

**Middle
East
Studies
Association**
of North America, Inc.

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MESA '08
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Meir Sheerit
Minister of Interior of Israel
2 Kaplan Street, Kiryat Ben-Gurion
Israel

via fax 011-972-2-670-1628

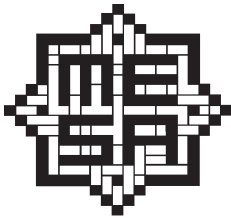
Dear Minister Sheerit:

I write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our grave concern regarding your decision on 23 May 2008 to deny Professor Norman Finkelstein entry into Israel on what appears to be retribution for his critical academic examination of Israeli government policy, including the ongoing occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. We urge you to reverse this decision, which represents a serious threat to future scholarship and academic freedom.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in its field, the Association publishes the International Journal of Middle East Studies and has more than 2800 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

Professor Finkelstein, a US citizen, is a well-known scholar who has published extensively with the top academic presses in his field. In the early morning of 23 May 2008, he arrived at Ben Gurion airport en route to friends in the West Bank city of Hebron. Over the next 24 hours the professor was detained, questioned by Shin Bet officials, and finally forced to board a plane bound for the United States. Upon his deportation, the authorities informed him that for "security" reasons he would be barred from entering Israel (and the Occupied Territories) for at least ten years, and that he should contact the Ministry of Interior should he wish to inquire about the precise reason for the ban issued against him. Since then, however, government officials have offered two different explanations for their decision. The first, reported by *Ha'aretz*, was 'suspicions involving hostile elements in Lebanon,' referring to Professor Finkelstein's well-publicized meetings with Hizbullah officials in Lebanon in January 2008. The second reason, reported in the *Jerusalem Post*, was the professor's 'outspoken anti-Zionist opinions and for his harsh criticisms of Israel.'

We understand that Israeli law allows you to deny entry to any non-citizen you choose. But the absence of a consistent explanation, and one that may even constitute punishment for a professional scholarly critique, is troubling on several grounds. First, you have failed to explain how Professor Finkelstein poses an actual threat to state security as a result of his meetings with Hizbullah officials. The timing of your decision raises a second concern. According to Professor Finkelstein, this is the first time in 20 years (and at least 16 visits) that he has had trouble entering the country. His most recent book, *Beyond Chutzpah* (University



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page 2/re: Finkelstein denied entry

of California Press, 2007), investigates Israeli policy in the Occupied Territories, focusing in particular on Israel's human rights record since 1967. The unprecedented nature of his deportation can easily lead people to wonder whether there is a connection between your decision and the analysis presented in this book.

If you have evidence that Professor Finkelstein poses a security risk to the State of Israel, we urge you to make it available so as to reassure the Israeli public—who are accustomed to open debates about the state of their country—that untoward political pressures did not affect your decision. We also ask that you clarify whether you intend to uphold the 10-year ban against Professor Finkelstein: what would happen to him should he attempt to visit Israel before 2018?

Denying qualified scholars entry into the country because of their political beliefs strikes at the core of academic freedom. This is why we write to protest the barring of Professor Finkelstein and to request that the Israeli government reverse the action immediately.

Finally, we would like to request clarification from the Ministry about the implications of your decision regarding Professor Finkelstein for the membership of the Middle East Studies Association. Can MESA members, who may or may not oppose various aspects of Israeli government policy, expect similar treatment when entering your country?

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Mervat F. Hatem
MESA President
Professor of Political Science, Howard University

cc: The Honorable Condoleeza Rice, U.S. Secretary of State
Ambassador Richard H. Jones, U.S. Ambassador to Israel
Ambassador Daniel Ayalon, Israeli Ambassador to the U.S.