



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

**Headquarters & Secretariat**

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16 August 2024

Raymond Rodrigues  
Chancellor, State University System of Florida  
chancellor@flbog.edu

Dear Chancellor Rodrigues:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our grave concern about recent measures announced by the State University System of Florida that will police and censor teaching about Israel, Palestine, the Middle East and related topics at the state's public universities and colleges. While the State University System has framed these measures as combatting "antisemitism" and "anti-Israeli bias," we regard this new policy directive, along with other recent measures taken by the state and its officials, as a politically motivated attack against First Amendment-protected speech and academic freedom at Florida's public institutions of higher education.

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.

According to reporting in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, during the week of 29 July 2024 you and Emily Sykes – the State University System's interim vice chancellor for academic and student affairs – sent messages to, and held calls with, leaders of all twelve Florida public universities and colleges, instructing them to review course descriptions, syllabi, and test banks for "antisemitic material or anti-Israeli bias." In an email to university presidents on 2 August 2024 you instructed presidents of Florida state universities and colleges that "any course that contains the following keywords: Israel, Israeli, Palestine, Palestinian, Middle East, Zionism, Zionist, Judaism, Jewish, or Jews [should] be flagged for review;" that "[t]his review should flag all instances of either antisemitism or anti-Israeli bias identified and report that information to [your] office;" and that the review should be "completed by the conclusion of the Fall Semester." Your email also asserted "the need to implement a process for each faculty member to attest that they have reviewed all resources (textbooks, test banks, online materials, etc.) for each course that they teach."



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As reported by the *Chronicle*, your email did not define “antisemitism” or “anti-Israeli bias,” nor did it make clear what would happen to the courses or those who teach them should they purportedly manifest either form of discrimination. Nonetheless, the intent and consequences of the new policy are quite clear. Indeed, leading First Amendment advocacy organization FIRE has [described](#) the State University System directive as “Orwellian” and cautioned that it, and “the censorship that will follow, leaves students and faculty unsure about whether their discussions of course materials addressing current events – from terrorism, to the war in Gaza, to international relations more broadly – will land them in trouble with elected officials or campus administrators.” The measure also undermines a foundational aspect of academic freedom: that faculty, who are experts in their fields, are exclusively responsible for the content and materials taught in university courses – not university administrators, state officials or politicians.

This directive is only the latest in a series of assaults that the State of Florida has launched against First Amendment-protected speech and academic freedom in its public universities and colleges, with the apparent aim of promoting pro-Israel viewpoints while censoring criticism of Israel and support for Palestinians. These efforts include the Florida legislature’s recent [adoption](#) of the controversial International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s definition of antisemitism, which includes “examples” of antisemitism that are in fact First Amendment-protected critiques of the State of Israel. We also note that, in October 2023, you issued a [memo](#) “deactivating” all chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), a pro-Palestine student group active at Florida public universities and colleges, because National SJP had allegedly provided material support to Hamas – a measure you were forced to [rescind](#) after the decision was challenged in court for violating the First Amendment.

Over the last few years, the state has also adopted a series of [politically motivated](#) laws and policies aimed, amongst other things, at eliminating DEI programs and so-called “Woke” ideology” at its public universities and college. These developments led the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) to conduct a special investigation of Florida’s higher education system, which [concluded](#) that “[a]cademic freedom, tenure, and shared governance in Florida’s public colleges and universities currently face a politically and ideologically driven assault unparalleled in US history, which, if sustained, threatens the very survival of meaningful higher education in the state, with dire implications for the entire country.” Combatting



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antisemitism and other forms of bias and racism are laudable goals, but it is clear from Florida's track record that your recent directives are an additional instance of political interference in the state's higher education system masquerading as anti-discrimination measures.

Instead of doing further damage to the standing and reputation of Florida's higher education system, we urge you, in your capacity as chancellor, to heed the AAUP's [statement](#) on "Academic Freedom in Times of War," issued on 24 October 2023: "It is in tumultuous times that colleges' and universities' stated commitments to protect academic freedom are most put to the test. As the Israel-Hamas war rages and campus protests proliferate, institutional authorities must refrain from sanctioning faculty members for expressing politically controversial views and should instead defend their right, under principles of academic freedom, to do so."

We therefore call on the State University System to rescind its recent politically motivated directives regarding Israel-Palestine and related topics, and to refrain from further action that threatens or undermines speech protected by the First Amendment and academic freedom at the state's institutions of higher education.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

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

Ashi 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