



Middle East Studies Association of North America, Inc.

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18 May 2026

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Your Excellencies, High Representative, Special Rapporteurs, and Mr. Secretary:

I write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America to express grave concern about the widening pattern of attacks on higher education infrastructure and the targeting of scholars, academics, and students across the Middle East, and especially in Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran. These attacks appear to reflect an increasingly dangerous interpretation of universities, research facilities, and academic expertise as “dual use” and

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therefore targetable. We reject this logic in the strongest terms. Universities, laboratories, libraries, classrooms, faculty offices, student dormitories, and the scholars and students who inhabit them are quintessentially civilian. Treating them as “dual use” or presumptively suspect, especially on the grounds that knowledge itself may have military applications, gravely undermines international humanitarian law and the principle of distinction at its core.

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 2,600 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 principle of distinction requires parties to an armed conflict to distinguish at all times between civilians and combatants, and between civilian objects and military objectives. Attacks must be directed only at military objectives. Under Article 52 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives, and military objectives are limited to objects that, by their nature, location, purpose, or use, make an effective contribution to military action and whose destruction offers a definite military advantage in the circumstances at the time. This definition of civilian objects is widely accepted as a statement of customary international law and thus binding on all parties to a conflict. This rule articulates the legal barrier that protects civilian life, civilian institutions, and the social worlds that make survival possible in wartime.

That barrier is now being eroded by an expansive and legally dangerous use of “dual use” reasoning. International law does not recognize “dual use” as an independent category that automatically transforms civilian objects into military objectives. Yet in Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran, we see a disturbing pattern in which educational institutions are treated as targetable because they may include laboratories, technical training, engineering expertise, data infrastructure, or scholars whose knowledge could theoretically be put to military use. This reasoning has no limiting principle. If accepted, it would expose every research university, every science department, every engineering faculty, and every medically oriented research center in a conflict zone to attack. Academic knowledge is not, by definition, a weapon.

In Gaza, this logic has accompanied the near-total destruction of the higher education sector. MESA has previously documented the killing of thousands of students and hundreds of educational staff, the destruction of all major universities in Gaza within the first 100 days of the war, and the devastation of the physical infrastructure necessary for higher education, including laboratories, libraries, classrooms, and technological systems. The destruction has not been limited to buildings. It has included the killing of university presidents, deans, professors, lecturers, librarians, researchers, and students whose work sustained Palestinian intellectual life.

In Lebanon, two academics were killed in an Israeli drone strike at the Lebanese University while leaving a campus meeting convened to organize remote education for students displaced or endangered by the conflict. This illustrates the dangerous spread of the same lethal logic the Israeli military applied in Gaza to Lebanon. Israel reportedly claimed that one of the scholar's scientific expertise had been used for military purposes. The consequence of normalizing such a claim would be chilling: physicists, chemists, engineers, computer scientists, physicians, and other academics could be stripped of civilian protection because their expertise is considered useful, or potentially useful, to a military actor.

In Iran, MESA has documented attacks on universities, research centers, medical science facilities, schools, and technical institutes. In a letter dated 22 April 2026 MESA's Committee on Academic Freedom documented that, between 28 February and 30 March, twenty-one universities in Iran were attacked by U.S.-Israeli strikes, damaging 154 buildings and sites across campuses, including major institutions in Tehran and provincial academic centers. The letter further describes damage to research facilities, medical science infrastructure, dormitories, libraries, laboratories, and data systems. MESA also notes that U.S.-Israeli claims that certain institutions were "dual use" not only undermines the principle of distinction but also stretches the concept of "dual use" in ways that disregards proportionality and fails to account for the direct, indirect, and cumulative harm to civilians.

We are particularly alarmed by the apparent embrace by the United States of an expansive Israeli interpretation of "dual use" for targeting purposes. When the United States adopts, supports, enables, or fails to repudiate a theory under which civilian universities and scholars become legitimate targets because of their fields of study, research capacity, or alleged contribution to a broader war effort, it helps normalize a doctrine that puts academic life across the region, and, if the same logic were to be applied elsewhere, the world, at risk. Such a doctrine is incompatible with the protective purpose of international humanitarian law. By collapsing the distinction between civilian intellectual infrastructure and military objectives, the U.S. is now extending the Israeli practices that have converted education itself into a field of war.

The effects are cumulative and long-lasting. The destruction of higher education infrastructure does not end when a strike ends. It deprives students of education, severs communities from professional training, destroys archives and laboratories, displaces faculty, interrupts medical and scientific research, and attacks the social capacity of a people to rebuild. The killing of scholars and students likewise destroys more than individual lives. The consequences of the widescale targeting of, and attacks on, scholars and higher education infrastructure disrupts the continuity of intellectual communities, the transmission of knowledge, and the civilian future of entire societies. Scholars have described such campaigns as scholasticide: the deliberate destruction of educational institutions and the intellectual life they sustain.

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We therefore call upon international and regional organizations, including the United Nations, UNESCO, the European Union, and all states with influence over the parties to these conflicts, to condemn the targeting of universities, research facilities, schools, scholars, academics, and students in Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran. We urge them to reject any interpretation of “dual use” that treats academic expertise, technical knowledge, or civilian research capacity as sufficient grounds for targeting. We also call upon all scholarly associations globally to join us in condemning the dangerous precedent set by the rampant targeting of higher education infrastructure and personnel across the Middle East.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ussama Makdisi', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Ussama Makdisi
MESA President
Professor, University of California, Berkeley

Cc:

Coly Seck, Chair of the 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

Srinivasan Muralidhar, Commissioner of the UN Human Rights Council’s Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel

Florence Mumba, 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

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

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

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

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 the European Commission

Hélène Le Gal, Managing Director for the Middle East and North Africa, European Union, External Action Service (EEAS)

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

Donald J. Trump, President of the United States

Pete Hegseth, U.S. Secretary of Defense

Dorothy Shea, Acting United States Ambassador to the United Nations

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

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

Joseph Aoun, President of Lebanon

Massoud Pezeshkian, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Amir-Saeid Iravani, Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the UN