

Déjà vu: San Francisco State University threatens academic freedom, investigates professor for showing Prophet Muhammad image in history class

From the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) and Reason.com. The original source, [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#) is subscription only.



San Francisco State University is [investigating](#) history professor Maziar Behrooz (left) for showing a drawing of the Prophet Muhammad while teaching a lesson on the history of the Islamic world last fall. A student reportedly “strongly objected” and filed a complaint with the university.

FIRE wrote SFSU today urging the university to end its investigation and reaffirm that it will protect faculty academic freedom rights.

As a public institution, SFSU is bound by the First Amendment

to respect faculty's academic freedom rights. This includes the right to teach material relevant to their classes without facing sanction.

Maziar Behrooz, an associate professor of history at San Francisco State University, does not yet know what a teaching decision he made might cost him.

In the fall of 2022, Behrooz was teaching the history of the Islamic world between 500 and 1700 and showed a drawing of the Prophet Muhammad. He's taught the course, and the image, for years. One student, a devout Muslim, strongly objected, outside of class. His main point, Behrooz told *The Chronicle*, was that it's not permissible for an image of the Prophet Muhammad to be shown in any shape or form.

"This is the first time that this has happened," Behrooz said. "I was not prepared for somebody to be offended, in a secular university, talking about history rather than religion."

He said he explained to his chair that the student's view is not uniform among all Muslims. The type of drawing he shows in class can be bought at markets in Tehran near holy shrines. Many Shiite Muslims have such drawings on walls in their homes, said Behrooz, who was born in Tehran and has written books on Iran's political history.



Persian School, Mohammed Preaching his Farewell Sermon, 632 AD ,

None of the articles repeat the illustration shown, but I suspect it would have been something like the picture left, which is a 14th century Iranian (which was Persia then) manuscript which was copied

in the 17th century under the Ottoman empire.

The student also apparently complained to “authorities higher up” at the university, according to Behrooz. The professor said the institution’s office of Equity Programs & Compliance informed him in March that it would investigate the incident and asked him to attend a Zoom meeting.

As FIRE told SFSU, the university cannot investigate an instructor, which implies the potential of punishment, for displaying pedagogically relevant material in their classroom, regardless of whether it offends some, many, or most students:

This investigation comes just months after Minnesota’s Hamline University faced a firestorm for not renewing the contract of instructor Erika Lòpez-Prater because she displayed medieval artwork depicting the Prophet Muhammad in her art history course. Unfortunately, □SFSU administrators haven’t learned anything from Hamline’s mistakes. Just like with Hamline, SFSU is violating a professor’s academic freedom rights because some took offense to pedagogically relevant course content.