



**Middle
East
Studies
Association**
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8 December 2023

Félix V. Matos Rodríguez
Chancellor of the City University of New York
chancellor@cuny.edu

Ann Kirschner
Interim President, Hunter College
president.kirschner@hunter.cuny.edu

Dear Chancellor Matos Rodríguez and Interim President Kirschner:

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 what appears to be a failure on the part of CUNY to live up to the university's avowed commitment to upholding the free speech rights and academic freedom of its faculty, students and staff.

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.

We note, first of all, the decision made by the Hunter College administration to cancel a screening, organized by Hunter's Department of Film and Media Studies and originally scheduled for 14 November 2023, of the award-winning documentary *Israelism*. This violation of the right of free expression and of academic freedom prompted vigorous protests by Hunter College faculty and students, and ultimately the screening was rescheduled for 5 December 2023. However, Hunter's Arabic Studies Program, one of the co-organizers of the original screening, was reportedly barred by the administration from co-sponsoring the rescheduled screening, which prompted the Department of Film and Media Studies to withdraw its sponsorship in protest. As we understand it, the rescheduled screening was, unlike most CUNY events, open only to Hunter College ID holders, and thus closed to the public and to faculty, staff, and students from other CUNY campuses. Moreover, the announcement of the rescheduled event was sent only to Hunter College students, not to faculty. Hunter College's heavy-handed and arbitrary actions in this matter do not evince a serious understanding of, or commitment to, academic freedom, nor do they contribute to fostering a campus culture in which all points of views can be expressed and debated.

We further note that the leaderships of CUNY and of its colleges have so far failed to speak out vigorously to denounce the harassment, threats and doxing



Re: Hunter College *Israelism* screening

8 December 2023

Page 2

to which members of the CUNY faculty have been subjected because of the opinions they have expressed – or are alleged to have expressed – regarding the war in Gaza and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict of which it is a part. In these fraught times university leaders have a heightened responsibility to protect the freedom of speech, academic freedom and physical safety of all members of the campus community. The failure of CUNY’s leadership to speak out in defense of its faculty members is thus an abdication of professional and academic responsibility and, intentionally or not, sends the message that you countenance the defamation and harassment to which members of your faculty have been subjected.

This country’s institutions of higher education should be places in which all members of the campus community can express their views freely. This is all the more important now, when violence is raging in the Middle East, our own government is so deeply involved in what is happening, and various individuals and organizations with a political agenda are weaponizing allegations of antisemitism in order to denigrate and silence people with whom they disagree.

We therefore call upon you to clearly reiterate your commitment to respect and defend the constitutionally protected right to free speech and the academic freedom of all members of the CUNY community, which includes their right to screen documentaries and hold events expressing perspectives with which some people may disagree. We also urge you to publicly denounce the defamation and harassment to which CUNY faculty and students have been subjected for expressing their opinions and to take all appropriate measures to support and protect them.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Asli Ü. Bâli'.

Aslı Ü. Bâli
MESA President
Professor, Yale Law School

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laurie Brand'.

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