



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

1957 E Street NW, Suite 401  
Washington, DC 20052

Phone 520-333-2577

Fax 520-207-3166

caf@mesana.org

mesana.org



14 February 2022

Representative Michelle Udall  
Chair, Education Committee  
Arizona House of Representatives

Representative Jacqueline Parker  
Vice-Chair, Judiciary Committee  
Arizona House of Representatives

Travis Grantham  
Vice-Chair, Rules Committee  
Arizona House of Representatives

Dear Representatives Udall, Parker and Grantham:

We write to you on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our grave concern about aspects of HB 2819, a bill now under consideration by the Arizona House of Representatives and recently referred to your committees. While the avowed purposes of the bill – to prohibit discrimination on the basis of students' religious beliefs and to combat antisemitism – may be laudable, the bill embraces a flawed definition of antisemitism and thereby poses a threat to academic freedom and to the constitutionally protected right of 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, MESA publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has over 2800 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

We are of course deeply disturbed by the rising tide of racism, xenophobia and antisemitism in the United States, and we firmly believe that combatting antisemitism and all other forms of racism, bigotry and discrimination is an essential duty for educational institutions, including Arizona's colleges and universities. However, Section 2 of HB 2819, which would amend Section 15-1862 of the Arizona Revised Statutes, incorporates (in clause G) the language of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's [much-criticized](#) definition of antisemitism. As we have repeatedly [pointed out](#), this definition is not only flawed but dangerous, because it conflates criticism of Israeli actions and policies, of Israel as a state and of Zionism as a political ideology with antisemitism. The bill requires Arizona's universities and community colleges to use this broad and vague definition when adopting policies to prohibit discrimination on the basis of religion, which may result in the sanctioning of faculty, students or staff who express opinions that are critical of Israel but not by any reasonable definition antisemitic. More broadly, it may have a chilling effect on teaching about, and public discussion of, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on community college and university campuses in Arizona.



Re: HB 2819  
14 February 2022  
Page 2

We see such efforts to unduly expand the definition of antisemitism to include legitimate, constitutionally protected criticism of Israel as part of a broader campaign by individuals and organizations based outside of academia to use the power of government in order to silence opinions and advocacy with which they disagree. We believe that all political speech, including criticism of any government or ideology and advocacy for any group's rights, is, and must remain, constitutionally protected in Arizona and throughout the United States. At our institutions of higher education this constitutional protection must be accompanied by a rigorous respect for the standards and traditions of academic freedom, which HB 2819 in its current form threatens.

We therefore call on you to amend this bill so that it does not incorporate the IHRA definition of antisemitism, especially as alternatives are readily available which much more clearly and effectively define antisemitism and distinguish it from criticism of Israel and Zionism – for example, the [Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism](#).

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Eve M. Troutt Powell'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Eve Troutt Powell  
MESA President  
Professor, University of Pennsylvania

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Laurie Brand'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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