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Minister of Education Naftali Bennett
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Dear Prime Minister Netanyahu and Ministers Shaked, Deri and Bennett,

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express our grave concern regarding the behavior of Israel's Border Police in the occupied West Bank on Wednesday, 7 March. Agents disguised as Palestinian journalists entered the campus of Birzeit University and abducted the president of the student council after detaining and beating him, while pulling out their guns and aiming them at students.

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 publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 2500 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 multiple reports in the Israeli and Palestinian press, as well as in statements issued by Birzeit University and its Right to Education campaign, undercover Israeli Border Police entered the campus mid-day where they accosted, beat, and arrested Omar al-Kiswani, who is the president of the student council. The six agents, who were posing as journalists soliciting a statement from Mr. al-Kiswani, were videoed by other students. In [the video](#), four agents pulled out their firearms and waved them in the direction of other students who were present, while two other agents struck and subdued Mr. al-Kiswani. The agents whisked Mr. al-Kiswani away through the university's western gate, where members of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) were waiting to receive him. At that point, the IDF became involved in clashes with students,

and fired shots in the direction of those protesting the kidnapping of their classmate.

According to officials in the Border Police, Mr. al-Kiswani was arrested because he is suspected of being affiliated with Hamas. In addition, in an egregious violation of Israeli law, the agents beat Mr. al-Kiswani. Israeli authorities have not levied a public charge against him. Officials at Birzeit University do not know where Mr. al-Kiswani is being held.

Israel's flagrant disregard of its international humanitarian law obligations, which require that Israeli occupation authorities protect universities as spaces of education, and its egregious violation of Mr. al-Kiswani's personal academic freedom are deeply troubling. Equally alarming is the fact that "undercover" Israeli agents waved their guns at innocent student bystanders while the army was present to secure a perimeter around the university. This unwarranted threat to civilians in what should be the protected space of a university campus is an outrageous violation of Israel's basic obligations under international human rights and humanitarian law.

According to Birzeit University's Right to Education campaign, this is not an isolated incident. There are more than sixty (60) students from Birzeit University currently in Israeli detention and many more from other universities around the occupied West Bank. Remarkably, Mr. al-Kiswani is the seventh sitting student council president to be arrested by the Israeli authorities since 2004; three former student council presidents have also been arrested in the same period.

Students at Birzeit University and at all other educational institutions in occupied Palestine must be permitted to exercise their protected right to education. This committee has written to you numerous times in the past to express our condemnation of assaults that continue to be carried out against Palestinian universities and arrests of Palestinian students without charge. These acts are illegal under international law. The occupation forces have destroyed the private property of student groups, including flags, banners, posters, and the materials used to decorate them; they have jeopardized the physical well-being of students; and they have interrupted the normal conduct of university business and student life. These raids disrupt the regular functioning of the university, and are thereby clear violations of the right to education enshrined in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966). Israel is a signatory to both of these conventions.

We, therefore, once again strongly urge the Israeli occupation authorities to release Omar al-Kiswani immediately. We also implore the Israeli Ministry of Education to respect the academic freedom of Palestinian students and all members of the university community by forbidding, or at least condemning, military activities and intelligence-gathering raids against any and all Palestinian universities. Further, we call upon the Israel Defense Forces and the



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Border Police to cease conducting such raids and threatening students, faculty, and staff with deadly force.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Judith E. Tucker', written in a cursive style.

Judith E. Tucker
MESA President
Professor, Georgetown University

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Amy W. Newhall', written in a cursive style.

Amy W. Newhall
MESA Executive Director