

University of Washington names new Middle East Center director 3 months after political firing of Aria Fani

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On July 1, 2026, Daniel Hoffman, director of the University of Washington's Jackson School of International Studies (JSIS), appointed Associate Professor Asli Cansunar as the permanent director of the school's Middle East Center. The appointment follows three months of administrative turmoil sparked by the political removal of the previous director, Aria Fani, on the pretext that he had used the center's email "improperly."

In reality, Fani, an associate professor of Middle Eastern languages and cultures, was removed from his leadership position on March 27 following a coordinated campaign of online harassment and political pressure by right-wing forces opposed to his criticism of the war against Iran. In his communications, Fani condemned US foreign policy, opposed the military actions of the United States and Israel and characterized the ideology of Zionism as "cancerous."

Fani's removal followed months of coordinated right-wing agitation. Beginning in January, Fani, who immigrated to the United States from Iran at the age of 18, was subjected to a doxxing and harassment campaign after organizing an academic symposium titled "The World as Palestine: On Advocacy, Activism, and Justice." Local conservative talk radio commentator Ari Hoffman led the public denunciation of Fani, branding the academic event antisemitic and publicly questioning University of Washington President Robert Jones over Fani's leadership.

The UW Jewish Alumni Association joined the campaign, claiming on Twitter/X that Fani was unable to properly "educate" Americans on why war against Iran was necessary to advance US interests. The

organization was founded at the beginning of the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza in October 2023 to propagate the lie that anti-Zionism and opposition to Israel's genocide constituted "Jew hatred."

The university administration quickly capitulated to the right-wing campaign. During a town hall, Jones distanced the administration from the symposium, declaring that such academic discussions must not make members of the community feel "unsafe." Fani's removal received the full backing of upper-level administrators, including divisional Dean Andrea Woody, College of Arts and Sciences Dean Dianne Harris and Provost Tricia Serio. Defending the decision, Provost Serio claimed that Daniel Hoffman was balancing academic freedom against professional obligations.

The UW administration is turning reality on its head. US imperialism, under Democratic and Republican presidents alike, is the greatest source of violence and insecurity confronting the world's population. It is committing a crime against peace and waging a war of aggression against Iran, a close ally of nuclear-armed Russia and China. Washington has spent hundreds of billions of dollars waging a proxy war against Russia in Ukraine while supporting a government and military overrun with neo-Nazis.

The US government continues to fund Israel's genocide in Gaza, which has killed at least 200,000 people and devastated the enclave's infrastructure. At home, it is unleashing state violence against the population. Millions of immigrants and their families live in fear that they could be the next victims of Trump's immigration Gestapo, which has murdered Renée Nicole Good, Alex Pretti, Lorenzo Salgado

Araujo and Johan Sebastián Durán Guerrero in broad daylight.

Fani's email placed these crimes in a broader historical context, noting that the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan caused between "176,000–212,000+ direct deaths, including over 46,000 Afghan civilians."

In an interview following his removal, Fani told the UW student newspaper *The Daily*, "We would have these conversations in class about war, violence, particularly about the war in Vietnam." Academia now offers "no reflection whatsoever about the reality that was [is] unfolding outside the classroom," he continued.

The University of Washington's attack on opposition to the war against Iran expresses its role in defending the interests of the US state. UW has longstanding ties to the Democratic Party, which took the lead in arming and financing the genocide in Gaza, has collaborated with Trump and the Republicans in the war against Iran and continues to fund Immigration and Customs Enforcement operations throughout the country.

The university also maintains deep institutional connections with major military contractors and technology corporations, including Boeing and Microsoft, as well as the fossil fuel industry.

UW has repeatedly deployed riot police and SWAT teams against opponents of the genocide in Gaza, including to break up a peaceful demonstration last May. In 2023, it prevented CodePink co-founder Medea Benjamin from holding a meeting at the University Book Store opposing the war in Ukraine, citing objections from a "pro-Ukrainian student group" at UW.

By contrast, the university has permitted Turning Point USA to hold multiple meetings on campus. The organization was founded by the late fascist political operative Charlie Kirk and has played a central role in normalizing fascist politics on college campuses across the United States.

Fani's removal has generated substantial opposition within the university. The Faculty Senate passed a resolution demanding transparency regarding the grounds for his termination, while hundreds of students and faculty members signed petitions and letters of appeal opposing the decision. Hoffman himself was forced to resign his position in the Comparative History

of Ideas department after faculty members issued a joint letter expressing concern over his actions.

Notably, Seattle's "socialist" mayor, Katie Wilson, has issued no statement opposing Fani's removal. Neither the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) nor its Seattle and campus youth chapters have defended him. Their silence is in line with Wilson's and the DSA's political orientation to the Democratic Party.

It is equally revealing that United Auto Workers Local 4121, which represents graduate students at UW, has issued no statement defending Fani. The UAW apparatus has played a critical role in suppressing opposition to war and genocide on campuses across the country. In the University of California system, the UAW contained a strike by graduate students and assisted the police in dismantling the anti-genocide encampments. At Harvard, the union apparatus betrayed a 40-day strike earlier this year in deference to Trump's demand that the university be brought into line with the administration's war aims.

The political censorship at the University of Washington is not an isolated local incident that can be resolved through petitions and appeals to the administration. It is one expression of the turn by the capitalist state and its academic institutions toward authoritarian methods of rule. Students and youth must turn to the working class, the only social force capable of defending democratic rights, as part of the broader struggle against imperialist war and for socialism.



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