28 June 2021

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett
Fax: +972-2-5664838

Minister of Education Yifat Shasha-Biton
Fax: +972-2-5602390

Minister of Justice Gideon Sa’ar
Fax: +972-2-6285438

Brigadier General Ghasan Alyan
Head of Civil Administration in the West Bank, Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT)
Fax: +972-2-6599133

Chief Clerk Init Malul
Supreme Court of the State of Israel
Fax: +972-2-6759648

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 demand a halt to the Israeli military’s ongoing violence against students, faculty and staff at Palestinian universities.

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.

On 2 June, Fadi Washaha, a student of political science at Birzeit University (BZU), died from injuries he suffered at the hands of the Israeli military nearly two weeks prior. The murder of Fadi Washaha is the story of higher education under occupation. During his time as a university student, Fadi was arrested several times. He spent ten years in Israeli prisons, eight of those while an enrolled student at BZU; he was killed before he was able to finish his degree. His multiple arrests are not uncommon. According to the Right to Education Campaign at BZU, over the course of this academic year (2020/21), 38 arrests of undergraduate students were recorded at BZU alone.

BZU faculty have also been subjected to violent aggression. On 23 May 2021, Israeli forces attacked Dr. Lena Miari, a professor of Women’s Studies and Anthropology, while she was protesting ongoing dispossession in the neighborhood of Shaikh Jarrah in Jerusalem. Members of the heavily militarized Israeli police forces occupying the neighborhood threw a sound grenade directly at Professor Miari’s head. She was severely injured and subsequently spent several days in intensive care in hospital.
As we have detailed in previous letters, the numerous arrests, subsequent brutal interrogations, and imprisonment are not only a clear violation of the basic rights of the individuals themselves; they are also part of a larger policy that directly targets thousands of Palestinian students and undermines the role of Palestinian academic institutions. In our letter dated 12 April 2021, we documented the intensification of this policy, including the criminalization by the Israeli military of student political activities on Palestinian university campuses. This intensification has now become a widespread campaign of terror. According to Nadi al-Aseer (Palestine Prisoners Society), in May 2021 alone Israeli military and police forces arrested 3100 Palestinians throughout Palestine/Israel: 2000 arrests of Palestinian citizens of Israel; 677 arrests of Palestinians in occupied Jerusalem; and 423 arrests of Palestinians in the occupied West Bank.

These arrests and detentions are emblematic of the Israeli policy of targeting students, professors and employees on Palestinian campuses and disrupting Palestinian higher education. Currently, there are more than 300 Palestinian students in Israeli prisons. Our committee has repeatedly written to you to protest these arbitrary arrests [see letters dated 11 May 2020, 24 September 2019, 22 January 2019, 8 August 2018].

We are particularly alarmed by the Israeli army’s aggressive targeting of BZU students. As we noted in previous letters, over seventy currently registered BZU graduate and undergraduate students are incarcerated in Israeli prisons. According to the Right to Education Campaign at BZU, in May 2021, twelve students were arrested by the Israeli military. According to testimonies gathered by the Palestinian Prisoners Society, this most recent wave of arrests has included an intensification of methods of torture during interrogation, as documented in the arrest and interrogation of Mahmud ‘Abed, a first-year student studying mathematics at BZU, from the ‘Issawiya neighborhood of Jerusalem. He was arrested in the early morning hours of 21 May 2021, when special forces of the Israeli military invaded his family home, first blowing up the door and then proceeding to confiscate all the mobile phones of Mahmud’s family members. They then violently arrested Mahmud and transferred him by military vehicle to the Moscobiya detention center in Jerusalem. According to Mahmud, for 13 days he was subjected to constant beatings, deprived of access to basic human needs, and imprisoned in a small room without access to light. He was later released to house arrest and fined 2000 NIS. This was Mahmud’s fifth arrest, and he is only 18 years old.

These tactics are practiced throughout Palestine/Israel. Asala Mansour, a Palestinian citizen of Israel from Majd al-Krum, is a fourth-year student at BZU, studying law with a minor in English literature. On 24 May 2021, Asala was notified by the police, via a phone call to her father, that she had to turn herself in at the local police station for questioning. According to the testimony she gave to the Palestinian Prisoners Society, she was interrogated for seven hours while shackled. She demanded that the interrogation be conducted in Arabic; her refusal to respond to the interrogators in Hebrew led her to be
strip-searched, also while shackled. She was later released for a period of house arrest for five days with a fine of 5000 NIS.

We have recorded these methods of interrogation in previous letters, in reference to, for example, the interrogation of BZU student Ruba ‘Assi. Ruba and her classmates Shatha al-Tawil, Elia Abu Hijleh, and Layan Kayed (about whom we wrote on 19 June 2020), as well as Mais Abu Ghosh before them (about whom we wrote on 11 May 2020), have undergone physical and psychological torture, sometimes lasting weeks. Ruba was recently sentenced to 21 months in Damon Prison and fined 3000 NIS. She was arrested on 9 July 2020, just before she was to begin her fourth and final year as an undergraduate student studying sociology at BZU. While the most recent events in Palestine/Israel, about which the MESA Board of Directors issued a statement [dated 21 May 2021], have included an intensification of arrests and detentions, Ruba’s case shows that this is a longstanding practice. The classmates with whom she began her university career graduate this month, but Ruba ‘Assi remains a political prisoner.

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 [see our many letters, for example, 12 April 2021, 11 April 2019, 22 January 2019, 13 March 2018]. The Israeli courts have ordered administrative detention for two of the BZU students arrested during May 2021. This is a practice of imprisonment without charge, subject to renewal. As a result, these students face the prospect of extended detention without trial and without the state’s being required to produce evidence, thus interrupting their education for however long the courts extend the detention.

The practices described above are part of a pattern of Israeli violation of 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, to release all of these students, and to 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 Emerita, University of Southern California

cc:
European Coordination of Committees and Associations for Palestine (ECCP)
Michael 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
Veronica Michelle Bachelet Jeria, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders
Maria Arena, Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights
Dunja Mijatovic, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights
Kati Piri, Member, Committee on Foreign Affairs, European Parliament
Irene Khan, UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression