



**Middle  
East  
Studies  
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September 21, 2006

Dear Prime Minister Ehud Olmert  
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Dear Minister of Defense Amir Peretz  
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I write to you on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America, and its Committee on Academic Freedom in order to request that the Government of Israel and the Israeli Defense Forces allow 10 occupational therapy students from Gaza to attend Bethlehem University. These students, including Shima Naji, petitioned the Israeli Supreme Court in December 2005, and asked the court to overturn the restriction placed on their access to study in the West Bank. We request that you immediately lift the order restricting them from traveling to the West Bank and that you direct your legal representatives not to oppose this petition. This is essential in order that these students exercise their right to access to education, a key component of academic freedom.

The Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the International Journal of Middle East Studies and has more than 2600 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.

While Israel has legitimate security concerns and a responsibility to protect its citizens, it must do so in a manner that does not violate international human rights and humanitarian law, including the prohibition against collective punishment. A sweeping prohibition imposed on all students from Gaza against studying subjects such as occupational therapy and medical specializations that are only available at West Bank universities, however, constitutes precisely such a violation. The rationale offered by the Government of Israel and the Israeli Defense Forces is that students from Gaza studying in the West Bank might become involved in hostile acts against the State of Israel in the future. It is not based on any evidence of past and current wrongdoing on the part of individual students, but, rather, on a collective suspicion of all Palestinian students.

As you know, collective punishment is forbidden under humanitarian international law. A restriction imposed on all students from Gaza is transparently punitive and thus clearly constitutes collective punishment as well as a drastic and unwarranted denial of academic freedom. By proscribing access to West Bank universities and academic disciplines of choice, your government is denying the right to education to hundreds of students.

Over 200 professors in Israeli universities have recently called for these sweeping restrictions to be lifted.

On behalf of MESA, I ask that your government allow the 10 petitioning occupational therapy students from Gaza to attend Bethlehem University and thus restore their access to higher education and academic freedom. Occupational therapy is a new specialization in Gaza and there is currently only one practitioner with 24,000 cases requiring his/her attention.

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Juan R.I. Cole  
MESA President