



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

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2 July 2012

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu  
Minister of Defense Ehud Barak  
Minister of Education Gideon Sa'ar  
H.E. Michael B. Oren, Ambassador of Israel to the US

Dear Sirs,

We write this letter on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA). We remain deeply concerned about the Israeli Government's ongoing violations against Palestinian education and its denial of Gaza students' right to study in the West Bank. We understand that the Israeli Supreme Court has asked the Government of Israel to reconsider its refusal to allow four students to complete their programs at Birzeit University. Thus, in accordance with both international human rights law and international humanitarian law (IHL), we ask that you allow these students to pursue their education at Birzeit University and end the general ban prohibiting Palestinian students from Gaza from studying in the West Bank.

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 nearly 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.

As a committee of MESA charged with monitoring infringements on academic freedom, we have written in the past to express dismay about Israeli travel restrictions and their impact on Palestinian students and educational institutions. We are disheartened that these violations persist. We are also disappointed that the Israeli Government has yet to adopt the Supreme Court's 2007 ruling to establish a mechanism to evaluate individual requests by Gaza students, and to allow students who are likely to have "a positive humanitarian impact" on society to study in the West Bank.

The case under consideration illustrates the magnitude and pointlessness of these sweeping restrictions. It includes four women – Aza Kfarna, Andlib Sahada, Suheir Saqa, and Amal Abu Aisha – who seek to finish the studies they were forced to discontinue in 2000 when Israel revoked the travel permits of all students from Gaza studying in the West Bank. Pending Israeli government approval, these four petitioners – who are all in their 30s and 40s – seek to resume and complete their MA degrees in gender, democracy, and law at Birzeit

2 July 2012

Re: Gaza students' right to study in the West Bank

Page 2

University. All have established positions with different NGOs in Gaza, and contribute positively to Palestinian society. A fifth petitioner, Lujain Zaim, is a recent high school graduate, who earned matriculation scores of 97.8 percent – putting her among the strongest students in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Lujain was accepted to the law program at Birzeit University where she hopes to pursue her law degree. Unlike the four other petitioners, Lujain's case was not included in the Supreme Court's request. There are no security claims against Lujain, but her request is denied because of the comprehensive ban. We ask that the Government of Israel also allow this talented young woman the opportunity to pursue studies in the Palestinian territories' top law school.

The blockade on the Gaza Strip has left institutions of higher education severely lacking personnel and basic resources such as books, equipment, and laboratory instruments. Moreover, educational programs vital to the well-being of any society, such as dentistry, physical and occupational therapy, and medical engineering are not available in the Gaza Strip. As you are well aware, the right to education is enshrined in Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and Articles 13 and 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The current policies preventing students from Gaza from studying in the West Bank constitute blatant discrimination based on national origin since they apply only to one community, the Palestinians, and violate the right to equality enshrined in the very human rights conventions to which Israel is a party.

For these reasons, we call on the Government of Israel to revoke its ban against the right of Gaza students to study in the West Bank, and honor the Supreme Court's request to allow these four women to finish their MA studies at Birzeit University, as well as to permit Lujain Zaim to begin university studies there.

We look forward to your response.

On behalf of the CAF,  
Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fred M. Donner". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Fred M. Donner  
MESA President  
Professor of Near Eastern History, University of Chicago

cc: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton