

22 May 2000

President Yasser Arafat  
Palestinian National Authority  
Al-Muntada  
Gaza, Palestinian National Authority  
*by facsimile: 972-7-282-2365 or 2366*

Dear President Arafat:

The Committee on Academic Freedom in the Middle East and North Africa (CAF MENA), of the Middle East Studies Association, is writing to express its grave concern over the arrest and continued detention without charge of Dr. Abd al-Sattar Qassim of An-Najah National University in Nablus.

The Middle East Studies Association of North Africa (MESA) comprises 2700 academics world wide who teach and conduct research on the Middle East and North Africa, and is the preeminent professional association in the field. The association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, and is committed to ensuring respect for principles of academic freedom and freedom of expression in the region and in connection with the study of the region.

According to information we received, Dr. Qassim was arrested in November 1999 and detained for six weeks without charge. Dr. Qassim was arrested again on 18 February 2000, and remains in detention at the Jericho jail. No formal charges have been brought against Dr. Qassim. His computer, files, and other personal materials have reportedly been confiscated. It appears that Dr. Qassim's arrest is related to his signing the "Petition of 20" (*bayan al-'ashrin*) in November 1999. The petition, signed by 20 prominent Palestinians, including members of the Palestinian Legislative Council, criticized the Palestinian National Authority over corruption and political mismanagement.

We believe that Dr. Qassim is being punished for the non-violent expression of his political views. This serious infringement of Dr. Qassim's academic freedom, furthermore, deprives his students at An-Najah National University from benefiting from his widely-recognized scholarly expertise. We therefore ask that the Palestinian National Authority either release Dr. Qassim immediately or file formal charges against him for an internationally recognizable criminal offense and accord him his right to a fair trial.

Finally, we respectfully request that no further harassment of Dr. Qassim—or other Palestinian scholars who express non-violent criticism of government policies—occur. You and other high Palestinian officials have stated on a number of occasions that you are committed to respecting all internationally recognized human rights standards. We urge you to ensure that, in the spirit of this commitment, officials of the Palestinian National Authority will desist from arbitrary detention and other illegal steps designed to intimidate scholars and others from expressing critical views.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter. We look forward to your reply.

Respectfully,

Mark J. Lowder  
Acting Executive Director

cc: Mr. Freih Abu Meddein, Minister of Justice  
Dr. Rami Hamdallah, President, An-Najah National University