

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

1219 N Santa Rita Ave
The University of Arizona
Tucson AZ 85721 USA

520 621-5850
520 626-9095 fax
mesana@u.arizona.edu
www.mesana.org

May 18, 2010

Senator Anthony H. Williams, williams@pasenate.com
Senator Andrew E. Dinniman, andy@pasenate.com
Senator Michael Stack, stack@pasenate.com
Senator Joseph B. Scarnati III, President of Senate, jscarnati@pasen.gov

Dear Senators:

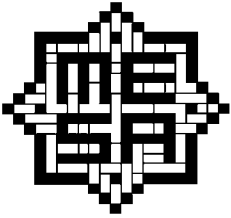
I write to you on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our grave concern about aspects of **Senate Resolution 315** (SR315), which you have introduced and which is currently under consideration by the Education Committee of the Pennsylvania Senate. We feel that in its current form the resolution threatens academic freedom and freedom of expression by deploying an overly broad and vague definition of anti-Semitism and by making unsupported and inaccurate allegations against a number of universities and colleges, as well as against unnamed departments of Middle Eastern studies.

The Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has close to 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.

MESA rejects all forms of hate speech, discrimination and racism, including anti-Semitism, and it supports prompt and forceful action in response to anti-Semitic incidents on university campuses. However, we are concerned that SR315 may actually weaken efforts to combat anti-Semitism by expanding the definition of that term to include an indefensibly broad range of legitimate speech and conduct and by advancing unsupported and groundless allegations against academic institutions.

SR315 asserts vaguely that “[h]ostile environments have been created by college and university instructors, students and campus visitors,” presumably as a result of anti-Semitism on college and university campuses. It goes on to claim that “[e]vidence suggests” that departments of Middle Eastern studies at unnamed institutions of higher education “provide highly inflammatory and polarizing academic presentations that may exclude Jewish student participation, academically discriminate or repress legitimate dissent.” The resolution mentions findings by the United States Commission on Civil Rights, apparently in support of these allegations. However, as MESA pointed out in a letter to the Commission dated June 11, 2007, its report and findings on campus anti-Semitism were deeply flawed and lacked any serious evidentiary grounding (MESA’s letter is available at http://www.mesa.arizona.edu/caf/letters_north_america.html#USCCRJJune11). We believe strongly that it is unacceptable for SR315 to make such vague and potentially damaging allegations without adducing any evidence.

The resolution goes on to mention the University of California (Irvine), Columbia University, Saint Cloud State College in Minnesota, Brown University, George Washington



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

1219 N Santa Rita Ave
The University of Arizona
Tucson AZ 85721 USA

520 621-5850
520 626-9095 fax
mesana@u.arizona.edu
www.mesana.org

May 18, 2010
Re: SR315
Page 2

University and the University of North Dakota as institutions at which “anti-Semitic instances have occurred,” purportedly as a result of “attempts to demonize the Israeli Government and its supporters.” There may well have been protests against policies of the Israeli government at some or all of these campuses in recent years, but we vigorously reject labeling criticism of the Israeli government as anti-Semitism. We believe that efforts to demonize academic and other critics of Israel or Zionism by tarring them with the brush of anti-Semitism may contribute to an already troubling environment of harassment, intimidation and censorship of faculty and students on college and university campuses, thereby threatening academic freedom and freedom of expression.

We therefore strongly urge you to reconsider and revise the language of SR315 so as to delete the unsubstantiated allegations and insinuations about biased and unprofessional conduct by Middle Eastern studies programs and faculty that it currently contains, along with all language conflating criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism.

Sincerely,

Roger Allen
MESA President
Professor of Arabic and Comparative Literature, University of Pennsylvania

Cc: Chair of Education Committee Jeffrey E. Piccola, jp Piccola@pasen.gov