



# Academic Freedom Initiative

*A project of MESA*

MESA's Task Force on Civil and Human Rights

Academic Freedom Initiative

Website Launch Webinar

May 4, 2026

## **Talk by Aslı Bâli: Connecting Here and There**

The launch of the Academic Freedom Initiative website is an opportunity to think through how to connect the dots from the intensification of repressive forces on campuses to the wider dynamics that are affecting our field in Middle East studies and then the region itself, which MESA has worked to document.

Resisting the separation between what is happening “over there” and what is happening here—that is, between imperial war in the Middle East and repression on US campuses—is critical. And it's something that this website is a part of, because there is a direct connection between the destruction of universities in Gaza, attacks on educational infrastructure in Lebanon and Iran, and the new architecture of surveillance, censorship, and punishment that is being built inside of American higher education. These are obviously not separate crises; they're linked. They're linked struggles over knowledge, political imagination, and the conditions under which people can name violence as violence—and the conditions under which people can fashion self-determining futures for themselves.

The way these struggles unfold obviously varies across geographies and orders of magnitude of violence and destruction. But I do think we should not lose sight of the connections, despite those differences. The intensification of repression on US campuses is often described as a free speech crisis, and of course it is that and an academic freedom crisis. Students and faculty have been disciplined, investigated, suspended, surveilled, doxxed, threatened for speech and organizing in defense of Palestinian rights, as Isaac and Tony have both clearly laid out and as the [website](#) makes very apparent. Non-citizen students and scholars have been targeted with visa revocations, detention, and deportation threats. This is why [MESA and AAUP went to court](#) against the Trump administration's

policies of targeting non-citizen students and scholars for pro-Palestinian speech and more generally on ideological grounds. That had nothing to do with immigration policy.

### *Campus Crackdown to Shield Imperial War*

But we can't stop there or we misunderstand the scale of what is happening. The campus crackdown is not only about suppressing dissent inside universities. It's about protecting the legitimacy of imperial war from the kinds of knowledge that would expose it for what it is. And Middle East studies has always occupied an uneasy place in the US academy for this reason. Our field studies a region that is not simply elsewhere to the United States. It's a region deeply shaped by US war making, sanctions, occupations, arms transfers, financing of proxies, counter-terrorism regimes, extraction, client states, proxy violence. To study the Middle East seriously is therefore, often, to study the United States, too. And it's to study the circuits through which US power moves. How it names its allies and enemies, how it distinguishes legitimate violence from terrorism, how it produces expertise, and how it disciplines the people who challenge its preferred narratives. And that is why the repression of Middle East studies is not incidental. It's structural. The field is being targeted because it supplies tools for understanding the very system of power now trying to silence it.

### *Scholasticide Foreclosing Futures, from Gaza to Lebanon and Iran*

And the clearest example of that has been Palestine. In Gaza the destruction of educational life has been so extensive that the language of scholasticide became unavoidable. We are obviously not speaking only of damaged campus buildings, as catastrophic as that has been. We're speaking of the destruction of schools, universities, libraries, archives, museums, laboratories, and critically, the people who sustain them. Education is not a symbolic casualty or collateral damage of some kind. It is the foreclosure of futures by the destruction of education, which is an attack on the possibility of social reproduction, and the capacity of people to preserve memory, to train future generations, and to imagine a political future that is beyond mere survival.

And that is why we named it scholasticide from the very beginning through the work of the MESA Board and the Committee on Academic freedom for the Middle East and North Africa. We tried to underscore the way in which the war has been, of course, killing people, in the horror that we've witnessed throughout Gaza and now far beyond in the region, but also destroying institutions through which a people becomes legible to itself and to the world. We see the destruction of archives as an attack on memory, the killing of professors as an attack on the capacity to transmit that memory and that sense of collective existence, the destruction of universities as an attack on the future itself. And we are now witnessing the generalization of those strategies of erasure visited on Gaza as they are extended into [Lebanon](#) and to [Iran](#), where once more universities and schools, scholars and cultural heritage are being targeted as part of campaigns unfolding from Tehran to Beirut to Bint Jbeil.

## *Universities' Legitimacy Crisis:*

### *Treating Dissent as a Risk Management Problem*

These dynamics are also why Gaza reverberated so powerfully across campuses in the United States. Students and scholars saw not just mass death but organized destruction of a whole educational world. They saw their own institutions continue business as usual, defend neutrality, punish protest, and in some cases cooperate with state and private actors to suppress criticism of Israel. The result was 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?

And what does academic freedom mean under AAUP's definition without [tenure](#)? If such freedom disappears the moment its exercise becomes politically costly regardless of the alleged protections on campuses? The answer to these questions offered by many universities has been a grim one. They have treated dissent as a risk management problem. They have turned conduct codes, event policies, Title VI offices, surveillance practices, mask bans, protest restrictions, disciplinary hearings, and curricular reviews into mechanisms for repression. And that repression has worked through the mundane. It doesn't always arrive as a dramatic ban or act of censorship that we can easily organize around. It often takes the form instead of changed permitting rules, facilities use policies, warnings from general counsel that remain isolated to a particular campus, new reporting mechanisms that arise in the bureaucratic underbelly of a university's functioning, sudden concerns with safety or a demand to audit words like Palestine, Zionism, settler colonialism, or Intifada.

