

15 March 1999

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu
Office of the Prime Minister
3 Kaplan St.
Jerusalem 91919 Israel

Fax: 972/3-691 7915 or 972/2-566 4838

Dear Prime Minister Netanyahu,

The Committee on Academic Freedom in the Middle East and North Africa (CAF MENA) of the Middle East Studies Association continues to be concerned at restrictions the Israeli government imposes on students in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In particular, we are alarmed in regard to the case of Iyad Habib Muhammad, president of the Bir Zeit University student council. Mr. Habib's recent arrest, subsequent detention, and denial of his right to legal counsel epitomizes a pattern of harassment of Bir Zeit students, which is disconcerting to all who share an interest in protecting academic freedom and the right to education.

The Middle East Studies Association comprises 2700 academics worldwide who teach and conduct research on the Middle East and North Africa. The association publishes the respected *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and is committed to ensuring respect for principles of academic freedom and human rights throughout the region.

Mr. Habib was arrested by the Israeli General Security Services on January 26th and five prevention orders have since been issued, depriving him of his right to meet with legal counsel. Israeli authorities have not informed Mr. Habib's family or lawyer of the reasons for his arrest. Mr. Habib was, however, arrested while leaving Bir Zeit subsequent to a long period of harassment during which Mr. Habib was often stopped at checkpoints set up by the Israeli authorities on the road to and from the university and interrogated about his campus activities. Mr. Habib's is not an isolated case, but rather exemplifies the treatment to which Bir Zeit student leaders have long been subject. There are currently fifty-five Bir Zeit students in detention in Israeli prisons, including past and present members of the student council, as well as a previous student council president. In just the last nine days, ten students have been detained on the basis of their Bir Zeit activities. Such sanctions on those who presume the right to speak and act freely in an academic context infringe on the fundamental scholarly value of free expression, without which a university cannot properly function.

These sanctions come within the larger context of a number of Israeli actions impinging on the right to education of those Palestinians resident in the West Bank and Gaza

Strip. Among these actions are the difficulties Gazan students have had in obtaining permits to study at Bir Zeit; the constant closures which have made access to Bir Zeit difficult even for students already in the West Bank; and the sealing of the road to Bir Zeit, making the university inaccessible to students and faculty for months at a time.

21 May 1999

His Excellency Husni Mubarak
President of the Arab Republic of Egypt
Cairo, Egypt

Your Excellency,

The Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America is writing to urge you to make a public commitment to defend academic freedom in Egypt and the free flow of information and ideas. We take this step in response to reports of increasing censorship and book-banning by the Ministry of Information. Officials such as yourself should play a leading role in promoting tolerance and respect for basic rights. In the face of recent challenges in the media and elsewhere to the fundamental right to receive and to impart information, the government has failed to meet this responsibility and has in fact acted to abridge this right.

The Middle East Studies Association comprises 2700 academics worldwide who teach and conduct research on the Middle East and North Africa. The association publishes the respected *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and is committed to ensuring respect for principles of academic freedom and human rights throughout the region.

21 May 1999

Dr. John Gerhart, President
The American University in Cairo
113 Sharia Kasr El Aini
Cairo, Egypt

Fax: 202-355-7565

Dear Dr. Gerhart:

MESA's Committee on Academic Freedom in the Middle East and North Africa (CAF MENA) is writing to express concern about threats to academic freedom at the American University in Cairo as a result of ongoing controversy over the inclusion of Muhammad Choukri's novel, *Al-Khubz Al-Hafi*, in a freshman seminar on Arabic literature. We encourage you to maintain the University's long tradition of academic freedom, and vigorously to defend the autonomy of your faculty when it is threatened.

We appreciate your strong public endorsement of academic freedom and faculty independence on several occasions since this controversy erupted. At the same time, we are concerned that other remarks,

as well as actions of the head of the Arabic Studies Department to restrict materials approved for use by faculty, have contributed to an atmosphere that is inconsistent with the university's long tradition of upholding the spirit of free inquiry and the free exchange of ideas. Despite facing considerable pressure from colleagues and the Egyptian media, individual faculty have insisted on their right to academic freedom and deserve your unqualified support.

The Middle East Studies Association comprises 2700 academics worldwide who teach and conduct research on the Middle East and North Africa. The association publishes the respected *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and is committed to ensuring respect for principles of academic freedom and human rights throughout the region.

In December 1998, the parents of some of the students enrolled in a freshman seminar on Arabic Literature taught by Professor Samia Mehrez complained to your office that they found the sexual content of Choukri's widely acclaimed novel to be offensive. Although the book has been legally available in Egypt since 1971, the parents demanded that it be removed from use, and that Professor Mehrez apologize to the students for its inclusion on her syllabus. On December 17, Professor Mehrez was called to a meeting in your office to discuss the parents' concerns. She was requested to explain her reasons for the inclusion of *Al-Khubz Al-Hafi* to her students, and to avoid using the book in the future. Following this meeting articles attacking the University, the Department of Arabic Studies, and Professor Mehrez appeared in several Egyptian papers, repeatedly accusing the University of teaching pornography and of showing a lack of regard for the values of Egyptians. In a 26 April letter to AUC, responding to an inquiry from the University, the Office of the Censor at the

Dr. John Gerhart, President