



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

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June 30, 2014

John Kerry
US Secretary of State
via fax 202-663-3636

Benjamin Netanyahu
Prime Minister of Israel
via fax 972-2-5303367

Dear Sirs,

On behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA), I write to express our concern about the recent raids by Israeli forces against Palestinian university campuses. In the course of these raids, Israeli forces destroyed university property, confiscated computers, student organization materials, documents and records, detained a number of university guards, and converted academic facilities into military barracks. Such attacks against educational institutions are direct infringements on academic freedom and serve only to bring more opprobrium upon the Government of Israel's continued illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories.

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.

During the early morning hours of Thursday, June 19, 2014, the Israeli military stormed the grounds of Birzeit University, north of Ramallah, in an attempt to round up student members of the Islamic bloc; the students were holding a non-violent sit-in to protest the political detention of their peers. In the course of the incursion, soldiers broke the eastern and western gates, raided campus buildings, and confiscated the property of student groups, including flags, notebooks, and flyers. For a second consecutive day, Israeli forces continued with their assaults and raided the Arab American University in al-Zababdah village, east of Jenin, and in the process destroyed the entrance gate padlocks and detained a university guard. There, too, the military raided student organization offices and confiscated flags and papers belonging to these groups. Israeli forces also raided the Palestine Ahliya University in Bethlehem on the

morning of Friday, June 20, and used its courtyard as a holding area for Palestinian detainees apprehended in the nearby Dheisheh refugee camp. In the latest of this series of raids, Israeli soldiers stormed Al-Quds University in Abu Dis on the morning of Sunday, June 22. During the raid, soldiers locked the security guards in one room, searched buildings, and confiscated Islamist flags and banners. Clashes broke out during many of these raids, and the Israeli military's attacks and use of tear gas incapacitated a number of protesters and students.

We are concerned that these recent acts of aggression are not isolated incidents, but part of Israel's broader systematic policies of undermining Palestinian academic institutions and infringing on Palestinian educational freedom. Palestinian university campuses continue to suffer immeasurably from Israeli collective punishment policies, foremost among them imposed movement restrictions which impede, and in some cases, prevent students from attending university. Disproportionately affected by these policies are students from the Gaza Strip, who are no longer allowed to study in West Bank universities. Since the latest reprisals, Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon issued instructions to further restrict movement through Gaza's crossings with Israel. In particular, at the Erez crossing, Israeli authorities now only allow medical patients and foreign citizens to exit Gaza. If there are Palestinian students from Gaza who wish to travel, Israeli authorities are preventing them from doing so.

These policies are systematic and ongoing. Israeli authorities limit the travel of Gaza students in a number of ways. Students who are awarded scholarships by foreign governments are technically eligible to receive Israeli travel permits to leave through the Erez crossing, however, Israel regularly prevents students from leaving the Gaza Strip. Moreover, because Israeli authorities issue the Palestinian identification documents required to obtain a Palestinian passport, they indirectly have the authority to delay student travel through the Rafah, Allenby, or Jordan Valley crossings—which they often do. The harassment, arrest, and holding of university students in administrative detention, a system of incarceration in which prisoners are held indefinitely without charge for renewable six-month periods, remains commonplace. These collective punishment measures extend to the physical infrastructure of Palestinian academic institutions in the Gaza Strip. As of October 2013 (for the eighth time since Operation Pillar of Cloud in November 2012), the Israeli defense minister ordered that the transfer of building materials into Gaza be halted. According to the Gaza Industrialist Association, 269 projects, including schools and universities--civilian projects which are very much needed by Gaza residents--cannot be completed.

The Israeli government claims to be carrying out the latest attacks on Palestinian towns and universities in retaliation for the kidnapping of three Israeli youths from a West Bank settlement. As a committee charged with monitoring infringements upon academic freedom, however, we believe that such provocative and aggressive measures

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of collective punishment against educational institutions and their students are never acceptable and cannot be justified. These collective punishment measures are in clear violation of both human rights law and international humanitarian law, and more specifically Article 33 of the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilians in Time of War, which stipulates: "No protected person may be punished for an offense he or she has not personally committed." Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights also guarantees the right to education, as well as Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

We call upon the Government of Israel to halt its illegal assault on Palestinian towns and universities and to respect the sanctity of Palestinian academic institutions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nathan Brown', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Nathan Brown
President

cc: Minister of Defense Moshe Ya'alon
Minister of Education Shai Piron
Ambassador Ron Dermer
Ambassador Daniel B. Shapiro