



AFI Website Launch Webinar  
4 May 2026

The Middle East Studies Association (MESA) has taken center stage in the fight to preserve higher education as a prime arena for the exercise and preservation of democratic principles of freedom of thought. Although the mission of MESA is to foster the study of the Middle East, the ramifications of its efforts—through legal cases, statements in defense of academic freedom, and most recently the [AFI website](#) produced through the Academic Freedom Initiative (AFI) of MESA’s Task Force on Civil and Human Rights—extend far beyond its membership of professional academics focused on a particular region.

The [AFI website](#) was launched on May 4, 2026 by the Task Force, a research and advocacy project re-energized in recent years in response to the attempts by the Trump administration and others to stifle Middle East studies and education about Palestine, and which is co-chaired by Profs. Darryl Lee and Lara Deeb.

To mark the occasion of the website’s launch, MESA members and members of the public gathered online at a well-attended webinar to hear about this resource and listen to three inspiring speakers: **Isaac Kamola**, who is directing the American Association of University Professors Center for the Defense of Academic Freedom and a professor of political science at Trinity College; **Tony Alessandrini**, member of the Task Force on Civil and Human Rights and Professor of English at Kingsborough Community College and of Middle Eastern Studies at CUNY Graduate Center; and former MESA president and current head of MESA’s Committee on Middle East Studies in the Public Sphere (CMPS), **Aslı Bâli**, who is the Howard M. Holtzmann Professor of Law at Yale Law School.

## The Webinar's Highlights

### *A Cornucopia of Resources*

The webinar began with a brief tour through the website, which hosts [four datasets](#). They track: 1) [lawsuits contending Title VI](#) violations and Title VI complaints against higher ed institutions; 2) [employer retaliation cases](#), in which employees of higher education institutions at all levels have faced repercussions for speaking out about Palestine; 3) cases in which universities have [interfered with events](#), mostly about Palestine, often resulting in their cancellation or movement off campus; and 4) a database of [Congressional interference](#), which includes information on committees in the House of Representatives and the Senate that have held hearings about and sent complaint letters to American universities and colleges related to Title VI issues since October 7, 2023. The website also provides a range of advocacy [resources](#) for surviving and fighting back against violations of academic freedom, including information about the shifting [visa regime](#), advice about [teaching](#) and managing classrooms in these troubled times, [managing digital devices](#) at the US border, and other timely publications coming out of Task Force's research, such as the very important report, co-issued with the AAUP, [Discriminating Against Dissent: The Weaponization of Civil Rights Law to Repress Campus Speech on Palestine](#). This report explains the politics behind the campaign to stifle and punish faculty and universities through Title VI complaints and offensive deployment of antisemitism allegations just for speaking out for Palestinian rights.

### **Speaking Truth to Power**

The webinar's real highlight were the speakers, who reflected on the implications of this moment, describing in unique and insightful ways the challenges facing higher education and the threats to educators who have anything critical to say about Palestine and the wider Middle East. Importantly, through their comments and their example, they show how these attacks can—and must—be resisted, identifying how the information available on the AFI website can be mobilized in campaigns in support of academic freedom.

### *Weaponizing Antisemitism from All Sides*

Isaac Kamola's talk drew on his extensive research into the legislative attacks on academic freedom during the 2021, 2022, and 2023 legislative cycles, detailed in his book-length white paper, "[Manufacturing Backlash](#)." He situated the attack on higher education that has taken on "the vernacular of antisemitism" within the longer culture war by "right-wing and libertarian think tanks, working closely with Republican politicians, to manufacture a culture-war backlash against educators and academic institutions," as he describes in his [report](#). He made the very interesting point that the

right-wing campaign to delegitimize higher education with “false narratives about universities as being out of control and woke” and attacking DEI initiatives as “divisive,” has been “successful in states like Florida, Texas, North Carolina, and Tennessee,” but had failed outside red states. But with October 7, 2023, the same activists with the same goals of defunding and capturing higher education rolled out an explicit strategy of weaponizing antisemitism as part of “MAGA's blue state strategy,” converging with pro-Israel activists and organizations to produce narratives to delegitimize their political opponents. This strategy was subsequently formalized in the Heritage Foundation’s Project Esther, and aims to transform their enemies into members of Hamas in the public imagination. Hamas, the unquestioned fiend, was portrayed as the force responsible for pro-Palestine activism and speech, By the transitive property of demonization, this contributed to the suppression of speech around Palestine.

