

MESA Board Statement on the repression of academic freedom in US By Jennifer Ruth on March 13, 2025

Today, March 13, 2025, the Middle East Studies Association released the following important statement. To go directly to the statement on the site, [click here](#).

The second Trump administration has ushered in an existential threat to academic freedom and higher education in the United States. The current campaign targeting universities is an extension of earlier right-wing efforts to attack and defund teaching about race, gender, and sexuality at the state level, but it is a significant escalation and one at the federal level. In the midst of Israel's genocidal war in the Gaza Strip of the last sixteen months and the fragile ceasefire in place as of this writing, Palestine solidarity protest activity on university and college campuses became a target of attacks that sought to undermine criticisms of Israel while simultaneously extending a pre-existing far-right war on higher education. The consequence has been, above all else, a censorious climate of repression to stifle voices in support of Palestinian self-determination and human rights and to secure ongoing, unconditional support to Israel. In the process, Palestine-related scholarship and advocacy have now become focal points of a frontal assault on universities as centers of critical thinking and knowledge production in a battle to destroy the autonomy of institutions of higher education in the US. The groundwork for this moment was unfortunately laid through the demonization and criminalization of campus anti-war protests in 2023 and 2024, including statements by the Biden administration and lawmakers across the aisle, as well as the bi-partisan congressional hearings investigating US universities. The Trump administration is now engaged in a multi-agency attack on institutions of higher education and is working in concert with a highly mobilized and organized set of private actors, including lobby groups, non-profits, social media personalities, and extremist right-wing organizations, to target universities and campus communities directly. The federal government is doing so primarily by cynically deploying a broad, vague, and flawed definition of antisemitism to chill constitutionally protected free speech rights and produce a chilling effect on teaching about, and public discussion of, Israeli policies toward Palestinians on college and university campuses. On January 29, President Trump issued an Executive Order on "Additional Measures to Combat Anti-Semitism," demanding action from every executive department or agency. Accordingly, a multi-agency "Task Force to Combat Anti-Semitism" was established on February 3, whose "first priority will be to root out anti-Semitic harassment in schools and on college campuses." The Task Force is led by the Department of Justice's Office of Civil Rights and includes elements of the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, as well as the General Services Administration and other agencies not yet announced. Little else is known at this moment about the Task Force's exact composition, scope of authority, or manner of operation.

In a matter of weeks, the Task Force has spearheaded the government's weaponization of spurious antisemitism charges against higher education. It has announced a Department of Justice (DoJ) investigation into the University of California (UC) to assess whether the UC has allowed "an Antisemitic hostile work environment to exist on its campuses." The Task Force has announced plans to visit at least 10 university campuses to consider "remedial action" action against them. In what appears to be the most egregious instance of government overreach against, and undermining of established due process for, higher education institutions, the Task

Force announced the suspension of \$400 million in federal funding to Columbia University without any clear legal basis.

The Task Force's suspension of federal funding to Columbia merits particular attention because it underscores the existential threat posed by the Trump administration to higher education. Only days after initiating an investigation of Columbia for alleged violations, the Task Force announced the suspension of funding as a punitive measure. It has been long-established practice that a university under Department of Education (DoE) investigation is given an opportunity to present evidence and afforded the option of a "resolution," that is a voluntary agreement with the DoE to take certain corrective steps. Only after the conclusion of an investigation, the issuance of findings and a resolution process would the DoE ever reach the point of instituting measures against a university. Even then, the long-established practice has been that any compulsory measures be tailored to address specific findings of violation. In other words, general funding cuts as a punitive measure are outside of the bounds of ordinary DoE practices. Instead of following these established procedures, the Task Force, rather than DoE, announced the suspension of federal funding without providing Columbia University an opportunity to respond to the allegations underlying the nascent investigation. The public record suggests that the Task Force neither provided an explanation of the specific basis for its action, nor did it identify particular corrective measures to be undertaken. Moreover, the suspension of the \$400 million was not tailored to any specific, alleged violation. Days later, the DoE announced that it had sent letters to 60 other universities under investigation, creating the appearance of a decision to make an example of Columbia University and thereby intimidate other institutions of higher education into taking preemptive measures to avoid similarly punitive cuts. In addition to these threats to universities and their institutional funding, the government has also taken steps to target individuals on campuses for immigration enforcement actions specifically on the basis of their speech and associational activity. This includes the use of AI to scan social media accounts to identify statements and activities the government disagrees with, and the subsequent use of social media posts as the basis for arrest, detention, and deportation. The most prominent example has been the arrest and detention, using ICE officers, of Mahmoud Khalil, who holds a green card. Khalil was apparently detained for having served as an organizer of protests at Columbia, where he was a graduate student last year. President Trump has made clear on social media that this case "is the first arrest of many to come," explicitly threatening that his administration will go after additional students at Columbia and other universities. Whatever specific legal pretext the government uses as the basis for this arrest and attempted green card revocation (or in other cases against targeted individuals), the intention is clearly to use the threat of deportation to deter all non-citizens from speaking out in support of views disfavored by the Trump administration.

