



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

Headquarters & Secretariat

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30 September 2024

Susan R. Wente
President, Wake Forest University

Michele Gillespie
Provost, Wake Forest University
asktheprovoat@wfu.edu

Dear President Wente and Provost Gillespie:

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 Wake Forest University's decision to cancel a scheduled lecture by Professor Rabab Abdelhadi, who is currently director of San Francisco State University's Arab and Muslim Ethnicities and Diasporas Initiative. We regard Wake Forest's action as a severe violation of 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.

According to media reports, Professor Abdelhadi was scheduled to speak on 7 October 2024 at an event sponsored by five academic units at Wake Forest. After the event was announced, a number of campus organizations launched an online petition drive demanding that the university cancel it. Apparently bowing to pressure, the university cancelled the event. In an email message to the campus community announcing the decision, the two of you [stated](#): "We have also made the conscious decision not to host events on this day that are inherently contentious and stand to stoke division in our campus community. We are living in complex times, and yet we remain hopeful about the future because of this caring community and our shared mission to serve humanity."

Exercising caution about contention and "stoking division" may be a laudable goal, but for Wake Forest to cancel an academic event because some people object to an invited speaker's perspective on an issue of public interest betrays the university's avowed commitment to academic freedom and to the free and open exchange of ideas, principles which are fundamental to the integrity and mission of our institutions of higher education. Moreover, the contention and "division" which you seek to avoid – when thought of as healthy disagreement



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and debate among scholars and students – is a laudable goal in and of itself for a college or university. Whether or not everyone at Wake Forest agrees with Professor Abdelhadi’s opinions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, silencing her cannot be acceptable at an institution which claims to uphold academic freedom and freedom of speech.

In these fraught times, college and university leaders have a heightened responsibility to protect the freedom of speech and academic freedom of all members of their communities – and their invited guests. 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, harassment or termination. As MESA’s Board of Directors put it in a [statement](#) dated 18 December 2023: “We call on university leaders and administrations to affirmatively assert and protect the rights to academic freedom and freedom of speech on their campuses. We reaffirm that there can be no compromise of the right and ability of students, faculty, and staff at universities across North America (and elsewhere) to express their viewpoints free of harassment, intimidation, and threats to their livelihoods and safety.”

We therefore call on you to immediately reverse the decision to cancel Professor Abdelhadi’s lecture at Wake Forest. We further call on you to vigorously reaffirm your commitment to uphold academic freedom and freedom of speech at Wake Forest and to actively foster an atmosphere of free academic inquiry and discussion, including the unhindered right of faculty and invited guests of the campus community to express their political opinions in the public realm.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

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

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