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Between the Grip of Persecution and the Limitations of Agency: Palestinian Students in Israeli Universities amid the War of Genocide on the Gaza Strip

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Mada al-Carmel
Arab Center for
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Palestinian Students in Israeli Universities amid the War of Genocide
on the Gaza Strip**

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Abstract

This paper examines political persecution and repressive practices against Palestinian citizens from inside the Green Line who study at Israeli universities, amid the war of genocide on the Gaza Strip that broke out after October 7, 2023. These practices have ranged from threats of expulsion to referrals to disciplinary committees, and even arrests. In parallel, the study examines the actions of student movements and Palestinian agency in the face of this campaign.

The paper starts by addressing transformations in the agency of Palestinian student movements at Israeli universities, offering some background and explanations for their reduced levels of agency and activity over the past two decades. It also discusses how the Israeli authorities have targeted the Palestinian student movement, which rose to prominence following the Dignity Uprising in 2021. The paper argues that these two factors—the targeting of university students and the decline of the student movement—have together undermined the ability of student activists to effectively confront this ferocious onslaught, which intensified in the wake of the war of genocide on Gaza.

Introduction

Data from the Council for Higher Education of Israel in Israel indicate that Palestinians inside the Green Line constitute 19% of the total student population in Israeli universities and colleges. In 2023, Arab students numbered 61,550 of a total of 332,000 university students in Israel.¹

Student movements have, over the decades, constituted a significant political, intellectual, and party-political force among Palestinians inside the Green Line, assuming societal and political influence that extends well beyond the university walls.² Arab students and student movements played key roles in the Land Day uprising of 1976 and the October 2000 uprising. Since its inception, the student movement has reflected—both intellectually and in terms of its activism—the various political and intellectual positions held by Palestinians inside the Green Line. These have included the *Al-Ard* (Land) Movement, leftist faction *Abnaa al-Balad* (Sons of the Village Movement), the *Tajammu'* (National Democratic assembly) student movement, the Islamist political movements—the Southern Branch of the Islamic Movement and its bloc *Al-Qalam* (Pen), as well as the Northern Branch, under the name *Iqra'* (Read)—along with the communist movement, represented by the Communist Party and the *Al-Jabha* (The Democratic Front for Peace and Equality)-affiliated university student movement.³

1. The Israeli Council for Higher Education. (2023, December 28). Opening of the 2023/2024 academic year. [Council for Higher Education](#). [In Hebrew]

2. Mustafa, Mohanad. (2011). **The Arab Student Movement at Israeli Universities**. *Iqra'*, The Arab Association for the Support of Education in Arab Society. [In Arabic]

3. Mustafa, Mohanad. (2002). **The Arab Palestinian Student Movement: A Theoretical and Historical Study of the Dialectic of the University and Politics**. Umm al-Fahm: Center for Contemporary Studies. [In Arabic]

In recent years, however, these student movements have failed to maintain the same strong presence and level of activity, for various reasons, most notably their inability to compete with the dominance of Israeli universities and student unions in the area of student services provision. The economic dominance of the latter has contributed to the sidelining of Arab student committees and the National Union of Arab University Students (bodies elected by Arab students to represent them before academic institutions). In addition, Israel's decision in 2015 to ban the Northern Branch of Islamic Movement and its student wing *Iqra'*, which had previously played a prominent role in student politics, further weakened Arab student movements inside the Green Line.

Moreover, when four Arab-majority political parties formed the Joint List, this made an additional contribution to the decline of the Arab student movements. As well as the absence of intellectual competition between these parties, they grew to rely on the Joint List as a means of self-preservation that did not require them to invest significant efforts in their own party institutions or student bodies. Thus, they failed to invest in the student and youth movements, which further undermined them.

Yet, this decline did not last long. By the late 2000s, the Palestinian student movement inside the Green Line had begun to regain momentum. This was first evident on the campus of Tel Aviv University, where five student movements became active: the *Ru'ya* (Vision) Movement, the *Jafra* student movement affiliated to the *Tajammu'* party, the *Al-Jabha* student movement, the Edward Said Forum (a non-partisan nationalist and cultural movement), and the Law Students' Forum. Serious student activism remained largely limited to Tel Aviv University, though there were more modest activities at Haifa University. There were no student movements at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (Be'er Sheva), the Technion – Israel Institute of Technology (Haifa), or Bar-Ilan University. Their absence was particularly notable at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, a campus that has historically been a main site of Arab student activism.

