



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

**Headquarters & Secretariat**

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26 November 2024

Michael I. Kotlikoff  
Interim President, Cornell University  
[mik7@cornell.edu](mailto:mik7@cornell.edu)

Dear Interim President Kotlikoff:

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 negative comments that you recently made regarding a course proposal developed by a distinguished member of the university's faculty, Dr. Eric Cheyfitz, Ernest I. White Professor of American Studies and Humane Letters, Professor of American Indian and Indigenous Studies, and Director of Graduate Studies of Cornell's American Indian and Indigenous Studies Program (AIISP). For a university leader to, in effect, publicly criticize a proposed course that had already been reviewed and approved by a faculty committee, in full accordance with Cornell's own procedures, contravenes the university's avowed commitment to the principles of academic freedom.

MESA was founded in 1966 to support scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 2800 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 elsewhere.

In the fall of 2024 Professor Cheyfitz's proposed course, "Gaza, Indigeneity, Resistance," was reviewed and approved by the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS) Curriculum Committee (CCC), and it is now scheduled (and fully enrolled) for the spring 2025 semester. Professor Cheyfitz is clearly eminently qualified to teach this course: he is an internationally recognized and respected scholar of Indigenous studies and has for many years been publishing and teaching on settler colonialism in North America and Israel/Palestine.

In an email message to a Cornell professor who had complained about Professor Cheyfitz's course and who was apparently the person who made your comments public, you are [reported](#) to have stated that you were "extremely disappointed with the curriculum committee's decision to offer the course and the course's apparent lack of openness and objectivity.... Cornell courses should provoke thought and present multiple viewpoints, rather than transmit pre-formed views of a complex



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conflict, and I personally find the course description to represent a radical, factually inaccurate, and biased view of the formation of the State of Israel and the ongoing conflict.”

You are of course entitled to your opinion about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the proposed course. But by criticizing, in your capacity as Interim President, a course designed by a recognized authority on the topic and reviewed by the faculty body officially charged with approving the CALS curriculum, without ensuring that your comments would remain entirely private, you have called into question both the committee’s judgment and Professor Cheyfitz’s reputation as a scholar and a teacher. Faculty governance, including control of the curriculum, are essential components of academic freedom, and your remarks may compromise the willingness of Cornell faculty to offer courses that deal with controversial issues and the CCC’s ability to fairly review new courses to which university leaders voice objections on political grounds. We call your attention to the American Association of University Professors’ 1994 [statement](#) “On the Relationship of Faculty Governance to Academic Freedom,” which declares that “experienced faculty committees—whether constituted to address curricular, personnel, or other matters—must be free to bring to bear on the issues at hand not merely their disciplinary competencies, but also their first-hand understanding of what constitutes good teaching and research generally, and of the climate in which those endeavors can best be conducted.”

We must also point out that your remarks contradict Cornell’s commitment to upholding the values of its accrediting agency, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), which requires adherence to core values including “academic freedom, intellectual freedom, freedom of expression, and respect for intellectual property rights.” We further note that the 1940 “Declaration of Principles” of the American Association of University Professors asserts that “academic freedom in its teaching aspect is fundamental for the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and of the student to freedom in learning.”

We therefore call on you to apologize to Professor Cheyfitz for your remarks, refrain from such comments in the future and commit to respecting the decisions of the faculty bodies charged with reviewing courses. We further call on you as Interim President to publicly and forcefully reaffirm your commitment to respecting and defending the academic freedom and the right to free speech, as well as the safety and well-being, of all members of the Cornell University community.



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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

cc:

Martha E. Pollack

Past President, Cornell University

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