And these bureaucratic forms allow universities to continue to present repression as some kind of neutral administration. That neutrality is a fiction, and that is what this [AFI website](#) makes clear. Rules are being selectively enforced. Speech is being recorded as threat only when it's about Palestine. Criticism of Israel is being recoded as discrimination, anti-Zionist analysis is being framed as anti-Semitism, solidarity is being described as support for terrorism, and all of this translation is cheapening the meaning of the language that we use and producing a full machinery of discipline to be activated at will, but that is very, very difficult to organize against, to resist. And that machinery in turn is not confined to campuses. It connects universities to Congress, donors, advocacy organizations, the Department of Education, immigration enforcement, national security discourse. And it produces 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 the same repressive project.

And the repression of campus Palestine activism cannot be described merely as a campus issue in the narrow sense as a result of this ecosystem I've just described. It is one domestic expression of an imperial order under strain. The violence of that order is now being made visible partly by the creation of something like the [AFI website](#). And its visibility is perhaps the reason that institutions capable of naming it are now being disciplined. And this is where the wider regional frame matters in connecting what this website is doing to what's actually happening in our region. Palestine is the center, but not the boundary.

## *Academics Turned into Military Targets*

We're seeing in Lebanon, for example, MESA's Committee on Academic Freedom has recently [condemned](#) the killings of two faculty members—professors of chemistry and physics at the same institution—in an Israeli drone strike that killed them in the courtyard of their campus where they were convening a meeting to organize remote access to education for students who've been displaced. They were killed while doing their work as professors trying to keep education possible during war. And that detail is crucial, because violence in Lebanon is, again, not only the destruction of buildings—although that destruction is itself staggering, and reporting has shown just how devastating it has been through the razing of villages and the destruction of civilian infrastructure everywhere south of the Litani River. But it's also the targeted killing of academics in Lebanon and of course also in Iran. And this adds something very specific to our analysis, which is the normalization of a dual-use logic that turns academics themselves into supposedly legitimate targets—military objects—because their knowledge might theoretically be useful and the protected civilian status of academic life itself may be collapsed.

Academic knowledge is being defined not just as a weapon in the ways that we have had speech weaponized against knowledge here in the United States. But literally it is being attacked as a military object, erasing every conceivable boundary that protects anything like academic life from constant destructive targeting. And Iran has shown that same logic at an even larger infrastructural scale, once more documented by MESA's Committee on Academic Freedom for the MENA region. In an April 2026 [letter](#) that I commend to everybody's attention, CAFMENA documented the ways in which Iran's educational and academic institutions have become a frontline in the US-Israeli war. The letter documents that 21 universities were attacked, damaging 154 campus buildings and sites, including major universities in Tehran and other urban centers and provincial academic institutions, but also attacks on medical and scientific research infrastructure, a century-old institution with national reference laboratories, biobanks, and World Health Organization collaborating centers. And then 760 primary and secondary schools directly hit or damaged as of the beginning of April.

What emerges is a regional pattern. And not just one that the US facilitates and supports, not just one unfolding in Palestine, but one that the US is now directly engaging in as a participant, targeting the material conditions of knowledge production and also the future-making capacities of whole societies.

These attacks disable the institutions through which people teach, research, remember, heal, rebuild, and make claims on the world. And this is why the campus crackdown in the United States belongs in the same analytic frame. The forms of violence are not identical. Obviously, we can't flatten them. A disciplinary hearing is not an airstrike. A visa revocation is not the bombing of a university. But they share a political logic, which is an effort to control the production, circulation, and consequences of knowledge about imperial violence. Abroad, that has meant destroying universities, killing scholars, razing towns, disabling research infrastructure. And at home it means surveillance, weaponized and pretextual investigations, donor pressure, immigration enforcement, curricular scrutiny,

disciplinary threats. In both settings, the target is speech, but also the social capacity to know, name, teach, and resist—which brings us back to Middle East studies.

### *Making Broader Patterns of Repression Visible*

The field is not simply affected by these dynamics, it is the place where they become visible. And this is something that is remarkably difficult to make visible, which is why the material gathered on the [AFI website](#) matters so much. It is documentation as a form of resistance. Repression depends on fragmentation. It says each student, each scholar, each department, each campus, even each country is experiencing an isolated crisis. A website like this one refuses that fragmentation. It makes visible the broader pattern to which each of these apparently isolated incidents belong. They're connected; they have institutions driving them; they have legal mechanisms, ideological justifications, funding structures, and geopolitical interests that sustain them.

### *The AFI Website: A place to find concepts not laundered through institutional fear*

The website also matters because it 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, for example, [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 a public archive resists that. It helps make that strategy explicit and gives 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. It's true that, for example, MESA's lawsuit alone is not going to be able to do enough to challenge state power, that litigation alone is definitely not going to save us. But 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 it also insists that academic freedom is not just an elite privilege, not just for the tenured.

### *Academic Freedom in A Wider Ecology of Freedom*

Academic freedom is often defended too narrowly as if it is only a professional protection for tenured faculty, but in this moment, it has to be understood as part of a wider ecology of freedom. It is connected to the rights of students, staff, non-citizens, adjuncts, researchers, postdocs, librarians, archivists, journalists, and communities under attack. And it is connected as a result to the rights of Palestinians, Lebanese, Iranians, Sudanese, Yemenis, Afghans, and others to produce knowledge about their own worlds without having those worlds destroyed or speech about their worlds criminalized.

*Learning to Distrust Official Euphemisms, Naming the Costs of Silence*

And this material matters because it helps us see how and why the university has become part of this battlefield—and the ways in which it's 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, where public knowledge can circulate, and where the costs of silence can be named.

**So, the task before us, as far as I'm concerned, is not to defend the university. Universities have shown us their limits. It's 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. And that ultimately to me is why the website matters, because it helps us understand what we are facing and helps us understand how we can challenge it.**