



**Middle
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Brigadier General Rasan Alian
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Supreme Court of the State of Israel
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Dear Prime Minister, Ministers, Brigadier-General, and Chief Clerk,

We write to you on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to once again urge a halt to the Israeli army's targeting, arrests and ongoing imprisonment of students and staff at Palestinian universities. As we have detailed in previous letters, these arrests and subsequent violent interrogation and imprisonment are not only a clear violation of the basic rights of the individuals themselves; they are part of a larger policy that directly targets students and undermines the role of academic institutions for thousands of students living under occupation. The Israeli military further escalated its attack on the Palestinian student movement on 21 October 2020, officially labeling a student bloc at Birzeit University in the West Bank, a "prohibited terrorist organization," thereby officially criminalizing students for their political work on campus. We condemn in the strongest possible terms the harm the Israeli army and judiciary inflict on students at all levels of education through these arrests.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, MESA publishes the International Journal of Middle East Studies and has nearly 2800 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

According to Palestinian sources, including the Palestinian Prisoner Society and Addameer, Palestinian Support and Human Rights Association, there are currently about 300 Palestinian students in Israeli prisons. These detentions are emblematic of the Israeli policy of targeting and disrupting Palestinian higher education. Students, professors and employees on Palestinian



campuses have been targeted by the Israeli military, as indicated by, for example, the continued detention of Imad Barghouthi, Professor of Theoretical Space Plasma Physics at Al-Quds University (see our letter dated [21 September 2020](#)). Our committee has repeatedly written to you in the past to protest these arbitrary arrests (most recently, see letters dated [11 May 2020](#), [24 September 2019](#), [22 January 2019](#), [8 August 2018](#)).

The Israeli army has been particularly aggressive in targeting students at Birzeit University (BZU). Over seventy currently registered BZU graduate and undergraduate students are incarcerated in Israeli prisons. According to the Right to Education Campaign at BZU, over the course of the first semester of this academic year (September 2020 through February 2021), the Israeli army arrested twenty-one students; each student endured a period of interrogation, often without access to legal representation or advocacy. Seventeen of these recently arrested students remain in prison. Three are being held in so-called administrative detention: Muhammad Zayton, Rami Karajeh, and Sufyan Maqdadi. Fourteen students have been subjected to violent interrogation, including physical and psychological torture; they were subsequently charged and now await trial: Muhammad Abu Hawa, Muslim Tamami, Omar Abu 'Aqil, Ahmad al Khatib, Osama al Sufi, Zayn Qadomi, Ahmad Khroub, 'Amro 'Aqil, Nadir Uwaidat, Muhammad Qasim, Mutasim Ballah Zaylom, Hazim Uwaidat, Yu'ad Abu Ayash, Abbas Abu 'Alyia, Husayn Qaddora, and Shatha al-Tawil.

Among these recent arrests is Shatha al-Tawil, who is now detained along with her classmates Elia Abu Hijleh, Ruba 'Assi and Layan Kayed (about whom we wrote on [19 June 2020](#)) in Damon prison. Shatha and Ruba, like Elia and Layan, as well as Mais Abu Ghosh before them (about whom we wrote on [11 May 2020](#)) have undergone physical and psychological torture. Elia has now been sentenced to 16 months in prison and a fine of 6000 NIS. Shatha and Ruba have been charged; they await trial and sentencing. All three were charged simply with involvement in student organizations on campus.

These new arrests follow the same pattern that the Israeli army and security forces have established over the last several years in a broad campaign targeting Palestinian students in the West Bank. Among these students are Omar al-Kiswani (about whom we wrote on [11 April 2019](#), [2 January 2019](#), [13 March 2018](#)), whom the Israeli army took captive from the heart of the university campus. Omar was subjected to prolonged interrogation in the Moscobiya detention center in Jerusalem. His lawyers report that he endured physical and psychological torture. He has subsequently been charged and sentenced to 50 months with a 55 000 NIS fine. On 2 April 2020, Muhammad al-Majid Hasan, like Omar al-Kiswani, was subjected to prolonged interrogation at the Moscobiya detention center. Muhammad endured forty days of interrogation, during which he was diagnosed with the Covid 19 virus. Muhammad was later sentenced to a 14-month prison term. The Israeli army also arrested Muhammad's brother, Abd al-Majid Hassan, on 30 March 2021. After interrogation, many of these students face the prospect of extended detention without trial.

The detention and sentencing of these students are examples of the ongoing mistreatment of Palestinian students by the Israeli authorities. They are part of a pattern of Israeli repression of Palestinian students, and clearly violate students' rights to free speech and peaceful protest. Furthermore, these arbitrary arrests are violations of the right to education enshrined in Article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 13 of the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. As a party to the UDHR and a signatory of the ICESCR, Israel is obligated to uphold these conventions. Hence, it must ensure the rights of the Palestinian people to education. We call upon you to cease these arbitrary arrests immediately and unconditionally, release all of these students, and protect Palestinian students' right to education.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Dina Rizk Khoury
MESA President
Professor, George Washington University



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

cc:

European Coordination of Committees and Associations for Palestine (ECCP)
Micharl Lynk, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the
Palestinian territories

James Heenan, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights,
Ramallah

UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, MENA section
Noha Bawazir, Head of Office and UNESCO Representative, UNESCO Liaison
Office, Ramallah

Palestinian delegation to UNESCO

Viktor Almqvist, Press Officer - Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) and
Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI) – European Parliament

The Honorable Veronica Michelle Bachelet Jeria, The United Nations High
Commissioner for Human Rights

The Honorable Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of
Human Rights Defenders



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Maria Arena, Chair of the Europeans Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

Dunja Mijatovic, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Kato Piri, Member, Committee on Foreign Affairs, European Parliament

Irene Khan, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression