



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

1957 E Street NW, Suite 401
Washington, DC 20052

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



28 November 2023

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu
Fax: +972-2-5664838

Minister of Education Yoav Kisch
Fax: +972-2-5602390

Minister of Justice Yariv Levin
Fax: +972-2-6285438

Prime Minister and Ministers,

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 a series of attacks against and restrictions/persecutions overwhelmingly of Palestinian citizens of Israel who are students in Israeli institutions. We call upon you in the strongest terms to put an end to this campaign against 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 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 in the past about aggressions against Palestinian students in Israeli universities (see our letter of [26 May 2022](#)), but there has been a dramatic increase in and intensification of the threats and repressive measures targeting them since the Hamas attacks of 7 October. In the wake of Israel's full-scale military response, Palestinian and some Jewish citizens of Israel have faced a severe crackdown on their freedom of expression. Hundreds of male and female students across post-secondary educational institutions have been and remain exposed to harassment and political persecution by their university administration, fellow students, and members of right-wing organizations, both inside and outside academic institutions, which can result in their expulsion or suspension. Some faculty have experienced similar persecution, as well. We cite below several examples, which are illustrative, but certainly not exhaustive, of the cases that have arisen.

Since the beginning of the war, dozens of Palestinian citizens of Israel studying at Israeli universities and colleges have received notices from their schools informing them of their expulsion or suspension, or that disciplinary action has been initiated against them for their social media posts, which

allegedly demonstrate "support for terrorism" or "sympathy with terror organizations." [Yousef Taha](#), the head of the Joint Body of Arab Student Blocs in Universities and Colleges estimated, based on the number of cases of which they had been informed, that more than 160 students had been targeted since the beginning of Israel's military operations in Gaza. According to [Adalah](#), some of these students' posts merely quoted verses from the Qur'an, while others included only lists of journalists from Gaza, or expressed solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza. In a majority of cases, the schools have denied students due process rights to be heard and to defend themselves.

According to a 13 November [2023 report](#) from Academia for Equality, Haifa University has suspended some seven students, while others have been summoned to and await disciplinary hearings. At Tel Aviv University five students had been summoned for disciplinary proceedings, at Ben Gurion University four, and at the Technion five. It is worth noting that there are also a total of five exceptional cases of male and female students from the College of Management - Rishon LeZion who received letters notifying them of "Immediate suspension and removal from studies" and/or "termination of studies."

Referring to developments at Haifa University, Yousef Taha [reported](#) a disturbing coordination between university authorities and the police:

“What happened with the students of the Haifa University is really strange, as the students were summoned to disciplinary committees weeks ago, and they imposed sanctions on them. But the university was not satisfied with that. Rather, it sent pictures of the students' publications to the police and acted as an 'informant' reporting its students to the police. The police, in turn, arrested the students. The policemen admitted the role of the university in these detentions during the court session that was held when the students' detention was extended.”

On 18 October 2023, the Minister of Education, Yoav Kish, passed a resolution in the Higher Education Council which required educational institutions to take immediate measures, such as expulsion or severe disciplinary procedures, against students who express "support for terrorism or identify with Hamas and Islamic Jihad," while threatening sanctions against universities that do not do so. Kish also passed a decision obliging these institutions to report on the manner in which the complaints that come to them are handled. The heads of the universities strongly objected to the move, writing to Kish that the decision "may create an atmosphere of McCarthyism and mutual whistleblowing on the campuses". Weeks after this decision, on 6 November, Kish, who serves as the

chairman of the Higher Education Council, ordered that the implementation be suspended pending further [discussion](#).

A number of faculty have also been threatened or terminated. We have previously written to you regarding the case of [Prof. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian](#) of Hebrew University, who was called upon by the university president and provost to resign for having signed a petition calling for an immediate cease-fire, and Prof. Uri Horesh of Achva Academic College, who was terminated for social media posts. In addition, there is the case of [Prof. Nurit Peled-Elhanan](#), winner of the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Human Rights and Freedom of Thought, who was suspended for a WhatsApp message characterized as "Expressing support for Hamas' terrorist acts and justifying them." She was subsequently summoned for a hearing, which was conducted by correspondence. Although she was not dismissed, the college administration severely reprimanded her for "expressing identification with Israel's most bitter enemy."

Then there is that case of Dr. Warda Sada from Kaye Academic College of Education. The charges against her were that "Through social media, she encouraged those heinous acts and by publishing words of encouragement, praise for the terrorists and their horrible deeds." Dr. Sada, who had taught for 28 years and long worked for peace and coexistence organizations in the Negev, was immediately dismissed as the result of her hearing. From the same college, Dr. Faten Masarwa is currently facing similar proceedings, based on old posts that were uploaded in May 2021.

Finally, in one case of a direct attack, we call your attention to the violent premeditated assault on Palestinian students at Netanya College. On the evening of 28 October hundreds of Jewish Israeli civilians stormed the campus of Netanya Academic College in central Israel and gathered outside the dormitories, calling for the expulsion of Palestinian students, citizens of Israel, and chanting racist slogans like "Death to the Arabs". The students were ultimately bussed away from the campus, and while the mayor of Netanya promised a full investigation of the incident, she also stated her intention to use the empty dormitories to house Israeli evacuees from the [south](#).

The dramatic increase in surveillance and repression these cases illustrate takes place against the backdrop of emergency regulations extending the period a detainee suspected of "security offenses" may be held without access to a lawyer. These regulations authorize the heads of investigatory departments in the Shin Bet (the Israel Security Agency) or a military officer of a specified rank to order the detention of a detainee for up to 30 days without access to a lawyer. The regulations further specify that this



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period can be extended for up to 90 days, subject to judicial approval. Adalah has argued that the regulations target Palestinians and violate the right of detainees to meet with lawyers, which is a fundamental right under international and Israeli law.

This repression is the result of widespread and coordinated efforts between government offices, Israeli institutions, and far-right groups, all targeting Palestinians in Israel and others who protest against the Israeli government policies in Gaza.

The suspensions and expulsion of students, and the intimidation and termination of faculty are clear violations 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 demand that you cease these 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 'Ashi Ü. Bâli', written in a cursive style.

Ashi Ü. Bâli
MESA President
Professor, Yale Law School

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laurie Brand', written in a cursive style.

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

cc:

Joseph R. Biden, President, United States of America

Anthony Blinken, Secretary of State, United States of America



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Lloyd Austin, Secretary of Defense, United States of American

Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Ambassador to the UN, United States of America

Samantha Power, Administrator of the US Agency for International Development

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

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