

Solidarity with Birzeit University

To: X, President of ... University

Dear President,

On behalf of the endorsers of this letter, we would like to urge you to access and disseminate as widely as possible the urgent call from Birzeit University, and to send a strong signal against the alarming academic isolation imposed by the Israeli authorities on Palestinian universities in the Occupied Territories.

On July 12 of this year, Professor Abdullatif Abuhijleh, your fellow Rector of the Palestinian University of Birzeit (hereafter BZU), published an urgent appeal to the international community to defend academic freedom in Palestine.¹

In his outcry, he denounces the harmful consequences - not only for Birzeit, but for all Palestinian universities and colleges² - of Israel's increasingly restrictive policy on access to and residence in the Palestinian territories which are entirely under its control.³

An increasing number of prospective professors and collaborators with international passports are being denied an entry visa (a B2 temporary tourist visa). For people already active in Palestine, regardless of the length of their residency, it is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain an extension of their permit. A glaring example is that of Professor Roger Heacock and his wife Dr. Laura Wick: two months ago, after working for 35 years in Palestine, they were forced to leave.⁴

¹ See below on p. 4: "*Annex 1: Call by Prof. Abdullatif Abuhijleh, president of Birzeit University*"; and on p. 6: "*Annex 2: Open Letter: "Stop the academic asphyxiation of the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt)"*".

² The West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip comprise 14 universities, 1 open university for distance learning, 18 colleges and 20 university centres for the first cycle. In 2015, the number of students enrolled was 214,000, of which about 54% were female and 46% male students. (Source : the report "*Les universités palestiniennes sous l'occupation*" (AURDIP, le 1er juillet, 2015), <http://www.aurdip.org/les-universites-palestiniennes.html?lang=fr#nb7> .

³ Israel has full control over access to (and departure from) the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and thus has the power to decide whether or not to issue a visa. Unlike some international humanitarian organisations, Palestinian universities (with the exception of Al-Quds Bard College) do not have the possibility to issue visas to their employees in coordination with Israel.

⁴ Roger Heacock worked at the BZU as a full-time professor of History and chairman of the Graduate Program in International Studies, where Laura Wick worked as a midwife and health researcher. See: Rania Zabaneh, "*Foreign residents in Palestinian territories denied visa renewals. Israel is increasingly rejecting applications to renew residency visas and families face being split up*" (Al-Jazeera, July 13, 2018), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/foreign-residents-palestinian-territories-denied-visa-renewals-180713112441505.html> . Now also: Raja Shehadeh, "*Israeli restrictions on overseas academics are holding Palestinian universities back. A labyrinthine visa process and perverse decision-making are making life increasingly untenable for non-Palestinian academics*" (The World University

Certainly, also in the past, foreign academics already faced deliberate sabotage by Israeli border authorities,⁵ but since 2017 the situation has worsened considerably. Visa applicants face an alarming escalation in obscure, arbitrary and ever-changing requirements and restrictions.⁶ According to officials of the Palestinian Civil Affairs Commission, the number of extensions granted by Israel to international academic staff has decreased from 70 per cent in 2017 to about 10 per cent in the first half of 2018. The very duration of this type of visa has been reduced to three months - a period that is absolutely insufficient, of course, to cover a full academic year. According to a questionnaire presented by the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education in eight universities, over the past two academic years - more than half of their international staff have been subjected to this kind of arbitrary refusal and restrictions. As a result, academic programmes and structures have been seriously disrupted, and it is increasingly difficult for universities to attract international expertise. Not surprisingly, the number of international academics in Palestinian universities has been reduced considerably.

