House Speaker Mike Johnson demanded that the National Guard be called in to suppress the university's student protest movement. In the ensuing days, Columbia and other universities, including institutions that have yet to be investigated but may fear investigation by the committee, succumbed to this pressure, unleashing [militarized police forces](#) against unarmed and peacefully protesting students, faculty, and staff. Instead of making Jewish students safer, which the committee claims is its goal, its pronouncements and actions have made countless students, staff, and faculty at college campuses across the country far less safe.



Re: US Higher Education

7 May 2024

Page 3

This is a pivotal moment for American higher education. Without robust commitments to academic freedom and the First Amendment, our universities would never have attained the stature they currently enjoy in the world. The committee's work represents the most direct threat in generations to this achievement. Our representatives in Congress must protect our universities and colleagues. To that end, we call on the committee to cease its hearings and investigations into institutions of higher education and to publicly commit to respecting academic freedom, free speech and freedom of assembly at all U.S. institutions of higher education.

Recognizing that some members of the committee are unlikely to grant these requests, we implore those members who believe in the First Amendment and its importance to higher education to take more forceful and clear positions in support of free speech, freedom of assembly and academic freedom at the committee's upcoming hearings. We ask these members to heed the concerns of their Jewish colleagues about the dangers of conflating criticisms of Israel with antisemitism. We further urge them to engage with the Palestinian, Jewish and other students involved in the pro-Palestinian campus protests to acquire first-hand knowledge of their experiences. Finally, we encourage these members to push for hearings that will investigate the substantial threats to and violations of academic freedom and the First Amendment that have occurred on U.S. university campuses over the last several months – threats that have led the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to issue a public statement of concern.

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