



23 January 2024

**Middle
East
Studies
Association**
of North America, Inc

Headquarters & Secretariat

Georgetown University
Center for Contemporary Arab
Studies

3700 O St. NW, ICC STE 241
Washington DC 20057

Phone 520-333-2577
Fax 520-207-3166
secretariat@mesana.org
mesana.org



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, pmoh@pmo.gov.il
Minister of National Security Itamar Ben Gvir, sar@mops.gov.il
Minister of Justice Yariv Levin, fax: +972-2-6285438
Minister of Education Yoav Kisch, sar@edu.gov.il
Police Commissioner Yaacov Shvetai, lishkatmafcal@police.gov.il
Rector of Tel Aviv University Mark Shtaif, Rector@tauex.tau.ac.il
Rector of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem Tamir Shearer,
rector@savion.huji.ac.il
Rector of The University of Haifa Gur Alroey, rector@univ.haifa.ac.il
Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs of the Open University Guy
Meron, guymiron@openu.ac.il
Rector of The Ben Gurion University of the Negev Chaim Hames,
rector@bgu.ac.il
Provost of Reichman University Varda Lieberman,
liberman.provost@runi.ac.il
Rector of Bar Ilan University Amnon Albeck, rector.office@biu.ac.il
Vice President of the Weizmann Institute of Science Ziv Reich,
Vice.President@weizmann.ac.il
Senior Executive Vice President of the Technion - Israel Institute of
Technology Oded Rabinovitch, svpr@technion.ac.il

Prime Minister, Police Commissioner, Ministers, University Rectors:

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 deep and growing concern regarding the ongoing attacks against and restrictions on Palestinian citizens of Israel who are students at Israeli institutions. We call upon you in the strongest terms to put an end to what appears to be a targeted repression of freedom of expression and uphold your responsibility to ensure academic freedom.

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 and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

We have written to you previously about aggressions against Palestinian students in Israeli universities following the attack of 7 October 2023. Since our [letter of 28 November 2023](#), it has come to our attention that many students in Israeli universities have been experiencing fear, surveillance, and incitement against them. While this atmosphere actually predates 7 October (see our [letter of 26 May 2022](#)), reports point to unprecedented levels of censorship and repression of Palestinian students and professors for their

criticism of the war on Gaza or their solidarity with the innocent people there.

The Arab Student Movements Union, representing Palestinian citizens of Israel who study at Israeli universities and colleges, has conducted a survey gauging these students' feelings about returning to school after 7 October. Over 150 students were polled; a majority reported feeling unsafe on campuses. They indicated that their institutions are not protecting their academic freedom or their freedom of expression. In addition, the general student unions at the various institutions, as well as the National Union of Israeli Students, do not actively represent them, but rather have tended to incite against them. We know, for example, that the leadership of the student union at Haifa University has called for stronger, more punitive measures against Palestinian students, and the union at the Technion has issued powerpoint slides with names of Palestinian students who are referred to as "terrorism supporters."

According to the survey conducted by the Arab Student Movements Union, 85 percent of the students polled indicated that their sense of security has been seriously affected; 71 percent wrote that they are facing economic hardship as their finances have been negatively affected because of the war. As a result, almost half of the Palestinian students who were polled responded that they were seriously considering leaving their studies and/or going abroad to pursue their education.

In addition, we have learned that since 7 October, approximately 160 students at various Israeli institutions have had disciplinary action taken against them, and 19 students have been arrested by the Israeli police and accused of allegedly supporting a terrorist organization. Typically, these students were expressing their solidarity with fellow Palestinians and with the children, women, and civilians in the Gaza Strip.

In the days following 7 October, nine Palestinian students at the University of Haifa were suspended without a disciplinary hearing by the university's rector, Gur Alroey, for sharing posts and stories on social media. Alroey stated that their presence could lead to "extreme situations," without explaining what that meant. The University of Haifa has since reversed the suspensions and [agreed to mediation](#) with the students' legal representation. After the reversal, however, Jewish-Israeli students at the University of Haifa created a WhatsApp group calling for the immediate suspension of the nine Palestinian students without due process and, with active support from the leadership of the student union, staged a protest against them.

Moreover, the National Union of Israeli Students (NUIS) has launched a campaign to allegedly bolster students' sense of security, yet it includes [a call](#)



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[to “eradicate the support of terrorism on campuses.”](#) Instead of protecting students, the NUIS chose to use militarized language, and in failing to call for due process in disciplinary cases put forward by universities, it has forsaken its mandate to support students and their freedoms, regardless of their background. This position bolsters the hostile climate and rhetoric on campuses. Furthermore, universities have gone so far as to publish guides on how to carry and use firearms on campuses leading to the presence of unprecedented numbers of guns and rifles, an environment that is not conducive to protecting Palestinian students or making them feel welcome. Academic institutions are expected to ensure that the campus climate is not hostile, that public discourse remains respectful, and that all students feel safe. Guns do not belong on university campuses.

We condemn the circumvention of due process, as well as the prejudicial treatment of and broad incitement against Palestinian students in Israeli institutions of higher education. We condemn attempts to portray all Palestinians as terrorists. Universities have a responsibility to protect all their students and uphold their freedom of expression.

Furthermore, suspending students for political reasons is a clear violation 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. Israel is a party to the UDHR and a signatory of the ICESCR and is therefore obligated to uphold them. We therefore call upon you to cease these targeted attacks on the higher education sector and ensure that Israeli campuses are safe for all their students and faculty, including those calling for an end to the war.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Asli Ü. Bâli'.

Aslı Ü. Bâli
MESA President
Professor, Yale Law School

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laurie Brand'.

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



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cc:

Daniel Zilberg, CEO of the Student Union at Tel Aviv University

Yuval Rivlin, CEO of the Student Union at Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Elad Asis, CEO of the Student Union at University of Haifa

Shlomi Ovadia, CEO of the Student Union at Open University

Barak Dvir, CEO of the Student Union at Ben Gurion University of the Negev

Lior Biner, CEO of the Student Union at Reichman University

Reuven Lorenzi, CEO of the Student Union at Bar Ilan University

Itay Israel, Chairperson of the Technion Students Association

Elhanan Fellheimer, CEO of the National Union of Israeli Students

Merav Avrahami, Vice President of the Israeli Council for Higher Education for Academic Affairs

Arie Zaban, Chairperson of VERA – Association of University Heads, Israel and President of Bar Ilan University

Josep Borrell-Fontelles, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

European Coordination of Committees and Associations for Palestine

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

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

Francesca Albanese, UN Special Rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories



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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

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

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

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