

Academic Freedom in Middle East Studies: Precarity, Neutrality and Collective Responsibility

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For a long time, scholars in Western academia framed debates on academic freedom within Middle East Studies (MES) primarily around the protection of researchers conducting research in West Asia and North Africa (WANA). They often treated academic freedom as a question of safeguarding researchers from constraints imposed by authoritarian regimes. At the same time, exiled and diasporic scholars from the region working in European and North American universities began to advocate a broader and more critical conception of academic freedom, while critiquing the orientalist, colonial and imperial assumptions that have shaped the field (Said, 1978). Rather than treating academic freedom as a nationally bounded issue, or as a problem located primarily in authoritarian contexts “elsewhere,” they highlighted the transnational conditions under which scholars produce, circulate, legitimize and constrain knowledge (Mourad et al., 2024).

Although scholars and students have increasingly legitimized postcolonial, decolonial and other critical approaches, these approaches now face growing pressure. Political and institutional actors have targeted their critiques of orientalist knowledge production, epistemic injustice and the political conditions of academic work. In several contexts, this backlash has taken the form of budget cuts, threats to departments and programmes, restrictions on curricula, public campaigns against individual scholars and, in some cases, dismissals or non-renewals (Scholars at Risk, 2025). Such pressures have dis-

proportionately affected the fields of critical interdisciplinary and area studies, including Middle East Studies, gender studies, postcolonial studies and critical race theory.

Against the backdrop of global attacks on academic freedom, this article reflects on the condition of MES. We examine recent shifts in debates on academic freedom, focusing on formalized efforts to address restrictions through Committees on Academic Freedom (CAFs) within MES associations, with particular attention to the recent German case.

From Individual Protection to the Conditions of Knowledge Production

With the global rise of authoritarianism, right-wing populism, wars and genocide in Gaza, scholars, institutions and publics have debated and contested academic freedom more intensely than ever. The development of the Academic Freedom Index (AFI), a quantitative tool that compares trends across countries over time, has made an important contribution to measuring academic freedom worldwide. Monitoring initiatives and networks such as Scholars at Risk (SAR) document different types of violations of academic freedom and the human rights of members of higher education communities, including killings, violence, imprisonment, prosecution, restrictions on travel, retaliatory dismissal and expulsion from study.

Qualitative and ethnographic research has added a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which political and institutional actors attack academic freedom. These attacks target not only individual scholars but also the broader conditions and infrastructures of knowledge production. Concepts such as epistemicide, scholasticide, decoloni-

zation of knowledge, research security, marketization of universities, funding dependencies, Staatsraison, algorithmic censorship, cyber-surveillance, weaponized AI in higher education and self-censorship have become central to current debates. We can describe this shift as a move from understanding academic freedom primarily in terms of “scholars at risk” towards a broader concern with “scholarship at risk” (Khoo et al., 2025).

According to these perspectives, we cannot understand academic freedom solely in relation to state repression in the region. We must also examine it in connection with global inequalities, institutional power relations, funding structures, migration regimes, racialization and the politics of expertise within North American and European universities themselves.

Academic Freedom Committees in Middle East Studies

Within Middle East Studies, academic freedom committees and related initiatives have become important sites where scholars debate, formalize and translate expanded understandings of academic freedom into collective forms of intervention. Rather than focusing only on individual cases of persecuted scholars, they increasingly address the structural, transnational and epistemic conditions that endanger knowledge production itself.

Among area studies organizations, the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA CAF) probably offers the most established example. Its Middle East and North Africa subcommittee dates back to 1990, while MESA established its North America subcommittee in 2005. MESA CAF has broadened academic freedom advocacy beyond university autonomy to include state repression, imprisonment, travel restrictions, censorship, warfare and occupation, and restrictions on access to research sites, archives and academic exchange. Since October 2024, MESA's Academic Freedom Initiative has also tracked threats to academic freedom on North American campuses after 7 October 2023.

The Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) provides another influential example. Through public

statements, interventions and open letters, BRISMES has increasingly framed academic freedom through decolonial critique, anti-racist scholarship, international law and the protection of scholars at risk. Other European Middle East Studies associations have followed similar developments. SeSaMO in Italy has moved from monitoring towards more direct institutional action, while recent shifts within SeMOMM in France point to stronger engagement with scholars facing state pressure, legal censorship or public attacks.

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Although the Arab Council for the Social Sciences (ACSS) is not a Middle East Studies association in the same sense, it plays an important role as a regionally grounded effort to address academic freedom and knowledge production within the Arab world itself. Its working groups on Safeguarding Knowledge Production in the Arab Region, formed in 2022, and the Future of Higher Education in the Arab Region, launched in 2025, reflect current concerns with scholasticide and educide, understood as the systematic destruction of universities, educational institutions and academic infrastructures. These initiatives show how scholars and institutions address academic freedom through the material, institutional and epistemic conditions that make knowledge production possible or impossible.

Taken together, these developments show that academic freedom advocacy in Middle East Studies has become more organized, transnational and attentive to the structural conditions of knowledge production. They also show that attacks on academic freedom require collective structures capable of responding to censorship, repression, epistemic exclusion and the destruction of academic infrastructures. We need to understand the establish-

ment of a Committee on Academic Freedom within the German Middle East Studies Association, DAVO, in this context.

Precarity and the Institutional Absence of Protection

DAVO's CAF initiative began in 2022, when a group of early-career scholars formed a working group on "postcolonial perspectives" within the association. The group received no funding and relied entirely on the voluntary labour of a few committed academics, including the authors of this article. Inspired by the examples of MESA and BRISMES, the initiative sought to create a comparable structure within German MES.

