



# Middle East Studies Association

## Task Force on Civil and Human Rights

Our classrooms are impacted by a higher education landscape in the U.S. where academic freedom is under constant threat, where multiple institutions have agreed to dangerous settlements with the federal government, where student protest has been suppressed in draconian ways, and where more institutions have or will likely adopt or are de facto applying the IHRA definition of anti-semitism. In this context, it is more important than ever for faculty to continue teaching about the region in general, and about Palestine in particular, without self-censoring as much as possible.

We have prepared these FAQ materials to help our members navigate an increasingly fraught environment, with the aim of resisting pervasive efforts intended to chill our research, scholarship, and teaching. This FAQ only addresses pedagogy and strategies for classroom discussions. For additional resources on matters beyond the classroom, see the [MESA Advocacy Resource Center](#), and for additional resources on teaching materials, see the Arab Studies Institute's [Palestine in Context](#) modules. MESA cannot and does not provide legal advice or resources, and nothing in this memorandum should be construed as legal advice.

It should be noted that the vast majority of Civil Rights Title VI complaints aimed at stifling the work of our field have targeted students. When faculty have been the targets, it is typically for speech outside the classroom. We encourage our members to prepare carefully in order to continue researching, studying and teaching about Palestine and other topics central to Middle East studies without avoiding sensitive or controversial issues. To do otherwise would be to enable the repression of our field of study.

What strategies can we use while refusing to participate in anticipatory obedience? How do we hold a line against self-censorship in our teaching while protecting the most vulnerable among us? The suggestions here apply to everyone teaching in the classroom, whether they have the protections of tenure or not, because they can be seen as “best practices” in terms of both pedagogy and network/alliance building. We do encourage people without the protections of tenure to consult with trusted senior colleagues or administrators at their institutions as well, to realistically assess their specific institutional context.

## FAQs on Teaching

1.

### **What are some general steps I can take in my classroom to protect myself and my students while teaching in this political climate?**

Good pedagogical practice is extra important in this context. For example:

- Ensure that your syllabus and classroom pedagogy frame material up front. Students should know the purpose of what they are reading/discussing in relation to the course and its learning goals. Be clear about how you expect students to approach assigned material.
- If discussion is a component of your course, ask students to create classroom discussion guidelines collectively as a class on the first day. Ensure that these guidelines include norms of how to disagree with one another (e.g., criticize an idea, not a person) and norms of confidentiality (e.g., you can share ideas from the class, but never link an idea to the person who said it). This “confidentiality” guideline is essentially a version of the “Chatham House Rule.” While this of course does not guarantee that students will abide by these rules, it helps create a climate for productive discussion in the classroom.

### 2.

#### **What are some general steps I can take outside the classroom to protect myself and my students while teaching in this political climate?**

The most important way to ensure that you and your students are supported is to create supportive networks at your institution. For example:

- Power map your administrators and know who your allies are on campus. Will your chair, dean, vice-provost, etc, support your academic freedom and that of your students? Are there administrators to whom you can reach out and open a proactive communication line about academic freedom in the current context?
- If you are including Palestine material or material on the genocide in your classes for the first time, and you are nervous about doing so, consider giving a supportive chair or dean a heads up so that they are aware and prepared to protect your and your students' academic freedom.
- Reach out to your AAUP or union or local chapter of FJP if you are not already connected to those networks.

In addition, you can:

- Protect yourself from doxxing by using tools, like DeleteMe, to scrub the internet of personal information.
- Familiarize yourself with your university's intra-institutional protocols for addressing harassment and doxxing.
- Understand your institution's rules relating to speech, academic freedom, discrimination, and harassment. (For example, some schools protect their members from discrimination and harassment based on political opinion, a category that is not protected by applicable federal law.)

### 3.

#### **What are steps I can take to protect international students in my classes?**

Repressive policies are greatly magnified when they induce a chill that results in self-censorship. Almost all complaints about student speech that have resulted in government investigations over the last two years have been concerned with extramural speech, not classroom speech. That said, it is also true that in the current climate international students are more vulnerable to serious sanctions (such as visa revocation) in connection to being named in a complaint based on speech.

Under these conditions, we encourage faculty to:

- change as little as possible about the participation component of their classes;
- avoid policies that single out international students in ways that might make them feel more vulnerable or disadvantaged;
- avoid taking steps that might induce panic or unnecessary anxiety about classroom participation;
- set classroom discussion guidelines as described above; and
- emphasize expectations of a mutually respectful environment with strong norms of confidentiality protections for in-class speech.

