

Middle East Studies Association of North America, Inc.

3700 O St. NW, ICC Suite 241 Washington, DC 20057
520-333-2577 secretariat@mesana.org mesana.org

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Volker Türk
UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

Sidharto Reza Suryodipuro
President, UN Human Rights Council

Francesca Albanese
UN Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories

Your Excellencies, Madam Special Rapporteur:

We write on behalf of the Board of Directors and the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express our deep concern regarding Israel's relentless assaults on Palestinian universities and its targeting of students and faculty in the occupied West Bank. While nearly every institution of higher learning in the Gaza Strip has been destroyed or has sustained considerable damage rendering them unusable, the violent military interventions at universities in the West Bank persist. On 6 January 2026, the Israeli military forcibly entered Birzeit University and fired live ammunition, rubber bullets, tear gas, and stun grenades, injuring forty-one students. Eleven students were hospitalized, including nine with gunshot wounds.

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 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.

During this most recent invasion, the Israeli military destroyed the university's main gates and raided the campus during formal hours of instruction while more than 8,000 students were present. Upon entry, the military opened fire indiscriminately, turning the university grounds into a military zone. According to Israeli sources, the military sought to disrupt "an event in support of terrorism." The event in question was a non-violent, student solidarity action in support of Palestinian political prisoners and the screening of "The Voice of Hind Rajab," a film about the final hours of 5-year-old Hind Rajab, who was trapped in a vehicle under heavy Israeli fire in Gaza before she was killed in January 2024.

This attack is not an isolated incident. One month prior, on 9 December 2025, the Israeli military raided both Birzeit University and Al-Quds University's main campus in Abu Dis. It entered the Birzeit campus during the early morning hours, detained five security guards and stormed several buildings, causing extensive damage to property and equipment. The attack on Al-Quds University took place later that morning during formal hours of instruction. The military positioned sniper units on rooftops, entered classrooms during lecture sessions, and interrogated students.

According to Palestinian Authority Ministry of Education and Higher Education statistics, in the period between October 2023 and December 2025, the Israeli military killed 37 university students and injured 259 others in the West Bank. It detained 463 university students – 148 of whom are from Birzeit University

– and 27 higher education staff, most held under administrative detention, that is, without trial or charge. Israeli military raids of Palestinian universities and colleges are routine practices. According to Birzeit University sources, the incursion on 6 January was the 26th raid on the university since 2002.

Israel's heightened movement restrictions on, and routine harassment of, Palestinians at military checkpoints regularly prevent students, faculty, and staff from reaching their respective campuses or impose on them significant delays, always with considerable threats to their personal security. According to the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), there are approximately 849 movement obstacles throughout the West Bank, including 288 gates, 60 percent of which are frequently closed. Israeli settlers, with the acquiescence of the military, routinely impose their own movement restrictions as well. Furthermore, in 2025, according to UNOCHA, Israeli settlers (with the protection, and in some cases, participation of the military) carried out 1,800 attacks in the West Bank that resulted in the injury of 1,190 Palestinians and property damage in about 280 communities across the West Bank, primarily in the Ramallah, Nablus and Hebron governorates where key universities and colleges are located.

Israel's systematic and ongoing assault on Palestinian institutions of higher learning, its raids on university campuses, ongoing and widespread detention of students, faculty and staff, movement restrictions, and the escalation of settler violence have made it nearly impossible for these institutions to carry out their educational mission. Israel's collective punishment measures are an extension of decades-old military occupation policies that seek to undermine the education sector. As evidenced by the many letters we have written [among them, those dated: 23 June 2025; 20 March 2024; 25 January 2024; 28 November 2023; 22 November 2023; 21 November 2023; 16 October 2023], the Government of Israel, its armed forces and the settlers it protects have engaged in persistent, gross violations of international laws and legal norms in their unrelenting attacks on Palestinian university students and institutions of higher education.

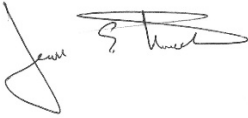
As an occupying authority, Israel's targeting of Palestinian educational institutions through incursions, raids, attacks and detention of students and faculty constitute violations of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, relating to the protection of civilians in times of war. The Government of Israel and its military's obstruction of education is also a clear violation of the right to education enshrined in Article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and Article 13 of the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The right to education is an internationally protected human right, and educational institutions are protected under international law; this right is binding in all circumstances and is to be protected in all situations, including during crises and emergencies resulting from civil strife and war. Israel is a party to the UDHR and to the ICESCR and is therefore legally obligated to uphold them.

