



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

Headquarters & Secretariat

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26 June 2026

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Dear President Isbara, Provost Berger, and Deans:

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 your decision to suspend Professor Savneet Talwar, a member of the faculty of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), from teaching and subject her to multiple investigations on dubious grounds. These actions, taken without granting Professor Talwar appropriate due process, appear to constitute a pattern of harassment and violate both the principles of academic freedom and the constitutionally protected right to free speech.

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.

Professor Talwar has served as chair of the Master of Arts in Arts Therapy and Counseling program (MAATC) at the SAIC and has published widely on the theory and practice of art therapy. Examining how best to provide bias-free care for individuals from marginalized communities is a standard part of Professor Talwar's research and pedagogical practice.

On 15 April 2026 Professor Talwar posted an assignment on the Canvas learning management site requiring students in her "Cultural Dimensions in Art Therapy" class to perform a case study analysis. The assignment described a hypothetical student who was queer, Muslim, female, Arab and in her 20s who was seeking therapy, detailing her romantic relationships, her relationship with her nuclear family and her class position. It also described the hypothetical student as someone for whom "protests in support of Palestine resonated with her on a personal level. She felt deeply affected by the violence against Palestinian civilians and was critical of the home government (in her Arab country of origin)'s limited response." The assignment asked students to demonstrate "their understanding of intersectionality as a method of analysis and how it informs their development of a thoughtful and ethical treatment plan." Their analysis should include, among other things, "consideration of relevant social, cultural, developmental, and contextual factors through an intersectional lens" and "reflection on the student's own potential countertransference and its impact on treatment."

In addition to uploading the assignment to Canvas, Professor Talwar emailed it to one of her students (whom we will call Student A), at the student's request. On 16 April 2026 Graduate Dean Delinda Collier told Professor Talwar by phone that SAIC president Lee Isbara had been contacted by an off-campus group regarding a case study mentioning Palestine. Later that evening, Professor Talwar was informed by Dean Collier that she was being removed from the classroom.

On 20 April 2026 Provost and Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs Martin Berger, SAIC legal counsel Leslie Darling and Dean Collier met with Professor Talwar and her attorney. In a letter which Provost Berger sent the following day to Professor Talwar, at the latter's request so that she could have a written record of the meeting, Berger stated that the meeting discussed the circumstances under which Professor Talwar had emailed the assignment to the student who had requested that she do so, but also a previous case regarding a student (whom we will call Student B) whose graduate project artwork Professor Talwar had overseen for the MAATC Exhibition. Student A had earlier filed a Title IX complaint

against Student B for allegedly revealing privileged information in a piece of artwork. Provost Berger asserted that “in the course of that investigation [the administration] developed concerns about your role in the matter” and informed Professor Talwar that “Pursuant to our anti-discrimination policy, SAIC will be investigating this matter immediately for alleged violations of its Policy Prohibiting Discrimination, Harassment, and Retaliation.” As we understand it, the SAIC administration chose to accept, and act on, Student A’s unsubstantiated claim that Professor Talwar’s class assignment referring to Palestine constituted retaliation against her for having filed complaints against Student B and other students.

In mid-May 2026 Professor Talwar received yet another email further expanding the grounds on which she was being investigated. It alleged, among other things, that on the first day of her “Cultural Dimensions in Art Therapy” class she had discussed the 14 December 2025 killing of fifteen Jewish people at Bondi Beach, Australia, as representing an instance of “gun violence” and not as an example of antisemitism. As we understand it, that discussion, held on the first day of class, was focused on gun violence in various places, including the difference in laws regulating access to guns in the U.S. and in Australia.

We note that when Professor Talwar uploaded her assignment to Canvas, she was not the subject of any investigation or disciplinary process. The assignment itself strikes us as entirely appropriate in terms of Professor Talwar’s own research and pedagogy as well as student final project work in the program. Moreover, we do not accept the implication that it is inappropriate to give an assignment to an entire class simply because one student in the class might experience its eminently reasonable references to Palestine as retaliation for a previous complaint. Finally, sanctioning Professor Talwar for referring to the Bondi Beach killings in a certain way in a classroom discussion strikes us as unjustified.

On 5 June 2026 the *Guardian* newspaper published an [article](#) about the investigations to which Professor Talwar has been subjected. Five days later she was made the subject of yet another allegation, based on the claim that the article had violated the privacy of the student who complained about the 15 April 2026 assignment by rendering her “recognizable within her academic cohort and within the SAIC community.”

SAIC’s investigations of Professor Talwar raise serious concerns about possible violations of her academic freedom and her freedom of speech; they also appear to violate the norms of faculty governance and due process. Article 5c1 of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP)’s [Recommended Institutional Regulations on Academic Freedom and Tenure](#) notes that a “faculty member will be suspended, or assigned to

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other duties in lieu of suspension, only if immediate harm to the faculty member or others is threatened by continuance.” That does not appear to have been the case in this instance. AAUP [Recommended Institutional Regulation \(RIR\) 5](#) provides that “before suspending a faculty member, the administration should consult with a faculty committee concerning the propriety, length, and other conditions of the suspension.” No such faculty review appears to have taken place before Professor Talwar’s suspension.

We therefore call on the SAIC administration to immediately terminate the investigative and disciplinary processes initiated against Professor Talwar and to publicly and forcefully reaffirm its commitment to respect and protect the academic freedom and free speech rights of all members of the SAIC community.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Ussama Makdisi
MESA President
Professor, University of California, Berkeley



Judith E. Tucker
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom
Professor Emerita, Georgetown University

Cc:

Farida Shaheed, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education

Professor Shaurya Kumar, Chair of Faculty, SAIC

Professor Elia Khalaf, Art Therapy and Counseling Chair, SAIC

Adam Mack, Faculty Liaison, SAIC



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Amy Vogel, Faculty Senate Chair, SAIC

Eric Lefkofsky, Chair of the Board of Trustees, SAIC

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