



Association of University Heads, Israel

May 21, 2024



To the Governing Board of the Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities,



We, the leaders of Israel’s universities and research institutions, are writing to express concern over your “CRUE statement on the violent situation in Gaza” and to offer our response. Let us be clear: we share your commitment to peace and justice in the region and thank you for your condemnation of antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of hatred. We agree with you that the situation in Gaza is tragic.



We appreciated finding in your list of demands the cessation of “any action of a terrorist nature” and “freedom for the people kidnapped by Hamas.” We know that you are well-aware of the horrific events of October 7th, that included the brutal massacre of over 1200 Israelis and foreign civilians and the kidnapping of 240 people, among them toddlers, children, and young and elderly men and women. We ask that you keep in mind also what Israel has been experiencing in the weeks and months since October 7th. The Hamas has fired since then more than 10,000 rockets from Gaza and Hezbollah more than 5,000 rockets and drones from Lebanon, causing a massive evacuation and hundreds of thousands of internally displaced citizens. This situation, together with the mobilization of tens of thousands of young men and women for reserve duty, meant that for months Israeli universities could not open the academic year and researchers could not engage in research. Students and faculty were forced to leave their homes and many lost close family members - siblings, parents, children. Students were killed. Others were badly injured and forced to stop their studies. No one’s life or work has returned to normalcy. The grave weight of the war continues to take its unbearable toll and upend all areas of academic life.



It is with this context in mind that we are deeply concerned by your decision to “review suspending agreements with Israeli universities and research centers that have not expressed a firm commitment to peace and compliance with international humanitarian law.” This stance not only implies that the blame for the current situation rests on one side, but also presupposes the possibility that Israeli academic institutions are not dedicated to peace and to international humanitarian law. Nothing could be further than the truth.



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We are compelled, therefore, to correct this misunderstanding by drawing attention to our policies and values.

1. *We Stand for Democracy, Freedom of Speech, and Human Rights in Israel*

Against the backdrop of our country’s long history of political polarization, violent regional conflicts, and ethnic and religious tensions, universities in Israel have always been bastions of democracy, freedom of speech, liberal values, and human rights, including for Palestinians.

As you may know, last year it was from our campuses that the clearest voices emerged against the attempted judicial overhaul in Israel, which many feared would have weakened democracy and minority rights. Our leadership, faculty, and students took a leading role in opposing measures and legislation that would compromise the basic foundations of Israeli democracy.

Contrary to false allegations, we do not punish our students or staff members for expressing pro-Palestinian views. We are institutions that prioritize freedom of expression and we protect the rights of our faculty, staff, and students to express ideas that challenge the prevailing consensus even during these difficult and sensitive times.

2. *Israeli Universities Are Independent Institutions*

Lately, Israeli universities have been vilified for any link to the Israel Defense Forces, the supposition being that we are either directly culpable for our government’s actions or an agency of the military. We need to be clear: Israeli academia is independent of the government and military, and it operates autonomously in all academic matters. According to the 2024 Academic Freedom Index, which measures the state of academic freedom worldwide, Israeli universities are on par with universities in Norway, Canada, and Switzerland in upholding academic freedoms; moreover, we are ahead of countries such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and the United States.

Faculty at Israeli Institutions make their own decisions on what to study and how to do so. While there are researchers at our universities who, in





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accordance with their academic freedom and rights, do research on subjects related to Israel's security, there are academics in just about every other country who conduct research related to national security. Such projects, of course, represent only a small percentage of the research conducted at each of our universities and certainly do not turn our universities into military agencies.

This does not mean, however, that our academic community speaks with one voice when it comes to the current war. While there are faculty members at our universities researching on topics related to national security, we also have others who raise incisive questions and hold critical perspectives about Israel's governmental and military policies in the current conflict. Our campuses are places where contentious issues are debated based on reason and fact, including all aspects of the war in Gaza.

