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Open Letter to U.S. and Canadian College and University Presidents

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to urge you to uphold academic freedom on your campuses. The Palestine-Israel conflict has long been a source of passionate debate and clashing scholarship and views, but never have we witnessed the extent of threats to faculty, students and staff that we have since 7 October. During this fraught time, we call upon you to redouble efforts to protect the free speech rights and defend the academic freedom of all members of your campus community.

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.

Free speech is essential for any democratic polity, and this country's institutions of higher education should be places in which even the most controversial and unpopular views can be expressed, debated and criticized. At the same time, all students deserve equal access to education, free from harassment and discrimination. Unfortunately, we are witnessing a dramatic increase in [antisemitic](#), [anti-Palestinian](#), [anti-Arab and anti-Muslim](#) harassment and discrimination on our campuses. North American institutions of higher education must confront this surge and vigorously combat all forms of racism and hate speech as well as threats, violence, harassment and intimidation directed against members of our campus communities.

We also share the concern expressed by [defenders of civil liberties](#) nationally that "ideologically motivated efforts to police speech on campus destroy the foundations on which academic communities are built." We note that the environment on North American campuses resembles that of the period [following the attacks of 11 September 2001](#), when students and faculty who criticized U.S. government actions or sought to provide historical context for the attacks were subject to harassment and assault. The current attempts to [police](#) acceptable speech, [suppress](#) certain phrases and perspectives, and punish (or even [criminalize](#)) political expression are also reminiscent of the [McCarthy/"Red Scare"](#) period of this country's history. College and university campuses must remain vibrant spaces in which the free exchange of ideas is promoted and protected, including criticisms of Israeli policies or actions and advocacy on behalf of Palestinian rights to freedom and equality. We call on you to [reject](#) baseless [demands](#) to investigate, [discipline](#) or punish members of your campus community for exercising their constitutional right to freely express their views.



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As university leaders, you have a heightened responsibility during fraught times to protect the freedom of expression, academic freedom and physical safety of all members of your campus. Undergraduate and graduate students, and untenured instructors and faculty, are especially vulnerable at a time when actors within and outside of the university increasingly resort to intimidation, harassment, threats and defamation to silence and punish those with whom they disagree. When university leaders fail to speak out in defense of faculty members, students and staff, they thereby abdicate their professional and academic responsibility and, intentionally or not, send the message that they countenance silencing, defamation and harassment. Such an abdication also emboldens individuals and organizations with a political agenda to weaponize their claims in order to disparage and silence those whose views they dislike. We note in particular the dangerous conflation of criticism of Israeli actions and policies, and of Zionism as a political ideology, with antisemitism. In our [letter dated 7 December 2023](#) to members of Congress, we underscored how this conflation has been deployed to silence legitimate political speech and intimidate those who seek to learn about the current conflict through candid discussion and debate on our campuses. The worry that senior administrators may pay a [steep price](#) for defending campus speech codes and the rights of all campus communities has had its own [chilling effect](#) across the country. As university leaders, we urge you to resist such external pressure and counteract this atmosphere of recrimination and suspicion by reinforcing a culture of free speech and critical inquiry on your campuses.

In a [statement dated 16 October 2023](#), MESA's Board of Directors declared that it is "acutely concerned with and heartbroken by the loss of Israeli and Palestinian lives....There can be no justification for the targeting of civilians. Many of our members have been directly affected and we join them in grieving. We also join all those who are committed to a political solution that offers safety, dignity, and equal rights for Palestinians and Israelis." The same statement went on: "We call on university leaders and administrations to affirmatively assert and protect the right to academic freedom and freedom of speech on their campuses. We reaffirm that there can be no compromise of the right and ability of students, faculty, and staff at universities across North America (and elsewhere) to express their viewpoints free of harassment, intimidation, and threats to their livelihoods and safety." Some two months later, our grief at the ongoing violence has grown as has our conviction that protection of rights of speech and association on campuses across the country is all the more essential.

We draw your attention once more to our Association's call to protect *all* of your universities' and colleges' students, faculty and staff in the exercise of their right to freedom of speech and of association, without fear of threat, harassment or intimidation. We also urge you to reiterate forcefully and clearly your commitment to resolutely defend the principles of academic freedom, which are essential to the intellectual and educational missions of institutions of higher education and to preserving a democratic society.



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Sincerely,

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