



**Middle
East
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17 October 2023

Troy A. McKenzie
Dean and Cecelia Goetz Professor of Law
New York University School of Law
troy.mckenzie@nyu.edu

Dear Dean McKenzie:

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 “inquiry” which you have launched into the conduct of Ryna Workman, a student at your law school and president of the NYU Student Bar Association, because of a message in the association’s online weekly newsletter in which they expressed their perspective on the attack on Israel which Hamas launched on October 7, 2023. That attack resulted in the death of some 1300 Israelis and has led to the massive Israeli assault on Gaza now under way, which has so far led to the death of several thousand Palestinians. We are concerned that the inquiry you have initiated threatens Workman’s right to free speech and calls into question the NYU Law School’s commitment to the principles of 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.

On 10 October 2023 Workman (whose pronouns are they and theirs) issued a [statement](#) to their fellow students in which they expressed their “unwavering and absolute solidarity with Palestinians in their resistance against oppression toward liberation and self-determination,” and declared that “Israel bears full responsibility for this tremendous loss of life.” Workman’s statement, which was widely publicized, led the law firm which had offered them a position to withdraw that offer, and the Student Bar Association is reportedly considering removing them as president. You as dean of the School of Law issued a [statement](#) on 10 October 2023 declaring that Workman’s message “was not from NYU School of Law as an institution and does not speak for the leadership of the Law School. It certainly does not express my own views, because I condemn the killing of civilians and acts of terrorism as always reprehensible.”

However, in an email message to Workman dated 12 October 2023 you also expressed your concern that “your independent decision to use your privileges and platform as President of the NYU Student Bar Association has created an intimidating and unwelcome environment for the members of our community” and informed Workman that you were initiating an “inquiry” – ostensibly in accordance with the NYU Student Bar Association’s constitution, to which we do not have



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access – in order “to better understand the circumstances and its impact on our community.” In the meantime, you effectively suspended Workman from their role as president of the Student Bar Association, disabled their ability to send group communications to Law School students and barred them from participating in the course evaluation review process.

Whether or not one shares Workman’s perspective on recent events in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, your decision to arbitrarily suspend them and to apparently threaten them with further investigation and possible disciplinary action for expressing their views raises serious concerns about your commitment to free speech and to academic freedom. We further note that it is dangerous to allege, as you did in your email message, that by expressing their opinion Workman had created “an intimidating and unwelcome environment,” without specifying for whom, in what way and by what standard.

This country’s institutions of higher education, including law schools, should be places in which even the most controversial and unpopular views can be expressed – and debated and criticized – without fear of sanction from university authorities. We therefore call on you to immediately terminate the inquiry you have launched into Workman’s speech act and publicly reaffirm your commitment to defending the free speech rights and academic freedom of all students, faculty and staff at the NYU Law School.

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