The Crisis in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank and its Impact on Academia

Scholars at Risk stands with the people of Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank suffering from horrendous violence, fear, insecurity, and acts of identity-based hatred. Scholars at Risk calls on states, non-state armed groups, the higher education sector, civil society, and the public to (1) protect higher education communities from attack, including by implementing a mutual, meaningful, and lasting cessation of hostilities and release of noncombatants; (2) support scholars and students from the region who are at-risk; and (3) protect and promote academic freedom and institutional autonomy, while (4) combating violence, intimidation, hate speech, and discrimination, including antisemitism and anti-Muslim and anti-Arab hate, on and off campus, without sacrificing the core higher education values for which SAR stands.

Background

The October 7 attack by Hamas killed upwards of 1,200 Israeli and foreign citizens and led to the abduction of around 240 others — of whom more than 130 are believed to be held hostage in Gaza. Israel's subsequent bombardment and invasion of Gaza has reportedly killed more than 18,000 Palestinians and displaced nearly 85 percent of the territory's population (estimates as of December 14), while violence has also escalated in the West Bank, including the killing of Palestinians by Israeli soldiers and settlers.

This violence brought much of higher education to a standstill across Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) and traumatized higher education communities, including Ben Gurion University, which lost dozens of students and personnel on October 7. Reports suggest that as of November at least 439 members of the Palestinian higher education community have been killed, and Israeli strikes have damaged buildings belonging to five of Gaza's six universities, including the Islamic University of Gaza, whose president was killed in an airstrike. Education at all levels in Gaza has largely stopped due to insecurity, lack of electricity and stable internet connections for online education, and shortages of basic necessities. In the West Bank, the escalation in violence and travel restrictions have forced higher education to move solely online.

Across Israel and the OPT, students and scholars are at risk because of their political views and personal identities. In the West Bank, Israeli forces raided Birzeit University and arrested Palestinian students and scholars. On Israeli university campuses, scholars have been pressured to resign for expression critical of the Israeli government's actions, while Palestinian students have been suspended for their social media posts and threatened with violence.

Globally, Jewish, Muslim, and Arab students have reported a climate of fear, due in part to violent incidents on or near their campuses and a rise in hateful rhetoric. While responding to these, some higher education administrators have threatened and violated the academic freedom of scholars and students. In the United States, university administrations suspended local chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace in connection with nonviolent protests and canceled lectures and film screenings. In the United Kingdom and Hong Kong, scholars have been removed from academic positions or been disinvited as speakers. In India, police forces have used disproportionate force in response to student protests.

Attacks on higher education in the region and the frequent efforts to punish and silence critical expression and inquiry on campuses around the world have put scholars and students

everywhere at risk. Even as they work to ensure security, states, higher education communities, and civil society must take action to protect higher education and academic freedom. The practices of evidence, reasoned debate, and civil discourse engendered within higher education communities are essential to promoting the information, ideas and understanding necessary for any future, lasting peace.

Call to Action

Scholars at Risk calls on states, non-state armed groups, the higher education sector, and civil society to take the following actions.

1) Protect higher education communities from attack, including from military use or occupation, military or paramilitary strikes, campus raids, detentions and arrests of students and scholars, and restrictions on their movement. **Specifically, SAR calls on governments and state and non-state armed groups in and outside Israel and the OPT to:**

- **Refrain from direct, complicit, or indirect involvement in attacks on higher education communities**, including by implementing a mutual, meaningful, and lasting cessation of hostilities and return of noncombatants, or at a minimum, by refraining from (i) military use or occupation of educational facilities, which violate their 'civilian object' character and endanger noncombatants; (ii) military targeting of educational facilities, regardless of their use, which entail indiscriminate risk of harm to civilians and noncombatants; and (iii) raids of education institutions, which endanger the lives and well-being of staff, students, and other noncombatants.
  - The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack offers resources that stakeholders should follow and endorse, including the *Principles of State Responsibility to Protect Higher Education from Attack*, a *Guide to Implementing the Principles of State Responsibility to Protect Higher Education from Attack*, the *Safe Schools Declaration*, and *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use During Armed Conflict*.
- **Refrain from arbitrary detentions and arrests** of students and scholars, and **release those who have been wrongfully imprisoned and detained**;
- **Respect scholars' and students' freedom of movement**, including by facilitating the movement of scholars, students, and other noncombatants to secure locations, including in third countries, and removing long-standing restrictions to academic movement (see relevant discussion of the OPT in *Free to Think 2022*); and
- **Support victims and deter future attacks**, including by investigating attacks and holding perpetrators accountable under law, and in accordance with internationally recognized human rights standards.

