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of North America, Inc.

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16 December 2025

President Jay B. Silveria  
The University of Arkansas  
[chancell@uark.edu](mailto:chancell@uark.edu)

Chancellor Charles F. Robinson  
The University of Arkansas  
[chancell@uark.edu](mailto:chancell@uark.edu)

Brian Raines  
Dean, J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences  
The University of Arkansas  
[beraines@uark.edu](mailto:beraines@uark.edu)

Dear President Silveria, Chancellor Robinson and Dean Raines:

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 the University of Arkansas's decision to remove Professor Shirin Saeidi from her position as Director of the King Fahd Center for Middle East Studies. There is good reason to believe that this decision was politically motivated and taken primarily because of Professor Saeidi's speech, thereby violating the principles of academic freedom, her First Amendment rights and university policy. We are also concerned that the university may have violated its own procedural rules in removing Professor Saeidi from her position as center director.

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.

On 5 December 2025, Brian Raines, Dean of the J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences, sent Professor Saeidi a [letter](#) abruptly terminating her as the director of the Center for Middle East Studies. The letter was issued after Professor Saeidi had been subjected to a vicious public defamation campaign, including [demands](#) that the university terminate her; that campaign has [continued](#) since she was terminated as center director. In removing Professor Saeidi the University of Arkansas appears to have capitulated to that pressure campaign by outside individuals and groups with a political agenda.

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We note that Dean Raines's letter did not claim that Professor Saeidi had failed to fulfil her responsibilities as director or was otherwise derelict in leading the university's Middle East Studies program. Instead, the letter pointed to Professor Saeidi's purported violation of relatively minor university rules—including her alleged past violation of rules relating to the use of university letterhead, which she has denied and for which she was never sanctioned—to distract from what was apparently the main reason for her termination: your administration's objection to public statements that Professor Saeidi made in both her personal and scholarly capacities.

These statements include a public petition signed by Professor Saeidi, as well as several posts on X, all of which relate to Israel's attack against Iran in June 2025. While Dean Raines described her termination as "apolitical," the letter makes clear that his decision was a decidedly political response to Professor Saeidi's public statements. In particular, Dean Raines described Professor Saeidi's "posts actively lauding" Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as "troubling given the position of the United States." In a similar vein, he stated that he was "very concerned" by Professor Saeidi's "repeated statement that, Israel, a nation recognized by the United States, must be 'dismantled' including being 'dismantled by international forces.'" More broadly, Dean Raines repeatedly characterized Professor Saeidi's statements as offensive and harmful to the image of the center as well as the university. These and other related allegations strongly suggest that had Professor Saeidi's political perspective been more aligned with U.S. government policy, she would have retained her position as director.

Dean Raines's letter also included statements that would seem to leave Professor Saeidi with no viable avenue to publicly express scholarly or political opinions that some may deem unpopular or controversial in the future. In particular, the letter admonishes Professor Saeidi for purportedly signing the petition with her "University affiliation with no disclaimer," while in the same breath dismissing the "disclaimer" on her X account as irrelevant and insufficient since Professor Saeidi is "widely known as the director" of the King Fahd Center. These contradictory statements suggest that Professor Saeidi may face further university sanctions if she makes any statement that the administration deems inflammatory, controversial or against the university's interests, even if she adheres to university policy.

The manner of Professor Saeidi's termination also raises serious concerns about whether the university has complied with its own rules. Professor Saeidi was terminated for opinions expressed as a private citizen. Under

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Board Policy [405.1](#) “mere expressions of opinions related to the faculty member’s scholarship, the subject matter of their assigned teaching duties. . . however controversial...shall not constitute cause for dismissal.” Policy 405.1 further states that when “[s]peaking or writing as a citizen, the faculty member is free from institutional censorship or discipline.” It also articulates a series of due process rights accorded to tenure-track and tenured faculty facing dismissal, none of which were followed in this case. While Dean Raines’s letter attempts to skirt these obligations by invoking his discretion to terminate the center director at his “pleasure,” the rule he cites does not explicitly bypass the dismissal rules applicable to tenure-track and tenured faculty, like Professor Saeidi. It certainly does not empower him to dismiss faculty in violation of the First Amendment.

We also note that the extramural speech on matters of public concern cited to justify Professor Saeidi’s termination as center director were well within her scholarly expertise on the contemporary politics of the Middle East. This type of speech is protected both by the university’s own avowed [commitment](#) to academic freedom and Professor Saeidi’s right to free expression and academic freedom. Unfortunately, this is not the first time that the University of Arkansas has failed to meet its obligations towards Professor Saeidi in this regard. As we understand it, in September 2025 Dean Raines pressured Professor Saeidi to withdraw, at the last minute, from a meeting and dinner reception with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian that she had planned to attend in her personal capacity and which would have benefited her scholarship. In an email memorializing that conversation, Dean Raines thanked Professor Saeidi for withdrawing, since “in light of your role as a faculty member in Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences, and, in particular, your role as Director of the Middle East Studies Program, considering the designations of Iran adopted by the federal and state governments as a country of concern and foreign adversary, and the lack of formal diplomatic relations between Iran and the U.S., for you to take part in such a meeting would have highly adverse consequences for the University, Fulbright College, and the King Fahd Center for Middle East Studies.” We regard this action as yet another violation of Professor Saeidi’s academic freedom.

As a public university, the University of Arkansas is bound by the First Amendment, which requires that it respect and uphold the free speech and academic expression rights of its faculty no matter how controversial that speech may be or how it may impact the university’s image. Penalizing Professor Saeidi for exercising those rights violates these commitments. We have previously [written](#) to the University of Arkansas about its failure to protect and defend the free speech rights and academic freedom of other faculty associated with its Middle East Studies program, as well as its capitulation to third-party efforts to censor and smear those individuals.

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Instead of rectifying that behavior, the University of Arkansas has continued to violate the constitutional rights of its faculty and flout the principles of academic freedom.

We therefore call on the university to immediately reinstate Professor Saeidi as director of the King Fahd Center for Middle East Studies. We further call on you to publicly denounce the campaign of defamation that has been waged against her and to refrain from any action that may chill or censor her speech or the speech of other faculty members at the University of Arkansas.

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:

Professor Indrajeet Chaubey  
Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs  
The University of Arkansas

Professor William Schreckhise  
Chair, Department of Political Science  
The University of Arkansas

Professor Kevin Brady  
Chair, Faculty Senate  
The University of Arkansas



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*The Arkansas Traveler*

Farida Shaheed

United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education