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Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
Foreign Secretary
Foreign and Commonwealth Office
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For the urgent attention of: Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP

19 August 2016

Dear Secretary of State,

Re: Death threats against human rights defenders pursuing Palestinian access to justice and accountability at the International Criminal Court

We write as human rights organisations to request your intervention to protect human rights defenders from threats and harassment that appear directly linked to their work pursuing accountability at the International Criminal Court (ICC) in connection with the Prosecutor's preliminary examination into the situation in Palestine.

The Al Mezan Center for Human Rights (based in Gaza) released a public statement on 11 August that reveals that its staff members have received three anonymous serious threats – the last one being a death threat to a human rights defender and his family – since the beginning of this month. This represents a very disturbing escalation of a pattern of incidents against Al Mezan since December 2015, which follows its work on a second confidential joint communication to the Office of the Prosecutor of the ICC regarding Israel's military offensive on Gaza in 2014.¹

Another human rights organisation, which worked with Al Mezan and the Palestinian Center for Human Rights on their first joint communication to the ICC, Al Haq (based in the West Bank), revealed in March that its organisation and specific staff members have received similar threats and harassment, including a death threat against a staff member working closely on the ICC submission, and the spreading of false information to their donors. A further statement issued last week by FIDH² states that the same staff member has subsequently received a series of further death threats, the latest occurring this month.

¹ For details, please consult the joint press release upon the submission of the communication at <http://mezan.org/en/post/21177>.

² <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/attacks-against-al-haq-s-representative-in-europe-ms-nada-kiswanson>

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It appears that the threats against Al Mezan and Al Haq are aimed to deter, undermine and divert their organisations' attention from their vital human rights work on accountability and justice. These human rights organisations say the targeting against them clearly indicates that they are under very close surveillance using highly advanced cyber capabilities. It should be noted that the police in three European countries have initiated investigations into these incidents.

Lawyers for Palestinian Human Rights, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International are extremely concerned by the mounting and grave seriousness of these threats. Accordingly we urge the UK government to take steps to highlight the threats and harassment faced by Palestinian human rights organisations and its staff members working for accountability and justice. In particular, we urge your government to consider working closely with your European counterparts to examine this issue under the framework of the EU Guidelines for Human Rights Defenders. We refer to the FCO's Human Rights and Democracy Report 2015, in which it confirms its commitment to this issue, stating, "The UK places great importance on work at the EU level on HRDs, including through the EU Guidelines."(p.27) We suggest this include preparing a joint public statement condemning the incidents and asserting the need to protect human rights defenders working on the critical issue of access to justice and accountability in connection with the Prosecutor of the ICC's preliminary examination into the situation in Palestine.

Thank you for your careful consideration of this urgent matter, and we look forward to your reply.

Yours sincerely,

Tareq Shrourou, Director,
Lawyers for Palestinian Human Rights

Sari Bashi, Israel and Palestine Country Director,
Human Rights Watch

Jonathan Cornejo, Tactical Campaign Manager,
Amnesty International UK