

May 22, 2007

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Ambassador Afif Safieh
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Dear President Abbas, Colonel Dahlan, Minister Haniya, and
Ambassador Safieh:

I write to you on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) to express our grave concern about what appears to be a series of systematic and brutal attacks on schools, libraries, and other educational facilities in Gaza. MESA has on numerous occasions protested to the government of Israel its policies of restricting access to education in Palestine. Our organization also is aware of the deteriorating economic and security situation in the Gaza strip to which Israeli actions and the US boycott policy are significant contributors. Even so, the Palestinian Authority and its security forces bear the primary responsibility for the protection of persons and educational institutions from attack by local assailants. We urge you to do everything you can to prevent such attacks in the future.

The Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has more than 2700 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.

According to press reports, the first of these attacks occurred on Saturday April 14, 2007, when the Al-Ataa, a cultural center in Beit Hanoun, was broken into and set on

fire by unknown assailants. The attackers completely destroyed the computer room of the center, damaged \$80,000 worth of equipment, and inflicted another \$40,000 in damages to the

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building itself. The attackers also destroyed one of the center's libraries, containing about 5,000 books. Al-Ataa was originally sponsored by the Welfare Association in coordination with the World Bank. This center aims especially to serve local women and children. Among its many activities, it runs workshops on non-violence.

The second attack happened in the early hours of Sunday, April 15, 2007, when an explosive device was detonated at the entrance to the Christian Bible Society's store in the heart of Gaza City. Among the many activities of this organization, it provides language and computer training courses to Muslims as well as Christians.

The third attack on April 21, 2007, was carried out by masked gunmen. They bombed the American International School in the northern Gaza area, causing damage estimated at more than \$200,000. This fee-charging school, which teaches in English and in Arabic, has 250 pupils, 50 of them on scholarships provided for students from poor families. The explosions destroyed administrative offices and the student cafeteria, and a classroom corridor was deliberately sprinkled with petrol and set afire. Also during the attack, the assailants handcuffed eight unarmed security guards and drove them half a kilometer from the school. Last year, unidentified gunmen kidnapped an Australian and a Dutch teacher who were later released unharmed. Since then all the foreign teachers have departed.

The most recent attack took place on May 6, 2007, when a large organized group ransacked the UNRWA-run Omariya Elementary School in Rafah. One person was killed and six others were wounded. The estimated 70 attackers mounted their assault during a celebration attended by the school's children and UNRWA and PA officials, including John Ging, the director of UNRWA operations in the Gaza strip. The attackers threw a number of hand grenades and opened fire with automatic rifles as participants prepared to leave the school premises. An UNRWA vehicle was hit as it left the scene, and five Palestinian journalists covering the event were beaten.

Attacks on educational facilities constitute a profound

injury to the people and to the future of education in Gaza. We call on the PA's national unity government to take all measures necessary to ensure law and order, and to provide security to all schools and humanitarian organizations that deliver vital educational services to the people of Gaza. We also urge that you investigate and prosecute where appropriate the groups and individuals responsible for these violent assaults.

Sincerely,

Zachary Lockman
MESA President

cc: General Karen Koning AbuZayd
UNRWA Commissioner
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