From its inception, internationalism - the free mobility and collaboration of students and professors from various cities, regions and countries - has always been part of the university's DNA. In the global context of the 21st century, the presence of an international staffing is, more than ever, a cornerstone and a condition for academic excellence. Israeli universities and research centres themselves have acquired their universally recognized excellence precisely through international collaboration and support. Think, for example, of their participation in long-term European research and innovation programmes such as Horizon 2020. Conversely, through its increasingly restrictive access policy, Israel prevents Palestinians living under its yoke from being able to reap the full intellectual and scientific benefits of international collaboration and exchange. Moreover it should be noted that mobility is sabotaged in both directions: Palestinian students and researchers who, often on an external grant, would also wish to study, work or attend a congress abroad, also face great difficulties in obtaining an exit visa. Since the Rafah to Egypt crossing is only exceptionally open, normally their sole possibility to leave the occupied territories including the Gaza Strip is via Jordan, an exit which is under full Israeli control.⁷

Rankings, Sept 13, 2018), <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/israeli-restrictions-overseas-academics-are-holding-palestinian-universities-back> .

⁵ RTE-report of 2013, "[Academia Undermined: Israeli Restrictions on Foreign National Academics in Palestinian Higher Education Institutions. Report of the Campaign for the Right to Enter the Occupied Palestinian Territories](#)" (24 pp.). For the present situation see the [website van RTE](#) (Right to Enter)

⁶ See the protest letter, "[Arbitrary demands on foreign national academics working in Palestinian universities.](#)" 6/8/2018 the "[Committee on Academic Freedom](#)" of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to all Israeli ministers involved: "[We write to you ... to express our dismay regarding the severe and unreasonable limitations imposed on foreign nationals who are faculty members at Birzeit University \(BZU\) and other Palestinian universities in the West Bank and Gaza.](#)" See: <https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom/2018/08/06/arbitrary-demands-on-foreign-national-academics-working-in-palestinian-universities> .

⁷ For a year now, researchers and students in the Gaza Strip have found it particularly difficult to travel abroad via the Erez Crossing: as a condition of boarding the shuttle to the Allenby Bridge, they

Israel's policy clearly violates the academic freedom of Palestinian institutions, their professors and students. Together with other Israeli discrimination and disruptions,⁸ the fundamental human right to education and future-oriented training that is at stake here. Rector Abuhijleh rightly refers in his complaints to the international obligations of the Israeli State: the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949) concerning military occupation,⁹ international conventions such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966),¹⁰ as well as the right to education guaranteed by article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990).

Finally, it is not surprising that the rector of the BZU is the first to sound the alarm. The BZU is not only one of the largest Palestinian universities,¹¹ but it is also probably the most international exchange-oriented institution.¹² It is therefore particularly affected by Israel's discriminatory policy. On 8 June 2018, seven of its international staff - one third of his international team - were denied a visa extension; several others had already been forced earlier by Israel to leave Palestine.

Together with Rector Abuhijleh, we must be aware of the disastrous consequences that this will have in the short and long term. The contribution of professors and researchers from abroad is of crucial importance, he wrote, *"not only to continue to be able to offer quality education to the BZU, but also for the longer-term development of Palestinian higher education"*. If Israel's obstructionist policy continues, *"Palestinian universities, including Birzeit's, will find themselves even more isolated from the global academic community. Our*

are forced to sign a commitment not to return to Gaza for at least a year. See: *"Gisha in letter to Gaza CLA: Stop the unlawful practice of making Gaza residents sign a commitment not to return for a year as they exit via Erez Crossing"* (Aug 9, 2017), <http://gisha.org/updates/8107>.

⁸ See the report by the Irish guest professor Brendan Ciarán Browne, at Al Quds Bard College: ["Education under occupation: everyday disruption at a Palestinian university"](#) (The Conversation, Oct 14, 2015).

⁹ Art. 50: *"The Occupying Power shall, with the co-operation of the national and local authorities, facilitate the proper working of all institutions devoted to the care and education of children."*

¹⁰ Signed by Israel on 3 October 1991. See in particular article 15(3): *"States Parties shall undertake to respect the freedom indispensable for scientific research and creative activities"*. Paragraph 4. *"States Parties to this Convention recognize the benefits arising from the promotion and development of international [!] scientific and cultural contacts and cooperation."*

¹¹ Cf. at the start of academic year 2017-18 at the BZU: *"On September 9, 2017, around 3500 new students began their journey at Birzeit University for the new academic year 2017-2018. The university welcomed a diverse group of new students, symbols of the growth of the institution, which has reached around 14,000 enrolled students"*. See: *"New academic year kicked off with contemporary academic programs and innovative co-curriculum initiatives"* (Sept 9, 2017), <https://www.birzeit.edu/en/news/new-academic-year-kicked-contemporary-academic-programs-and-innovative-co-curriculum>.

