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Dear Prime Minister, Ministers, and Ambassador,

We write to you on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express our dismay regarding the severe and unreasonable limitations imposed on foreign nationals who are faculty members at Birzeit University (BZU) and other Palestinian universities in the West Bank and Gaza. These faculty, some of whom have been teaching for years in Palestinian universities, now have to deal with a wide range of arbitrary demands and conditions in order to obtain re-entry visas that permit their employment in Palestinian universities. Moreover, for the past three years, the Israeli authorities have increasingly denied visas – both new and re-entry – to such academics. These restrictions severely imperil the quality of Palestinian education and the right to education of Palestinian students.

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 over 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.

We previously wrote to you on this matter on 6 August 2018. Like peer institutions across the world, Palestinian universities employ academics and administrators who are foreign nationals. For the past three years especially, these faculty and staff members have encountered numerous arbitrary measures imposed by the Israeli occupation authorities which endanger their employment and the quality of their research. These measures include: changing

documentation requirements without prior or official notification; lengthy processing periods that force applicants to overstay valid visas or leave the country; shortened and arbitrary duration of visas; the issuing of visas that allow the holder to reside and work only within the West Bank; restrictions on ports of entry/exit; and demands for financial bonds of 20,000 to 80,000 NIS or 5,600 to 22,500 USD. The application of such measures has not been transparent, and hence foreign nationals are unable to determine if they can accept a job offer from a Palestinian university, if they will be able to continue their employment for the duration of the appointment, or if, as a university employee, they would be permitted to travel abroad for academic conferences or for conducting research. Indeed, travel to a conference --in the United States, Europe, or the Middle East -- or making a research trip to an archive, including archives in West Jerusalem, could threaten the future employment of these professors, thus negatively affecting the quality of the scholar's research.

Because of these arbitrary and opaque measures, there has been a sharp decrease in the number of international academics in Palestinian universities. A survey conducted in February 2018 by the Palestinian National Authority's Ministry of Education and Higher Education showed that the previous two academic years (2016/2017 and 2017/2018) were exceptionally difficult for foreign nationals. The job security of US, British, Dutch, French, German, Indian and Jordanian citizens working as faculty and staff in several Palestinian universities (Al-Istiqlal, Al-Quds Open, An-Najah National, Birzeit, Hebron, Kadoorie Palestine Technical, The Arab American, Jenin, and the University of Palestine in Gaza) was under severe threat: over half of these scholars faced denials or restrictions on entry and residency. Israeli authorities denied twelve entries into the country and at least 20 academics are currently facing obstacles to extending/securing visas.

Denials or restrictions on entry and presence have been particularly devastating for BZU. Almost all foreign national academics and staff, from chairs to administrators, have encountered problems in visa renewals over the past year. The denial and restrictions of entry and residency visas have harmed the daily functions of BZU: teaching, instruction in foreign language, curriculum planning, committee work, supervising theses and papers, conducting research -- in short, everything that academics do to ensure the proper training of students and the quality of their research. Some of these professors began to work at the university more than a decade ago and have long-standing connections, not only with students and colleagues, but also with the community in which they live. The situation deteriorated further in June 2018, when Israeli authorities denied visa extensions to seven international faculty members, one-third of the international staff at the university. In the 2018-2019 academic year, eight international faculty of nineteen were denied visa extensions or entry.

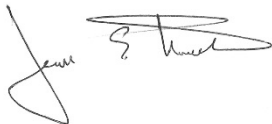
These measures have short-term and long-term effects. In the short term, they jeopardize academic and administrative work in these universities. In the long term, they imperil the right of Palestinians to education, isolate the Palestinian community from the rest of the world, and may eventually cause severe harm to the educational and employment opportunities of the next generation of Palestinian students.

We condemn, in general, the ongoing constraints imposed by the Israeli authorities on the higher education sector in the West Bank and Gaza. We condemn, in particular, the denial of the right to education of the hundreds of students in the West Bank who have been taught and mentored by these professors, and the imposition of capricious and cruel measures on our colleagues. These measures violate principles that should be protected, and indeed cherished, in any democratic state and are in contradiction of international humanitarian law and international human rights law. As the occupying power, Israel must maintain the functioning of Palestinian civil institutions, including Palestinian universities. In other words, Israel is obliged to maintain a transparent policy that allows the entry and presence of foreign faculty and staff members in a manner that does not harm or endanger Palestinian higher education. It is obligated, as well, to ensure the right of the Palestinian people to education. The right to education is enshrined in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966), an obligation ratified by Israel.

We therefore call upon you to ensure that these professors can renew their visas, and that the academic restrictions, whose sole purpose is to make it exceedingly difficult for foreign nationals to work in academic institutions in Palestine, be abolished immediately. We join the call from Birzeit University, Al-Haq, and Adalah--the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel--for an immediate halt to this policy of targeting Palestinian academic freedom and Palestinian institutions of higher learning. We ask that Israel lift the restrictions preventing international academics from staying and working in the West Bank, refrain from imposing arbitrary restrictions on the duration of stay or extension of stay for international academics, and order the publication of a clear and lawful procedure for issuing entry visas and work permits for international academics in the West Bank, to enable the university to manage and maintain its academic freedom.

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