



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

Headquarters & Secretariat

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30 September 2024

Michael I. Kotlikoff
Interim President, Cornell University
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Kavita Bala
Provost, Cornell University
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Ryan Lombardi
Vice President, Student and Campus Life, Cornell University
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Christina Liang
Director, Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards,
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Dear Interim President Kotlikoff, Provost Bala, Dr. Lombardi and Ms. Liang:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our extreme concern about your decision to temporarily suspend Cornell graduate student Momodou Taal, without proper due process, on the grounds of his alleged disruptive participation in a pro-Palestine campus protest. We are particularly concerned that, as a result of this callous and arbitrary decision, Mr. Taal, an international student attending Cornell on an F-1 visa, is facing immediate deportation, without adequate opportunity to defend himself against these allegations.

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.

Mr. Taal, who is an instructor at Cornell University as well as a graduate student, has been a vocal advocate for Palestinian rights. On 18 September 2024, along with approximately 100 other students, he participated in, and gave a short speech at, a demonstration outside of a career fair held at the university's Statler Hotel. The demonstrators

were protesting the presence on campus of defense contractors Boeing and L3Harris, whom they regarded as complicit in Israeli war crimes against the Palestinian population of Gaza. [Video evidence](#) from the protest shows that some students pushed through a police line to enter the job fair site, with others following. However, the footage also appears to show that Mr. Taal did not come into direct contact with the police line and entered the grounds only after access had been achieved by other students. Once inside, the students conducted a nonviolent demonstration which disrupted the job fair through chants and drumming, resulting in the fair being shut down. It is important to note that, according to his account, Mr. Taal was present in the hotel lobby for only a few minutes and left the protest early; we understand that he does not appear in any of the video footage documenting the protest inside the hotel.

On 23 September 2024 Interim President Michael I. Kotlikoff issued [a statement](#) condemning the student protestors for what he described as “highly disruptive and intentionally menacing behavior.” He claimed that demonstrators had violated university rules by pushing aside Cornell Police officers, forcibly entering the career fair site, creating excessive noise and disrupting display tables. He warned that the students involved would face immediate suspension or employment sanctions. However, of all the students who participated in the demonstration, Mr. Taal was reportedly the only one to receive a message directing him to report to Cornell’s Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards. On the same day that the Interim President made his statement, Mr. Taal was informed of his temporary suspension, given a physical copy of a no-trespass order barring him from campus, and notified that his F-1 visa would be terminated. It is our understanding that he was not fully informed of the specific allegations against him or given a reasonable opportunity to respond to them.

Mr. Taal appealed his suspension on 25 September 2024. One day later that appeal was rejected by Dr. Ryan Lombardi, Vice President of Student and Campus Life. We are deeply concerned about the apparent lack of a properly conducted formal investigation into the allegations against Mr. Taal, the denial of an adequate opportunity for him to respond to the allegations against him, Cornell’s failure to hold a disciplinary hearing before a full review panel and violations of Mr. Taal’s procedural rights under Cornell’s own policies. On 27 September 2024 Mr. Taal submitted a second, and as we understand it final, appeal to the Provost’s Office and is currently awaiting a response. We note that this is not the first time Mr. Taal has been specifically targeted for his pro-Palestinian activities: in April 2024 he



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was one of just four students [threatened with suspension](#) over involvement in a pro-Palestine encampment that involved hundreds of participants.

We believe that there is good reason to conclude that Cornell University, by ignoring due process and arbitrarily suspending Mr. Taal, has violated its own [Student Code of Conduct Procedures](#). Moreover, the university administration must have been aware that his suspension would result in the termination of his F-1 visa, subjecting him to deportation. We believe that the use of suspension resulting in deportation sets an extremely dangerous precedent and threatens the free speech rights and the academic freedom of Cornell's students, faculty and staff. We also note that, as a member of Cornell Graduate Students United-UE, Mr. Taal is entitled to union representation in disciplinary matters, as outlined in the union's [Memorandum of Agreement](#) with the university. Given that the union has asserted its right to bargain over the disciplining of Mr. Taal, your administration's unilateral actions appear to violate this agreement.

Mr. Taal is a promising graduate student with an outstanding academic record. As a Black Muslim international student, he is among the most vulnerable members of Cornell's student body and deserves, at a minimum, the same level of procedural protection and consideration that Cornell's policies are supposed to afford to all its students. The university's actions are an affront to its stated commitment to [diversity and inclusion](#) and to its [Core Values](#), which emphasize "free and open inquiry and expression—tenets that underlie academic freedom—even of ideas some may consider wrong or offensive." Moreover, by taking discriminatory disciplinary action against a marginalized student, without due process, the university's actions are also likely to have a chilling effect on other members of the campus community – especially other racialized and international students – thereby undermining their ability to exercise their First Amendment rights to free speech and assembly and their academic freedom. In this context we call your attention to the [statement](#) issued by MESA's board of directors and its Committee on Academic Freedom on 6 May 2024 which denounced actions by university leaders that delegitimize and repress campus advocacy opposing Israel's war in Gaza.

We therefore join the [Cornell chapter of the American Association of University Professors](#) and the [Cornell Graduate Student Union](#) as well as many members of the [Cornell community](#) and the public in calling on you to immediately rescind the temporary suspension of Mr. Taal. We further urge Cornell University to refrain from arbitrary and draconian disciplinary measures against students, faculty and staff



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exercising their right to freedom of speech and assembly, and their academic freedom, including by expressing their views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Aslı 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