



**Middle
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Hosts of the International Conference for the Reconstruction of Gaza

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Your Excellencies,

I write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express grave concern over Israel's indiscriminate bombardment and destruction of Palestinian educational institutions, including the destruction of 22 schools, significant damage to an additional 198 schools and two universities, and the targeting of six United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) schools which killed 47 civilians in July and August, 2014. It is imperative that these assaults be understood as part of an ongoing, intentional attack on education by Israel in the context of continued military occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Rather than continue to pay for reconstruction of what Israel has destroyed, donors should demand that Israel end its punitive blockade of the Gaza Strip and its repeated military assaults on the territory. Israel is flouting its obligation as the occupying power in the Palestinian territories to protect the population from harm. The willingness of donors to continually pay for reconstruction without clear condemnation of the military occupation relieves Israel of responsibility and allows it free rein to continue its attacks on Palestine's educational system.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. It is the preeminent organization in the field. The Association published the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 3,000 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 the United Nations Office of Coordination for Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA), in the most recent assault on the Gaza Strip, Israeli shelling badly damaged at least two universities, the Islamic University of Gaza and al-Quds Open University, as well as four colleges. Israel targeted the Islamic University's central administration building on the grounds that it housed a weapons development facility, the same rationale marshaled to justify bombing the university in 2008-2009. No evidence has ever surfaced to support Israel's allegations that a weapons development facility existed at

the university. Al-Quds Open University was raided at least three times during the latest onslaught. Israeli forces also destroyed several buildings of the University College of Applied Sciences, including the central administration building, a conference hall, computer laboratories and classrooms. All of the institutions of higher education in the Gaza Strip canceled summer courses during the July-August onslaught, affecting tens of thousands of students. Given the destruction of physical plant—not to mention lives, homes and livelihoods—none of these institutions were able to open at the beginning of the new school year.

In addition, Israel damaged 220 schools (141 operated by the government, 75 by UNRWA and four by private parties) in bombing raids. Twenty-two of these schools require complete reconstruction. Moreover, unexploded ordnance litters educational facilities and will need to be cleared before their reopening.

Israel also targeted six UNRWA schools that were serving as civilian shelters, killing 47 civilians and injuring hundreds. Nine UNRWA staff members were among the dead: four teachers, two social service workers, a school principal, a school attendant and a laborer.

The summer 2014 Israeli attacks upon the Palestinian educational system are an extension of decades-old military occupation policies that systematically undermine this sector. Palestinian universities suffer immeasurably from Israeli collective punishment policies, foremost among them campus raids and restrictions on movement that, in some cases, prevent students from attending classes. Furthermore, when these latest attacks commenced, the Gaza Strip had yet to recover from the damage caused by Israel's bombing campaign of 2008-2009. By the end of those military operations, Israel had killed 250 students and 15 teachers, and had injured 866 students and 19 teachers. Its bombing campaign damaged 16 kindergartens, 217 schools, and all eight of the Gaza Strip's institutions of higher education—the Islamic University of Gaza, the University College of Applied Sciences, Al-Aqsa University, Al-Quds Open University, the College of Applied Sciences and Technology, the College of Dar Al-Da`wa and Humanities, Al-Azhar University, and the University of Palestine. At least six university buildings were damaged beyond repair. The total damage to educational facilities was estimated at over \$32 million.

Even prior to these massive air assaults, the Gaza Strip's educational facilities were already severely weakened by Israel's blockade: the building of new schools to accommodate natural population growth has not been possible, and many schools, especially at the elementary level, were already overcrowded, operating on a shift system and undersupplied.

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Since 2009 numerous UN bodies have called upon international donors to hold Israel accountable for the cycles of destruction in Gaza. We echo this call. All outside commitments and pledges of aid will be virtually useless if the blockade and other policies of military occupation persist. To protect academic freedom and the right to education, the fundamental circumstances in the Gaza Strip must be transformed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nathan J. Brown', written in a cursive style.

Nathan J. Brown

MESA President

cc:

- US Secretary of State, John Kerry (fax: 202-261-8199)
- Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu (pm_eng@pmo.gov.il; fax: 972-2-566-4838)
- United Nations Special Coordinator to Middle East Peace Process, Robert H. Serry (fax: 972 -2-568-7288)
- World Bank Country Director to the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Steen Jorgensen (sjorgensen@worldbank.org)
- Head of the European Union Delegation to the West Bank and Gaza, and United Nations Relief and Works Agency, John Gatt-Rutter (delegation-west-bank-gaza@eeas.europa.eu; fax: 972-2-541-5848)
- Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, Pierre Krähenbühl (c/o Christopher Gunnes, c.gunness@unrwa.org)