



**Middle  
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7 December 2023

Representative Mike Johnson  
Speaker of the House of Representatives

Representative Hakim Jeffries  
Minority Leader, House of Representatives

Dear Speaker Johnson and Minority Leader Jeffries,

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) to express our concern about the provision in article 4 of House Resolution [894](#) (adopted on 5 December 2023) explicitly equating antisemitism with anti-Zionism. We share your justifiable commitment to combating antisemitism, but are deeply concerned that the passage of H.R. 894 threatens to harm those efforts while inviting inappropriate and unconstitutional suppression of protected speech.

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 prestigious *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 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 in North America and outside of North America.

We are well aware of, and deeply troubled by, the rising tide of racism, xenophobia, antisemitism and anti-Muslim racism in the United States. Combatting antisemitism and all other forms of racism, bigotry and discrimination is an essential duty. However, we do not believe this cause is well served by abetting current efforts to delegitimize and silence free speech on Israel and Palestine by conflating criticism of Israeli actions and policies, and of Zionism as a political ideology, with antisemitism. Unfortunately, we have recently witnessed statements by university leaders, as well as by politicians, government officials and legislative bodies, that manifest this kind of conflation, thereby posing a grave danger to academic freedom and to the constitutionally protected right of free speech.

In March 2021, the Board of Directors of MESA expressed its grave concern specifically about a number of the “Contemporary Examples of Antisemitism” that accompany the definition of antisemitism formulated by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), which has been adopted or endorsed by some government agencies and university administrations. At the time the Board noted that these examples accompanying the IHRA definition so broadened the definition



of antisemitism – properly understood as hostility toward, hatred of, and/or discrimination against Jews – as to encompass legitimate criticism of and opposition to Israel, its policies, and/or Zionism as Israel’s official state ideology, thereby posing a threat to free speech and academic freedom.

Recently, as the American Bar Association (ABA) passed its own resolution on antisemitism, the ABA considered adopting the IHRA definition and ultimately [declined](#) to do so. At that time, [numerous civil rights organizations](#) wrote to the ABA urging it not to adopt a definition equating antisemitism with anti-Zionism, which would result in the suppression of First Amendment-protected speech. Concerns about these implications of the examples accompanying the IHRA definition led a distinguished group of Israeli and Jewish scholars to draft the [Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism](#) – endorsed by a wide range of civil and human rights organizations — designed precisely to avoid the dangerous conflation of antisemitism with criticism of Israel.

To equate criticism of Zionism and Israel, and advocacy and activism informed by such criticism, with antisemitism delegitimizes, and exposes to punitive sanctions, a range of legitimate political perspectives and those who express them. As Congressman Jerrold Nadler observed in his [statement of 5 December 2023](#), there are, for example, staunchly anti-Zionist religious Jewish communities that cannot be depicted as antisemitic. Similarly, many others also hold and express views that are anti-Zionist or critical of Israel without being antisemitic. The adoption of this resolution equating anti-Zionism with antisemitism threatens constitutionally protected rights including free speech. If government agencies or university administrators were guided by the resolution, it would exert a chilling effect on research and teaching about, as well as public discussion of, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on college and university campuses, undermining the academic freedom so vital to the mission of our institutions of higher education.

We therefore call on all members of the US House of Representatives to refrain from making policy on the basis of the conflation of anti-Zionism and antisemitism. We urge them to rigorously uphold the constitutionally protected right to free political speech, including criticism of any country, government or ideology, and the right to engage in advocacy for any group’s rights. This constitutional right is particularly critical at our institutions of higher education, where it should be accompanied by rigorous adherence to the standards and traditions of academic freedom, including freedom from the threat of politically motivated harassment or punishment.



Re: House Resolution 894

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We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Asli U. Bali'.

Aslı 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

cc.

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