Repeated attempts were made to reorganize student movements —whether party-affiliated, cultural, or religious— at other universities, which eventually resulted in the revival of their activities at most universities.

Since the 2017-2018 academic year, the Palestinian student movement within the Green Line has taken a more prominent role by organizing various activities that have had significant impact and generated widespread engagement. This was particularly evident with events to commemorate the *Nakba*, which have become some of the most important activities for Palestinian student movements, and through the act of raising the Palestinian flag on Israeli university campuses. These universities now witness annual *Nakba* commemorations, most notably activities organized by the Palestinian student movement at Tel Aviv University and Ben-Gurion University in 2022, and in particular on May 15, *Nakba* day itself.

This period also saw widespread Israeli incitement and the introduction of various restrictions and regulations aimed at cracking down on such activities. For example, following the *Nakba* commemorations in 2022, the administration of Ben-Gurion University referred student activists to disciplinary committees, on the pretext that they had organized illegal activities on campus, and based on accusations that they had used terms or expressions that incite to terrorism and violence. For example, one female student was referred to the university's disciplinary committee for using the word 'martyrs' (*shuhadā*).⁴

At Tel Aviv University, the police arrested three student movement activists, severely assaulted them, and tried to shut down the *Nakba* commemoration event. However, it went ahead, with hundreds of Palestinian flags raised, something that fueled further incitement.

The three students were arrested at the entrance to the university, an area under the university's direct authority and managed by its own private security service. However, in relation to this particular event—the commemoration of the *Nakba* by Palestinian student movements at Tel Aviv University—the administration made an exceptional decision to allow the Israeli police to intervene. The university stood back from the event, even though it took place on campus grounds, which resulted in police assaults of Arab students, even as they were also being attacked by right-wing activists. Arab students were assaulted and arrested before the event had even started, in an attempt to intimidate others students and discourage them from taking part in activities of this kind.⁵ The police extended the detention of some students by one or two days, and their court hearings sparked large student demonstrations against the arrests and the persecution of the Palestinian student movement at Tel Aviv University.⁶

The Start of the Escalation

The aforementioned activities were followed by a widespread Israeli campaign of incitement against Palestinian student movements active in Israeli universities, led by the right-wing *Im Tirtzu* movement,⁷ which operates primarily on university campuses.

4. Arab48. (2023, March 9). Be'er Sheva University cancels proceedings against a student who used the word martyrs. [Arab48](#). [In Arabic]

5. Arab48. (2022, May 15). Tel Aviv University: Arab students arrested, widespread participation in Nakba ceremonies. [Arab48](#). [In Arabic]

6. Arab48. (2022, May 17). Extension of detention of Tel Aviv University student Ahmed Jabareen for one day. [Arab48](#). [In Arabic]

7. The *Im Tirtzu* movement was founded in 2006 by prominent right-wing figures led by Ronen Shoval, who remains its chairman as of the time of writing in 2025, and Erez Tadmor, who was active in the **Likud** party and took part in an Institute for **Zionist Strategy** (IZS) "youth leadership program". *Im Tirtzu* defines itself as a conservative, right-wing Zionist organization that seeks to promote "**Zionist values**" in Israel and to preserve "the State of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people" by renewing **Zionist** discourse, thought, and ideology within Israeli society and among the younger generation, to prepare them to lead the state in the future. See: Badawi, Abdel Qader (2023, May 2). 'Im Tirtzu: Either Zionism or Annihilation': The most extreme and racist of the Zionist right-wing groups. [Israeli scene newsletter, Madar- The Palestinian Forum for Israeli Studies](#). [In Arabic]

Some of the incitement came from politicians, Members of Knesset (MKs), and media figures, and it even reached the chambers of the Knesset. On May 16, 2022, a day after the *Nakba* commemorations, the Knesset held a heated session during which a campaign of incitement was waged against Palestinian student movements, specifically in response to the *Nakba* commemorations and the raising of the Palestinian flag at Tel Aviv and Ben-Gurion Universities.

