



**Middle
East
Studies
Association**
of North America, Inc.

1957 E Street NW, Suite 401
Washington, DC 20052

Phone 520-333-2577
Fax 520-207-3166
caf@mesana.org
mesana.org



6 December 2023

Howard Gillman
Chancellor
University of California, Irvine
chancellor@uci.edu

Willie L. Banks, Jr.
Vice Chancellor
University of California, Irvine
wlbanks@uci.edu

Dear Chancellor Gillman and Vice Chancellor Banks:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our alarm at the decision of the University of California, Irvine (UCI) to charge Margaret Goldman, a graduate student in the Department of Criminology, Law and Society, with “disturbance of the peace,” “disorderly/lewd conduct,” and “disruption” for attempting to ask a question at a campus event. In these fraught times university leaders have a heightened responsibility to protect freedom of speech and academic freedom. This is even more important now, when violence is raging in the Middle East and our own government is so deeply involved in what is happening. Initiating disciplinary action against a student for non-disruptively engaging in a campus conversation is a threat to academic freedom, and it also violates UCI’s stated policies regarding, and avowed commitment, to free speech.

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 14 November 2023 UCI hosted an event titled “The Israel-Hamas War: Five Week Update,” featuring Alon Burstein, a visiting professor (through the Israel Institute) in UCI’s Department of Political Science. At the last minute, attendees were informed that questions would only be taken through written notecards. When the question and answer portion of the event began, Ms. Goldman stood up and sought to make a brief statement about her own positionality as context for the question she planned to ask. According to reports she barely had time to identify herself as a descendant of Holocaust survivors before other attendees began



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aggressively shouting her down. It was these verbal assaults, not Ms. Goldman's attempt to pose a question, that disrupted the event and resulted in the campus police removing students from the event.

UCI's free speech policy states that "free speech requires all members of the UCI community to accept that we will be exposed to viewpoints, arguments or forms of expression that make us uncomfortable or even offend us" and that "members of our community are free to criticize and contest the views expressed on campus, and to criticize and contest speakers who are invited to express their views on campus." Ms. Goldman demonstrated this principled behavior by remaining silent during the speaker's presentation and trying to raise her question only after he was finished. Her actions thus embody and express UCI values, such that charging her with disorderly conduct appears less an enforcement of campus order and more the silencing of student speech.

We therefore call upon you to immediately drop all disciplinary charges against Margaret Goldman and to publicly reiterate UCI's commitment to respect the constitutionally protected right to free speech and the academic freedom of all of its students, faculty and staff.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Asli Ü. Bâli'.

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.

Student Conduct Office
University of California, Irvine
conduct@uci.edu