



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

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Dear President Garber 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 grave concern at the decision of the Harvard Educational Publishing Group (HEPG), which publishes the *Harvard Educational Review* (*HER*), to cancel a planned special issue on the topic of education and Palestine. This decision, apparently the result of political considerations, is (as we note below) not entirely unprecedented, but it is certainly highly unusual. We believe that it constitutes an egregious violation of the principles of academic freedom and a blatant betrayal of Harvard University's avowed commitment to scholarly integrity and freedom of expression.

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 a 22 July 2025 report in the [Guardian](#), *HER* decided in March 2024 to publish a special issue on education and Palestine, scheduled to appear in the summer of 2025. As the editors put it at the time, "The field of education has an important role to play in

supporting students, educators, and policymakers in contextualizing what has been happening in Gaza with histories and continuing impacts of occupation, genocide, and political contestations.” Editors proceeded to sign agreements with authors, and a number of the planned articles were submitted and edited.

In early May 2025, however, HEPG told *HER* editors that it wanted a legal “risk assessment” of the special issue by Harvard’s Office of the General Counsel, allegedly because of concerns that the issue would draw accusations of antisemitism. On 9 June 2025 HEPG suddenly cancelled the special issue, citing an “inadequate review process” and the need for “considerable copy editing.” Authors who had submitted articles, along with *HER* journal editors, have rejected these claims and instead reasonably attribute HEPG’s decision to the cancelled issue’s focus on Palestine. As one of the authors told the [*Harvard Crimson*](#): “It’s hard to disassociate this cancellation from the broader context and the related pressure that Harvard is being placed under by the Trump administration. ... It seems to be a classic case of the Palestine exception.” That term (more fully, the “Palestine exception to free speech”) refers to the all too common practice of selectively ignoring, restricting or denying freedom of speech, academic freedom and the right to protest when it comes to pro-Palestinian advocacy and criticism of Israel. In this case, as with Harvard’s unjustified and arbitrary [dismissal](#) in March 2025 of the director and associate director of its Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard has capitulated to those who wish to stifle the expression of entirely legitimate scholarly perspectives simply because some people may find them objectionable.

In these fraught times university leaders have a heightened responsibility to resist pressures from the government and outside groups to suppress scholarly inquiry on issues of public concern. HEPG and Harvard University have clearly failed to protect the academic freedom and freedom of speech of all members of the academic community, including those who contribute to scholarly publications housed within the university. As we noted in a [letter](#) dated 17 March 2025 protesting the cancellation of a special issue on Palestine of the *Journal of Architectural Education* by the journal’s publisher: “Investigating complex and controversial issues in a scholarly manner, and educating professional communities about how to engage with them in the same manner, must be a critical dimension of research and pedagogy in architecture as in all of the disciplines and professions that are part of this country’s institutions of higher education. Capitulation to politically motivated groups seeking to suppress critical scholarly engagement with certain issues will only



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encourage such groups to become even more aggressive and embolden them to intensify and extend their attacks.” All the members of the *Journal of Architectural Education*’s editorial board resigned to protest the publisher’s action.

We therefore call upon you to immediately rescind HEPG’s decision to cancel the special issue on Palestine and ensure that it appears as originally envisioned by the journal’s editors. We further call on you to publicly reiterate your commitment to protect the academic freedom and the free speech rights of all members of the Harvard community and of those who participate in scholarly projects under Harvard’s auspices.

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 A. Brand'.

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