Then-opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu opened the session with the words:

These are red days, in which red lines are being crossed. We all see the flames that want to consume us all. Palestinian flags are being raised everywhere in Israel. We all saw that large *Nakba* demonstration at Tel Aviv University (or "Al-Shaykh Muwannis," as they call it). This is happening in the heart of Tel Aviv, while anyone who raises the Israeli flag must summon courage to do so. This is what is happening now in the State of Israel. It is a disgrace!⁸

A week later, a bill was introduced to ban the raising of the Palestinian flag on university campuses and passed a preliminary reading. Several MKs used the one minute slot granted to each MK to speak about any bill under consideration as an opportunity to engage in further incitement against the student movement and *Nakba* commemoration events held at Israeli universities. During the discussion of the bill, former Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant, a member of the opposition at the time, recalled the outcome of the *Nakba* and threatened a new one. In his speech, he expressed intense anger at the actions of the student movements, saying:

In recent weeks, days, and hours, we have witnessed an increase in acts of terrorism from the Arab community in Israel. These acts are dangerous, first and foremost, for the Arabs in Israel, not for the state. I will perhaps convey a message to the Arabs not to make a mistake. And I want to explain what I mean... Rampant crime in Arab society is starting to take on a nationalist character, and what happened in recent days at Tel Aviv University and Ben-Gurion University poses a great danger to you [addressing the Arabs community]. 74 years ago, your leadership, Hassan Salameh and Amin al-Husseini, dragged you into a war that resulted in your fleeing the country. I tell you: Do not repeat the same mistake. There will come a time when you cross the red line, and then the price will be very high. If you continue with this behavior, we will reach a point of no return. And I promise you that this will not happen. I know how to carry out [security] operations and use force, and this will be the case once the new Likud government comes to power, soon.⁹

Also commenting on the proposed legislation, Likud MK Yisrael Katz delivered a speech from the Knesset podium on May 23, 2022, in which he stated:

8. Knesset Channel. (2022, May 16). Knesset Plenum Session– Section C. [Knesset Channel](#). [In Hebrew]

9. Ibid.

I address the Arab students in the universities who are waving Palestinian flags, and I say to them: Remember the 1948 War. Remember our War of Independence and your Nakba. It was our independence and your Nakba. Ask your elders and your grandparents. They will assure you that in the end, the Jews will rise up and defend themselves. Don't pull the rope tighter that it can bear, and don't bring another catastrophe like the Nakba upon the Arab community in Israel.¹⁰

In the same speech, Katz said the demonstrations were reminiscent of those held at universities in the 1970s, and incited against Dr. Azmi Bishara. In the 1970s there were violent student demonstrations against the Israeli right, during which Bishara, who played a key role in the protests, was arrested twice, becoming one of the movement's most prominent leaders. Katz also threatened the Islamic Movement, saying, "We have banned it, and the rest are on the way". He concluded by declaring: "We will teach you a lesson you will never forget. We'll put an end to this terrorism in the universities and we won't allow you to continue down this path. The day will come when you will lose everything you have achieved and everything you have".¹¹

Katz's comparison of activism on university campuses during the *Nakba* commemorations in 2022 to the events of the 1970s was deliberate. Many consider the 1970s to have been a golden age for the student movement, which was highly active at the time¹² and played a pivotal role in the 1976 Land Day uprising. This period was also a critical stage in the establishment of the National Union of Arab Students, of which Azmi Bishara was the first president as well as a leading founder. At that time, the Arab student movement at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem was at the forefront of student politics, producing many leaders of the Palestinian political movement inside the Green Line. Katz's comparison therefore serves to confirm that Israel takes the recent resurgence of Palestinian student movements extremely seriously, and intends to go beyond merely containing them. The prevailing discourse now includes clear threats of expulsion, repression and a repetition of the *Nakba*, in a clear and forceful effort to prevent the student movement from regaining influence, and affirming that the response will be even more harsh and repressive than it was in the 1970s.