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We aimed to foster and professionalize collective engagement with academic freedom on the basis of a critical understanding of knowledge production. We intended such a committee not only to support early-career and precariously employed academics, but also to create a space for exchanging experiences of researching, teaching and publishing on politically sensitive topics. This also meant reflecting on what counts as "sensitive" in particular political, institutional and regional contexts, and how the positionality of the researcher shapes such sensitivities. The limited institutional protection available to scholars working on politically contested topics made the need for such a structure more urgent. With few exceptions, universities and research institutions in Germany still lack systematic mechanisms to support, prepare and protect researchers and their collaborators. Scholars often depend instead on the personal commitment of supervisors, mentors or individual research teams. This points to a broader

challenge facing academia under conditions of growing authoritarianism, shrinking resources and declining political support for critical scholarship. At the DAVO General Assembly in Vienna in September 2023, the working group submitted a motion to establish a DAVO Committee on Academic Freedom. The membership approved the motion, allowing the group to begin drafting statutes for the committee. Over the following two years, the initiators discussed concerns, ideas and needs with numerous DAVO members. In September 2025, the membership formally established the committee by majority vote. Following this decision, the DAVO directorate stepped down.

Neutrality, Objectivity and the Politics of Knowledge

Major discussions on academic freedom emerged during public events and panels at DAVO's annual conferences in 2023, 2024 and 2025. These discussions concerned both the establishment of a CAF and the role of Middle East Studies more broadly. One central question focused on how academic freedom should be organized, by whom and in what form. While participants broadly agreed that scholars should receive protection against repression, censorship and intimidation, some raised concerns that public statements or interventions by a CAF could endanger researchers, interfere with ongoing fieldwork or compromise scholarly credibility. Others argued that, precisely because risks are unevenly distributed, individual scholars cannot defend academic freedom on their own. From this perspective, a CAF could distribute risks, offer solidarity and respond to threats that exceed the capacities of individuals.

These concerns became more pronounced after 7 October 2023. In Germany, academic freedom around Israel/Palestine faced increased pressure, as recent assessments of declining academic freedom and reports of self-censorship, restrictions on public events and institutional caution around related topics have shown (Kinzelbach et al., 2026; Grimm et al., 2025). This context intensified concerns about how actors would perceive a CAF in an already polarized environment. At the same time, it highlighted the need for a formalized structure that

could address threats to academic freedom in a careful, procedural and collective manner.

The debates also revealed competing understandings of neutrality and objectivity. Participants often invoked scholarly neutrality to caution against public positioning or collective intervention. Yet such appeals do not stand outside politics. Institutional, political and epistemic power relations shape decisions about when to speak, which cases to address, whose vulnerability to recognize and which forms of knowledge to treat as legitimate. In this sense, neutrality can function not only as a safeguard of scholarly integrity but also as a mechanism that discourages engagement with contested forms of knowledge and politically sensitive topics.

This is particularly relevant for Middle East Studies, a field shaped by restrictions, geopolitical interests, racialization, migration regimes, funding structures and controversies in Europe and North America. Questions relating to Palestine, Kurdistan, terror, security, gender, racism and Islamophobia show that what counts as “sensitive” is never fixed. It depends on political context, institutional location and the positionality of the researcher.

The establishment of a CAF therefore raised not only organizational questions but also epistemological ones. If scholars produce knowledge from situated positions, we cannot defend academic freedom through abstract claims to neutrality alone. Feminist and critical theorists have long shown that scholarly objectivity does not require detachment from social and political conditions. Donna Haraway’s concept of “situated knowledges” (1988), Sandra Harding’s notion of “strong objectivity” (1991) and Pierre Bourdieu’s call for reflexivity (2004) all point to the need to examine the conditions under which scholars produce, legitimize and contest knowledge.

Conclusion: Academic Freedom as Collective Responsibility

The public discussions around the CAF, therefore, revealed a broader tension within academia: should we understand academic freedom primarily as the individual right of scholars to conduct research without interference, or also as a collective responsibility to protect the conditions of critical knowledge production? A CAF must navigate between visibility and

protection, public intervention and risk assessment, scholarly independence and institutional constraints. Its work is therefore not external to scholarship. It forms part of the infrastructure necessary for sustaining academic life under conditions of growing political pressure.

Silence, individual resilience or abstract appeals to neutrality alone cannot protect academic freedom. Scholarly autonomy depends on social, institutional and epistemic conditions that scholars and institutions must actively defend

Academic freedom in Middle East Studies, therefore, goes far beyond the right to speak on Palestine alone. It concerns whether universities remain willing and able to sustain critical, historically informed, regionally competent and politically inconvenient knowledge in the face of state interests, media campaigns, threats of funding cuts, security logics and colonial epistemologies.

In its original sense, academic freedom served to defend the autonomy of scholarship and its right to pursue knowledge and truth independently of the interests of the nation-state. To defend this autonomy is therefore never simply an apolitical act. The debates around neutrality, objectivity and the possible role of a CAF have shown that silence, individual resilience or abstract appeals to neutrality alone cannot protect academic freedom. Rather, academic freedom requires reflection on the institutional, political and epistemic conditions under which scholars produce, contest and render knowledge vulnerable.

This does not mean abandoning scholarly standards. Rather, it means recognizing that scholarly autonomy depends on social, institutional and epistemic conditions that scholars and institutions must actively defend. Collective structures such as academic freedom committees can help address threats in ways that are careful, procedural and collectively accountable. They make possible forms of shared

protection, public intervention, risk assessment and scholarly solidarity that individual scholars, especially those in precarious or vulnerable positions, cannot provide on their own.

In this sense, we should understand academic freedom not only as an individual right, but also as a collective responsibility to sustain the conditions under which critical, situated and politically inconvenient knowledge remains possible.

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