

June 6, 2007

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The Honorable Richard  
United States  
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Email:

Dear Prime Minister Olmert, Minister Peretz, President  
Bush, Secretary Rice,  
Mr. Ambassador Jones, and Mr. Abrams:

I write to you on behalf of the Middle East Studies  
Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on  
Academic Freedom (CAF) in order to express our grave  
concern about the broad assault on the education system in  
the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The current academic crisis  
is the result of numerous factors, including Israel's  
military bombing campaigns and incursions in the  
Palestinian territories. Direct attacks on educational  
institutions, the denial of free access to schools through  
the operation of military checkpoints, and the isolation of  
Palestinian universities through Israeli immigration  
restrictions on faculty, researchers, and students with  
foreign passports have severely disrupted education at the  
primary, secondary, and university levels. The impact of  
international sanctions against the Hamas-led government is  
further crippling the Palestinian education system by  
rendering the Palestinian Authority unable to pay teachers'  
salaries with any consistency, parents unable to afford  
tuition and other fees, and universities unable to provide  
scholarships to those in need of financial assistance.

Our organization is aware of the violent strife among Palestinian factions in Gaza that have also had a detrimental effect on educational institutions and personnel, and we have publicly expressed our concerns to Palestinian leaders about that fact. We are also aware of the rocket attacks from Gaza on Israeli civilian targets in the past three weeks, but Israeli responses must not violate international law. Moreover, Israel, as the occupying power, and the United States, Israel's primary financial and political backer, bear responsibility for ensuring the Right to Education as enshrined in The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which Israel ratified in 1991. We urge you to take immediate measures to ensure the continuing operation of the educational process at all levels.

*Prime Minister Ehud Olmert*  
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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.

The latest disruption to the Palestinian education system took place on 24 May 2007, when Israeli forces abducted Dr. Nasser Eddin al-Shaer, Minister of Education, along with 32 prominent political and community figures. On Israel's Army Radio, Defense Minister Peretz stated that the recent detentions are intended to pressure Hamas's armed wing to stop the firing of Qassam rockets from Gaza into Israel. However, regardless of official justifications for the arrest, Dr. al-Shaer's detention without charge or trial clearly contravenes international and human rights laws. In a separate raid on 24 May, the army also vandalized a local school in Hebron, confiscating computers and teaching materials.

These recent events are just a few of the incidents exemplifying a disturbing trend in Israel's occupation policies, which have hindered the academic freedom of 1.2 million students in the occupied Palestinian territories (who constitute 32 percent of the total population), and obstructed the work of 10,000 teachers and educational staff. Since the start of the Intifada in September 2000, the Israeli army has partially or fully destroyed 73 schools in Gaza, including a teachers' training college in 2004, and it has shelled or raided eight out of eleven universities in the West Bank.

The ongoing disruption to Palestinian education constitutes a violation of a basic human right that will have long-term political, economic, and humanitarian consequences for all peoples involved. It also does further damage to the reputation of Israel and the United States, and presents an additional obstacle in the already obstructed path toward a peaceful resolution to this conflict. We call on the Israeli and United States governments to take all measures necessary to remove those physical, military, and political barriers that they have placed in the way of Palestine's educational system.

Sincerely,

Zachary Lockman  
President

cc: President Mahmoud Abbas  
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