

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

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5 January 2009

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert
3 Kaplan St., Qiryat Ben-Gurion
PO Box 187
91919 Jerusalem
Israel

via fax: 972-2-6512631

Dear Prime Minister Olmert:

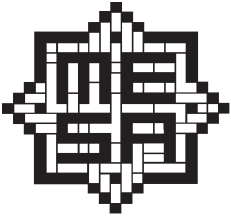
I write to you on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) to express our grave concern about the 27 December missile strike which killed eight students outside the Gaza Training College in Gaza City and about the bombing of the Gaza Islamic University on 29 December, both part of your government's current military attacks against the Gaza Strip.

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.

On December 27, the first day of your government's aerial attacks, witnesses reported to Human Rights Watch that an Israeli air-to-ground missile struck a group of students leaving the Gaza Training College, adjacent to the headquarters of the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in downtown Gaza City. The students were waiting to board buses to transport them to their homes in Khan Yunis and Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip. The strike killed eight students, ages 18 to 20, and wounded 19 others.

According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* of 29 December 2008, two Islamic University structures -- the science-laboratory block and the Women's Building, where women studied in classrooms separate from those for male students-- were hit by Israeli bombs. We are aware of the IDF claim that the science laboratory facilities were used as "a research and development center for Hamas weapons, including Qassam rockets." However Gaza Islamic University officials have denied these claims. Such an attack would be lawful only if the Government of Israel can demonstrate that the university was in fact being used for military purposes. If the Government of Israel has proof of the university's facilities being used for such purposes, we urge it to adduce that evidence immediately. We are aware of no claims, however, regarding the Women's Building except that supporters of Hamas study there or regarding the Training College. Such impermissibly broad targeting would be a violation of Israel's international commitments.

In March 2008 we wrote to Ismail Haniyah urging him to use his authority to halt the activities of armed groups engaged in indiscriminate rocket fire against Israeli towns bordering Gaza. Our letter was triggered by the 27 February 2008 bombardment of Sderot, during which around 50 rockets hit the western Negev, one of which slammed into Sapir College near Sderot killing Roni Yechiah, a 47-year-old student.



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In the context of the current Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip we are writing to remind you that your government has the responsibility to ensure the Right to Education as enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which it ratified in 1991. The disruption of Palestinian education caused by the deliberate destruction of academic facilities constitutes a violation of a basic human right that will have long-term and negative political, economic, and humanitarian consequences for all peoples involved.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Virginia H. Aksan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Virginia H. Aksan
MESA President

cc: Minister of Defense Ehud Barak