



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

Headquarters & Secretariat

Georgetown University
Center for Contemporary Arab
Studies

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11 March 2024

Tedd Mitchell
Chancellor, Texas Tech University System
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Lawrence Schovanec
President, Texas Tech University
lawrence.schovanec@ttu.edu

Dear Chancellor Mitchell and President Schovanec:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our deep concern about the suspension of Jairo Fúnez-Flores, Assistant Professor of Curriculum Studies and Teacher Education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Texas Tech University (TTU). In a statement issued on 5 March 2024, your administration [announced](#) that Professor Fúnez-Flores had been placed on paid leave pending an investigation because some of his social media posts were “hateful, antisemitic, and unacceptable,” and antithetical to the university’s values. The statement cited no examples to support these allegations. The social media posts which led to the suspension of Fúnez-Flores expressed robust criticism of Israel and vigorous support for Palestinian rights, but whatever one thinks of them they do not appear to have manifested anything which can reasonably be construed as antisemitic. We therefore regard the action you have taken against Professor Fúnez-Flores as a violation of his academic freedom and of his constitutionally protected right 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.

Professor Fúnez-Flores is widely regarded as a respected and promising younger scholar in the fields in which he works, and in the 2022-2023 academic year the TTU College of Education awarded him its Hemphill-Wells New Professor Excellence in Teaching Award. We note that the allegations which led to his suspension were apparently first disseminated on the right-wing *Texas Scorecard* website in late February 2024. It is regrettable that an institution of higher education would embrace such intemperate and baseless allegations. It is even more disturbing that your characterization of the opinions Professor Fúnez-Flores expressed on



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social media as antisemitic and hateful is based on a dangerous and insupportable conflation of criticism of Israel's policies toward the Palestinians and its military campaign in Gaza with antisemitism. We are of course well aware of, and deeply troubled by, the rising tide of antisemitism, anti-Muslim racism and xenophobia in the United States. Combatting antisemitism and all other forms of racism, bigotry and discrimination is an essential duty for this country's colleges and universities. However, we do not believe this cause is well-served by abetting calculated efforts to delegitimize and silence free speech on Israel and Palestine by tarring legitimate criticism of Israel's actions and policies, or of Zionism as a political ideology, with the brush of antisemitism.

We understand that TTU and other colleges and universities, in Texas and across the country, are facing heightened pressure from donors, politicians and organizations pursuing a political agenda who are seeking to vilify and silence opinions with which they disagree. TTU has apparently succumbed to such pressure by suspending and investigating a faculty member for expressing his political views on a matter of public concern. This country's institutions of higher education should be places in which all members of the campus community can express their views freely, even on contentious issues like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. TTU claims to respect and uphold the right of its faculty to freedom of speech and to academic freedom, but its actions in this matter constitute a betrayal of that avowed commitment.

We therefore call upon the Texas Tech University administration to immediately terminate the suspension and investigation of Professor Fúnez-Flores, and to apologize for its egregious treatment of him. We further call on your administration to vigorously and publicly reiterate your commitment to respect and defend the right to free speech and the academic freedom of all of TTU's faculty, students and staff.

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



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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Laurie Brand'.

Laurie Brand

Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom

Professor Emerita, University of Southern California

cc.

Ron Hendrick

Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs,

Texas Tech University

Eileen Gianiodis

Assistant Vice President of Marketing & Communications,

Texas Tech University