

CENTRE FOR
FREE EXPRESSION

By email

October 15, 2020

Eric Yuan, Chairman, President & CEO
Zoom Video Communications, Inc.
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Susan Wojcicki, CEO
YouTube
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San Bruno, CA 94066
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Dear Mr. Yuan and Ms. Wojcicki:

Re: Censorship of San Francisco State University Academic Roundtable

We are deeply disturbed by the decisions of your companies to prevent access to an academic roundtable discussion at San Francisco State University.

As a result of the coronavirus, most of the educational activities and programming of universities and colleges in Canada and the United States are only possible through platforms such as yours. Your actions in relation to the roundtable at San Francisco State indicates you are willing to override the academic freedom that is the foundation of the university and its social mission to educate students and advance knowledge.

We strongly urge you to reconsider your position and to affirm your organizations' commitment to respecting academic freedom and freedom of expression and ensure your platforms never again interfere with the essential academic freedom of universities and colleges.

Your corporations' actions were contrary to the values of the U.S. [*First Amendment*](#), the [*Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*](#), the [*International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*](#), and the [*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*](#) with respect to freedom of expression, access to information, freedom of association, and freedom of assembly.

We understand the following events took place:

- The San Francisco State University's Arab and Muslim Ethnicities and Diasporas Studies program announced that it would host an online roundtable discussion in September entitled, "Whose Narratives? Gender, Justice and Resistance." One of the invited panelists was Leila Khaled. She is a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), which is designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the United States Department of State and is a Listed Terrorist Entity in Canada. In 1969 and 1970, Ms. Khaled participated in two airline hijackings. After the second, she was taken into custody, but was later released in an exchange for the release of hostages in a subsequent hijacking.
- The roundtable was scheduled to be hosted on Zoom, pursuant to the platform's agreement with the University. After becoming aware of the planned discussion, organizations which oppose PFLP's activities or politics pressured San Francisco State University to cancel the roundtable. They argued that, by hosting the event, Zoom would be in violation of U.S. laws forbidding the provision of "material support" to designated foreign terrorist groups.
- University President Lynn Mahoney objected. She affirmed "The University remains steadfast in its support of the right of faculty to conduct their teaching and scholarship free from censorship" and that "universities above all other places should be places to debate and question complexities."
- Zoom then refused to host the discussion – despite its claim that it is "committed to supporting the open exchange of ideas and conversations" and despite the fact that no U.S. court has ever ruled that merely allowing a member of a designated terrorist group to speak at an academic forum constitutes "material support" for that group.
- Roundtable organizers then attempted to move the event to YouTube. But after approximately 23 minutes, YouTube stopped the livestream – despite its stated position that it "believes people should be able to speak freely, share opinions, foster open dialogue," and that "everyone should have easy, open access to information."

We call for your companies' declaration that in future you will respect academic freedom and freedom of expression rights so vital to healthy public discourse and the proper functioning of our higher educational institutions. What you did at San Francisco State University was serious mistake. We seek your assurance that it is a mistake you will not repeat again.

Yours sincerely,



James L. Turk
Executive Director
Centre for Free Expression

Co-signed by: British Columbia Civil Liberties Association
Canadian Association of University Teachers
Canadian Civil Liberties Association
PEN Canada

cc: Lynn Mahoney, President, SFSU
Jennifer Summit, Provost, SFSU
Latoya Farrell, BCCLA
David Robinson, CAUT
Michael Bryant, CCLA
Cara Zwibel, CCLA
Richard Stursberg, PEN Canada
Brendan de Caries, PEN Canada