



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

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December 16, 2008

Mr. Isma'il Haniyeh, Caretaker Prime Minister, Gaza
Dr. Nabil Abuznaid, Representative of the Palestine Liberation Organization

Gentlemen,

I write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) regarding violence directed against students of al-Azhar University in Gaza this year. We note with dismay persistent reports of violence among political blocs on campus in which security forces either fail to protect students or actively participate in the violent actions.

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 3000 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.

Reports that the right of students to express political opinions on the al-Azhar campus is systematically threatened and that security services are aggravating rather than alleviating that threat are of special concern to us. We note in particular reports in both January and October this year of violence directed against students supporting the Fatah movement.

We have objected on several previous occasions to ways in which violence and actions by various political actors have disrupted the academic enterprise in Palestine and interfered with academic freedom. We have written, for instance, on behalf of students in Gaza who have been barred from travel for educational purposes as well as on attacks on educational institutions in the West Bank and Gaza. We are also writing at present to the authorities in the West Bank about their continued detention without charges of a number of students at campuses under their control, apparently for reasons related to peaceful political activity on campus.

We urge you as strongly as possible to work incessantly to prevent such attacks in the future and to protect the right of all students to exercise full rights to express political opinions. Peaceful and free exchange of ideas is at the heart of the academic enterprise, and attempts to silence or intimidate those who engage in such exchanges amounts to a serious violation of academic freedom. As a committee of MESA charged with monitoring infringements on academic freedom, the Committee on Academic Freedom is deeply concerned by the frequency and consistency of these accounts and will therefore continue to follow the issue by monitoring the situation at al-Azhar.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Virginia Aksan
MESA President
Professor, McMaster University

cc: President Mahmoud Abbas