



**Middle
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24 September 2012

Minister of Education Gideon Sa'ar
Ministry of Education
Government of Israel
Sent via email g Saar@knesset.gov.il

Dear Minister Sa'ar,

It is with great consternation that I write to you, on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA), regarding the recommendation (dated September 4, 2012) of the Subcommittee for Quality Assessment of Israel's Council for Higher Education that the Department of Politics and Government at Ben Gurion University not be allowed to accept students for the 2013-14 academic year. You may recall that in a letter to you, dated January 13, 2012, addressing the evaluation of that same academic department, we expressed our alarm about the punitive suggestion that the department be closed down should it not implement the recommendations embodied in the international evaluation committee's report, submitted to the Council of Higher Education.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. It is the preeminent organization in the field. The Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 3000 members worldwide. Its membership includes numerous Israeli scholars, as well as scores of scholars from all over the world whose research focuses on Israel. 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.

What we find most distressing about this situation is that even though the recommendations of the international evaluation committee for changes to the faculty and curriculum of the department were followed, the Subcommittee for Quality Assessment has nonetheless decided to recommend the suspension of student registration to that department for the 2013-14 academic year. In fact, the department, in conjunction with the university administration, acted upon the committee's recommendations swiftly and resolutely, achieving much of what was asked of them. To better represent the fields within Political Science, three new faculty members were recruited in comparative politics, quantitative methods, and political theory, and plans have been outlined for a fourth hire next year; at the same time, the department made changes to its curriculum.

The above changes elicited a positive response, in a note of congratulations – dated July 8, 2012 – from two members of the international evaluation committee who had been asked to oversee the department's implementation of

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Re: Ben Gurion University, Department of Politics and Government

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the report's recommendations. The note goes on to encourage the department to provide "time, resources, and mentoring" to the new faculty members so that they may be able to both advance their academic careers and contribute effectively to building a "pluralistic" curriculum. In closing, the two international members recommend continued attention to diversity in future faculty hires with respect to methodological and theoretical orientations.

That the Council of Higher Education's subcommittee has recommended closing the department, despite the positive response from its two appointed international members to the significant changes that have already been made and the plans for future changes, suggests, in no uncertain terms, that the recommendation has little to do with academic matters. That the department is not given the opportunity to continue the process of hiring diverse voices, nor even to support the new faculty members, hints at a separate agenda directed at that particular department. As we wrote in our January letter, we remain concerned that political motivations lie behind the negative attention being accorded the Department of Politics and Government at Ben Gurion University. As such, this represents a gross and abusive infringement upon academic freedom and independence.

We appeal to you, as Minister of Education and chairman of the Council for Higher Education, to reject the most recent, and very dangerous recommendation of the Subcommittee for Quality Assessment. Beyond the department at Ben Gurion University, the recommendation represents a profound threat to academic freedom, to the Israeli academic community, and to the international reputation of Israeli universities. Instead, we urge you, along with your colleagues, to recognize and applaud the good will and concerted efforts of Ben Gurion University and the Department of Politics and Government. To live up to your mission and your avowed ideals, we urge you, as well, to truly embrace the core of academic freedom by welcoming voices that enrich thought and knowledge by broadening the landscape of ideas.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fred M. Donner". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Fred M. Donner
MESA President
Professor of Near Eastern History, University of Chicago

cc: Members of the Council of Higher Education