



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

Headquarters & Secretariat

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21 May 2024

Dr. Richard C. Benson
President,
University of Texas at Dallas
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Dr. Inga Musselman
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs,
University of Texas at Dallas
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Dr. Nils Roemer
Dean of the Harry W. Bass Jr. School of Arts, Humanities and
Technology,
University of Texas at Dallas
nroemer@utdallas.edu

Dear President Benson, Provost Musselman and Dean Roemer:

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 over your administration's recent actions with respect to the peaceful student encampment at the University of Texas at Dallas (UT Dallas) in support of Palestinian rights. We are particularly distressed by your decision to call the police to campus on 1 May 2024, resulting in the arrest and brutalization of several students and faculty on your campus, including Professors Ben Wright, Rosemary Admiral and Ali Asgar Alibhai. We note that Professors Alibhai and Admiral are members of the Middle East Studies Association.

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 *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has over 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 North America and elsewhere.

On the early morning of 1 May 2024, students at UT Dallas began an encampment at Chess Plaza in support of Palestinian rights, joining other university encampments across the country and around the world. By all accounts, this was an entirely peaceful protest. At an Academic Council meeting at UT Dallas that same day, university leadership affirmed its commitment to freedom of speech on campus; however, a few hours later your administration reversed its stance, threatening students with expulsion and calling in the police.



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We are deeply troubled by reports from various sources that police officers from five different departments, including a SWAT team, raided the encampment with excessive force, assaulting students and faculty. Twenty individuals were arrested and face potential six-month jail sentences for criminal trespassing. We note that the police not only handcuffed the arrestees but also shackled their wrists, feet and legs, and detained them in an unventilated vehicle for 30 minutes before taking them to be booked. Moreover, although the arrests occurred in Dallas County where the university is situated, those arrested were taken to jail in neighboring (and more conservative) Collin County, where they were held for 24 hours and subjected to unacceptable conditions and racist language by arresting officers.

We are dismayed that your administration has prohibited at least one of the arrested faculty members from entering campus, requiring them to teach online for the rest of the semester. We further note that one of the students arrested was arbitrarily removed from your university's graduation event by police and threatened with a second charge of criminal trespassing. In both these cases, these actions were not mandated by the conditions of their release from jail.

Your decision to call in the police to break up a peaceful encampment on its very first day contravenes your university's Academic Freedom [policy](#) (UTDPP1121), which guarantees "the freedom to learn, the freedom to teach, and the freedom to develop and share knowledge with the community - all without fear of censorship or retaliation." That policy also states that "UT Dallas concurs with the AAUP 1940 Statement that 'the common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition.' No UT Dallas policy or procedure shall infringe on academic freedom, due process, or other protected rights."

We 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 your decision to have some of your students and faculty arrested and disciplined:

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.



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We therefore echo the demands of a [letter](#) signed by numerous UT Dallas faculty calling on your administration to drop legal and disciplinary charges and procedures against everyone involved in the 1 May 2024 encampment and subsequent protests, to refrain from initiating additional sanctions, and to allow all students and faculty barred from campus to return to their studies or their work. We also call on you to issue an immediate apology to the students and faculty for creating an unsafe and harmful environment on campus by using excessive force to break up a peaceful demonstration. We further ask you to refrain in the future from adopting any policy, or taking any measure, which is likely to exert a chilling effect on the right or ability of students, faculty and staff to freely express their opinions on matters of public concern and to advocate for whatever cause they wish. Finally, we urge you to publicly and forcefully reaffirm your commitment to respect and defend the free speech rights and the academic freedom of your faculty, students and staff, and to fully protect the safety and well-being of all members of your campus community.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ash Ü. Bâli'.

Ash 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