These cumulative attacks on higher education are part of a broader genocidal campaign now being waged against the Palestinian people. We call upon international actors to intervene as they can to put an end to the ongoing assaults on the academic sector and take measures to ensure that Palestinian universities can carry out their educational mission and Palestinian students can continue their education undisturbed.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this urgent matter.



Ussama Makdisi
MESA President
Professor, University of California, Berkeley



Judith E. Tucker
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom
Professor Emerita, Georgetown University

Recommendations

To the United Nations:

1. Implement concrete measures, such as the coordination of “protective presence” in the form of visible international accompaniment at checkpoints, routes to universities, and on college and university campuses, to ensure the protection of students, faculty and staff from Israeli military and settler attacks and arbitrary police actions, so that students can continue their education, faculty can continue to teach and universities can carry out their educational mission.
2. Demand full access to the occupied Palestinian territories to ensure that the UN can carry out independent monitoring and documentation of violations against institutions of higher education.
3. Demand that Israel lift its restrictions on movement that have prevented Palestinian institutions of higher education from properly carrying out their educational mission.

To the United States:

1. Ensure the implementation of a permanent ceasefire and call for an end to Israel’s blockade on the Gaza Strip so that the education sector can begin to be rebuilt and the right to education can be upheld.
2. Demand that the Government of Israel, its armed forces, and the settlers it protects halt their violent and arbitrary attacks against Palestinian universities, and violent harassment of faculty, staff and students. Impose sanctions on Israeli officials and settlers responsible for the blockade and raids against Palestinian institutions of higher education.
3. Pressure Israel to lift its restrictions on movement that have prevented Palestinian universities from properly carrying out their educational mission.

To the European Union:

1. Support a permanent ceasefire and call for an end to Israel’s blockade on the Gaza Strip so that so that educational sector can be rebuilt, and the right to education can be upheld.
2. Demand that the Government of Israel, its armed forces, and the settlers it protects halt their violent and arbitrary attacks against Palestinian universities, and violent harassment of faculty, staff and students. Impose sanctions on Israeli officials and settlers responsible for the blockade and raids against Palestinian institutions of higher education.
3. Pressure Israel to lift its restrictions on movement that have prevented Palestinian universities from properly carrying out their educational mission.

4. Conduct a legal assessment of Israeli violations against the Palestinian higher education sector to determine which aspects of EU-Israel cooperation violate international law and take steps to remedy those violations.

cc:

United Nations

Cheikh Niang, Chair of UN Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People
Ajith Sunghay, Head of Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in the Occupied
Palestinian Territory

Farida Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education

Navanethem Pillay, Commissioner of the UN Human Rights Council's Independent International

Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel

Miloon Kothari, Commissioner of the UN Human Rights Council's Independent International

Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and
Israel

Chris Sidoti, Commissioner of the UN Human Rights Council's Independent International Commission of
Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel

Martin Griffiths, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator
of UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

Riyad Mansour, Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to the UN

Audrey Azoulay, Director-General, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

Noha Abdul-Aziz Bawazir, Head of UNESCO Office in Ramallah and UNESCO Representative in
Palestine

European Union

Roberta Metsola, President of the European Parliament

David McAllister, Chair of the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs

Mounir Satouri, Chair of European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

Viktor Almqvist, Press Officer for the Committee on Foreign Affairs and Subcommittee on Human
Rights of the European Parliament

Ursula von der Leyen, President of European Commission

Kaja Kallas, Vice-President European Commission and EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and
Security Policy of European Commission and Council of the European Union

Hélène Le Gal, Managing Director of European External Action Service

Michael O'Flaherty, Commissioner for Human Rights of Council of Europe

United States

Donald J. Trump, President of the United States

Marco Rubio, Secretary of State and US National Security Advisor

Peter Hegseth, Secretary of Defense

Mike Waltz, Acting Representative of the United States to the UN

Other

Ahmed Abul Gheit, Secretary General of the League of Arab States

H.E. Hissein Brahim Taha, Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation