



**Middle
East
Studies
Association**
of North America, Inc.

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December 16, 2008

Mahmoud Abbas, President, Palestinian National Authority
Dr. Salam Fayyad, Prime Minister, Ramallah
Dr. Nabil Abuznaid, Representative of the Palestine Liberation Organization

Gentlemen,

I write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) regarding violence directed against students of al-Azhar University in Gaza this year. We note with dismay a continuing pattern of arrests at West Bank universities in which students are held without charges, apparently for political activities occurring on campus.

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.

We have objected on several previous occasions to ways in which violence and actions by various political actors have disrupted the academic enterprise in Palestine and interfered with academic freedom. We have written, for instance, on behalf of students in Gaza who have been barred from travel for educational purposes as well as on attacks on educational institutions in the West Bank and Gaza. We are also writing at present to the authorities in Gaza about violence and intimidation directed against Fatah supporters at al-Azhar University.

Over the past few months, Palestinian security forces have arrested dozens of students on various campuses on the West Bank. Since they have been held without charges, we can only speculate about the reason for their detention. But many seem to have been arrested primarily for their peaceful political activities on campus. Many of these students have been eventually released, but some continue to be held. Colleagues at Bir Zeit University, for instance, identify the following students as still being held without charges:

1. Mustafa Jamal Mustafa Abu-Saleemeh
2. Firas Tayseer Qawasma
3. Rushdi Husni Jayyousi
4. Foad Nazem Khafash
5. Hasan Ahmad Hasan Obaid
6. Zaki Mohammed Hussein Amriyeh

We call on you to release these students or explain their continued detention. If there is evidence that these students have committed any crime, they should be charged and tried in accordance with established legal procedures.

Peaceful and free exchange of ideas is at the heart of the academic enterprise, and attempts to silence or intimidate those who engage in such exchanges amounts to a serious violation of academic freedom. As a committee of MESA charged with monitoring infringements on academic freedom, the Committee on Academic Freedom is deeply concerned by the frequency and consistency of these arrests and will therefore continue to follow the issue by monitoring the situation.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Virginia H. Aksan
MESA President
Professor, McMaster University

cc: Ismail Haniyya, Caretaker Prime Minister, Gaza