



Via e-mail

October 22, 2020

Re: Resist Censorship Demands Over October 23rd Event at University of Massachusetts Boston

Dear Chancellor Suárez-Orozco and Provost McDermott:

We write in support of University of Massachusetts Professors Heike Schotten, Leila Farsakh, Jeff Melnick, and Karen Suyemoto and webinar participants Leila Farsakh, Isaac Kamola, and Andrew Leong to urge you to defend the constitutional and academic freedom rights of the organizers of the October 23 event “We Will Not Be Silenced: The Repression of Academic Freedom and Resistance, from Leila Khaled to UMass Boston.” Zoom has already announced that it has cancelled a similar event at the University of Hawai‘i Mānoa (UHM). If Zoom tries to censor the UMass Boston event, we urge you to stand up to Zoom in order to protect the First Amendment and academic freedom rights of the professors, groups, and departments who organized and are co-hosting the event as the law and your educational mission require you to do.

As you must be aware, this event, organized by and featuring UMass Boston faculty, is scheduled to take place on Zoom because in-person events pose a serious health risk due to COVID-19. On October 20, Zoom publicly announced that a similar event at UHM would not be permitted to take place, claiming that a scheduled special appearance by Leila Khaled would violate Zoom’s terms of use and community standards. Zoom also tried to justify its cancellation of the UHM event because it had cancelled another event featuring Ms. Khaled, at another school, San Francisco State University, on September 23.

While we do not know if Zoom has been in communication with you regarding the UMass Boston event, it is important that you understand that any claim that these events would violate the law are specious. Israel lobby organizations have made frivolous threats based on a false claim that it would constitute criminal activity to host Ms. Khaled for an academic discussion. Lobby groups claimed that it would constitute “material support for terrorism” to host Ms. Khaled as a speaker because she has been publicly affiliated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), a group that the U.S. has designated as a terrorist organization, and because Ms. Khaled, now 76, participated in two plane hijackings fifty years ago, as part of Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation.

The claim that academic institutions in the U.S. cannot have Ms. Khaled speak has no basis in law or fact. Ms. Khaled was not compensated for the events, she is not representing the PFLP at these events, and fundamentally, the exchange of ideas in a university setting is constitutionally protected free speech. Again, these events are academic discussions: the September 23 class

event was to examine critical narratives of resistance, gender and sexual justice, and the October 23 webinar's focus is on liberation, censorship and academic freedom.

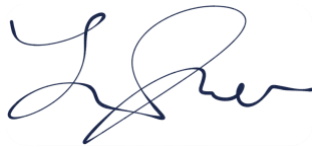
To extend counterterrorism laws to pure speech and academic discourse would severely undermine all of our First Amendment rights to speech and association.

We urge you not to give any credence to such frivolous claims and to recognize the grave risks that such an approach would pose to the climate of academic freedom at UMass Boston and to professors engaged in scholarship and critical discussions.

If Zoom tries to censor the October 23 event at UMass Boston and the University is unable to ensure that Zoom will allow the event to go forward, the University must arrange for an adequate alternative venue with the same features, and it must ensure that its contract with Zoom is cancelled or amended to ensure that the University is able to live up to its constitutional and educational responsibilities.

Thank you for your attention into this matter

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Liz Jackson', with a stylized, cursive script.

Liz Jackson
Senior Staff Attorney
Palestine Legal

On behalf of:

American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC)
Asian Americans Advancing Justice – Asian Law Caucus
Center for Constitutional Rights
Civil Liberties Defense Center
Climate Defense Project
Defending Rights and Dissent
National Lawyers Guild International Committee
Partnership for Civil Justice Fund
Project South
Water Protector Legal Collective