



**Middle
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Professor Rivka Carmi
President
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev
Israel
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Dear Dr. Carmi:

On behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA), I write to express our grave concern about an alarming pattern of restrictions on freedom of expression on the Ben Gurion University campus. Since our last letter to you of 27 August 2009, BGU students and faculty have been intimidated and punished for peacefully expressing themselves on matters of public concern. As a self-declared supporter of “critical thinking” and “alternate perspectives,” we call on you to live up to your commitment and to protect dissent and debate on your university campus, especially if university community members espouse political views different from your own.

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

According to reports in Israeli newspapers and by the human rights organization the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, a growing climate of restriction pervades Ben-Gurion University. In September 2010, a BGU disciplinary tribunal reprimanded students Ran Tzoref and Noa Salor, placing them on probation for one semester for taking part in a protest over Israel’s raid in May 2010 on the Gaza-bound flotilla. A third student, Tal Beharav, was brought up on disciplinary charges after he helped organize a demonstration in support of the janitorial staff at the university.

In late November 2010, BGU Dean of Students Ya’akov Afek barred leftist students from distributing a flyer on campus that criticized various Knesset bills. While other universities permitted the flyer, which featured a picture of Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, Afek said it constituted libel.

In January 2011, BGU went a step further by codifying the new restrictive practices. Despite the opposition of some faculty members, the BGU Senate changed the ethics code to prohibit lecturers from mentioning their university affiliation while speaking publicly and to regulate what professors can say in the classroom. The new protocol states, “voicing a partisan stance during a class is strictly prohibited as it may unfairly and indiscernibly influence the students attending the class. The university may regulate the lecturers’ partisan and religious remarks, despite the fact that they are part of their civic liberties, in order to prevent teaching and research being used for partisan purposes.”

President Rivka Carmi
November 28, 2011
Re: Freedom of expression
Page 2

In late June 2011, BGU went further still when it withheld half of Linguistics Professor Idan Landau's salary for the period during which he was imprisoned for refusing to serve in the Israel Defense Forces reserves in the West Bank. Your administration argued that although Landau had made up the lost instructional time, half of his salary would still be deducted because he had been absent from his campus office during his imprisonment. Despite the swift opposition of hundreds of academics from Israel and abroad, including 90 BGU faculty members, university spokesman Amir Rozenblit justified the decision in bureaucratic terms, stating "employees are paid a salary for work. Since Dr. Landau was in detention, he was not at the disposal of his employer and is therefore not entitled to a salary for that period."

BGU's concerted attempts to police the behavior of its faculty and students gravely undermine the principle of academic freedom. Universities are only as good as the quality of free inquiry and productive debate they generate on their campuses. Ben Gurion University's increasing administrative restrictions on its members violate the very principles that you have professed to support.

In your opinion piece in *The Jerusalem Post* on May 28, 2011, you wrote, "Universities are not about headlines. They are about the footnotes. They are about the slow, painstaking research that goes into the writing of a PhD dissertation or the publication of a scientific paper; about the open exchange of ideas that encourage serious scholarship and innovative thinking. Universities are about empowering students, encouraging them to experience the excitement of discovery and volunteering in the community."

We call on you to match word and deed and promptly reverse the raft of prohibitions on freedom of expression for BGU faculty and students.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Suad Joseph
MESA President
Professor of Anthropology and Women and Gender Studies
University of California, Davis