



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

Headquarters & Secretariat

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4 November 2024

Alan M. Garber
President, Harvard University
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John Manning
Provost, Harvard University
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Martha Whitehead
Vice President for the Harvard Library and University Librarian
martha_whitehead@harvard.edu

Dear President Garber, Provost Manning, and Vice President for the
Harvard Library and University Librarian Whitehead:

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 Harvard University's decision to ban a number of undergraduate students, law students and faculty from entering Harvard University's libraries. We regard this action as a violation of the principles of academic freedom and of freedom of expression, in contravention of the essential role that this country's colleges and universities play as incubators of democratic ideals and sites for open political expression and debate.

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 21 September 2024 a group of undergraduate students [spent time](#) silently studying in Widener Library while wearing *kufiyas*, a traditional Palestinian scarf, and displaying signs on their personal computers protesting Israel's wars on Gaza and Lebanon. At least twelve of the students were subsequently [banned](#) from the library for a period of two weeks. On 25 October 2024 some twenty-five members of Harvard's faculty were [banned](#) from entering the same library after they conducted a silent "study-in" that involved placing signs supporting the right to free speech on the



Re: Harvard University's libraries

4 November 2024

Page 2

tables in front of them or attached to their computers. Finally, [Harvard Law School students were banned](#) from the Langdell Law Library for engaging in a similar action. We emphasize that all the students and faculty involved were seated in the library, reading and working silently.

The University Librarian has [claimed](#) that these students and faculty members were in violation of university policy because their actions were a form of protest, had the potential to make other students uncomfortable and manifested attention-seeking behavior. We note, however, that university policy does not prohibit either the wearing of culturally specific items of clothing in libraries or the expression of political viewpoints by means of signs displayed on individuals' personal property. Moreover, the allegation concerning "attention-seeking behavior" is so vague and arbitrary that it could be used to justify the suppression of any form of expression, political or otherwise. We note the [statement](#) issued on behalf of all six co-presidents of Harvard's own Council on Academic Freedom, which pointed out that "the students who sat quietly and studied did not interfere with normal campus activity, and Harvard thus has no compelling reason to prohibit their speech. Indeed, our commitment to free expression requires us to allow it."

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. 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 Harvard's administration to immediately rescind the bans imposed on entry to its libraries and to apologize to all those who were subjected to a ban. We further call on Harvard to publicly reaffirm, and act in accordance with, its avowed commitment to respect for "freedom of speech and academic freedom," as set forth in the [University-Wide Statement of Rights and Responsibilities](#), in a transparent and content-neutral manner.



Re: Harvard University's libraries

4 November 2024

Page 3

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