A week after the tumultuous Knesset session, the legislature approved —on June 1, 2022, in a preliminary reading— a bill banning the raising of the Palestinian flag at academic institutions that receive state funding. The vote was passed by a majority of 63 members of the 120-seat chamber in favor, with only 16 opposed. The bill was proposed by MKs from the Likud party, who were backed by senior figures in Naftali Bennett's government and his coalition, despite Bennett's previous pledge not to back any bill

10. Knesset Channel. (2022, May 23). Knesset Plenary Session— Section C. [Knesset Channel](#). [In Hebrew]

11. Ibid.

12. Ghassan, Dima. (2018, April 8). The Student Movement in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and the Battle for Existence and Steadfastness. [NoonPost](#). [In Arabic]

tabled by the opposition bloc at the time. However, they united around this bill, while alternate Prime Minister Yair Lapid and all his party's MKs abstained. After the vote, opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu stated, "We have now passed in the Knesset the Flag Law, which prohibits the raising of the PLO flag in state-funded institutions, and confirms that Israel has only one flag. We will return Israel to the right. This is an important day for the State of Israel and for the future of the Jewish state".¹³

In response to the passage of the law, the *Tajammu'* student movement issued the following statement:

The Palestinian flag is our national flag, and is a symbol that reflects our identity as Palestinian students everywhere, both inside Israeli universities and beyond. We will respond to any unjust law intended to strip our students of their national consciousness by celebrating and holding ever more tightly to these symbols... We have always placed attachment to our national identity and consciousness at the center of our student activism, and we have consistently and resolutely confronted the policies of erasure and Israelization pursued by the Israeli establishment from the Nakba to the present day. These foolish attempts will not succeed, and we will continue to affirm our absolute allegiance to the Palestinian people, despite all these ridiculous laws.¹⁴

The *Jabha* student movement also condemned the passage of the law with the following statement:

Prohibiting the raising of the Palestinian flag is a violation of all international agreements and conventions, and an infringement of the freedoms of expression, protest, and thought. The raising of the Palestinian flag is not a product of recent events; we in the student movements raised it in the earliest days of student activism at Israeli universities. However, violating the sanctity of the university and imposing a right-wing political agenda on it represents a continuation of unrelenting attempts to de-legitimize the Palestinian flag and our very presence as Palestinian Arab students in these universities.¹⁵

Despite attempts by student movements to stand up to these repressive policies, the campaign of persecution against the Palestinian student movement continued, through various forms and methods. Among them was a request by right-wing group *Im Tirtzu* to Tel Aviv University to ban the *Tajammu'*-affiliated *Jaфра* student bloc, on the grounds that its members had chanted "pro-terrorism" slogans during a student protest against the Israeli army's assault on the West Bank city of Jenin in February 2022. The university

13. Shalev, Tal. (2022, June 1). The law that split the governing coalition: Prohibiting the raising of Palestinian flags in a preliminary reading. [Walla](#). [In Hebrew]

14. Arab48. (2022, June 2). The Knesset approves two laws targeting the existence of the Palestinian people and its flag. [Arab48](#). [In Arabic]

15. Panet; & Panorama Newspaper. (2024, May 15). The *Jabha* Student movement at Tel Aviv University commemorates the *Nakba*. [Panet](#). [In Arabic]

officially rejected this request in a letter written by its vice president.¹⁶ However, a month later, the university banned *Jafra* from holding its annual book fair, on the pretext that it included inciting material.¹⁷

This was followed by the approval —at a preliminary reading— of another bill, more comprehensive than previous ones, explicitly targeting the activities of Arab student movements. This legislation aimed to outlaw these movements and expel active students from universities if they expressed support for the Palestinian struggle (which the law termed "terrorism") or raised "enemy" flags, i.e. the Palestinian flag. The law was approved at its preliminary reading by a majority of 50 Knesset members, with 32 opposed.¹⁸ As with previous repressive measures, both the *Tajammu'* and *Jabha*-affiliated student movements issued statements of protest in response to the law's passage.¹⁹

