



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

Headquarters & Secretariat

Georgetown University
Center for Contemporary Arab
Studies

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November 3, 2025

Donde Plowman
Chancellor, University of Tennessee, Knoxville
chancellor@utk.edu

Dear Chancellor Plowman:

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 the capricious and hasty suspension of Assistant Professor Tamar Shirinian of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and your decision to terminate her. This action, allegedly taken because of comments Professor Shirinian made on social media, violates her First Amendment right to free speech as well as the principles of academic freedom which your university claims to uphold.

Founded in 1966, MESA promotes scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. As the preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the prestigious *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 2,800 members worldwide. Our organization is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression both within the Middle East and in connection with the study of the region both in and outside of North America.

Following the assassination on 10 September 2025 of Charlie Kirk, leader of Turning Point USA, Professor Shirinian made comments on social media that some found highly objectionable. Professor Shirinian subsequently took down the comments and apologized for them, explaining that she had seen them as private in character and intended only for a small group of friends. Nonetheless, right-wing social media [activists](#) and others launched a campaign to have Professor Shirinian dismissed. On 15 September 2025 the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, capitulated to outside pressure by suspending Professor Shirinian and initiating proceedings to terminate her.

Although Professor Shirinian's expression of her opinions on social media is clearly protected by the First Amendment and the principles of academic freedom, your [letter](#) suspending her pending termination dangerously mischaracterized her action as constituting gross professional misconduct and dereliction of responsibility, and as causing reputational damage to the university. We note that your suspension of Professor Shirinian was not preceded by a transparent

investigative process that conformed to established principles and procedures of faculty governance but was instead an arbitrary and hasty decision on your part. As faculty at your university have [pointed out](#), your action in this matter violated the university's faculty handbook, which stipulates that it is the provost, not the chancellor, who is empowered to initiate termination proceedings against a faculty member.

Your action also ignores or violates your university's own [policy](#) regarding free speech as well as the University of Tennessee system's [Policies Governing Academic Freedom Responsibility and Tenure](#), both of which clearly state that freedom of speech and inquiry are essential to your institution's mission. We further note your action violates the State of Tennessee's 2017 [Campus Free Speech Protection Act](#), which unambiguously obliges colleges and universities in Tennessee to adhere to the following principle:

An institution shall be committed to maintaining a campus as a marketplace of ideas for all students and all faculty in which the free exchange of ideas is not to be suppressed because the ideas put forth are thought by some or even by most members of the institution's community to be offensive, unwise, immoral, indecent, disagreeable, conservative, liberal, traditional, radical, or wrong-headed.

Given that your letter suspending Professor Shirinian pending termination invoked her alleged violation of the professional norm of "civility" – inherently ambiguous and much disputed – we call your attention to the [warning](#) issued by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) against using extramural utterances as grounds for dismissal. We share that concern and regard your suspension of Professor Shirinian pending termination as a denial of her right to due process as well as of her academic freedom and her right to freedom of speech.

As Professor Shirinian and critics of your action have pointed out, the University of Tennessee has a history of defending the free speech rights of faculty under attack by individuals and groups based outside the university for making statements some deem controversial or beyond the pale, including in connection with political violence in the United States. We now call on you to live up to that history by immediately rescinding Professor Shirinian's suspension and halting termination proceedings against her. We further call on you to forcefully and publicly affirm your commitment to respect and defend the academic freedom as well as



Re: Professor Tamar Shirinian

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the First Amendment and due process rights of all members of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, community.

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

Cc:

Randy Boyd
President, University of Tennessee System

John Zomchick
Provost, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Professor Charles Noble
President, Faculty Senate, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Farida Shaheed
United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education