



**Middle
East
Studies
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January 23, 2017

Keith Eldredge
Dean of Students at Lincoln Center
Fordham University
via fax: 212-636-7987

Dear Dean Eldredge,

We write to you on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express our concern over your decision to deny recognition to Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) as a student club at Fordham University. This decision violates the principles of academic freedom and the right to free speech. By attempting to suppress rather than encourage dialogue buttressed by critical thinking, it also threatens the principles and tradition to which Fordham as a Jesuit educational institution professes to adhere.

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 *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 3000 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 elsewhere.

In your decision denying recognition of an SJP chapter at Fordham you stated that you “cannot support an organization whose sole purpose is advocating political goals of a specific group, and against a specific country, when these goals clearly conflict with and run contrary to the mission and values of the University.” The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is indeed complex and debate about it can be heated. But to deny students the right to form a club through which to express a specific political position on this conflict in effect aligns the university with one point of view and actively suppresses others. Moreover, such a stance may increase rather than reduce or avoid polarization, instead of fostering the free inquiry and vigorous discussion that are the hallmarks of a liberal education. While MESA as an organization has no position on SJP’s political platform, we vigorously support the rights of students and faculty to form organizations to advocate for their political views.

We are especially concerned that your decision may have been influenced by efforts in New York and elsewhere in the country to silence groups advocating for Palestinian rights, including SJP. Submission to or compliance with such pressures, often exerted by groups with a clear political agenda based outside of academia, can only undermine Fordham’s professed commitment to the pursuit of a liberal education and to fostering a campus environment that encourages the free exchange of ideas about even the most controversial topics.

We therefore call on you to reconsider your decision and allow the formation of a SJP chapter at Fordham, thereby upholding the commitments to “freedom of inquiry,” developing students’ “understanding of and reverence for cultures and



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ways of life other than their own," and "cosmopolitan education" that are articulated in Fordham's mission statement. We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'B. Baron' followed by a long, horizontal, slightly wavy line.

Beth Baron
MESA President
Professor, City University of New York

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Amy W. Newhall' in a cursive, flowing script.

Amy W. Newhall
MESA Executive Director
Associate Professor, University of Arizona