Later, in early 2023, National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir issued an order to the Israeli police prohibiting the raising of the Palestinian flag, under his authority as minister in charge of the police force. Police Commissioner Yaakov "Kobi" Shabtai then issued a directive enforcing the prohibition, a measure the police have implemented consistently ever since.²⁰ Notably, students at Tel Aviv University defied Ben-Gvir's order and raised hundreds of Palestinian flags during the *Nakba* commemorations of May 2023.²¹

The repression was not limited to Tel Aviv University; other universities throughout Israel followed suit, wielding policies of control and repression against their Palestinian students. For example, the University of Haifa, which has the largest Arab student

16. Arab48. (2023, February 15). Tel Aviv University rejects 'Im Tirtzu's' request to ban the Tajammu' Jafra student group. [Arab48](#). [In Arabic]

17. Arab48. (2023, March 19). Tel Aviv University prevents the Jafra movement from organizing a book fair for Arab students. [Arab48](#). [In Arabic]

18. Al-Jarraq News. (2023, July 20). A draft law banning Palestinian student movements was approved... and Jafra: We will continue our student work. [Al-Jarraq News](#). [In Arabic]

19. The statement by the *Tajammu'* student movement read, "Racist laws will not deter us from continuing our national student activism at Israeli universities. Rather, they will only increase our resolve and determination to move forward and expand our work and activities even further, because this law clearly demonstrates how unsettled they are by the work and activities of our student movement, whose impact goes beyond the halls of the Knesset and offers hope to our people everywhere, through the presence of outstanding and high-achieving Palestinian students at Israeli universities who remain dedicated to their people and their cause, and who are actively engaged in national and cultural student activism." The statement by the *Jabha* student movement said, "The law banning student movements and persecuting political activists is an infringement of freedom of expression and an attack on the Palestinian Arab minority. It is also an attempt to control the academic sphere. There is no doubt that this attempt aligns with their broader attempts to seize control of the state's judicial system and tailor academia to suit the fascist right and serve its ambitions of occupation, undermine the Palestinian people's right to self-determination and to end the occupation, and removing any prospect for dialogue and peace". Panet; & Panorama Newspaper. (2022, June 1). The *Jabha* student movement condemns the passage of the law banning the raising of the Palestinian flag. [Panet](#). [In Arabic]

20. Breiner, Joshua (Josh). (2023, January 8). At Ben-Gvir's direction, Police Commissioner Shabtai orders enforcement of the ban on raising of the Palestinian flag in public. [Haaretz](#). [In Hebrew]

21. Dalasha, Omar. (2023, May 15). Commemorating the *Nakba* at Tel Aviv University. [Arab48](#). [In Arabic]

population in the country,²² banned all forms of protest on campus and threatened students with expulsion for taking part in any such activity. In addition, the university blatantly violates the rights of Palestinian students in the students movement, using bureaucratic tools to thwart their activities, interfering in their content, and prohibiting the use of certain terms and expressions, such as "Palestinian students", "the Palestinian people", and "the national cause". The university also requires that Palestinian student movements translate their publications into Hebrew before distribution, so that university representatives can monitor and review their content. It uses further tactics to obstruct the dissemination of the groups' publications, such as conditioning their release on prior approval through a lengthy bureaucratic process. Sometimes this process takes weeks, thereby preventing the timely distribution of the publications and rendering them irrelevant to the events that they address—if permission is granted at all—amounting to a form of censorship through other means.

Bar-Ilan University has imposed an unofficial ban on any Palestinian student movement. In 2023, an official request was submitted to register a chapter of the *Jafra* movement at the university, which has repeatedly stalled and refused to approve its establishment ever since. Meanwhile, several right-wing student groups are active, working in close cooperation with the university administration and its student union. Adalah – The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel recently submitted an official request to the university asking it to end its delaying tactics and register the group.²³

This period has proved to be one of the greatest challenges for Palestinian student activism at Israeli universities. It has become clear to those involved in student activities that the current phase is one defined by censorship and policies of control, persecution, and even threats. This reality also reflects the scale and influence of the student movement, which has stood up to these policies with resilience, demonstrating commitment and cohesion, and taking bold actions despite the difficult and challenging situation. As a result, the student movement succeeded to establish itself during this period as an influential political player within Palestinian society inside the Green Line, and in its dealings with the establishment. Matters even escalated to the point where the Knesset held emergency sessions, various committees conducted deliberations, and bills were submitted in direct response to the Palestinian student movement's political and national activities at Israeli universities.

