



**Middle
East
Studies
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25 September 2012

Professor Thomas Risse
Otto Suhr Institute for Political Science
Freie Universität Berlin
Hnestr. 22
14195 Berlin, Germany

Professor Dr. Ellen M. Immergut
Philosophische Fakultät III
Institut für Sozialwissenschaften
Humboldt Universität
Berlin, Germany

Dear Professors Risse and Immergut,

I write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association's Committee on Academic Freedom to express our concern over developments related to the Department of Politics and Government at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. As you may be aware, the Israeli Council of Higher Education's Sub-Committee for Quality Assessment has recently recommended that new students not be allowed to register in the Department of Politics and Government, thereby effectively closing it. (<http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/politics-in-academia-1.464374>) We call upon you, as members of the international committee whose report has been used as a basis or justification for this drastic and troubling move, and as the two members who were chosen to oversee the department's implementation of the committee's recommendations, to intervene without further delay.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, MESA publishes the International Journal of Middle East Studies and has nearly 3000 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

We are aware of the major criticisms included in the international committee's report on the department as well as of your subsequent, favorable view of the steps taken by the Department in a very short period of time in response to those criticisms. The department's move to hire new faculty in the fields of comparative politics, quantitative methods, and political theory was in keeping with your committee's recommendations. In addition, it had announced plans for 2013-14 to hire a Europeanist to strengthen the political science component of its offerings. Given how slowly the wheels of academe often turn, such swift

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responses to address the department's weaknesses indicate a serious desire on the part of faculty and administration to improve and move forward.

We are also aware that you have continued to stress your recommendation "that the department should increase its diversity in terms of methods and theoretical orientations in future recruitments..." Yet, surely the fact that more remains to be done after such a short period of time should not be allowed to serve as a justification for the closure of the department. Indeed, given the current climate in the academy in Israel, the fact that the Israeli Council for Higher Education is poised to take such a drastic step suggests to us that the motives have less to do with concern for academic rigor, and more to do with a desire to silence voices that are deemed politically problematic.

Given that you have repeatedly pronounced favorably on the steps taken so far by the Department of Politics and Government at Ben-Gurion University, we appeal to you to intervene with the Israeli Council of Higher Education to endorse the positive steps taken by the department to date and to express your concerns over the Council's closure decision. Time is of the essence, as a final decision is expected shortly after Yom Kippur.

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: Dr. Rivka Carmi, President, Ben Gurion University
Professor Dani Filc, Chair, Department of Politics and Government,
Ben-Gurion University