

January 14, 2026

Charles F. Robinson
Office of the Chancellor
University of Arkansas
425 Administration Building
Fayetteville, Arkansas 72701

Sent via U.S. Mail and Electronic Mail (chancell@uark.edu)

Dear Chancellor Robinson:

FIRE, a nonpartisan nonprofit that defends free speech,¹ is concerned by the University of Arkansas's termination proceedings against tenured political science professor Shirin Saeidi for her protected political speech. While her political commentary may be offensive to some, it is also unquestionably protected by the First Amendment, which protects public university professors' right to speak as private citizens on matters of public concern. We urge U of A to uphold faculty expressive rights by dismissing the disciplinary charges against Saeidi.

On December 16, 2025, Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences Dean Brian Raines formally recommended U of A terminate Saeidi because of: (1) Saeidi's December 8 repost on X: "Warm blood, brave one, thrust the dagger from Doha into the throats of the Zionists, so that all of them howl," followed by a smiling face and "okay" hand emojis and "#FreePalestine," and: (2) Saeidi's written testimony to a Swedish court in the 2023 trial of Iranian official Hamid Nour.² Saeidi did not write the offending post and only retweeted it to criticize anti-Semitism in the pro-Palestinian movement.³

¹ For more than 25 years, FIRE has defended freedom of expression and other individual rights on America's university campuses. You can learn more about our mission and activities at thefire.org.

² Letter from David Johnston, EO & Title IX Investigator, to William D Schreckhise, Department of Political Science Chair (Dec. 15, 2025) (containing screenshot of post) (on file with author); Shirin Saeidi, *Stockholm District Court Testimony in the Trial of Hamid Nouri* (2023), available at https://docs.google.com/document/d/1uTIYbiClZUogqAht6aunwOgr1IsOv2F8Mxt_8TsDdG4/edit?tab=t.0 [<https://perma.cc/5FGU-SZ4V>]. The recitation here reflects our understanding of the pertinent facts. We appreciate that you may have additional information and invite you to share it with us. To these ends, please find enclosed an executed privacy waiver authorizing you to share information about this matter.

³ Saeidi's X account was suspended soon after her post. She had explained this criticism on X before her account was suspended, on other social media platforms, and at academic conferences.

Raines claimed Saeidi's post was "violent and disturbing," and "in alignment with ... other posts contained on her X account that describe Israel as a 'genocidal and terrorist state' and calling for Israel to be 'dismantled.'" ⁴ He added that it was "disparaging of Zionists," "threatening in nature," "could significantly disrupt the work and learning environment that the University strives to foster" and "is extremely damaging to the University's reputation." ⁵ He also claimed that "many Jewish and/or Israeli student[s] would refrain from fully participating in the University's academic programs because they would determine that they would be unsafe and/or unable to receive fair and objective treatment." ⁶

Raines further alleged Saeidi spoke for the university without permission based on her unauthorized use of university letterhead for her written testimony to a Swedish court. ⁷ Accordingly, U of A charged her with discrimination, harassment, and unfitness to serve the university, among other charges, which may result in her termination. ⁸

Saeidi's personal comments on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are undoubtedly "core political speech" at the very heart of the First Amendment, where its protection is "at its zenith." ⁹ This principle encompasses expression others find repugnant, offensive, or even hateful, ¹⁰ and applies with particular force to universities dedicated to open debate and discussion like U of A. ¹¹ Accordingly, the First Amendment protects state university professors' right to speak about political issues in their private capacities. ¹² Saeidi's post about the Gaza conflict on her

⁴ Johnston Letter, *supra* note 2.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Letter from Brian Raines, Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences Dean, to Shirin Saeidi, Professor (Dec. 16, 2025) (on file with author).

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Buckley v. Am. Const. Law Found.*, 525 U.S. 182, 186–87 (1999) (quoting *Meyer v. Grant*, 486 U.S. 414 (1988)); see also *Mills v. Alabama*, 384 U.S. 214, 218 (1966) ("Whatever differences may exist about interpretations of the First Amendment, there is practically universal agreement that a major purpose of that Amendment was to protect the free discussion of governmental affairs.").

¹⁰ See, e.g., *R.A.V. v. City of St. Paul*, 505 U.S. 377 (1992) (striking down ordinance that prohibited placing on any property symbols that "arouse[] anger, alarm or resentment in others on the basis of race, color, creed, religion or gender"). The Supreme Court has notably refused to recognize a limitation on speech viewed as "hateful" or demeaning "on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, disability, or any other similar ground." *Matal v. Tam*, 582 U.S. 218, 247 (2017).

