



**Middle
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13 November 2023

Kent Syverud
Chancellor, Syracuse University
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Gretchen Ritter
Provost, Syracuse University
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Behzad Mortazavi
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences, Syracuse University
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Dear Chancellor Syverud, Provost Ritter and Dean Mortazavi:

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 a pattern of egregious threats to academic freedom aimed at faculty who have commented on the war in Gaza. 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 Syracuse University's leadership to speak out clearly and publicly against these threats is an abdication of professional and academic responsibility. Intentionally or not, your silence conveys the message that you countenance the 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.

Over the last several weeks, it has become public knowledge that two of your faculty have been specifically targeted for harassment and threat of physical harm because they drew on their areas of scholarly research to inform the campus community about the war in Gaza and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict of which it is a part. In one instance, one or more students recorded a faculty member's in-class remarks without permission and then circulated the video online, clearly in order to target the faculty member for their views on the Palestine issue. In another instance, a collective "Solidarity Statement" from the Women's and Gender Studies Department that mourned all the lives lost to violence in Israel and Palestine, and clearly denounced antisemitism, was subjected to false accusations, defamatory remarks and racist language; a change.org petition was also launched demanding the dismissal of the department chairperson.



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Unfortunately, instead of defending the right of faculty to share their scholarly expertise with the Syracuse University community, Provost Ritter told the University Senate on 25 October 2023 that a hitherto unknown policy prohibited faculty from using university resources to circulate statements. On 31 October 2023 Chancellor Syverud contributed to a further chilling of academic speech by cancelling a student-organized teach-in on Palestine featuring a well-known Palestinian scholar, citing “safety concerns” that have yet to be substantiated.

Syracuse University, along with this country’s other institutions of higher education, are precisely the places in which a broad range of perspectives should be expressed, debated and criticized. This is especially critical today when our own government is so deeply implicated in the ongoing violence in Gaza and the West Bank. We also note that your failure to speak out forcefully in defense of academic freedom emboldens various individuals and organizations with a political agenda to weaponize 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 members of your faculty are being subjected and to do whatever you can to have the offensive 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 Syracuse University 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 Ü. Bâli', written in a cursive style.

Aslı Ü. Bâli
MESA President
Professor, Yale Law School

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laurie Brand', written in a cursive style.

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