Dear Committee Members,

I am writing to you with deep respect and with a deep interest in this position.

In this letter, I would like to tell you a little about myself, my plans and capabilities, and why I feel I am right for this position as I understand it. The attached letter provides more professional details about my studies.

My formal training is as a historian, although I wrote my doctoral thesis at the Department of Political Science, after completing the required additional studies to specialize in this discipline. Ever since, I have navigated between the twin fields of history and political science. Equally, my biographical books have been written on the basis of a desire to reach a general educated audience, and they have indeed generated interest outside academic circles. I believe that the academic world, and the field of Jewish Studies in particular, must not remain closed off in an ivory tower. This is one of the reasons why I occasionally publish opinion pieces in Ha’aretz and other media outlets in Israel and around the world.

My doctoral thesis examines the subject of “The Revisionist Movement Leaders’ Attitudes toward Jewish Religion, 1925-2005.” The thesis focuses in particular on the founding fathers of the movement, Ze’ev Jabotinsky and Menachem Begin, although it also casts light on their successors as leaders of the Likud party – Yitzhak Shamir, Ariel Sharon, and Benjamin Netanyahu. With the exception of my own work and a small number of additional studies, the research literature on these figures is very limited. Accordingly, my thesis, which I hope to publish in book form, makes an important contribution to the scholarship in the field.

The inspiration for my thesis was my intellectual curiosity about an issue that, in my opinion, is extremely relevant to the field of Israel Studies over the past four decades: the attempt to explain an Israel that has been governed almost continuously over 40 years by the leaders of the Revisionist movement, the Likud, after a period from the 1930s through 1977 when this movement was relegated to the ranks of the opposition. The basic assumption behind the study, as supported by surveys and additional findings, essentially argues that the affinity of most Israelis to the Likud since the period of Begin is not necessarily associated with a hawkish position among the public regarding Israel’s foreign affairs and security issues, nor with support for the idea of Greater Israel. On the contrary – a majority of the Israeli public is willing to compromise on these matters. Rather, it reflects an identification with the values of the movement, including the perceived pro-traditional approach of its leaders, as opposed to the image of the left as alienated from religion.

Accordingly, I attempted to explore and understand the true position of the leaders of the movement regarding religion, the differences between these figures and the leaders of the Labor movement, and the significance of their attitude toward the Jewish religion in all its senses (nation, culture, heritage, and so forth). Naturally, since we are discussing the attitude toward religion among secular leaders, my studies are grounded in the latest theories that criticize the outmoded dichotomy between religion and secularity and emphasize the traditional orientation as a phenomenon that has its own independent characteristics, as distinct to an approach that regarded traditionalism essentially as “a bit of both” or “neither one thing nor the other.” My research reflects an approach that recognizes that secularism has its own shades, including some that have a religious character (an approach that developed in the character of Jabotinsky during his latter years). Accordingly, the attitude of secular people toward religion should be examined in a nuanced manner and not monolithically. My study also examines theories relating to leadership, and is naturally grounded profoundly in the development of Israeli politics and society, as well as in the attitude of the Zionist movement in general toward Jewish religious heritage.

My letter presenting my research agenda will include greater detail about the professional themes in my research. Here, though, I would like to emphasize that my studies into the Zionist right-wing seek to fill a significant lacuna in the Israeli academic world. The reasons for this are historical, cultural, political, and even economic and I will not discuss them here. But in any case, although – or perhaps because – I am far removed from the right in political terms, I believe that it deserves to be studied and understood as one of the decisive phenomena in the history of modern Israel. I hardly need to add that the decline of the left and the rise of the right are also related to similar developments in the Western world, as I also discuss in my studies.

In the context of studies on right-wing issues, I am the first – and, to date, the only – researcher who has published a complete research-based biography of Menachem Begin. I wrote the Hebrew version of this biography while I was still studying for my MA in the School of Jewish History at Tel Aviv University. An updated English-language version was published by Yale University Press in 2012, while I was still studying for my PhD.

My interest in the right-wing is purely intellectual, and may have its origins in my personal biography as the son of immigrants from Iraq who grew up in Holon, a suburb of Tel Aviv, where I was exposed to support for the Likud and a longing for Begin, who during my childhood had become a recluse in his home after retiring from politics. My sympathy for Begin, who had a quasi-mythological status, developed during my years as a student, and later as a researcher, sparking an intellectual aspiration to understand and explore the Zionist right-wing and the affinity to this stream among the Israeli public. In particular, I was interested in cracking the secret of the bond between Begin and the Mizrahim. In this personal context, I believe that the fact that I was born and raised in areas that are less well-represented in the Israeli academic world offers me an advantage in terms of my ability to understand more diverse strata of Israeli society and politics.

