



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

Headquarters & Secretariat

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1 April 2024

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Dear Dean Fried and colleagues:

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 decision to remove Dr. Kayum Ahmed from the Core curriculum teaching team at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health (SPH). This decision was apparently made in response to demands to silence Dr. Kayum and other academics who use critical scholarly frameworks to analyze the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It thereby constitutes a violation of Dr. Ahmed's academic freedom.

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.

In spring 2023 Dr. Ahmed's syllabus, which included a unit on settler colonial determinants of health, was approved by the Core teaching team. In September 2023 Dr. Ahmed taught his classes without incident. However, in December 2023 Core Director Matthew Perzanowski communicated to Dr. Ahmed concerns "around the format of the session and the use of the Settler Colonialism framework without a discussion of other viewpoints on

the application of that framework to Israel and Palestine.” Dr. Ahmed met with Dr. Perzanowski and agreed to make various modifications to his teaching and to submit a revised syllabus by May.

On 8 March 2024 an article in *The Wall Street Journal* claimed that some SPH students and faculty considered Dr. Ahmed’s course to be “political indoctrination.” Three days later, citing his approach to teaching about Palestine, Vice Dean Michael Joseph and Dr. Perzanowski informed Dr. Ahmed that he would not be invited back to teach in the Core. One week later he was informed by his department chair that he would not be able to teach his Health and Human Rights Advocacy course. No explanation was offered for the latter decision, and Dr. Kayum was not afforded a fair hearing before his summary removal. Dr. Ahmed was apparently sanctioned because he taught a unit on the settler colonial determinants of health in relation to Palestine, an action that appears to be a blatant violation of Columbia University’s own [Code of Academic Freedom](#), which states “that all officers of instruction are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subjects” (§70a).

The basic principle of academic freedom holds that faculty have the right to investigate and discuss all relevant matters in the classroom, without interference. The freedom to teach entails the right of faculty to select the materials, determine the approach to the subject, make the assignments, and assess student academic performance. This is precisely what Dr. Ahmed and the Core teaching team engaged in, both when they approved Dr. Ahmed’s syllabus and when Dr. Ahmed and other faculty deliberated together on how to modify his teaching style to more effectively present the material.

In these fraught times, university leaders have a heightened responsibility to withstand powerful external pressures and demands for censorship, by protecting the fundamental rights of faculty and students to engage in free debate and contentious speech. This country’s institutions of higher education should be places in which a broad range of perspectives can be expressed, debated, and criticized without fear of defamation, harassment, or termination.

We therefore call on you to immediately reinstate Dr. Ahmed and apologize to him for the procedural and substantive unfairness of the decision to bar him from future teaching in the Core curriculum. We further call on you to actively foster an atmosphere of free academic inquiry and discussion at SPH, including the unhindered right of faculty to exercise their professional competence in the classroom.



Re: Dr. Kayum Ahmed

1 April 2024

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We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Aslı 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