



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

1219 N Santa Rita Ave
The University of Arizona
Tucson AZ 85721 USA

520 621-5850
520 626-9095 fax
sbs-mesa@email.arizona.edu
www.mesana.org



September 17, 2013

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu
Minister of Defense Moshe Ya'alon
Minister of Education Shai Piron
Ambassador Michael Oren
Ambassador Daniel B. Shapiro

Dear Dignitaries,

On behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA), I write to express MESA's concern about the recent repeated attacks against Al-Quds University campus in Abu Dis carried out by IDF forces. As a result of the indiscriminate firing of tear gas canisters and rubber-coated bullets into campus grounds during school hours, at least eight students have sustained rubber-coated bullet injuries and been transferred to the Abu Dis emergency center, while over two dozen students have suffered from tear gas inhalation. Such attacks against an educational institution constitute a direct infringement on academic freedom in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. It is the preeminent organization in the field. The Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 3,000 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.

Since the beginning of September 2013, an Israeli border police patrol has been stationed near the entrance of the main gate to Al-Quds University. The soldiers have occasionally searched students, inspected their identity cards, and held some for several hours without apparent cause or stated justification. On the 8th of September, the Israeli soldiers attempted to enter the university without permission, and were prevented from doing so by unarmed staff and university guards, which soon led to the Israeli forces to attack the campus, wounding two university guards Radwan Dawoud and Mohammed Darwish. According to eyewitness accounts and student testimonies, it was at this point that the Israeli forces launched tear gas canisters and commenced firing rubber bullets indiscriminately. University officials are concerned that these repeated provocations by Israeli patrols are intended to interrupt the university's preparations for the start of the new academic year, and to create a sense of instability on campus. As a committee charged with monitoring infringements upon academic freedom, we fail to see how such provocative and aggressive measures against an educational institutional, its students and its staff can be justified.

At the most fundamental level, these recent acts of aggression jeopardize the physical security of students and the general wellbeing of the university environment. Such worrisome events are not simply isolated incidents, but part and parcel of systematic Israeli policies of control and intimidation that infringe upon Palestinian educational freedom, both within the occupied West Bank and inside Israel proper.

Students, faculty, staff and visitors are negatively affected by Israeli restrictions on movement that impede, and in some cases prevent, the regular functioning of courses, university activities and campus life at Palestinian institutions of higher learning. Roads leading in and out of university campuses are

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regularly subjected to arbitrary closures by Israeli military checkpoints and patrols. Students from the Gaza Strip, who are no longer allowed to study in West Bank universities, are disproportionately affected by these policies. Moreover, the harassment, arrest, and holding of university students in Administrative Detention, a system of incarceration in which prisoners are held indefinitely without charge for renewable six month periods remains commonplace.

Al-Quds University has been unduly affected by these travel restrictions. In the early 1990s, the campus was established as a merger between four campuses in Jerusalem and Abu Dis which were only 4.35 miles apart. On the heels of the Oslo Accords, the direct link between the different Al-Quds University campuses was cut off, and this 4.35 mile distances now requires over 45 minutes of travel time, passing through the separation wall and at least one military checkpoint.

Israel's infringements on Palestinian institutions of higher education are clearly in violation of both human rights law and international humanitarian law (IHL), and more specifically Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which guarantees the right to education, and Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESR) to which Israel is a signatory.

We request that you denounce such widespread practices of intimidation by the IDF, establish credible and effective protections of Palestinian academic freedom, and work to protect the security and dignity of Palestinian educational institutions, students, faculty and staff.

Sincerely,



Peter Sluglett
MESA President
Visiting Research Professor, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore

cc: US Secretary of State John Kerry
c/o Foreign Press Center for the Middle East and North Africa