I am continuing to investigate the right-wing in many different contexts. I have submitted an article to the journal ‘…’ discussing the “upheaval” of 1977 and its ramifications for Mizrahi politics in Israel, while my recent article on Menachem Begin was accepted for publication by Oxford University’s Jewish Encyclopedia. I am currently working on two further articles. The first aims to analyze the way in which Jabotinsky, in his latter years, developed a unique approach to religion. Contrary to the usual depiction of Jabotinsky in the literature as an unswerving secularite, I argue that he developed a position that supported the spiritual dimension religion can offer even secular people, by way of psychological inspiration, without a commitment to the commandments. Another article I am working on focuses more directly on Israeli politics, and specifically on the Likud victory in the 2015 elections.

However, I believe that in order to understand one side, you also need to examine the opposite side. Accordingly, my studies have also addressed the stream that dominated Zionist history until 1977 – the Labor Zionist movement, and in particular the positions of Israel’s founding father, David Ben-Gurion. The more I read about Ben-Gurion, the more I came to recognize that his final years, following his retirement as prime minister in 1963 and through to his death in December 1973, shortly after the Yom Kippur War, have received little if any attention in the scholarly literature. This is particularly surprising since Ben-Gurion continued to be active during this period and wrote a considerable amount of material. When I proposed exploring Ben-Gurion’s final years, many fine people explained that this was not an interesting subject, since the former leader was no longer in power by this stage. I argued that my generation of relatively young Israelis would be interested to learn about Ben-Gurion through the period when he was “just a man” rather than an all-powerful leader. I insisted on my position and the result was published in the book *Ben-Gurion, Epilogue*, which I wrote alongside my doctoral thesis. In the end the book was widely praised, contributed to the revival of interest in Ben-Gurion that has been seen over recent years, and, no less importantly – provided the basis for a film that was extremely successful in Israel and around the world by the standards of the documentary genre. Although the film does not reflect the deeper layers of the book, it has also helped to inspire interest in the opinions of Israel’s founding father.

On the theme of expanding the academic perspective to include the broader public, I should emphasize – and I apologize if I am forced to blow my own trumpet, as is unfortunately often the case in letters of this type – that before embarking on my academic career, I worked as a journalist and editor in a range of publications. This experience improved my writing skills and encouraged me to adopt a style that, while based on high research standards, appeals not only to a scholarly audience but also to the general educated public. This helps explain why my books on Begin and Ben-Gurion met with considerable public and media interest. As I explained at the beginning of this letter, I believe that as academics we must move beyond our narrow comfort zone and bring our research, in mediated form, to the general public – particularly in a field such as Israel Studies that is so relevant to everyday life.

In the same context, and although my chief preoccupation is naturally academic research, I also write opinion articles from time to time for Ha’aretz, as noted. I am frequently interviewed by various media outlets in Israel, as well as by the New York Times and the German Bild. In this respect, I will also be delighted, as and when possible, to maintain contacts with the Jewish and general American public and to create interfaces between academic events and the public. I often take part in such public projects in Israel and enjoy the contact with people from diverse backgrounds. Academics should always, I believe, remember their duty to serve the public, and I am confident of my ability to identify some unexpected bridges between the public and researchers.

While I was working as a journalist and before turning to academia, I managed and established news departments in several newspapers. My years as an editor also strengthened my managerial capabilities and my skills in the field of human relations, a factor that is also crucial in the academic world, and certainly in this position, since the Center for Israel Studies also serves as a platform for interdisciplinary activities.

I enjoy teaching, and my evaluation surveys are strong.

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So far I have mentioned my studies focusing on the founding fathers of Israel and the main ideological camps of the Zionist movement. My latest book – *The Left Wing’s Sorrow: Yossi Beilin and the Decline of the Israeli Left* – examines the weakness of the peace camp and the Israeli left over recent decades. I will discuss this field of research, too, in the letter detailing my research agenda. I will note here that this book draws on an opportunity I received to enjoy exclusive access to the archive of Yossi Beilin, the architect of the Oslo Accords. Beilin provides me with an ideal character for examining the Israeli left beyond the purely political context. He represents the main characteristics of the left as perceived in the popular imagination: Ashkenazi, liberal, secular, and rooted firmly in north Tel Aviv. I drew on hundreds of items and documents I found in his archive, naturally alongside additional archives and sources, in order to paint a sociological and political portrait that seeks to explain the decline of the Israeli left. This study has also generated interest and earned accolades, and an English-language version is due to appear next year.