¹² *"The president talked about the achievements that the university has accomplished in the last year. 'We are gaining increasing international recognition, and we are proud to be listed in the QS World University Rankings among 3% of the best universities in the world'"*, during the same opening.

ability to provide world-class education will be further compromised if we lose international perspectives, diverse high-level professional experiences and skills, which are of crucial importance to Palestinian academic life and the campus environment as a whole."

Dear rector, dear colleague, in the interest of academic solidarity with the affected sister institutions in Palestine, we ask that our university gives a strong signal. First, the signatories ask you to send a letter to your BZU colleague in which you express your solidarity and support. Secondly, we ask you to join your colleagues of the other universities to denounce publicly the isolation the State of Israel tries to impose on Palestinian universities and high schools.

Any rector who wishes to turn the institution he or she heads into a "truly international university" may only be shocked, we think, if this legitimate aspiration is denied to other universities. That is why we hope you will support us.

Annex 1: Call by Prof. Abdullatif Abuhijleh, president of Birzeit University (7/12/2018):

"Birzeit University condemns breach of academic freedom after academics forced to leave Palestine"

Since the beginning of the current academic year (2017-2018), scores of foreign passport holders, many of Palestinian origin but without residence documents, living and working in the occupied Palestinian territory have been denied entry in the country, or have had their visa renewal applications refused by the Israeli authorities. At Birzeit University alone, we have 15 foreign passport-holding faculty members whose requests for visa renewals have been refused or significantly delayed.

These faculty members have full-time status, work in all the various faculties on our campus, and include senior faculty and department chairpersons. Our faculty who are currently under threat teach in the BA, MA, and Ph.D. programs at Birzeit University, are members of university committees, and serve the larger Palestinian community through public seminars and lectures. Already some professors have been forced to leave the country; including one from the Department of English and Literature, and a professor of European History at the Ibrahim Abu Lughod Institute for International Studies who has devoted his entire academic career to Palestine and the university for the past four decades.

These international professors play a critical role not only in the ongoing provision of quality education at Birzeit University but also in the long-term development of Palestinian higher education. If this policy continues, Palestinian universities, including Birzeit University, will be further isolated from the global academic environment. Our ability to deliver a world class education will be further compromised if we lose the international perspectives, diverse professional experiences and high-level skills these faculty members crucially bring to Palestinian academic life and the campus environment as a whole. In the global academic

environment of the 21st Century, having an internationally diverse faculty has become a fundamental cornerstone of academic excellence at universities worldwide. If Birzeit University and Palestinian higher education as a whole are denied the right to engage international faculty members, what is ultimately being denied is our right to deliver a quality and standard of education that meets the accepted global norm.

The right to education is a fundamental human right as established in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That article simultaneously underlines the critical link between education and the furthering of global perspectives, understanding and connection between diverse peoples and nations:

"Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace."

A long line of UN Security Council and General Assembly resolutions, and rulings of the International Court of Justice affirm Israel's obligation to exercise its responsibility as the occupying power in West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip in accordance with international humanitarian law (including The Hague Convention of 1907 and the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949) as well as applicable international human rights law. Israel is obligated by international law to both protect and facilitate the functioning of Palestinian civil institutions, including higher education. All states that are signatories to these resolutions also bear a responsibility to ensure that Israel exercises its obligations towards Palestinian education under international law; including that it exercises its control over the entry and presence of foreign academics in a manner that avoids unnecessary harm to Palestinian higher education and to the occupied population's fundamental right to education.

We call on everyone - including governments, institutions, academics, and associations - to decry these policies, protect our fundamental right of academic freedom at Birzeit University and for all Palestinian higher education.