22. Arab students account for approximately 44% of undergraduates and 33% of master's and doctoral students at the University of Haifa. See: Israel Central Bureau of Statistics. (2023, December 28). Higher Education in Israel- Selected Data for the Academic Year (2022/ 2023) for the Opening of the Academic Year. [Israel Central Bureau of Statistics](#). [In Hebrew]

23. Adalah. (2024, November 14). Registration of the Jafra Student Bloc at Bar-Ilan University. **Letter from the Adalah Legal Center to the administration of Bar-Ilan University**. (Author's archive). [In Hebrew]

The Student Movement and the War on the Gaza Strip

The policies and practices adopted by various Israeli universities prior to October 7, 2023, can be seen as an ominous prelude to what followed. In the early days of Israel's war on Gaza, these universities launched a campaign against their Palestinian students, in cooperation with Israeli student unions and their Jewish classmates, who acted as informants against Arab students, as will be explained below. This confirms what was stated earlier: that these policies and practices did not emerge in a vacuum, but rather represent a direct continuation and escalation of a years-long campaign of incitement, restrictions and repression against Palestinian nationalist student activism at Israeli universities before the start of the war of genocide on Gaza.

The University of Haifa spearheaded this round of incitement by initiating a wave of repression, and was soon joined by dozens of universities and academic institutes throughout Israel, with support and direction from Education Minister Yoav Kisch and various government authorities.²⁴ On October 12, 2023, less than a week after the war began, Kisch wrote to the heads of academic institutions to demand that they report to the Council for Higher Education on the measures they had taken against students who expressed support for "terrorism", and that they deal with them with an iron fist.²⁵ At the same time, Israeli universities summoned more than 150 students to appear before so-called "disciplinary committees",²⁶ mainly in relation to accusations concerning posts they had made on social media. Most hearings in these committees devolved into something resembling intelligence interrogations that probed the students' opinions, views, and political positions, often with no direct connection to the content of their posts.²⁷

The disciplinary committees focused their questioning on political and ideological matters²⁸ that had no bearing to the text or substance of students' posts, aiming instead to entrap the students and put them on the defensive. Notably, more than 90% of the cases involved stories that students shared on Instagram, and the process resulted in dozens of them being suspended for one or two semesters, and in some cases, to their permanent

24. Haj Yahia, Deiaa. (2023, October 9). Haifa University students to Arab48: What is happening is revenge against Arab students?. [Arab48](#). [In Arabic]

25. Minister of Education. (2023, October 12). Dealing with cases of incitement to terrorism by students and staff at academic institutions. **Letter from the Minister of Education to the heads of universities and colleges**. (Author's archive). [In Hebrew]

26. Bweerat, Ameer Ali. (2023, November 15). Israeli universities summon 160 Arab students during the war on Gaza: Students arrested weeks later. [Arab48](#). [In Arabic]

27. Follow-up and Documentation Committee. (2024, January). Work of the Joint Student Committee and the Arab Emergency Committee. **Joint Student Committee**. (Author's archive). [In Arabic]

28. The students were represented at most of these hearings by Adalah– The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, in cooperation with volunteer lawyers and legal associations, including the Meezan Center for Human Rights, as well as volunteer lawyers who helped defend students before these committees.

expulsion.²⁹ Although dozens of students were acquitted by their colleges and universities and the cases against them were closed, the mere operation of these committees —and the publication of the students' names— placed them in grave danger, and added to the atmosphere of incitement against them. The situation even escalated to the point of physical assaults and open threats to their lives, as occurred during right-wing protests against Arab students at the student dormitories of Netanya Academic College.³⁰

