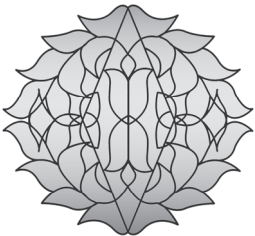


**Middle
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MESA '09

November 11, 2009

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu
Minister of Defense Ehud Barak
Mr. George J. Mitchell, US Special Envoy for Middle East Peace
H.E. Michael B. Oren, Ambassador of Israel to the US

Gentlemen,

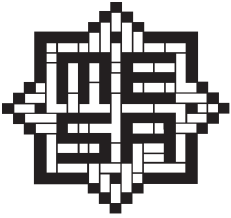
I write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to you to express our concern regarding the arrest and subsequent deportation to Gaza by Israeli authorities of Ms. Berlanty Azzam, a 21-year-old student of business translation who was weeks away from completing her degree at Bethlehem University.

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.

Ms. Azzam began her studies at Bethlehem University in 2005 after Israeli authorities granted her a permit to travel across Israel from Gaza to the West Bank. This travel permit was not subsequently renewed, so in order to complete her degree, she remained in Bethlehem, unable to see her family for four years. On October 28, 2009, she was stopped at a roadside checkpoint in the West Bank and was detained, as best we can ascertain, solely because she is legally a resident of Gaza. Despite appeals by the university and human-rights groups she was then deported.

The Israeli military policy of banning Palestinian residents of Gaza from studying at Palestinian universities in the West Bank, and of arresting West Bank-resident Palestinian students with Gaza identity cards such as Ms. Azzam and sending them back to the coastal strip is a drastic and unwarranted denial of academic freedom as well as a form of collective punishment, which, as you know, is forbidden under humanitarian international law. According to the Israeli Human Rights organization Gisha, Ms. Azzam's case is the sixth in less than two weeks involving Gazans arrested at the same checkpoint.

As a committee of MESA charged with monitoring infringements on academic freedom, CAF members are very troubled by the action taken against Ms. Azzam and what it implies about Israel's policies toward academic freedom. We have written several letters in the past several years, the most recent dated 1 May 2008, expressing our concern specifically over the issue of the impact of travel restrictions on students from Gaza. Israel 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. If there is evidence of Ms. Azzam's constituting a security threat, we urge you to produce it and process her case through established judicial channels. If not, we ask that you to allow her immediately to return to Bethlehem to complete her degree.



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Re: Deportation to Gaza of Ms. Berlanty Azzam
page 2

The ongoing disruption of Palestinian education 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 call on the Israeli government to create a reliable policy that will allow students from Gaza to undertake and complete university education outside the Strip.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

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