

April 9, 2026

Dear President Robert Jones, Provost Tricia Serio, Dean Dianne Harris, and the Jackson School of International Studies Director Daniel Hoffman:

We write on behalf of [Academia for Equality](#) (A4E), a membership organization of Israeli academics committed to the democratization of Israeli academia and society, and to defending academic freedom and critical voices against silencing and retaliation. We write to express our deep concern regarding the recent removal of Dr. Aria Fani from his position as Director of the Middle East Center (MEC) at the University of Washington, Seattle. Based on public reporting and Dr. Fani's own account, his dismissal from a leadership role followed the circulation of two emails that he sent through the MEC listserv, offering a critical analysis of the ongoing U.S.–Israeli war on Iran.

Dr. Fani's emails were impassioned and embattled, to be sure, but it is crucial to read these messages in context.

First, in the weeks leading up to Dr. Fani's emails, he became the target of a vicious doxxing campaign by local "pro-Israel" groups, following a MEC-organized event titled "The World as Palestine." The campaign called on university leadership and Washington State lawmakers to discipline him. The magnitude of the harassment that Dr. Fani was subjected to had such a profound impact on his physical and mental health that he had to request that his public profile be taken down from the MEC website out of fear for his safety. It also led him to request a medical leave for the spring quarter; this leave was approved and set to begin on March 30.

Second, when the U.S.–Israeli war on Iran began on February 28, Fani, who has relatives in Iran, lost contact with his family while absorbing, from afar, the news of heavy bombardments of civilian infrastructure. As of today, he still cannot reach his 85-year-old aunt in Tehran.

Lastly, Dr. Fani's former student, Ayşenur Ezgi Eygi, was shot in the head and killed by an Israeli soldier on September 6, 2024, while peacefully participating in a protest in the West Bank. Dr. Fani was deeply affected by the killing of his student, as any person of conscience and caring teacher would be. His institutional page notes that "he honors the loving memory of Ayşenur Ezgi Eygi, whose courage and moral clarity profoundly transformed the UW community." Dr. Fani has also helped establish a memorial lecture series at the Middle East Center to carry forward her name and memory.

We offer this context because we are moved by the distress of a scholar who has endured multiple forms of intimidation and loss over the past two and a half years. As Israeli academics, many of us specializing in the Middle East, we are well aware of what it means to study one's field without the privilege of a safe distance, where the professional is always also deeply personal.

To any empathetic reader, it is evident that in these emails, which have now been made public, Dr. Fani was writing through his own pain. In his second message sent on March 18, he speaks candidly about his deteriorating mental and medical situation. Nonetheless, he was removed from his directorial role on March 27, two days before he was already set to begin medical leave.

Was his removal the only possible course of action? We believe the UW should have handled this situation differently, setting an example for the kind of care for its employees that it professes, instead of subjecting Dr. Fani to punitive measures under what appears to be, given the wider context of the earlier doxxing of Dr. Fani, a set of external and internal pressures.

In light of the broader political climate of political repression across the American academy in the last two and a half years, and the specific context of the attacks and harassment Dr. Fani has faced, such a punitive measure raises serious concerns about proportionality, academic governance, and the protection of dissenting voices.

We are especially alarmed that this action appears to have occurred in a broader climate in which universities across the United States have increasingly restricted or sanctioned criticism of Israel, particularly since October 2023. Within this context, Arab and Muslim faculty and students, as well as those working on the Middle East, have been disproportionately targeted, subjected to heightened scrutiny, professional repercussions, and, in some cases, like Dr. Fani's, coordinated harassment campaigns.

When administrative actions follow, rather than resist, these pressures, they effectively legitimize harassment and undermine the university's public responsibility. If we, as an academic community, do not succeed in preventing the deterioration of universities and colleges into environments of repression and punishment, we will lose essential spaces for encounter and deliberation and weaken the position of academia in society.

Academia for Equality

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We encourage the University of Washington to review and adopt the A4E Guidelines for the protection of freedom of speech which can be found [here](#).

A4E stands in solidarity with Dr. Fani and calls for the opportunity of his reinstatement as MEC director to be offered to him at the conclusion of his medical leave.

Sincerely,

The Board of [Academia for Equality](#)

Cc: Ed Taylor, Vice Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Academic Affairs, UW
Jane Yung, Vice President and Chief Compliance and Risk Officer, UW
Stephanie Parker, Executive Assistant to the UW President
Stephanie Selover, Associate Professor and Chair of Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures, UW
Aria Fani, Associate Professor of Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures, UW

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