



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

Headquarters & Secretariat

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26 August 2024

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Dear Interim President Jameson and Colleagues:

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 the apparent cooperation of the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) with the witch-hunt which the Republican majority on the House of Representatives Committee on Education and the Workforce is conducting against several members of its faculty, as well as faculty and students at other institutions of higher education. Your failure to resist the committee's improper demands and resolutely defend your faculty makes a mockery of your university's avowed commitment to academic freedom.

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



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connection with the study of the region in North America and outside of North America.

In a [letter](#) to the president of the University of Pennsylvania and the chair of its board of trustees dated 24 January 2024, Representative Virginia Foxx, chairwoman of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, alleged that the university had failed to address antisemitism on campus or protect its Jewish students, and she requested that the university turn over to the committee a very broad range of documents that would ostensibly enable the committee to investigate these allegations. The letter falsely accused three members of Penn’s faculty -- Associate Professor of Arabic Literature Huda Fakhreddine, Dr. Ahmad Almallah, an artist-in-residence at Penn’s Creative Writing Program, and Professor of Political Science Robert Vitalis – of making “antisemitic remarks and statements of support for Hamas.” As we noted in a 9 November 2023 [letter](#) calling on Penn’s administration to defend its faculty against vicious attacks on social media, “[t]hese allegations are based on the tendentious conflation of criticism of Israel’s actions in Gaza and its well-documented violations of Palestinian rights and aspirations with antisemitism.”

Unfortunately, it appears that since January 2024 Penn has provided the committee with some of the materials it requested – even though no subpoena has been issued with which the university is legally obligated to comply. On 20 August 2024 the university’s counsel informed Professor Fakhreddine and Dr. Almallah that it had received a request from the committee to provide it with their c.v.s, their syllabi since the fall 2022 semester, “all course-wide communications for courses since the fall 2023 semester, and any communications since 8/1/23 relating to the Gaza Solidarity Encampment, Faculty for Justice in Palestine, and/or the Palestine Writes Festival.” Penn has agreed to turn over Professor Fakhreddine’s and Dr. Almallah’s c.v.s and syllabi. The extent to which it will comply with the committee’s other demands is not clear, but it has apparently placed holds on Professor Fakhreddine’s and Dr. Almallah’s university email accounts, which indicates that it may give the committee access to their email messages.

As we noted in a 7 May 2024 [letter](#) to the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, “[t]hrough its recent investigations and public hearings, the committee has threatened the freedoms



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essential to university life and learning, including academic freedom, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly. As a result of this campaign, the committee has made our campuses less safe for students, faculty and staff alike. These efforts shock the conscience and violate the First Amendment in ways that are reminiscent of the now-disgraced House Un-American Activities Committee hearings in the late 1940s and 1950s.” The letter went on to note that “the framing and content of [the committee’s hearings and investigations] make it clear that many committee members are less concerned with combatting invidious discrimination than with suppressing and punishing pro-Palestine speech.”

That the University of Pennsylvania would collaborate with the committee’s politically motivated investigations, at the cost of sacrificing the academic freedom and right to free speech of members of its faculty, is deeply troubling. We must remind you of the [statement](#) on “Academic Freedom in Times of War” issued by the AAUP on 24 October 2023, which is directly relevant to the current circumstances: “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 University of Pennsylvania to immediately desist from any form of cooperation with the witch-hunt which the House Committee on Education and the Workforce has launched against members of its faculty. We further call on you to affirm your commitment to protect the academic freedom of your faculty, students and staff, and to vigorously defend them against all forms of governmental harassment and intimidation. Finally, we urge you to offer a public apology to the Penn faculty members whose information you chose to turn over to the committee.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



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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
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cc:

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