2) Support scholars and students from the region who are at-risk due to their views, academic work, identity, threat of violence, and conflict. These include Palestinian scholars and students in the OPT, in Israel, and outside the immediate region, and Israeli and Jewish scholars and students in Israel and elsewhere who have been subjected to threats or harassment, including for expressing views, supportive or critical, of the Israeli government and its policies. Providing safe haven and other direct assistance for at-risk members of the higher education community is an important way to aid colleagues in need of support and demonstrates commitment to academic freedom. **Specifically, SAR calls on higher education and government stakeholders to:**

- **Host at-risk scholars and students from the region on your campus**, including by establishing funds and placements for at-risk scholars and students, issuing public calls to host, reaching out to academic colleagues in and from the region who may be seeking assistance, and communicating and coordinating with other institutions interested in joint-hosting initiatives;

- **Refer at-risk scholars to SAR for hosting consideration within the Network** (learn more in SAR's eligibility and application criteria and find information on hosting scholars in the How to Host handbook);
- **Establish dedicated fellowship schemes to support at-risk scholars** who are able to travel (consider for reference the European Union's MSCA4Ukraine program, which supports displaced researchers from Ukraine); and
- **Support students abroad who cannot safely return home at this time**, such as by waiving tuition fees and providing scholarships and living stipends (*see* examples from Indonesia and Malaysia).

3) Protect and promote academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Higher education leaders have a responsibility to ensure the safety of students and personnel, including by combating violence, intimidation, and hate speech. However, they can and must exercise this responsibility consistently with their responsibility to protect and promote academic freedom. SAR's *Promoting Higher Education Values* guidebook offers frameworks for responding to incidents. **Specifically, SAR calls on higher education leaders to protect and promote academic freedom and institutional autonomy by:**

- **Refraining from wrongful suspensions, terminations, sanctions against campus associations, or threats of the same** in response to nonviolent expressive or academic activity by faculty, students, and other members of the campus community;
- While condemning hate speech and antisemitism, **resisting policies and frameworks that conflate evidence-based criticism of Zionist political ideology or the policies of the Israeli government with antisemitism** (*see* American Association of University Professors and *Times Higher Education*);
- **Resisting external interference** from government officials, donors, alumni, corporations, and other actors demanding restrictions on or punishments for nonviolent expressive or academic activity on or off campus;
- **Ensuring due process standards** when investigating and responding to allegations of violence, intimidation, hate speech, or other violations of university policies;
- **Reasserting academic freedom as an essential value of higher education and of democratic society,** especially during times of conflict and division, including by hosting and facilitating dialogues, classes, teach-ins, and events aimed at deepening understanding about sensitive or contentious issues; and
- **Developing proactive, values-based approaches to assessing and responding to values-related incidents,** that account for the safety and well-being of all members of the community while ensuring respect for core higher education values, including academic freedom, institutional autonomy, accountability, equitable access, and social responsibility (as discussed in SAR's *Promoting Higher Education Values* guidebook and the free online course, "Dangerous Questions: Why Academic Freedom Matters").

4) Combat violence, intimidation, hate speech, and discrimination, on and off campus, without sacrificing core values. Students, faculty, and other higher education personnel have a right to engage in campus life fully and freely, without fear of violence, harassment, intimidation, or discrimination. Higher education leaders must commit to fighting antisemitism and anti-Muslim and anti-Arab hate on and off campus, while preserving academic freedom and free expression. **Specifically, SAR urges higher education leaders, administrators, and faculty to take the following actions and to review the linked resources for additional actions:**

- **Speak out against antisemitism, anti-Muslim hate, anti-Arab hate, racism, and other forms of hatred** as antithetical to the core research, teaching and public engagement functions of higher education;
- **Support affected members of the campus community**, including by increasing access to mental health and wellness services;

- While ensuring due process, **investigate and hold accountable perpetrators** of violence, harassment, and intimidation, and other conduct that violates the law or university policies;
- **Foster education and discussion** about the history and impact of antisemitism, anti-Muslim hate, and anti-Arab hate; and
- Create and **promote spaces for deeper understanding and evidence-based dialogue**, including dissenting views.

Additional Resources

SAR resources:

For assisting at-risk scholars:

- *How to Host* Handbook and Scholar Eligibility and Application Criteria
- MSCA4Ukraine (Coordinated by SAR Europe)

For reporting on incidents and attacks:

- Academic Freedom Monitoring Project
- Annual *Free to Think* reports
- SAR's Academic Freedom Media Review (email summary of related media) (sign up)
- Advocacy Insider (e-bulletin of SAR-related advocacy actions) (sign up)

For promoting evidence-based dialogue:

- *Promoting Higher Education Values* Guide and Workshop Supplement
- Dangerous Questions: Why Academic Freedom Matters (free online course)
- Principles for Implementing the Right of Academic Freedom

For general updates and opportunities:

- SAR e-Newsletter (sign up)

Partner resources:

For responding and preventing attacks:

- Principles of State Responsibility to Protect Higher Education from Attack
- Safe Schools Declaration
- Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use During Armed Conflict

For responding to hate-speech:

- Advice on Responding to Hateful Speech on Campus
- Handling Rising Antisemitism on Campuses
- Rising Anti-Muslim and Anti-Arab Hate on Campus
- Campus Free Speech Guide

READ ON THE SAR WEBSITE