Others suggest that our universities are guilty parties since our students are soldiers. As you must know, Israel is a small country; most young people here are required by law to enlist in the army when they are 18, and they later serve in the reserves. Since October 7th, many in our communities were enlisted. At the height of the war, approximately 25% of our students were called up for duty. These students (and some faculty members) risked their lives to protect their families, communities, and country. We all have students who haven't returned alive. For those students who have returned, we have a duty to support their reintegration and their mental health. We are proud of the way we perform this duty, as we are sure every university in the world would be.

3. *We are Dedicated to Bettering the Lives of Palestinians and to Promoting Peace*

All Israeli universities are actively and extensively engaged in projects aiming to promote equality between Jews and Palestinians. 18% of our students are Muslim and Christian Palestinians, a figure that closely reflects their percentage in Israel's population. Many of the Palestinian students study in our most competitive programs including medicine, computer science, engineering, and law. This reality is the result of extensive efforts and demonstrates the commitment of each one of our universities to equality and diversity and to promoting social mobility.





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These efforts include providing extensive program of financial aid and fellowships for Arab students in all degree levels, including programs specifically encouraging and supporting promising candidates in advanced degree and post-doctoral programs.

The universities work hard to nurture multi-cultural campuses, taking seriously their responsibility to do so given that the period of study at the university is sometimes the first opportunity for meaningful positive interaction between Jews and Arabs. This requires not only recruiting diverse faculty members and students, but also creating a welcoming atmosphere and fostering meaningful learning opportunities across campus.

For decades, all our universities have spearheaded hundreds of projects and initiatives aimed at promoting peaceful relations in the region. Scholars in engineering, environmental studies, medicine, life science, and more collaborate regularly with counterparts in neighboring countries on projects designed to drive innovation on regional challenges in climate change, agriculture, sustainable development, public health and other areas (including collaborations with students in Gaza on water research). Other scholars work on promoting equity and social justice for Palestinian communities within Israel, including through our law clinics, educational initiatives, and community work. Our affiliated hospitals have regularly treated patients from Gaza and have also provided care for refugees from the Civil War in Syria. The space here is insufficient to even begin to enumerate all such projects.

4. *The Danger of Academic Boycotts*

We understand that those calling for academic boycotts against Israeli universities aim to protect and improve Palestinian lives and to end the crisis in Gaza. The truth is that we too mourn the loss of innocent life in this horrific conflict and want a better future for Palestinians and Israelis both. However, academic boycotts are dangerous and may very well cause more harm than good.

Weakening Israeli academia would only undermine Israel's democratic foundations, as well as the very community fighting to protect human rights and establish a more inclusive society. While many like to think the result of these boycotts would drive the type of change we saw in South Africa,





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tragically the result could be instead an increasingly militant and illiberal state, one less likely to promote regional peace, prosperity, and democracy.

In Israel, there is a high correlation between one's level of education and one's commitment to liberal democratic values, the rule of law, and support for a just solution to the conflict; teaching democracy and human rights is part of our educational mission. Our higher education system has helped Palestinian Israelis to achieve important positions in areas like law, medicine, the arts and high tech. Furthermore, our researchers are among some of the leading voices in Israel and globally for finding solutions for this crisis. Our academics remain steadfastly committed to peace, coexistence and international humanitarian law in the face of current challenges. Do Spanish universities want to weaken this force for good in the region rather than support it?

It is imperative that we reinforce academic collaborations to ensure that we live up to our shared global aspirations for a better collective future, and for the pursuit of knowledge and truth.

Respectfully,

Prof. Arie Zaban, President of Bar-Ilan University
Chairperson of Association of University Heads – VERA

Prof. Daniel A. Chamovitz, President of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Prof. Alon Chen, President of Weizmann Institute of Science

Prof. Asher Cohen, President of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Prof. Leo Corry, President of the Open University of Israel

Prof. Ehud Grossman, President of Ariel University

Prof. Ariel Porat, President of Tel-Aviv University

Prof. Ron Robin, President of University of Haifa

Prof. Uri Sivan, President of the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology

