



**Middle  
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Dr. Ze'ev Tsahor, President  
Sapir Academic College  
D.N. Hof Ashkelon 79165  
Sderot, Israel

Dear President Tsahor,

I am writing on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) regarding the case of Nizar Hassan, a well-known filmmaker and professor at Sapir College, who, we understand, is to be dismissed from his post for comments he made on 8 November 2007 to an army reserve student who had come to class in uniform and carrying a weapon.

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 more than 2700 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.

According to reports in *Ha-Aretz*, Sapir College has no formal set of disciplinary regulations nor a charter concerning the behavior of students and teachers. Yet, in the absence of such regulations, a disciplinary procedure was launched against Prof. Hassan; moreover, he was suspended from his teaching duties even before the procedure was concluded. Apparently, three days after the first media reports, the Sapir College administration convened its internal academic council, which decided that "measures" had to be taken. This resulted in the establishment, for the first time in the College's history, of a committee to look into such a case.

Again, according to press reports, the council did not invite Prof. Hassan to the committee's meeting. Instead actions were taken on the basis of a report you submitted grounded in your conclusions regarding the incident. According to *Ha-Aretz*, you have contended that the committee acted on the basis of the decision of the internal academic council and according to what you have characterized as "the academic ethos" --that politics stops at the classroom door -- an ethos you claim Prof. Hassan has violated.

Our committee does not seek to pass judgment on either the question of military attire in the classroom, or on what constitutes the politicization of the classroom. We are very concerned, however, that Sapir College does not have established procedures for investigating charges against faculty, and hence that the process initiated against Prof. Hassan has been ad hoc. Indeed, Prof. Faingulernt, who is department chair, has claimed that if both he and Prof. Hassan had been in Israel at the time the controversy arose, matters would have been worked out differently, and that Sapir College has seen worse cases in the past. This statement, in conjunction with your own explanations of how events have unfolded, strongly suggests that the process by which Prof. Hassan's case has been investigated and considered has been highly irregular.

A key base of academic freedom is a system of regulations and procedures whereby grievances can be investigated and adjudicated openly and fairly. We, therefore, call upon you to review the case of Prof. Hassan in this light, to ensure that his case is dealt with in the same way as other cases of complaints against faculty have been.

Sincerely,

Mervat Hatem  
MESA President