

January 21, 2003

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon  
3 Kaplan Street  
Kiryat Ben Gurion  
Jerusalem, ISRAEL

*By Facsimile:* 972 2 651 2631  
972 2 566 4838  
972 3 691 7915

Dear Prime Minister Sharon,

I write to you on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America, and its Committee on Academic Freedom, in order to express our grave concern over your government's closure of two Palestinian universities in the West Bank. The closure of these institutions is transparently punitive, and thus clearly constitutes collective punishment as well as a drastic and unwarranted denial of academic freedom. We ask that your government rescind this decision immediately.

The Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) comprises 2700 academics worldwide who teach and conduct research on the Middle East and North Africa, and is the preeminent professional association in the field. The association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, and is committed to ensuring respect for the principles of academic freedom and freedom of expression in the region and in connection with the study of the Middle East and North Africa.

The IDF statement of January 15, 2003 announcing the closure of Hebron Polytechnic University and the Islamic College of Hebron the previous day alleged that several students who had attended these institutions had been involved in armed attacks against Israeli targets. Some of these attacks targeted Israeli civilians while others were directed against military occupation forces.

While we appreciate that the State of Israel has the right to defend itself and its citizens, closing Palestinian universities is not a proper recourse. If Israel has evidence of wrongdoing on the part of individual students or other persons, the government should arrest those persons and prosecute them in a manner that meets international fair trial standards.

We further note that most of the attacks cited occurred in early 2002, while one dated from 1996. Thus it appears that these closures were instituted not for concrete and legitimate security purposes but as a form of punishment of the Palestinian community in the Hebron area.

Page 2/January 21, 2003

Re: MESA concern over closure of universities

As you know, collective punishment is forbidden under humanitarian international law. By closing the universities, your government is denying the right to education to over 6,000 current students because of the alleged deeds of a few. In addition to the collective punishment of thousands of students who have not been charged with any offense, your government's action also adversely impacts the faculty and staff of these universities.

Press reports indicate that these may not be the only universities to be closed by Israel. Birzeit University and Al-Najah National University in Nablus have also been mentioned as candidates for closure. We urge that your government not make a bad situation worse by further closures of institutions of higher education.

There is no evidence that university closures such as these will lead to a decrease in Palestinian violence against Israel. Indeed, Israel closed all Palestinian universities for years in the late 1980s and early 1990s during the first Intifada with no discernable drop in violence. We are thus skeptical that enhanced security is a plausible justification for the action.

On behalf of MESA, I ask that your government rescind immediately the decision to close Hebron Polytechnic University and the Islamic College of Hebron, and that no other closures be contemplated.

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Amy W. Newhall  
Executive Director