Moreover, additional grounds to go after universities and their funding seem to be proliferating daily. The recent action pausing federal funding from the Department of Agriculture to the University of Maine over allegations that the university is allowing transgender athletes to compete in sports, makes clear that the Trump administration's determination to go after university funding is in no way limited to claims related to alleged antisemitism.

Beyond the actions targeting universities and individuals, there remains in the background potential legislation that would strip universities, scholarly associations, and philanthropic

foundations of their nonprofit status on the basis of unilateral determinations by executive officials that they have allegedly engaged in vaguely defined forms of support to groups on terrorism blacklists, including through speech or other associational activity. Passed by the House of Representatives in the waning weeks of the Biden administration, the reintroduction of such a measure in a Congress continues to loom over higher education as a whole.

These and other recent policy initiatives represent an attempt to focus repression against university administrators to enlist them in efforts to monitor protest activity on their campuses as part of a campaign of intimidation. In this context, and in a continuation of the campus repression that began last year, some universities have, prior to any federal case or investigation, begun implementing measures in line with the Trump administration's preferences, communications, and executive orders. Multiple institutions have begun defunding or dismantling various DEI initiatives, scrubbing or retooling language about valuing diversity and inclusion, and even threatening to decrease funding for longstanding gender studies and ethnic studies academic departments and programs. School administrators have instituted ad-hoc changes to campus policies to further limit opportunities for expressive and associational activities. Disciplinary proceedings against students, faculty, and staff who have participated in pro-Palestine protests have intensified. Some universities have gone so far as to expel students for protest activity. Such anticipatory obedience threatens to radically scale up the government's repressive agenda. Further, as recent developments demonstrate, such compliance does not in fact protect institutions from federal threats.

The example of Columbia is again instructive. Repeated efforts by university leadership to anticipate and comply with demands by hawkish government actors—including multiple crackdowns on student protestors with police and draconian disciplinary measures, as well as the disciplining of faculty and staff via administrative leaves, suspensions, and threats of termination—have only exposed the university to even more extreme forms of sanction. Succumbing to intimidation has failed to assuage the university's antagonists; indeed it seems only to have emboldened the government to intensify its attacks. The government's announcement of massive funding cuts to Columbia University within days of announcing its investigation against the university is an extraordinary punitive measure no other university has experienced to date.

In the current national climate, as institutions of higher education and their mission of critical inquiry face unprecedented attack, MESA unequivocally supports efforts to stand up for freedom of expression, academic freedom, and institutional autonomy. Rather than facilitating or acting in the interests of government repression, we must all take a collective stance to defend higher education in the United States.

First and foremost, the MESA Board of Directors demands that the government immediately end its repressive campaign against American colleges and universities. We call on all branches of the federal government as well as elected officials and civil servants working at all levels to reject this brazen undermining of fundamental protections enshrined in the Constitution, including due process.

The MESA Board of Directors also calls on lawmakers to recognize the threat these policies represent to higher education in general, and to the specific campuses based in their

constituencies in particular. Lawmakers have a critical role to play in ensuring transparency, accountability, and the constitutionality of any and all policies.

The MESA Board of Directors urges university and college administrations to affirmatively defend the autonomy of higher education and the rights of all members of their campus to engage in lawful, First Amendment-protected activity. We also call on university and college administrators to protect and support vulnerable members of our campus communities. Leaders in higher education must recognize that voluntary cooperation — beyond what is legally compulsory — with repressive efforts targeting individual members of our campuses or those abrogating the autonomy of higher education will compromise the safety of campus communities and render all universities more vulnerable to governmental overreach and censorship. Anticipatory obedience is neither a defense against repression nor a viable strategy to avert risk. Rather, it is an invitation to greater repression that endangers students, faculty, and staff, and compromises the integrity of institutions of higher education in a democratic society.

Lastly, we recognize that all of these events, and the climate of fear they have produced, are deeply traumatic to our members. The MESA Board of Directors is determined to face this new threat level and act as a resource in solidarity with our membership in defense of freedom of speech, academic freedom, and institutional autonomy. We will support our members in their efforts to mobilize their own campus communities.

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