



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

Headquarters & Secretariat

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11 May 2026

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Alberto Cuitiño
Dean, School of Engineering
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Dear Chancellor Conway, Provost Geary and Dean Cuitiño:

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 Dean Alberto Cuitiño's decision to cancel the graduation address that Arcellx chair and CEO Rami Elghandour had been invited to deliver on 15 May 2026 at Rutgers University's School of Engineering. The dean's decision was prompted by complaints from a few graduates who regard Elghandour's advocacy for Palestinian rights as offensive. As such, the cancellation flies in the face of the university's First Amendment obligations, Elghandour's free speech rights and the right of Rutgers students, faculty and staff to benefit from hearing Elghandour's commencement address. It also compromises the integrity of Rutgers University as an institution of higher education and contravenes its own policy on free 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.

In December 2025 Dean Cuitiño invited Elghandour, a graduate of the School of Engineering, to address the Class of 2026 convocation ceremony. The invitation was prompted, in part, by Elghandour's humanitarian work, which includes work relating to Palestine. In late



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April 2026 Dean Cuitiño abruptly canceled Elghandour’s appearance, based exclusively on complaints from students who claimed his social media posts were “against their beliefs and convictions” and refused to attend graduation if Elghandour spoke. According to Elghandour, Dean Cuitiño did not in his subsequent communication with him identify the specific posts in question or indicate the number of complaining students. Even though the dean acknowledged that many students and their families would be upset by the cancellation of Elghandour’s address, he insisted that canceling was preferable to alienating an undisclosed but presumably small number of graduates. Dean Cuitiño even suggested that the school might not invite commencement speakers in the future, in order to avoid “this issue” arising again.

Though Rutgers-New Brunswick has since attempted to justify Dean Cuitiño’s decision by [claiming](#) that it “keeps the focus on our engineering students and honors the celebratory spirit of the event,” it is in fact an exclusionary move that suggests those who speak or act in support of Palestine are unwelcome at the School of Engineering. Furthermore, the decision represents the kind of viewpoint-based discrimination that violates the university’s First Amendment commitments, directly impinges on the free speech rights of an invited speaker and deprives Rutgers’ faculty, staff and students of the benefit of hearing Mr. Elghandour’s perspective. The dean’s decision also breaches the university’s own [policy](#) on free expression, which states that “[w]hile Rutgers will not defend the content of every opinion expressed by every member of our academic community, or of speakers who we invite to our campus, it will defend their right to speak freely.” Rather than upholding this commitment, Rutgers-New Brunswick and its School of Engineering have decided that Elghandour cannot speak on campus at all. We note that a year ago Rutgers University-Newark faced similar backlash against another graduation speaker, Rami Youssef, but [stood by](#) Youssef and did not cancel his [address](#).

We therefore call on the School of Engineering to rectify these apparent violations of law and policy by rescinding its decision and reinstating Rami Elghandour as a speaker at the 15 May 2026 graduation ceremony. We also call on Rutgers-New Brunswick to make clear that it rejects viewpoint discrimination, to publicly recommit to ensuring invited speakers are allowed to “speak freely” and to refrain from adopting policies that altogether ban convocation or other speakers in order to avoid engaging with controversial issues.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Ussama Makdisi', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Ussama Makdisi

MESA President

Professor, University of California, Berkeley

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Judith E. Tucker', in a cursive style.

Judith E. Tucker

Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom

Professor Emerita, Georgetown University

Cc:

The Daily Targum

Farida Shaheed

United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education