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of North America, Inc

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27 June 2024

Elhanan Fellheimer
Chairman, National Union of Israeli Students

Prof. Arie Zaban
President of Bar-Ilan University
Chairperson of Association of University Heads – VERA

President Zaban, Chairman Fellheimer,

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express our profound concern over the National Union of Israeli Students' proposed bill and billboard smear campaign against faculty in Israeli higher education institutions who are critical of Israeli government's actions and policies. The proposed bill and billboard smear campaign appear to target, in particular, Professor Anat Matar and Professor Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (about whom we sent letters on [9 November 2023](#), [21 March 2024](#), and [6 May 2024](#)).

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 close to 2800 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and the freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

Contrary to the principles of academic freedom and freedom of expression, the National Union of Israeli Students' vaguely worded draft bill of 19 May 2024 proposes that: "Academic institutions will be obliged to immediately fire a lecturer, a teacher or researcher who expresses or acts in a manner that includes denial of the existence of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, incitement to racism, violence or terrorism and/or support for an armed struggle or an act of terrorism against Israel." The draft bill also stipulates that even tenured faculty can be terminated immediately without compensation and that any institution refusing to abide by the proposed law by not firing a faculty member could lose state funding. To promote this bill, the National Union of Israeli Students has also funded what appears to be an [expensive public campaign](#), which includes posters and billboards placed in various parts of Tel Aviv and its vicinity with quotes from Matar and Shalhoub-Kevorkian and which call for such faculty to be fired without compensation.

This flagrant disregard for the basic values that underpin academic scholarship is detrimental to Israeli academia in general and its struggle to remain relevant globally. On 21 May 2024, the Committee of University Heads of Israel (VERA) published [a detailed, five-page letter to convince Spanish institutions not to boycott Israeli institutions](#), in which they argue that they share the "commitment to peace and justice in the region and [...] agree with you that the situation in Gaza is tragic." If VERA wishes for its claims to be taken seriously, campaigns

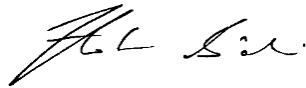
promoting undemocratic, fascist policies against academics and students must be strongly and publicly resisted.

While it was indeed important that VERA published a [letter on 3 June 2024](#) opposing the bill and calling on members of Israel's parliament to reject it, further actions are required to protect academic freedom and the freedom of speech. VERA must stand behind faculty and students who are being attacked on campuses and in the public sphere. Furthermore, opposition to the war or any other Israeli policy must remain legal if, indeed, the academic sphere is to be described as liberal and democratic, committed to peace and justice in the region. Students, staff, and faculty, both Jewish Israeli and Palestinian, must be permitted to express themselves regarding the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, which is far more than simply "tragic."

We call upon the National Union of Israeli Students to stop threatening critical voices at the country's universities, thereby exacerbating student and faculty fears for their safety on and off campus, and instead promote open, democratic academic settings. Further, we urge VERA to be true to its own words and stand behind the effort to block the National Union's dangerous proposed bill. A pluralistic political environment that ensures academic freedom for all requires nothing less.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Aslı Ü. Bâli
MESA President
Professor, Yale Law School



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

cc:

Volker Türk, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, MENA section

James Heenan, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights,
Ramallah

The Honorable Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders

Irene Khan, UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression

Francesca Albanese, UN Special Rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories

Noha Bawazir, Head of Office and UNESCO Representative, UNESCO Liaison Office, Ramallah, Palestinian delegation to UNESCO

Josep Borrell-Fontelles, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

Dunja Mijatovic, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

European Coordination of Committees and Associations for Palestine

Viktor Almqvist, Press Officer, Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) and Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI), European Parliament

Kati Piri, Member, Committee on Foreign Affairs, European Parliament

Maria Arena, Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

Yoav Kisch, Minister of Education, Israel

Gali Baharav-Miara, Attorney General, Government of Israel

Amit Aisman, State Attorney, Government of Israel