

**Middle
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February 18, 2010

H.E. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali
President
Palais Présidentiel
Tunis, Tunisia

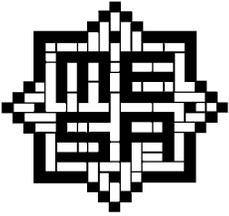
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Your Excellency,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA), to express our deep concern about the recent closure of the *Université Libre de Tunis (ULT)*, Tunisia's first and pre-eminent private university, and the withdrawal of that institution's authorization to operate for the next three academic years. After careful review of the information available to us, we are forced to conclude that the decision, signed by the Tunisian Ministry of Higher Education, is not about alleged administrative and pedagogical irregularities. Rather, it is the culmination of a long-standing pattern of singling out for mistreatment this particular institution and its founders. We call upon you, Your Excellency, to reinstate the highly respected *ULT* and allow it to pursue its important mission of educating Tunisia's young men and women in the disciplines at the core of your country's growth and development.

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 more than 3000 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.

The closure of the *ULT* was apparently preceded by an inspection, in December 2009, carried out by the Ministry of Higher Education. It would seem, however, that the allegations in its report of (five) irregularities are without substantiation, as demonstrated by the *Fondation Universitaire Bouebdelli* in its careful and documented response to the Ministry. The decision to close the *ULT* is, unfortunately, reminiscent of previous efforts on the part of the Tunisian government to close other education institutions, the *Ecole Jeanne d'Arc* and the *Lycée Louis Pasteur*, which are closely connected to the *Fondation Bouebdelli*. This gives us reason to believe that the closure relates not to administrative irregularities on the part of the *ULT*, but rather, to other factors – of a personal nature – that should not enter into the decision. For example, the opinions expressed by Mohamed Bouebdelli, the pioneer of private higher education in Tunisia and founder of the *Université Libre de Tunis (ULT-INTAC)* in 1973, in his recent book should not provoke the closure of the *ULT*. Concern that the reason for the closure decision is reprisal for M. Bouebdelli having expressed his opinions rather than shortcomings of the institution itself is what prompts us to address this letter to you. The closure seems to be a clear attempt to deprive M. Bouebdelli of the freedom of expression.



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Your Excellency, we urge you to reconsider the decision of the Ministry of Higher Education, and re-open the highly respected *Université Libre de Tunis* – with its 1500 students from Tunisia and abroad, and schools of engineering and architecture, faculties of law and management. We urge you to allow the ULT to function as it has very successfully prior to this decision, without interference in the academic integrity of the institution. We urge you to take this positive step forward in order to safeguard the integrity and rigor that the *ULT* is known for, and ensure that Tunisia respects the democratic practices which it espouses.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Roger M.A.Allen
MESA President
Professor of Arabic & Comparative Literature,
University of Pennsylvania