



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

Headquarters & Secretariat

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July 21, 2025

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Soyica Colbert
Interim Provost, Georgetown University
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David M. Edelstein
Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Georgetown University
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Joseph A. Ferrara,
Senior Vice President and Chief of Staff, Georgetown University
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Dear Interim President Groves, Interim Provost Colbert, Dean
Edelstein and Vice President Ferrara:

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 about Georgetown University's punitive actions and statements against Professor Jonathan A. C. Brown, who holds the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Chair of Islamic Civilization in Georgetown's School of Foreign Service. These actions and statements, which sanction Professor Brown for speech acts protected by the First Amendment, violate the principles of academic freedom and blatantly contradict Georgetown's own policies on freedom of expression. They may also have helped fuel the barrage of threats, including death threats, to which Professor Brown and his family have been subjected.

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

Georgetown University's actions and statements against Professor Brown revolve around a single [tweet](#) that he posted on X on 22 June 2025. That tweet was posted while the war, which Israel had initiated

against Iran, was ongoing, and one day after the United States entered that war by launching strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities. In his tweet, Professor Brown stated, in part: “I’m not an expert, but I assume Iran could still get a bomb easily. I hope Iran does some symbolic strike on a base, then everyone stops.” As Professor Brown subsequently [explained](#), his tweet proposed a way to end the conflict by referencing a previous episode involving the US and Iran in which a symbolic Iranian retaliatory strike on a US military base that caused [no American casualties](#) quickly led to de-escalation and an end to that conflict.

Shortly after his tweet was posted, right-wing individuals and media outlets scurrilously accused Professor Brown of calling for violence against US troops. Your administration responded to these attacks by pressuring Professor Brown to delete his tweet. He promptly complied with that request and, in another tweet, clarified that his original message was not a call for violence, that he had “two immediate family members in the US military who’ve served abroad” and that he “wouldn’t want any harm to befall American soldiers . . . or anyone!”

Nonetheless, on 26 June 2025, David M. Edelstein, at the time Interim Dean of Georgetown’s College of Arts and Sciences, formally notified Professor Brown that the university would not be renewing his position as interim chair of the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, specifically because of his 22 June 2025 tweet. Professor Brown had served as the interim chair of the department at the university’s request and was set to be renewed for a second term before the smear campaign against him began.

At his appearance on 15 July 2025 before the Committee on Education and the Workforce of the US House of Representatives, Interim President Groves responded to inflammatory and tendentious questions about Professor Brown by declaring that the university was “disciplining” and “investigating” Brown, that it had forced him to remove his tweet, that he was no longer a department chair and that he was “on leave.” Groves’ response amounted to complicity with the smear campaign against Professor Brown as well as with the committee’s ongoing [efforts](#) to eviscerate academic freedom, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly at this country’s institutions of higher education.

In addition to violating Professor Brown’s academic freedom, Georgetown University’s statements and actions with regard to him

are a clear and obvious violation of the university's own [policy](#) on speech and expression. As that policy states:

As an institution of higher education, one specifically committed to the Catholic and Jesuit tradition, Georgetown University is committed to free and open inquiry, deliberation and debate in all matters, and the untrammelled verbal and nonverbal expression of ideas. It is Georgetown University's policy to provide all members of the University community, including faculty, students, and staff, the broadest possible latitude to speak, write, listen, challenge, and learn.

The ideas of different members of the University community will often and naturally conflict. It is not the proper role of a university to insulate individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive. Deliberation or debate may not be suppressed because the ideas put forth are thought by some or even by most members of the University community to be offensive, unwise, immoral, or ill conceived.

By pressuring Professor Brown to delete his tweet, removing him as department chair and threatening to "discipline" and "investigate" him for his views, Georgetown University has violated its avowed commitment to "free and open inquiry," egregiously trampled upon his ability to enjoy the "broadest latitude to speak, write, listen, challenge, and learn," and suppressed his perspective because some found it to be "offensive, unwise, immoral, or ill conceived." Moreover, by failing to publicly defend Professor Brown as well as by implicitly validating the baseless accusations against him, Georgetown also bears some responsibility for the many threats of violence made against him and his family since 22 June 2025. These included phone calls and emails, as well as reports of individuals traveling to your campus and attempting to locate Professor Brown.

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. 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." That statement went on to quote from an earlier board [statement](#): "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



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viewpoints free of harassment, intimidation, and threats to their livelihoods and safety.”

We therefore call on Georgetown University to immediately reinstate Professor Brown as interim chair of the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies and to terminate all disciplinary investigations or procedures under way against him. We further call on Georgetown University to publicly state its support for Professor Brown’s right to express his opinions on a matter of public concern and to condemn the threats of violence against him and his family. Finally, we urge your administration to forcefully reaffirm its commitment to defend the academic freedom and free speech rights of all members of the Georgetown University community.

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 A. Brand'.

Laurie A. Brand
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom
Professor Emerita, University of Southern California