President Abdullatif Abuhijleh,

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<https://www.birzeit.edu/en/news/birzeit-university-condemns-breach-academic-freedom-after-academics-forced-leave-palestine>

Annex 2: Open Letter: “Stop the academic asphyxiation of the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt)”.

While Israel has been a member of UEFA since 1994 and has been participating in the preliminary rounds of the European Championship since then, it restricts the freedom of movement of its Palestinian football players and officials, disrupts the importation of their football equipment and hinders the construction of sports facilities in the Palestinian Territories.

While Israel is warming up for the organisation of the Eurovision Song Contest in 2019, Palestinian musicians, theatre makers, writers and cartoonists are the target of persecution, harassment and being deprived of their livelihood.

While Israel is able to compete for funding from the major European research funds such as Horizon 2020, for Palestinian universities and colleges it is becoming increasingly difficult to attract foreign teachers and researchers or to send their own people abroad.

In short, while Israel is enrolling ever more deeply in the European, and therefore global, sports, cultural and academic space, it is isolating the Palestinians in each of these areas and depriving them of vital international growth opportunities. The latter is serious when it comes to sport or culture, but totally unacceptable when it comes to science and higher education, because it is hampering the intellectual and technological future of an entire society. That is what is happening now in the oPt and against which we want to protest strongly.

As academics, we know all too well the importance of good international networking, communication and exchange. Academic mobility is an essential part of any university career, whether it concerns participation in congresses or summer schools, visiting lectureships or research stays abroad. Conversely, every university or college of higher education knows the added value of international mobility of its teachers, researchers and students. In the occupied Palestinian territories they are aware of this for years for the simple reason that this international interaction is increasingly made difficult for them.

For some time now, foreign academics in the oPt have been encountering deliberate obstruction from the Israeli border authorities, but since 2017 the situation has deteriorated dramatically. Applicants are faced with an escalation of obscure, arbitrary and ever-changing requirements and restrictions. This is reflected in the decreasing number of extensions granted by Israel to international academic staff, which have fallen from 70% in 2017 to around 10% in the first half of 2018. The very duration of such visas has been reduced to three months - a period that is absolutely insufficient, of course, for a full academic year. As a result, academic programmes and structures have been severely disrupted and international expertise is increasingly moving away from Palestinian universities and colleges.

Not only the indefinite duration of Israel's occupation and colonisation of the Palestinian territories is in breach of international law, as confirmed by a long and sad list of United Nations Security Council resolutions. The way in which Israel's policies of repression and

dispossession of the native population are implemented, is also unacceptable under international law. Being part of a comprehensive policy of cultural dispossession (recently: the demotion of the Arabic language in Israel from a “*national*” to a “*special*” status) Israel’s incremental international isolation of Palestinian higher education and scientific research not only violates the academic freedom of Palestinian institutions, their lecturers and students but it also jeopardizes the fundamental human right to education and future-oriented development. The Fourth Geneva Convention (1949) on military occupation, the international conventions such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) and the right to education guaranteed by Art. 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and by Art. 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), they are all ignored by the Israeli regime.

The outcry that prompted us to write this open letter and the call for urgent action addressed to the Belgian rectors, came last July from Prof. Abdullatif Abuhijleh. As the Rector of Birzeit University, one of the largest and most internationally oriented Palestinian universities, and in the name of some fifty Palestinian higher education institutions and their more than 200,000 students, he expressed his fears about the future of Palestinian quality education and training and the spectre of ever-increasing isolation from the global academic community. He knows what he is talking about. From the West Bank, where Birzeit is located, the dystopia of Gaza is looming, where universities have been virtually closed off from the outside world for ten years.

The many academic signatories of this open letter are first and foremost addressing all the rectors of the Belgian universities in order to publicly and collectively respond to and echo the cry for help from our colleagues of Birzeit University. This comprehensive reaction must above all be a signal to the Israeli authorities that the destruction of the academic, intellectual and scientific life in the oPt will not pass silently. It will not even be drowned out by the applause of the Eurovision Song Contest or the enthusiasm for a European project grant.¹³

¹³ Contact: Herman De Ley, herman.deley@ugent.be