



**Middle
East
Studies
Association**
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9 November 2023

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Dear President Magill 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 your failure to respond to the defamation and harassment to which at least three of your faculty have been subjected as a result of remarks they made 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 Penn's leadership to speak out in defense of these 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 they have been subjected.

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.



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Sometime in late October 2023, a person calling himself “Penn Jew Against Terrorism” posted a petition on the change.org website under the title “Remove Anti-Semitic Professors from UPenn’s Campus.” The petition alleged that three of your faculty – Huda J. Fakhreddine, Associate Professor of Arabic Literature in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations (NELC); Fatemeh Shams, Associate Professor of Persian Literature in NELC; and Dr. Ahmad Almallah, an artist-in-residence at Penn’s Creative Writing Program – had made antisemitic remarks at various public events in recent weeks and on Twitter/X.

These allegations are based on the tendentious conflation of criticism of Israel’s actions in Gaza and its well-documented violations of Palestinian rights and aspirations with antisemitism. None of the three faculty members whose dismissal from the Penn faculty the petition is demanding attacked Jews as such, and in their recorded remarks two of them explicitly denounced the indiscriminate killing of Israeli civilians on 7 October 2023 and condemned antisemitism. The author of this petition apparently deems any criticism of Israel for its policies toward the Palestinians, and specifically the military campaign Israel is currently waging in Gaza, as self-evidently antisemitic. Such a broad and vague definition of antisemitism, and its politicized deployment to silence critical voices, is dangerous and serves to undermine legitimate efforts to combat actual hate speech and real manifestations of antisemitism.

We note your laudable concern for Jewish students, faculty and staff at Penn, expressed most recently in your email message to the university community dated 6 November 2023. In that message you stated: “The perniciousness of antisemitic acts on our campus is causing deep hurt and fear for our Jewish students, faculty, and staff and shaking their sense of safety and belonging at Penn. This is intolerable. I condemn personally these vicious and hateful antisemitic acts and words.” We regret that you do not seem to have clearly expressed the same concern for the “sense of safety and belonging” of faculty, students and staff at Penn who (like Professors Fakhreddine and Shams, and Dr. Almallah) have been harassed because they are of Middle East origin (but not from Israel) and/or because they have engaged in legitimate advocacy for Palestinian rights. Like other members of the University of Pennsylvania community, these faculty, students and staff are entitled to your recognition and support. Your silence about such incidents is thus distressing and manifests an abdication of your responsibility.



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This country's institutions of higher education should be places in which a broad range of perspectives can be expressed, debated and criticized. 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 disparage and silence people with whom they disagree.

We therefore call upon you to publicly denounce the defamation and harassment to which these three members of your faculty are being subjected and to do whatever you can to have the offensive [change.org](https://www.change.org) petition taken down. More broadly, we urge you to forcefully reiterate your commitment to protect the safety and well-being of *all* members of the University of Pennsylvania community and to defend their constitutionally protected right to free speech as well as their academic freedom.

We look forward to your response,

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Asli U. Bali'.

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

Cc.

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