The next study I plan to pursue moves beyond my interest in leaders and politics and enters the realm of culture. My central argument is that alongside increasingly lively discourse in Israel in recent years on questions concerning the relations between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, Israel is undergoing a rapid process of “Mizrahization” in cultural terms. This process is evident among both Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, and accordingly requires us to explore Israel from the perspective of a Middle Eastern country rooted in the region and subject to its cultural influences. This contrasts with the usual approach that regards Israel as a Western island in the Middle East or focuses on its affinity with Diaspora Jews. The perception of Israel as an Arab-Jewish state can have interesting ramifications for understanding the nation and even for its future integration in the region. I will also discuss this aspect further in the letter detailing my research agenda.

I would like to emphasize that I am submitting my application with all my motivation, energy, and interest. Together with my family – my wife Lior, a psychologist by profession, and my sons Itamar, who is five, and Roi, who is three months old – we are seeking a new challenge outside Israel. I am convinced that the proposed position could be mutually enriching and that I will be able to integrate successfully and use my capabilities and strengths to advance the Center for Israel Studies.

Many thanks for considering my candidacy. I will be pleased to provide any further materials to illustrate my capabilities.

Declaration of contribution and commitment to diversity

I attach great important to promoting diversity. Diversity is essential, I believe, in order to create a more productive and efficient society on both the collective and the individual levels. I come from the second generation of a family of immigrants to Israel from Iraq. The first generation faced a difficult uphill struggle in order to adapt to the reality of life in Israel and to strengthen their social position. Although I have never felt any particular need for special support, I have always been aware – and all the more so since entering the academic world – that its core focuses on elitist groups of a uniform character. Men and women from more marginalized sections of society had fewer means to enter this circle. This is true of women as a group, who require support due to social structures that impede their progress, in Israel as elsewhere. It is also true of Arabs and – despite the significant progress in this field – to Mizrahim, including Ethiopians. Naturally, it is also true of disadvantaged socioeconomic sectors, regardless of their ethnic origin (such as Russian immigrants living in peripheral regions of Israel).

Accordingly, it is important to identify support tracks for those who come from less dominant and hegemonic circles. I attempt to apply this insight wherever I can. My research focus on the right wing was motivated in part by a desire to understand the reasons for the sense of alienation during the state’s formative years (and ironically, given the weakness of the Israeli left in recent decades, my latest book discusses the weakness of this sector). I work with the Palestinian Forum for Israel Studies in Ramallah, where my studies are translated into Arabic, thereby facilitating direct contacts with “the other” rather than just writing about the other. During my post-doctoral studies at New York University, I facilitated a special group of students from the Gaza Strip and Israel who studied together thanks to a unique scholarship. As part of my work at the NYU annex in Tel Aviv, I teach a course on the conflict together with Dr. Ahmad Amara, an Arab citizen of Israel, thereby exposing the students to a broader and more authentic range of opinions concerning the conflict. They are surprised and impressed by our ability to work together, even when presenting opposing opinions in some instances. They also come to understand that the identities involved here are more complex than Jew and Muslim, since to some extent we are both Arabs in terms of our cultural origins.

I have also learned about the importance of diversity through my teaching experience. I taught the first course on Israel Studies at Tsinghua University in Beijing, China and met students from across Asia and the developing world, some of whom I am still in touch with. In my courses at New York University – in the US and in Israel – my classes include white Americans and African-Americans, Jewish-Americans, and Arab students from Abu Dhabi, among others. This diversity is vital, and I am pleased to find that it is both meaningful and feasible to hold together these diverse students in a single class.

I am active in various organizations, such as “When did you last see the horizon?” that offer lectures at accessible locations to young people – pubs and cafés. The lectures raise fresh angles on discourse on equal opportunities for different national, cultural, and gender groups. I also write extensively about the Mizrahi question in my newspaper articles.

Above all, however, I believe that I support diversity in all my activities and in my everyday actions. This is manifested in a consistent commitment to understand those perceived as “the other” and as disadvantaged, and in the recognition that by supporting such groups I am not merely making a contribution but facilitating mutual influence and fertilization. In this sense, there is an interesting distinction to be drawn between two etymologically related words in Hebrew. *Tzedakah* – charity – is needed in situations when there is no *tzedek* – justice. From this perspective, actions to support diversity seek to promote *tzedek* so that there will no longer be a need for *tzedakah*.