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Silencing Dissent: Palestine Solidarity under Attack

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By Ben White*

Students at Palestine Technical University in the Occupied West Bank face an unusual challenge in pursuit of their studies: the Israeli military has [built a training facility](#) on campus. The university may be the only one in the world where an occupying army has not only built a firing range on campus, but also regularly shoots and detains student protesters; [in one six week period recently, some 350 Palestinian students were injured by the Israeli army.](#)

Or take universities in the Gaza Strip. According to [UNESCO](#), Israel killed 421 Palestinian students, and injured 1,128 during the 2014 'Operation Protective Edge' offensive. The UN agency stated that Palestinian "higher education institutions were directly targeted [by Israel] during the hostilities." Nine members of staff were also killed, with "the total estimated cost of repairs to and replacement of HEI [Higher Education Institutions] buildings, facilities and equipment" at \$16 million.

On January 11, Israeli occupation forces [raided](#) Birzeit University campus, ransacking the student council and science faculty, damaging property, and confiscating equipment. The Syndicate of the Palestinian Universities Union has [urged](#) universities worldwide to "denounce these violations."

This is just a snapshot of what Palestinian students and academics face, as a result of Israel's [apartheid](#) policies. Yet when students and faculty members in universities in Britain, or North America, protest these injustices and express support for the Palestinian people's basic rights, they are often singled out for smears and intimidation.

Last year, a [conference](#) on Israel and international law at the University of Southampton was cancelled on the grounds of 'health and safety'. The decision, however, followed months of [lobbying](#) – privately and publicly – by pro-Israel advocacy groups, who urged the cancellation of a scholarly event they said would "surpass the acceptable."

The campaign against the conference, driven by the Board of Deputies of British Jews, Jewish Leadership Council, Union of Jewish Students, and Zionist Federation, was widely [condemned](#), including by a public [petition](#) that attracted more than 11,000 signatures. A separate [statement](#) of support for the conference, which slammed "partisan attempts" to "silence dissenting analyses of the topic in question", was signed by more than 900 academics from the UK and worldwide, including dozens from Oxbridge, Russell Group universities, and Ivy League schools.

Meanwhile, students who seek to go beyond debate, and end their complicity as individuals or as an institution in Israel's ongoing war crimes and human rights abuses, find themselves the target of legal threats. In spring 2014, King's College London Students Union [passed](#) a motion 348 to 252, calling on the union to pressure the university "to divest from Israel and from companies directly or indirectly supporting the Israeli occupation and apartheid policies."

However, pro-Israel students, [assisted](#) by a group called UK Lawyers for Israel, quickly sought to undermine the democratic process, warning the union trustees of "potential legal consequences" should the motion be implemented. The union gave in to the pressure. Other student unions have faced similar problems. In autumn 2014, Manchester University Students' Union voted in favour of establishing official ties with Al-Najah University in Nablus (occupied Palestinian West Bank), and for a plaque to be displayed expressing support for the Palestinians' right to education. Again, [legal threats ensued](#).

It is a similar story on North American campuses, as those who want to shield Israel from scrutiny and accountability are on the defensive in the face of a [growing](#) Palestine solidarity movement. Palestine Legal, an organisation "dedicated to protecting the civil rights of people in the U.S. who speak out for Palestinian freedom", [recorded](#) some 300 incidents over an 18-month period 2014-15, including "baseless legal complaints, administrative disciplinary actions, firings, harassment, and false accusations of terrorism and anti-Semitism."

American Indian studies professor Steven Salaita had his appointment to a tenured position at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign revoked, because of his tweets criticising Israel's bombardment of the Gaza Strip in summer 2014. Salaita's breach of contract lawsuit [ended](#) in an out of court settlement that saw the university pay Salaita US\$875,000 (but he was not reinstated).

The London School of Economics (LSE) is [not immune](#). Last November, the university condemned activities of the student Palestine Society in a public statement, despite the fact that the LSE Students' Union (LSESU) had investigated, and exonerated, the Society. For LSESU General Secretary Nona Buckley-Irvine, it was "deeply disappointing" that the university

had “sought to engage with the political activity of a society beyond its legal responsibilities.” According to [Buckley-Irvine](#), “fear of reputational damage” led LSE to buckle under the “external pressure” of “a slew of lobbyists.”

It is not always this crude; the marginalisation and silencing of Palestinian voices in academic discussion and the media, including by liberals, is a broader, more entrenched problem. For example, as I reported last month, of 138 op-eds published on Palestine/Israel over a two-year period by [The Guardian](#), only 20 were written by Palestinians.

However, Israel advocacy groups, on and off campus, are hindered in their efforts despite, or in some cases because of, their influence and resources. There is a huge disparity in grassroots support for Palestinian rights on the one hand, and for Israel on the other: elite access can make a difference, but in the long term, it is no substitute for a groundswell of public sympathy – or anger.

On British campuses, like elsewhere, students and staff are increasingly aware of the facts of Israel's colonialism, occupation, and apartheid. Palestinians and those in solidarity with them are ever more numerous, organised, and focused on advancing campaigns like Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions.

Efforts to silence Palestinians and to intimidate human rights campaigners are not going to stop anytime soon, but they are a reflection of the same kind of panic we see amongst Israeli politicians. As the LSE Palestine Society [said](#) last term, following the administration's November statement: “your intimidation tactics will be fruitless, we are not easily intimidated as you clearly are.”

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