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Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu
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Supreme Court Justices and Registrars
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Minister of the Interior Aryeh Machluf Deri
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Dear Prime Minister Netanyahu, Supreme Court Justices and Registrars, Ministers Shaked, & Deri,

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to register our grave concern regarding the recent ruling by the Jerusalem District Court that upheld the deportation of Mr. Omar Shakir on the basis of his human rights advocacy. Shakir, who is the director of Human Rights Watch (HRW) in Israel and Palestine, remains under the threat of deportation based on his advocacy both before and during his time at Human Rights Watch regarding Israeli human rights abuses. HRW, a Nobel Prize-winning organization, is a global leader in advocacy. Its research reports are evidentiary grounds for academics, journalists, governments, and international organizations alike.

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 more than 2500 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.

The Israeli government is targeting Omar Shakir for the positions he has articulated on social media as well as for the HRW reports he has produced. The latter reveal how nearly 1000 companies, operating in at least 16 settlement industrial zones, contribute to human rights abuses of Palestinians when they do business with Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank. The West Bank is home to about 2.9 million Palestinians who are denied civil and political rights under a fifty-two-year-old military occupation. There are more than 600,000 Israeli settlers on the West Bank and in East Jerusalem; they build their settlements with state support on territories that are recognized by international law, as well as UN resolutions, as occupied. The court ruling indicated that Shakir has until 1 May 2019 to leave the country, but Shakir and HRW have said they are appealing the ruling to Israel's Supreme Court.

Omar Shakir has been the country director for HRW in Israel and Palestine since October 2016. During his tenure in this position, the Israeli state has targeted both Shakir and

HRW in an effort to muzzle any criticism of Israel's human rights abuses. When HRW initially applied for a work permit for Shakir in July 2016, the decision was delayed and eventually denied by the Interior Ministry in February 2017, on the grounds that the group engaged in "Palestinian propaganda, while falsely raising the banner of human rights." After international pressure, Shakir was granted a work visa and allowed to take up his position. His office has published reports on the following topics: how settlements violate Palestinian human rights, the repression of Palestinians by the security forces of both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, Israeli war crimes in Gaza, and how Israeli banks and international corporations contribute to abuses of Palestinians by working with the illegal settlements. None of these reports advocate for a boycott.

In December 2017, the Ministry of Strategic Affairs compiled and shared with Shakir a detailed dossier that noted individual tweets of his, as well as his activities while a student, some of which date back to over a decade ago when Shakir was an undergraduate at Stanford University. These notes in the dossier are decontextualized and are selectively presented as evidence that Shakir's advocacy is anti-Israel. In May 2018, the Interior Ministry ordered Shakir to leave Israel within two weeks, accusing him of promoting boycotts of Israel. The decision focused on Shakir's activism before he joined HRW.

HRW and Shakir challenged the decision, and the case has been in the Jerusalem District Court for the past year. In court, the Israeli government shifted to highlighting Shakir's and HRW's research on business activities, such as global companies like Airbnb and Booking.com. This research and resulting reports recommended that these companies cease operations in Israeli settlements on the West Bank. The court ruled that such activities constitute a call for "boycott of the law." They also interpreted Shakir's refusal to disavow his past advocacy in court as a commitment to "boycotts." Israel's Supreme Court will now hear the appeal.

Compiling statements and dossiers about people advocating for non-violent and time-tested tactics like boycotts is not the work of a democracy. Yet, the state of Israel insists on using a political litmus test for entry into or permission to stay in the country even if one has a legal visa. Shakir has been barred entry by the authoritarian and repressive states of Syria, Bahrain, and Egypt. If Israel joins this list and makes entry contingent on an individual's political stance, it stifles democratic debate.

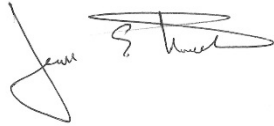
This case sets a chilling precedent for academic researchers. Ejecting the country director from one of the most prominent human rights organizations in the world will constrict witnessing and reporting on the human rights abuses of Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and Hamas. It also may facilitate a broader government campaign to silence organizations or researchers that engage in advocacy regarding settlements and Israeli human rights abuses. The spillover effect could be applied to those seeking to conduct academic research, engage in a debate about ideas and policies, or visit family members.

We therefore express hope that the Israeli Supreme Court will reverse the district court's decision. We call upon the Interior Ministry to cease deporting or barring people from entry on the basis of their political views. We also call upon the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs to stop its surveillance and publishing remarks to publicly smear the person and work of an individual legally permitted to work and reside in the country.

These Canary Mission-like dossiers publicly denounce people who differ with the viewpoints of the Israeli state. The campaign to contain researchers marks a dangerous escalation in anti-democratic tactics. It highlights the perils of over a half a century of military occupation.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Judith E. Tucker
MESA President
Professor, Georgetown University



Laurie Brand
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom
Professor, University of Southern California