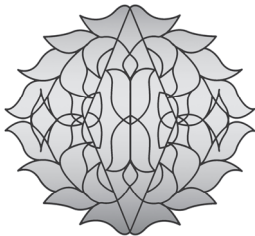


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MESA '09

October 7, 2009

Mr. Eliyahu Yishai, Minister of the Interior, Israel
Mr. Daniel Rubenstein, US Consul General, Jerusalem
Mr. George J. Mitchell, US Special Envoy for Middle East Peace
H.E. Michael B. Oren, Ambassador of Israel to the US

Gentlemen,

I write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to ask about the reasons for Rima Najjar Merriman, a citizen of the US and Assistant Professor of American Literature at the Arab American University in Jenin (AAUJ), to have been denied entry into the West Bank at Allenby on September 14, 2009.

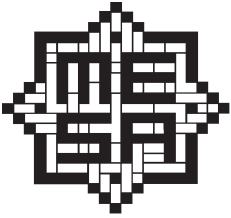
MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has more than 3000 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

Professor Merriman has been employed at AAUJ for 2 1/2 years and has been allowed to enter the West Bank at Allenby without difficulty each academic year until now. Each time that she entered, she was given a tourist visa stamped “not permitted to work,” even though the authorities at Allenby had full knowledge of her employment at AAUJ. Heretofore, her tourist visa was extended by Beit El through the PA Ministry of Interior for the remainder of the academic year. To this end, Beit El routinely requested work contracts to verify her employment at a Palestinian institution.

From all that we have learned of this incident, we are persuaded that Prof. Merriman has done everything possible to remain within the restrictions imposed by Israel on international academics who seek to enter and reside in the West Bank to teach at Palestinian institutions. Now, however, it appears that new rules are being applied – rules that prevent educators like Prof. Merriman from teaching at AAUJ and her Palestinian students from benefiting from her instruction.

What, then, prompts these changes in policy? And why was Professor Merriman denied entry even though several of her colleagues who teach in the English Department at AAUJ successfully entered the West Bank a week or so before her? Although it now appears that Professor Merriman has been allowed to enter the West Bank, the decision to deny her entry on September 14 and send her back to Amman is unduly capricious. Moreover, it places undue burdens on those who are trying to fulfill their contractual agreements with Palestinian institutions of higher education. And it also creates enormous difficulties for the administrators of those institutions as they seek to attract foreign faculty members.

Such restrictions, as well as the recent practice of stamping the passports of US citizens of Arab descent who are allowed to enter the West Bank with the proviso “PA Territories Only,” are discriminatory. To make matters worse, there is no procedure available in current



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Israeli administrative regulations that will allow Prof. Merriman or other US citizens of Arab descent to protest such discrimination and seek redress.

The policy, if it is a policy rather than a simple mistake that can easily be corrected by providing Allenby officials with better instructions, is both illegal and short-sighted. It is illegal insofar as it puts Israel in violation of UN regulations governing the obligations of an occupying power, and it is short-sighted insofar as it deprives Palestinians of the very education that will allow them to participate fully in the viable society Israel claims to desire for them.

As a committee of MESA charged with monitoring infringements on academic freedom, CAF members are very troubled by the action taken against Prof. Merriman and what it implies about Israel's attitude toward academic freedom. In that spirit, I write to urge that you investigate this incident and then explain on what grounds the initial refusal to admit Prof. Merriman was warranted. Since our committee has written several letters to different officers in the Israeli government recently to protest infringements of academic freedom, it would be both instructive and productive for a few members of the committee resident in the Washington D.C. to meet with Amb. Oren or the academic liaison at the Israeli Embassy and explore how such difficulties might be avoided in the future.

I await your response.

Virginia H. Aksan
MESA President
Professor of History, McMaster University