



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

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April 8, 2015

Vice-Chancellor Don Nutbeam
University of Southampton
University Road
Southampton SO17 1BJ
United Kingdom
via email: Delia.Edwards@southampton.ac.uk

Dear Vice-Chancellor Nutbeam:

I write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) to express our grave concern regarding the University of Southampton's decision on March 30, 2015 to cancel a conference entitled "International Law and the State of Israel: Legitimacy, Responsibility and Exceptionalism." The conference was organized by Professor Oren Ben-Dor of your institution and Professor George Bisharat of the Hastings College of Law of the University of California, and was scheduled to take place at your institution on April 17-19, 2015.

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 3,000 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.

Your decision to cancel the conference on the basis of "foreseeable risks to safety and public order at and near the conference venue" cannot but send a chill through the ranks of scholars engaged in controversial fields of inquiry. The rationale for your decision suggests that, given significant numbers, protesters of whatever political leaning will have the wherewithal to prevent your faculty from freely debating important topics of the day on your campus, in light of the "risks to safety and public order" that such protesters might pose. We are hard-pressed to imagine a more insidious precedent threatening freedom of individual speech, the conduct of public debate on issues of public importance, and the advancement of scholarship than that which you have established with your decision to cancel this conference.

The suggestion that you make in your public statement on the issue – that you will work with the conference organizers "to find a venue suitable for a conference of this nature at a later date" – fails to take due consideration of the significant time and resources that the organizers have already committed to this event. Indeed, the



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organizers have assembled a distinguished program of over 50 speakers and 13 panels involving academics from all over the world, including several members of the Middle East Studies Association. To cancel the conference at this juncture will involve material losses and extraordinary inconvenience for both the organizers and the participants, but more importantly it will greatly harm the reputation of the University of Southampton as a venue for serious scholarly inquiry.

We therefore urge you to reverse your decision at the earliest possible opportunity, and allow the conference organizers to proceed with this event as already planned.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nathan J. Brown', is written over a white background.

Nathan J. Brown

President, Middle East Studies Association and Professor of Political Science
and International Affairs, George Washington University

cc:

Professor Paul Whittaker, Dean of the Faculty of Business and Law