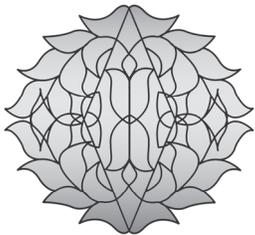


**Middle  
East  
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**MESA '09**

19 June 2009

Chad Gaffield, President  
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council  
350 Albert Street, P.O. Box 1610  
Ottawa, ON K1P 6G4, Canada

Dear President Gaffield,

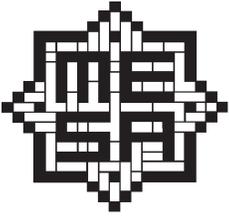
On behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA), I am writing to express our grave concerns about a recent public exchange which took place between you and the Minister for Science and Technology, the Honourable Gary Goodyear, regarding an upcoming SSHRC-funded academic conference entitled "Israel/Palestine: Mapping Models of Statehood and Paths to Peace", scheduled to take place at York University 22-24 June 2009.

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 more than 3000 members worldwide, including 133 members at universities across Canada. 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.

CAF wishes to publicly acknowledge your defence of SSHRC's "commitment to independent peer review and its grant policies and procedures" in response to Mr. Goodyear's demand that SSHRC review its funding of this event. However, we remain deeply troubled by the minister's unprecedented level of interference in SSHRC's decision-making processes. We were dismayed by your suggestion in a June 11 statement on SSHRC's website that, in light of the minister's concerns, SSHRC might re-examine its support for the conference in order to ensure that the organizer has not violated any "post-award procedures."

We strongly believe that this particular conference deserves the same unequivocal support SSHRC extends to all its grant recipients and that critical scholarship on controversial issues of our times such as the Israel/Palestine conflict can only proceed with the support of non-partisan, scholarly institutions such as SSHRC. We are therefore satisfied by your statement dated June 15 that "SSHRC has accepted [York University's] assurance that planning for the conference is proceeding in a manner consistent with provisions of the Grant Holder's Guide for the program."

In his statement dated 5 June 2009, Mr. Goodyear demanded that SSHRC reconsider its funding for the "Israel/Palestine" conference, and strongly recommended that SSHRC subject this proposal to an unprecedented "second review process" in order "to determine whether or not the conference still meets SSHRC's criteria for funding of an academic conference". According to Mr. Goodyear, such a request was justified because, since funding was granted, several speakers were added to the programme whose names were not included in the initial proposal. Mr. Goodyear argued that "several individuals and organizations have expressed... concerns that some of the speakers have, in the past, made comments that have been seen to be anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic". He also noted that some people worried "that the event is no longer an academic research-focused event."



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In your 11 June response, you correctly refused to subject the conference to a "second review process" on the grounds that the conference had already been "peer reviewed by an independent multidisciplinary committee of scholars, using established criteria". This was a necessary and laudable response because it protects the professional vetting standards that SSHRC stands for internationally from a general politicization.

Nevertheless, in that same statement, you said that, "in this particular case" in light of "public discussion", SSHRC would investigate "whether or not there had been significant changes to the conference since the application was submitted in November 2008". Such a review of "post-award procedures" was deemed necessary in this case in order to ensure that SSHRC's "policies and procedures" had been duly followed.

Both the decision and the language in which it is framed are of deep concern to us. We see no evidence of "public discussion" of this matter and the minister has withheld the names of the alleged sources on which he bases his demands. This, therefore, seems an instance, not of legitimate public discussion, but of political interference at the highest level. The government seems to have attempted to force the hand of an independent academic institution. The minister's concerns are political, not scholarly, and SSHRC does not have a mandate to make political judgments or to respond to those kinds of concerns. Institutions like SSHRC are required to protect researchers from political expediency and the pressures of partisanship. Allowing unnamed "individuals and organizations" to influence SSHRC's review processes is a potential violation of SSHRC's mandate.

We therefore commend you for issuing the June 15 statement in which you defend SSHRC's "unwavering in its commitment to independent peer review and its grant policies and procedures" and clear the conference organizers of Minister Goodyear's malicious charges and insinuations. You took an important stance on academic freedom in Canada.

We have written to Minister Goodyear to urge him to retract his request for a second peer review of the conference in order to restore the confidence of the scholarly community in his commitment to Canadian academic freedom, and to York President Mamdouh Shoukri to commend him for his strong commitment to academic freedom.

Sincerely,

Virginia H. Aksan  
MESA President  
Professor, McMaster University