¹¹ See, e.g., *Vega v. Miller*, 273 F.3d 460, 467 (2d Cir. 2001) (academic freedom instructs colleges "not to discipline a college teacher for expressing controversial, even offensive, views"); see also *Rodriguez v. Maricopa Cnty. Cmty. Coll. Dist.*, 605 F.3d 703, 705 (9th Cir. 2009) (faculty member's use of system-wide listserv to send "racially-charged emails" was not unlawful, as First Amendment "embraces such a heated exchange of views," especially when they "concern sensitive topics like race, where the risk of conflict and insult is high").

¹² *Garcetti v. Ceballos*, 547 U.S. 410, 419 (2006) ("[T]he First Amendment protects a public employee's right, in certain circumstances, to speak as a citizen addressing matters of public concern."); see *Board Policy, Appointments, Promotion, Tenure, Non-Reappointment, and Dismissal of Faculty*, § IV(A)(14)(c), UNIV. OF ARK. SYS., 12 (2018), <https://www.uasys.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2018/04/405.1-Appts-Promotion-Tenure-etc.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/H5NZ-CDND>] ("Speaking or writing as a citizen, the faculty member is free from institutional censorship or discipline.").

personal social media account falls squarely within this protection and may not form the basis of university punishment.

Moreover, punishing faculty for views that condone or praise violence imperils a broad range of political speech and academic inquiry, especially in times of intense disagreement about global affairs. U of A may properly punish unprotected true threats, harassment, and discrimination.¹³ But the First Amendment’s protection encompasses rhetorical hyperbole, the conceptual endorsement of violence,¹⁴ and assertions of the “moral propriety or even moral necessity for a resort to force or violence.”¹⁵

Additionally, U of A has put forth no evidence that Saeidi is unfit to teach or has harassed or discriminated against students.¹⁶ Her post fails to rise to the university’s definition of discrimination as there is no evidence it “adversely affects a term or condition of an individual’s employment, education, living environment, or participation in a program or activity.”¹⁷ Likewise, her post did not constitute discriminatory harassment because U of A has not shown that it “unreasonably interferes with, denies, or limits an individual’s ability to participate in or benefit from the University’s education or employment programs or activities.”¹⁸ These charges are inappropriate because her speech did not target or name any particular student, nor did it suggest that she would be unable to grade students fairly or lecture effectively. Though the university claims her post “*could* significantly disrupt” campus,¹⁹ the First Amendment’s robust protection for offensive speech bars U of A from punishing faculty for reputational concerns or the “perceived threat of disruption ... caused not by the speech itself but by threatened reaction to it by offended segments of the public,”²⁰ as “apprehension of disturbance is not enough to overcome the right to freedom of expression.”²¹

Saeidi’s testimony, like her X posts, is also protected speech as a private citizen on matters of public concern. The “critical question” in determining whether the speech was that of an employee or private citizen is “whether the speech at issue is itself ordinarily within the scope of an employee’s duties, not whether it merely concerns those duties.”²² As public universities do not ordinarily employ professors to submit testimony to international criminal tribunals

¹³ *Unprotected Speech Synopsis*, FIRE, <https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/unprotected-speech-synopsis> (last accessed Jan. 14, 2026).

¹⁴ *Watts v. United States*, 394 U.S. 705, 708 (1969).

¹⁵ *Noto v. United States*, 367 U.S. 290, 298 (1961); see also Aaron Terr & Matthew Harwood, *Why (most) calls for genocide are protected speech*, FIRE (Dec. 8, 2023), <https://www.thefire.org/news/why-most-calls-genocide-are-protected-speech>.

¹⁶ Johnston Letter, *supra* note 2.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.* (emphasis added).

²⁰ See *Berger v. Battaglia*, 779 F.2d 992, 1001 (4th Cir. 1985).

²¹ *Flanagan v. Munger*, 890 F.2d 1557, 1566–67 (10th Cir. 1989) (quoting *Tinker v. Des Moines Indep. Cmty. Sch. Dist.*, 393 U.S. 503, 506–07 (1969)) (internal quotations omitted).

²² *Lane v. Franks*, 573 U.S. 288, 240 (2014).

and her use of university letterhead was unauthorized, Saeidi's speech was not on behalf of the university, which therefore precludes punishment.²³

Terminating a tenured professor is a drastic sanction reserved only for severe misconduct not remotely present here. We request a substantive response to this letter no later than the close of business January 28, 2026, confirming U of A will refrain from punishing Saeidi.

Sincerely,



Zachary Greenberg
Faculty Legal Defense Counsel, Campus Rights Advocacy

Cc: Indrajeet Chaubey, Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs
Jim Gigantino, Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs
Brian Raines, Dean of the Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences
Bill Schreckhise, Chair of the Department of Political Science

Encl.

²³ The mere knowledge of a speaker's employment does not render their speech pursuant to their official duties. *See, e.g., Pickering v. Bd. of Ed.*, 391 U.S. 563, 576–78 (1968) (public school teacher's letter to a local newspaper criticizing his employer was protected speech as a private citizen despite the teacher explaining his employment).