Kamola’s important argument was that the imposition of this campaign was possible because higher education “had not flexed its academic freedom muscle” before this moment, as some liberal Democrats, academics, and university leaders had already conceded to institutions like the ADL that used false accusations of antisemitism to shut down criticism of Israel. As Kamola’s forthcoming article on “MAGA's blue state strategy,” co-authored with John Feingold, shows, concessions during the Biden administration laid the groundwork for “when Trump came into power, to be able to use the full levers of the federal government, including Title VI investigations the and the Department of Justice, the Department of Education, ransom letters against individual colleges and universities, lawsuits and threats of lawsuits to double down the attack on higher education.” (Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, prohibits institutions that receive federal financial assistance from engaging in discrimination on the basis of “race, color, or national origin,” and has been extended to include “shared ethnic characteristics” as grounds to bring antisemitism claims into Title VI purview, opening the door for an overly “broad notion of antisemitism that can be easily used to recast many criticisms of Israel as unlawful discrimination,” as the MESA-AAUP [report](#) also shows.)

As Kamola noted, the tactical convergence of pro-Israel and right-wing activists becomes evident in the [Title VI Lawsuits and Investigations database](#). The ADL, the Brandeis Center, conservative organizations like Campus Reform and The Young Americas Foundation, and other libertarian think tanks, all “focused on the culture war attack on a higher education,” have together been weaponizing antisemitism accusations through Title VI cases. The database demonstrates “the horrific consequences” of this history of concessions that have helped normalize the attacks on higher education.

*Three Repressive Dynamics and How to Resist*

The second speaker, Tony Alessandrini, drew from his experience with the faculty union at the City University of New York, the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), where he's been chair of the union's [academic freedom committee](#) (although his comments don't represent the position of the PSC leadership or the union), and his role as chair of MESA's Committee on Precarity and Adjunctification.

He laid out the three repressive dynamics he sees shaping higher education under neoliberalism: adjunctification, the weaponization of civil rights law, and the weaponization of academic freedom, framing his analysis and calls for advocacy under the umbrella principle: defend the university as a site of knowledge production for the common good.

While we may all be familiar with the rise of the adjunctification of academic workers, who are forced into the role of content provider and customer service agent, and we know this has developed alongside the decline of tenure, one thing we may forget is that tenure is [the primary basis](#) for academic freedom. Adjunctified educational labor is therefore more vulnerable to the kinds of attacks we've seen intensified especially since October 2023.

The denigration of academic freedom has come about through multiple means, including through universities' framing of issues around Title VI as being, falsely, "a choice between academic freedom versus anti-discrimination." Alessandrini highlighted the observation in the MESA-AAUP report, [Discriminating Against Dissent](#), that the pursuit of racial discrimination cases has drastically declined as weaponized antisemitism charges against people criticizing Zionism or Israel sky-rocketed after October 7. "The fight against the weaponization of civil rights law is a fight for academic freedom and it's also a fight to reclaim Title VI as a civil rights law," legislation originally designed to desegregate higher education. The [convergence](#) can also be seen in the fact that laws banning the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement (BDS) or BDS discourse were rewritten to ban critical race theory. Those fighting to protect spaces for exploring critical race theory and Middle East studies can come together through data-driven recognition of common threats.

In his summary of the third repressive dynamic, Alessandrini criticized the growing tendency to equate academic freedom with both-sides-ism, as if academic freedom was guaranteed through viewpoint diversity, ideological balance, and neutrality. Scholarly standards are not those of journalistic objectivity, but such are often imposed especially on scholars in Middle East studies, Palestine studies, and increasingly, scholars of Iran, gender, and critical race theory.

In turning to the question of how to fight back, Alessandrini drew on CUNY's unionist model of academic freedom, a method of organizing that takes as a given that "academic freedom is indivisible": no one group of academic workers can enjoy academic freedoms unless all do. And this requires "finding your people," organizing, and studying the victories, first steps in pushing back. In organizing together, the kinds

of “invisible retaliation” suffered by adjuncts who can be fired at will (and have been, as documented in the [Employer Retaliation database](#)), can become visible and resisted. Among the victories worth studying is the [contract](#) won by the NYU Contract Faculty United (CFU-UAW Local 7902), which changes the reappointment process and includes specific guarantees of academic freedom. He urged academics to work with students, as knowledge producers and sources of scholarly and institutional innovation, and to bring students, including student journalists and organizers, into this conversation as people also invested in these battles.

Pointing to information available on the AFI website, Alessandrini urged the audience to “use the data.” [The Title VI report](#) records how high a percentage of those bringing weaponized complaints claiming antisemitism come from people outside the institutions. This is just another means of attacking higher education, where the struggle is, in part, over who controls universities. Using this kind of data, a coalition of interests can come together to reassert the practice of shared governance of “the university for the common good” as a fundamental principle. Since “the common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition,” to quote the AAUP's [1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure](#), scholars have some responsibility to protect the university, and as a constituent part of that their autonomy.

