



**Middle
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13 November 2012

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton:

On behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA), I write to express MESA's concern about the recent decision by the US Department of State to freeze scholarships in the 2012-13 academic year for students from Gaza who seek to further their studies in the West Bank. According to Victoria Nuland, spokesperson for the US Department of State, the scholarships were suspended for this academic year so that American policy can be in compliance with ongoing Israeli policy concerning the issuance of travel permits to Gaza 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 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.

Members of the CAF committee of MESA charged with monitoring infringements upon academic freedom see no justification at all for the US Department of State to strive for compliance with an unjust policy on the part of the Government of Israel. The blanket travel ban in place since 2000 against students from the Gaza Strip who want to study in the West Bank and the more recent decision by the Israeli High Court that Israel is not obligated to allow Palestinian residents of Gaza to study in the West Bank and may treat them as "enemy citizens" for purposes of passage constitute blatant discrimination based on national origin since they apply only to one community, the Palestinians. Moreover, the ban and the court decision violate the very human rights conventions to which Israel and the United States are party.

On numerous occasions, most recently in July of this year, CAF has written to the Israeli government to protest its ongoing violations of the rights of Palestinians to education and denial to Gaza students of the possibility to study in the West Bank. The reasons set forth in these letters are ones CAF members would have expected the US State Department to uphold when interacting with the Government of Israel. After all, these are principles American citizens have long taken for granted as holding for themselves and ones US officials would defend in relations with other nations. Nothing in keeping with these principles justifies the compliance voiced by Ms. Nuland and reflected in the decision she defends.

13 November 2012

Re: Scholarships for students from Gaza

Page 2

The US scholarship program, which has been in place for two years, has offered thirty scholarships annually to promising students from under-privileged backgrounds -- students who would not otherwise have had such a life transforming opportunity. Given that Israel approves approximately 4000 travel permits per month for individuals from Gaza wishing to travel to the West Bank for medical or humanitarian reasons, we suggest the following: Rather than suspend the scholarship program, work with the Government of Israel to expand the latter's definition of "humanitarian" to include education

Israel's violations against the rights of Palestinians are extensive, and the barriers it places before those who seek to further their education are a central part of that record. Friends of freedom, especially friends of freedom who claim to view all humans as equal, should have no part in furthering the discriminatory practices followed by Israel. Members of MESA's Committee on Academic Freedom and I therefore urge that you rescind this decision to suspend the scholarship program and pursue the step suggested above. That will allow the US to return to its time-honored position of defending the rights of all people to academic freedom.

We look forward to your response,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Fred M. Donner".

Fred M. Donner

MESA President

Professor of Near Eastern History, University of Chicago

Cc: Minister of Education Gideon Sa'ar
Ambassador Michael Oren
Honorable George Mitchell
Ambassador Daniel B. Shapiro