



**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



28 February 2022

Ana Mari Cauce
President, University of Washington

Dear President Cauce:

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 your administration's treatment of Liora Halperin, Associate Professor of International Studies, History and Jewish Studies at the University of Washington and until recently incumbent of the Jack and Rebecca Benaroya Endowed Chair in Israel Studies. As a consequence of your administration's decision to return the endowment for this chair to its donor, Professor Halperin – a highly regarded scholar, teacher and university leader – has been removed as the occupant of this chair and the Israel Studies program she has overseen since her arrival at the University of Washington has been stripped of its funding from this endowment, jeopardizing its viability. This action calls into question the University of Washington's commitment to the principles of academic freedom and seriously compromises its integrity and independence as an institution of higher education.

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.

In May 2021, in response to the escalation of violence in Israel/Palestine, Professor Halperin signed a public letter condemning the "state violence" committed by Israel and expressing solidarity with the people of Gaza while also acknowledging the "pain, fear, and anger" provoked by "unjustifiable and indiscriminate Hamas rockets." In signing this letter Professor Halperin acted as a private citizen exercising her First Amendment right to freedom of speech, and not in any official university capacity; her action in no way violated the university's code of conduct.

According to media reports, your decision to return the donation that funded this endowed chair, which resulted in Professor Halperin's removal from it, was taken in response to the donor's complaints over that May 2021 letter as well as over aspects of Professor Halperin's leadership of Israel Studies at the University of Washington. We understand that StandWithUs, an advocacy group that seeks to silence criticism of Israel, also pressured the university about Professor Halperin. Capitulating to pressure from a donor or from a group external to the university pursuing a political agenda is a grave violation of academic freedom. As the American Association of University Professors' 1994 statement "On Freedom of Expression and Campus Speech Codes" asserts: "Freedom of thought and expression is essential to any institution of higher learning. Universities and colleges exist not only to transmit knowledge. Equally, they interpret, explore, and expand that knowledge by testing the old and proposing the new."



Re: Liora Halperin

28 February 2022

Page 2

We note further that, as we understand it, neither the university's agreement with the donor who endowed this chair nor its own policies provide for donated funds to be returned if the donor is displeased with the speech or actions of the holder of a chair they have endowed. That you apparently chose to ignore or contravene that agreement and university policy by returning the donation renders this violation of academic freedom and proper university governance even more egregious.

It is the duty of university leaders to resist pressure from donors and other external actors who object, on purely political grounds, to what faculty members may say or teach, or how they lead the academic units they are appointed to oversee. The failure of the University of Washington to fulfil this obligation has not only harmed Professor Halperin; it sets a dangerous precedent for other faculty at your university and at other institutions of higher education. We therefore call on you to initiate an independent inquiry into how this issue was handled, reconfirm your commitment to the principles of academic freedom and to generally accepted standards of how universities should relate to donors, and ensure that neither Professor Halperin nor the university's Israel Studies program suffers as a result of your actions.

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 A. Brand'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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