



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

Headquarters & Secretariat

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5 November 2024

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Dear President Cunningham 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 concern about the decision of the administration of the University of Minnesota (UMN) to indefinitely suspend eight students who participated in an occupation of a university building, Morrill Hall, on 21 October 2024. Whatever one thinks of the students' action, we regard the university's decision to bar them from classes, dormitories, dining halls and campus jobs as an unduly harsh sanction that violates their rights to education and sustenance. The fact that this sanction was imposed without the students having had the opportunity to defend their actions in a properly conducted disciplinary process makes it all the more egregious. The university's actions in this regard seem aimed at deterring students from exercising the dictates of their conscience on matters of urgent public concern. They also contravene the University of Minnesota's laudable tradition of countenancing contentious student protests.

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 21 October 2024, some members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), part of the UMN Divest Coalition, held a rally to protest UMN's recently revised [student conduct policy](#) and the Board of Regents' [rejection](#) of requests to divest from Israel-related investments. Divestment had been the subject of ongoing discussions between university leaders and UMN Divest since the dismantling of the spring 2024 protest encampments. Some students and alumni then marched to Morrill Hall, a main administrative building, and barricaded themselves inside, using patio furniture and other items. Protesters declared the building "Halimy Hall," in commemoration of 19-year-old Medo Halimy, a university student in Gaza who documented daily life in wartime and was killed by an Israeli airstrike in Khan Yunis in August 2024.

According to a 22 October 2024 [statement](#) from the Office of the President, the students spray-painted over internal security cameras and damaged other property. The statement asserts that employees in Morrill Hall were unable to exit the building due to protesters preventing their free movement and exit. "These actions crossed the line into illegal activity," the statement asserts, and on that basis the University of Minnesota Police Department entered Morrill Hall two hours into the occupation, along with [Hennepin County police officers](#), arrested eight students and three alumni. We note, however, that video evidence seems to show students encouraging staff who wished to leave to do so after announcing their occupation and [offering escorts](#) to an available exit. Those arrested were released without charge from Hennepin County Jail on 24 October 2024.

The university has issued indefinite interim suspension orders for the eight students, on the premise that they pose an ongoing threat to the university. The orders bar them from attending classes, living in dormitories, eating in dining halls or participating in their campus jobs and activities. Students also face two sets of disciplinary hearings, to which they are permitted to bring lawyers: a first hearing concerning the interim suspension and a second concerning the conduct charges.

We regard the barring of the students from all university activities, before any transparent investigation or disciplinary hearing has been conducted, to be an unduly draconian sanction that contravenes the university's obligation to educate and to foster debate, however heated. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) has recently [called attention](#) to the alarming expansion of restrictive policies that intimidate and silence faculty and students, especially those voicing their principled opposition to Israel's genocidal assault on the Palestinian people in Gaza and the West Bank. As the AAUP put it, "Administrators who claim that 'expressive activity' policies protect academic freedom and student learning, even as



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they severely restrict its exercise, risk destroying the very freedoms of speech and expression they claim to protect.”

The University of Minnesota’s recently issued protest guidelines state that “engagement that is inconsistent with University policies becomes civil disobedience.” We remind you of the generative role of civil disobedience in the university’s own history. For example, in January 1969 African American students occupied Morrill Hall to protest discrimination and racism, an event documented by the [University Archives](#). Their action led to the founding of the [African American and African Studies Department](#) later that year.

Students engaged in conscientious political action who are willing to accept the consequences of their actions ought not to be prevented from continuing their education. We therefore call on you to rescind the indefinite suspension orders imposed on the eight students and to ensure that any disciplinary process to which they are subjected is conducted in a fair and transparent manner and in accordance with generally accepted standards.

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

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laurie A. Brand'.

Laurie Brand
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom
Professor Emerita, University of Southern California