### *Linked Struggles for Political Imagination “Over There” and Here*

Rounding out the presentations was Aslı Bâli, who urged us to recognize the scale and scope of what the “campus crackdowns” are about. Beyond the violations of academic freedom, freedom of speech, and the rights of non-citizen scholars and students that are happening through the “new architecture of surveillance, censorship, and punishment” inside American higher education, those suppressing dissent are trying to “protect the legitimacy of imperial war from the kinds of knowledge that would expose it for what it is.” As she explained, since the Middle East is “a region deeply shaped by and interwoven with the US”—through “US war making, sanctions, occupations, arms transfers, financing of proxies, counter-terrorism regimes, extraction, client states”—the study of the Middle East necessarily means the study of US power, making Middle East studies a potential threat to that power. This is why the field is being targeted.

Bâli spoke in disturbing detail about the ways that attacks on academic freedom in North America are directly connected to attacks on education in Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran. The scholasticidal assaults on the infrastructure of higher education, especially concentrated in Gaza and extending into [Lebanon](#) and [Iran](#), are an “attack on social reproduction and the capacity of people to preserve memory, to imagine a political future that is beyond mere survival.” The efforts by MESA and Middle East studies more broadly to name, analyze, and challenge the destruction of the “conditions under which people can fashion self-determining futures for themselves” are important “here” and

“there.” They are intertwined because the US imperial project, whose attacks “disable the institutions through which people teach, research, remember, heal, rebuild, and make claims on the world” makes them so. The attempts by universities to continue business as usual while Gaza’s higher education system, and much else, was destroyed; their punishing of protest; the selective enforcement of new rules to discipline speech and teaching about Palestine; and universities’ “cooperation with state and private actors to suppress criticism of Israel” produced a crisis of legitimacy for the university itself: “because what is the university for if not to enable the possibility of truth-telling in the face of power?”

Despite so spectacularly failing in that mission and, indeed, working so actively to subvert that mission, universities have disguised these efforts through bureaucratic forms: “treating dissent as a risk management problem, through conduct codes, event policies, Title VI offices, surveillance practices, mask bans, protest restrictions, disciplinary hearings, and curricular reviews, the audits of words like Palestine, Zionism, Settler Colonialism, or Intifada.” This approach has allowed “universities to continue to present repression as some kind of neutral administration,” which makes it more difficult to organize against and resist. As does the connection of “universities to Congress, donors, advocacy organizations, the Department of Education, immigration enforcement, and national security discourse,” which has produced “a landscape in which visa revocations, detention, funding threats, weaponized discrimination complaints, accreditation pressures, nonprofit restrictions, attacks on tax exempt status, are all part and parcel of one repressive project.”

And with this, Bâli concluded with a rousing statement about why the [AFI website](#) provides an essential resource. Although the repressive project is of a piece, the repression functions, in part, through fragmentation. “It says each student, each scholar, each department, each campus, even each country is experiencing an isolated crisis.” The AFI website “refuses that fragmentation by making visible the broader pattern to which each of these apparently isolated incidents belong.” They’re connected through “the institutions driving them and the legal mechanisms, ideological justifications, funding structures, and geopolitical interests that sustain them.”

### *Academic Freedom, Part of A Wider Ecology of Freedom*

The website preserves the space to resist the weaponization of language and the transformation of our fields of study into so-called divisive concepts. It provides the documentation that shows the ideological mechanisms by which the language of anti-discrimination has been distorted to serve as an ideological project that is itself deeply discriminatory. Repressive power works by making accurate language professionally dangerous. And this public archive resists that. It helps make that strategy explicit and give students, faculty, journalists, lawyers, and organizers a place to find concepts that have not been laundered through institutional fear. The website also matters because it

links analysis to action. The materials here document what's happening, but they're not limited to mourning the violence that we're witnessing. They show us how to respond. They include legal strategies, know your rights work, academic freedom frameworks, committee work, data collection, public statements, and models of collective advocacy.

[Litigation](#), documentation, public scholarship, faculty governance, student organizing, and cross-institutional solidarity make repression more costly and less invisible. And this website matters because it helps us do all of those things, and insists that academic freedom is not just an elite privilege. In this moment it has to be understood as part of a wider ecology of freedom.

It helps us see how and why the university is not just part of a battlefield, but also a place where solidarities can be formed, where young people can learn to distrust official euphemisms, where faculty can refuse anticipatory obedience, where archives can be rebuilt as they're being destroyed, and where public knowledge can circulate, and where the costs of silence can be named.

**The task before us is to defend the possibility of education as a practice of freedom, which requires connecting Gaza's destroyed universities to the very things that are being documented in this website. The website helps us understand what we are facing and helps us understand how we can challenge it.**

The Task Force hopes that you will take these insights and the website's resources to your colleagues across your campuses and fields of specialization, and to your staff and administrators, and help them see how the threats are all of ours to resist.