



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

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18 April 2024

Carol Folt
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Andrew Guzman
Provost, University of Southern California
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Errol G. Southers
USC Associate Senior Vice-President of Safety and Risk Assurance
southers@usc.edu

Dear President Folt, Provost Guzman and Associate Senior Vice-
President Southers:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our outrage regarding the 15 April 2024 announcement by the University of Southern California (USC) that valedictorian Asna Tabassum will not be permitted to speak at this year's commencement. Suppression of Ms. Tabassum's valedictory address constitutes a serious violation of academic freedom, and it also sends a chilling message to the campus community about what kind of speech and which speakers the university values and protects.

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 5 April 2024 President Folt named Asna Tabassum as valedictorian for USC's May 2024 commencement. Ms. Tabassum, who identifies herself proudly as a Muslim woman of South Asian origin, will graduate with a major in biomedical engineering and a minor in USC's interdisciplinary "Resistance to Genocide" program. Selection for this honor requires a minimum GPA of 3.98, a record of active involvement in the USC university community and submission of an essay reflecting on the student's personal and intellectual journey while at USC. This year, nearly 100 students were considered for this honor by the Valedictorian and Salutatorian Selection Committee, composed of three



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faculty members. The committee's selection of Ms. Tabassum was forwarded to and accepted by Provost Guzman.

Shortly after the announcement of her selection as valedictorian, Ms. Tabassum began to be targeted by a number of campus and off-campus groups, among them We Are Tov, Trojans for Israel and the Lawfare Project, which falsely accused her of antisemitism based on social media posts that were critical of the State of Israel and supportive of Palestinian rights, and called for the university to revoke its designation of her as valedictorian. The posts these organizations cited cannot plausibly be construed as antisemitic. As we have explained on numerous occasions, including in a [letter](#) to USC regarding another academic freedom issue in 2020, criticism of Israel or of Zionism must not be conflated with antisemitism. Such conflation threatens the constitutionally protected right to free speech as well as the academic freedom of faculty and students at USC.

The USC administration has justified the decision to cancel Ms. Tabassum's valedictory address by the need "to maintain the safety of our campus and students" and by its "fundamental obligation to keep our campus community safe." We note, however, that at no point has USC offered any specific information about the character or extent of any threats to safety which it might face if Ms. Tabassum spoke. Surrendering to attacks and threats by politically motivated groups seeking to silence the expression of opinions with which they disagree perverts the notion of community defense. Moreover, your claim that maintaining campus safety required the suppression of Ms. Tabassum's valedictory address is difficult to reconcile with USC's apparent ability to ensure security at a variety of high-profile events where threats might well be anticipated. As Ms. Tabassum put it in an eloquent [statement](#):

"I am not surprised by those who attempt to propagate hatred. I am surprised that my own university – my home for four years – has abandoned me. In a meeting with the USC Provost and the Associate Senior Vice President of Safety and Risk Assurance on April 14, I asked about the alleged safety concerns and was told that the University had the resources to take appropriate safety measures for my valedictory speech, but that they would not be doing so since increased security protections is not what the University wants to "present as an image."

Your assertion at the end of your 15 April 2024 announcement that you intend to rethink the process of valedictorian selection offers further evidence that it was not the safety of Ms. Tabassum or anyone else that you sought to secure; rather, it appears that your intent was to silence her



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and what she represents at USC, in the process appeasing those who have vilified and threatened her. Your administration's actions – including your failure to even mention Asna Tabassum by name in your announcement cancelling her valedictory address – thus constitute a shocking abdication of moral and professional responsibility and make a mockery of your avowed commitment to the safety and well-being of your students.

In these fraught times university leaders have a heightened responsibility to protect the academic freedom of all members of the campus community. 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 seeking to vilify and silence faculty and students with whom they disagree.

We therefore call upon you to immediately apologize to Asna Tabassum and allow her to deliver the valedictory address at commencement. We also call upon you to initiate a transparent and impartial review of the process by which you have brought the USC community to this terrible juncture; your campus community is entitled to a thorough explanation of how and why your administration chose to acquiesce to ugly and baseless charges of antisemitism, leading to the silencing of its duly selected valedictorian.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

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

Ash Ü. Bâli
MESA President
Professor, Yale Law School

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Zachary Lockman'.

Zachary Lockman
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom -- North America wing
Professor, New York University