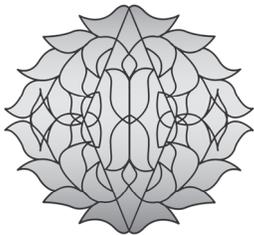


**Middle
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MESA '09

19 June 2009

Gary Goodyear, Minister of State, Science and Technology
117 Confederation Bldg
House of Commons
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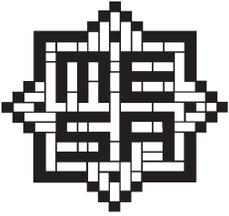
Dear Minister Goodyear,

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 dismay at your public interference in a major international academic conference to be held at York University on June 22-24, 2009 by requesting a second review process of the grant-in-aid it secured from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). It is unprecedented for a minister, especially one from a department that funds granting councils, to question the integrity of SSHRC in general and its acclaimed independent peer review system, its grant policies and procedures in particular. This intervention constitutes a gross violation of academic freedom and of the autonomy of scholarly inquiry from political expediency.

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.

The conference "Israel/Palestine: Mapping Models of Statehood and Paths to Peace" fields an extraordinary slate of Israeli and Palestinian, North American and European scholars, many of whom are leaders in their fields of study and others of whom are promising younger scholars. The conference is based on a public commitment to "respecting the rights to self-determination of both Israelis/Jews and Palestinians." The organizers' statement of purpose further assures SSHRC and the general public on the conference website that they are committed to ensuring that "neither anti-Semitism, nor any other form of racism, has any place in this forum." This commitment, they insist, "will inform both the conference and all aspects of its planning process." Finally, the organizers explicitly state that the conference's goal is to seek "to systematically measure models based on two states or a single binational state, federal and con-federal approaches, and other models in between and beyond." To insinuate that there are anti-Semitic motivations behind these goals is entirely groundless and constitutes fear-mongering of the most reprehensible kind.

You announced in a June 5 statement that "some of the speakers have, in the past, made comments that have been seen to be anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic" and raise "concerns that the event is no longer an academic research-focused event." You base your concerns on nameless "individuals and organizations." But your announcement appears to have been prompted by pressure from Meir Weinberg, the national director of the Jewish Defense League in Canada and other pro-Israeli lobby groups.



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re: "Israel/Palestine" conference

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Your vigilance against the spread of anti-Semitism is laudable. But at the risk of stating the obvious, criticism of Israel should not be conflated with anti-Semitism. You may not be aware that this conflation is part and parcel of the tactics of intimidation practiced by a few well-organized groups which are motivated not by finding equitable and peaceful solutions to the Israel/Palestine conflict but by a desire to insulate Israeli policies from all criticism. For many of these groups, advocating Palestinian statehood is ipso facto anti-Semitic. You have thus elevated the rumours and slander of the Jewish Defence League, an organization which represents a small fringe element among the Israeli and wider Jewish public, to the level of Canadian government policy.

Your allegation that "since funding was provided, the organizers of the conference have added a number of speakers to their agenda" is patently illogical and suggests that you are not familiar with the logistics of getting an international academic conference off the ground and funded. SSHRC, like many other bodies that fund international conferences, typically issues a "call for papers" as a condition for eligibility. While some senior international speakers are confirmed before the application deadline, thereby helping to convince the grant-giving institution of the academic merit of, and scholarly interest in, the proposed event, the actual vetting of the submitted papers occurs after the conference organizers are sure of the financial viability of the project. Given this, it would have been more appropriate for you to communicate any concerns you may have had with SSHRC directly, before raising them in public.

In a June 15 statement, the SSHRC has reiterated its confidence in the proposed York conference and its commitment to independent peer review. We have written to Professor Chad Gaffield commending SSHRC for its swift response to the baseless allegations, and to York President Mamdouh Shoukri to commend him for his strong support of academic freedom.

We urge you to publically retract your request for a second peer review of the application concerning the York University conference in order to restore the confidence of the scholarly community in your commitment to Canadian academic freedom.

Sincerely,

Virginia H. Aksan
MESA President
Professor, McMaster University