



**Middle  
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15 November 2023

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Dear President Shafik 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 Columbia University's decision to suspend the university's chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) for the remainder of the fall semester, thereby rendering them ineligible to receive funding or hold campus events. This decision, made in contravention of established rules of university governance and discipline, strikes us as a violation of your university's avowed commitment to defend and respect the free speech rights and academic freedom of its students, faculty and staff. It is also contrary to your obligation to foster a campus culture in which students and other members of the Columbia University community are able to freely express and debate a broad range of opinions.

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.

As we understand it, the two student organizations were suspended, at least in part, for what university officials characterized as "threatening



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rhetoric and intimidation.” However, to our knowledge, Columbia has not explained which specific speech acts or actions allegedly justified the suspension. Moreover, we understand that the decision to suspend these two groups was not made in conformity with Columbia’s normal policies and procedures but by a newly established “Special Committee on Campus Safety.” In addition, the SJP and JVP chapters have apparently yet to be told precisely what they need to do to be reinstated as recognized student organizations according to the university’s rules.

It is difficult to avoid the impression that university rules were altered and a new committee secretly created precisely in order to suspend two student groups that were voicing viewpoints the university leadership disfavored. The suspension thus represents the usurpation of unilateral and unaccountable power by the central administration in violation of fundamental academic values of shared governance. Moreover, it violates Columbia’s commitment to its own avowed values, embodied in its [Rules of University Conduct, Section 440](#): “A principal reason why universities have endured and flourished over centuries is that they provide a place for ideas to be tested, for values to be questioned, and for minds to be changed with as few constraints as possible. Like society at large, but even more so, the University has a vital interest in fostering a climate in which nothing is immune from scrutiny. And Columbia, in particular, has a long tradition of valuing dissent and controversy and in welcoming the clash of opinions onto the campus.”

In these fraught times university leaders have a heightened responsibility to protect the freedom of speech and academic freedom of all members of the university community. As MESA’s Board of Directors put it in a statement dated 16 October 2023: “We call on university leaders and administrations to affirmatively assert and protect the rights to academic freedom and freedom of speech on their campuses. We reaffirm that there can be no compromise of the right and ability of students, faculty, and staff at universities across North America (and elsewhere) to express their viewpoints free of harassment, intimidation, and threats to their livelihoods and safety.”

We therefore call on you to promptly rescind the arbitrary decision to suspend Columbia University’s SJP and JVP chapters. We further call on you to protect all of the university’s students, faculty and staff in the exercise of their right to freedom of speech and of association, without fear of threat, harassment or intimidation. Finally, especially in these troubled times, we urge you to resolutely defend the principles of academic freedom which are so essential to the intellectual and educational missions of our institutions of higher education and to a democratic society.



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We look forward to your response,

Sincerely,

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

Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom

Professor Emerita, University of Southern California