If discussion is a component of the grade for your class, let students know that they should meet with you if they have any concerns about fulfilling that requirement. This opens space for students to discuss a range of issues with you (from disability accommodations to concerns about losing a student visa if another student reports them for classroom speech) in a way that does not single out international students. You can then work with the student individually to come up with alternative ways that they can fulfill the discussion component of the course on days when the topic is politically sensitive.

4.

### **What should I do if I sense tension in my classroom? What de-escalation techniques can I use if a discussion gets heated in the classroom?**

Whether or not a situation has escalated, keep a written record of classroom dynamics that feel “off” to you, or of any tensions that emerge in the classroom. Consider sending an immediate report of a classroom situation to yourself or to a trusted colleague or administrator via email, so that there is a dated record of your perspective.

If a discussion grows heated, remember that you do not have to respond in the moment. Ask everyone to stop talking and take a moment to think silently.

You can always tell students that you will return to that discussion next class, and in the interim, consult with colleagues to figure out how best to handle the situation.

If you created discussion guidelines on the first day of class, put them up on the screen. Ask students to review them, and decide collectively how and when they want to proceed with the discussion.

Create a dated written report of what happened in class and email it to yourself, and/or a trusted colleague, and/or your chair or dean.

5.

### **What are my rights as a faculty member with regard to student accommodations that allow the recording of classes?**

In most situations, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 will be prioritized over privacy laws in the classroom. However, how accommodations are implemented varies widely from institution to institution. At smaller institutions or well-resourced institutions, it may be possible to provide a different “reasonable accommodation” for the student, such as a paid note-taker. You should open a conversation about what constitutes a “reasonable” accommodation for your class with the disability/accessibility office or appropriate administrator at your institution.

At all institutions, you are entitled to ask to opt out of default access to recordings for all enrolled students, since it is not a reasonable requirement to satisfy ADA considerations. You may then restrict access to recordings based on instructor permission or authorize access based on the disability/accessibility office’s determination. You should request to receive a list of all students who are being provided access and be given an opportunity to opt out of default access to all enrolled students.

As a faculty member, you are entitled to record your own class as long as you disclose that you are doing so (preferably in your syllabus) and make clear that these are private recordings for your own use in developing/revising your pedagogical approach to the course (or for whatever other official purpose you wish to disclose). If you are teaching a course on a subject you believe may engender controversy or in which your own contributions and your framing of the discussion may be mischaracterized, it may be prudent to record in such a way as to retain control over the recording.

### 6.

#### What can I do or ask my university to do if I am doxxed?

*Reach out to trusted individuals and ask for support.* In particular, ask your institution to remove your office location and phone number, and, depending on the severity of the situation and your comfort level, your email address, from your faculty webpage.

*If you are being smeared on social media, consider locking or deactivating your public accounts for the duration of the campaign.* Use the blocking function on your accounts, if available, to prevent those engaging in the campaign from attacking you in future.

If you haven't done so already, consider using external services such as "DeleteMe" to remove personal information from the web. Some institutions will pay for these or allow faculty to use research funds to do so. "DeleteMe" also has an online guide for how to remove such information yourself, available [here](#).

*Record everything.* Take screenshots, save emails, save voicemail recordings. Draft a memo memorializing what occurred, who was involved, as well as how your institution responded. This record will be particularly helpful if litigation results from the incident.

*Consider setting up email filters to send any harassing emails to a designated email folder.* This can be particularly useful if you are receiving a large volume of harassing messages. If you take this step, you or someone else should still review those emails to determine whether they include threats. If they do, forward those emails to the appropriate department at your university, which may be campus police or another office, depending upon the institution.

Depending upon the severity of the incident, consider whether to take a leave of absence or go on early research leave or sabbatical, in consultation with your department.

More resources are available [here](#) and [here](#).

### 7.

#### What can I do if my academic freedom is violated?

If your academic freedom has been violated in relation to your teaching or research about the Middle East, you can reach out to MESA's Committee on Academic Freedom at [caf@mesana.org](mailto:caf@mesana.org).

CAF's North America wing can provide guidance, and in some instances, will itself take up writing about your case if you feel a letter to your university or other relevant institution/individuals would be of help. Examples of previous, recent cases can be found [here](#).

Consider reaching out to your local ACLU, CAIR, or National Lawyers Guild chapters to share what has happened to you. Similarly, notify your university's AAUP and/or FJP chapters. Ask them to advocate on your behalf with your institution. One of the most effective strategies for resisting university repression is to leverage a vocal community, inside and outside the university, willing to publicly express support for you.

If you need a lawyer, reach out to ADC, Palestine Legal, or the National Lawyers Guild, all of which have databases of lawyers who may be able to help.