



**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

February 23, 2010

Chancellor Michael V. Drake
The Chancellor's Office
University of California, Irvine
Irvine CA 92697-1900

Dear Chancellor Drake,

On behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA), I am writing to express our concern about your university's response to the disruptive behavior engaged in by a number of students during a public talk by Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren on February 8, 2010. We are specifically concerned about reports that eleven students may be subjected not only to severe disciplinary action by your university for their actions at that event, but also to criminal prosecution.

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. 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.

As scholars and educators, we believe that universities must resolutely uphold and defend the principles of academic freedom, and must also be sanctuaries for the free expression of ideas and opinions; as such, Ambassador Oren or any other invited speaker has the right to be heard on your campus. However, it is also the case that controversial speakers and topics sometimes generate vociferous responses from audiences. In this instance, it would seem that while the students were indeed disruptive during Ambassador Oren's talk, they did not engage in threatening behavior or resist removal by security personnel. Moreover, despite the interruptions, Ambassador Oren was ultimately able to complete his talk.

Given this, it seems excessive and unwarranted to threaten these students with possible suspension or expulsion and to press criminal charges against them. This response on the part of your university also raises the question of whether these students are being singled out for especially harsh treatment: it is our understanding that, in the past, those engaged in similarly disruptive protests on your campus have simply been escorted out of the room and have not been subjected to disciplinary action or prosecution.

We believe that universities should be a haven for controversial speech – by invited speakers but also by those who wish to protest what those speakers have to say. University administrators should not be provoked by protests, even disruptive ones, to an excessively punitive response; to do so would be to undermine the vigorous (indeed, sometimes rowdy) give and take that are essential to the preservation of free speech and the protection of academic freedom.

We therefore call on you to refrain from taking disciplinary action against these students and to ask the Orange County District Attorney to drop all pending charges against them. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Roger M. A. Allen
President, Middle East Studies Association
Professor of Arabic & Comparative Literature, University of Pennsylvania