Many students were prevented from continuing their studies, or even entering their university campuses, after receiving multiple threats after their names and screenshots of their posts were published on social media. Incitement against students even extended to the Knesset's Education Committee, which convened a session to discuss the issue of Arab students, labeled as "supporters of terrorism" in the official invitation. The session took place in an atmosphere of incitement, including against certain individual Arab students who were mentioned by name. There was even incitement against the universities themselves for not having taken action, up to that point, to expel the students concerned. The Education Committee also allowed the presentation of slides featuring the names and photographs of students, all of which heightened the atmosphere of incitement against all Arab students and to various accusations being leveled against them.³¹

The National Union of Israeli Students (NUIS), which is directly elected by the members of student union councils in all universities and colleges in the country, also contributed to this escalating wave of incitement against Arab students. It set up an emergency operations room through which Jewish students could monitor and report their Arab classmates for social media posts, so they could subsequently be punished.³²

In addition, the NUIS sent a letter to Education Minister Kisch, demanding a bill to oblige academic institutions to dismiss, without compensation, any member of the academic staff who "dares to express any criticism of Israel and its policies".³³

Such persecution is consistent with a bill backed by the NUIS³⁴ that was introduced in July 2024 by MK Ofir Katz,³⁵ and which provides for the dismissal of any faculty member employed by an academic institution if they express support for a "terrorist

29. Follow-up and Documentation Committee. See footnote 27.

30. Bweerat, Ameer Ali. (2023, October 28) Arab students attacked by an extremist group chanting 'Death to the Arabs' in Netanya. [Arab48](#). [In Arabic]

31. Knesset Channel. (2024, July 2). Education, Culture and Sports Committee Session– Section A. [Knesset Channel](#). [In Hebrew]

32. National Union of Israeli Students (NUIS). [התאחדות הסטודנטים והסטודנטיות הארצית]. (2023, October 11). Supporters of terrorism will not be part of academia. [Facebook](#). [In Hebrew]

33. Haaretz. (2024, June 9). Shame on the university students. [Haaretz](#). [In Arabic]

34. Zrahiya, Zvi. (2024, July 10). Approval at a first reading of a bill that would require the dismissal of a faculty member who incites terrorism. [Calcalist](#). [In Hebrew]

35. Knesset Channel. (2024, July 10). Knesset Plenum Session– Section A. [Knesset Channel](#). [In Hebrew]

organization", "act of terrorism", or an armed struggle by a hostile state or by individuals against the State of Israel, or if they "incite terrorism".³⁶

It is noteworthy that Israeli universities rejected this bill, in a unanimous statement issued by the Forum of Israeli University Presidents.³⁷ This stance can be interpreted as reflecting their concerns at the time over the international campaign against Israeli universities, initiated in response to global student activism in support of Palestine, and which calls for the severing of ties with Israel and suspending relations with Israeli universities. This interpretation is supported by the fact that such pressures succeeded in bringing about the cancelation of joint projects between Israeli universities and academic institutions around the world, and inflicting strategic, financial and reputational damage to Israeli academia. A report published in *Haaretz*, based on data from the Forum of Israeli University Presidents, confirmed a growing number of academic boycotts against Israeli researchers and the mounting difficulties they face in establishing cooperation with academic institutions around the world. The report indicates that within the year between October 7, 2023 and October 7, 2024, academic institutions in Israel filed complaints about 300 cases of boycotts,³⁸ followed by a further 200 similar complaints between October 2024 and February 2025.³⁹

This scenario was deeply concerning to the university presidents, as they repeatedly expressed during official meetings.⁴⁰ By approving such a law, they risked exacerbating the situation and adding to the damage that their universities were already suffering at the time.

The university presidents' rejection of certain proposed legislation, despite their own complicity in repressive practices, can be linked to the policies of containment and integration pursued by the Israeli establishment over the past two decades towards Arab students. These have gone hand in hand with a policy of economic control and the promotion of a narrow, interest-based understanding of Israeli citizenship. These policies are evident in various projects approved by the Israeli government, most notably efforts to increase the percentage of Arab students in higher education institutions through the launch of numerous projects and initiatives under the heading of "Developing Access to Higher Education for Non-Jewish Communities". Universities have cooperated with these policies, establishing departments dedicated to the integration and monitoring of

36. The Knesset. (2024, June 24). Council for Higher Education Bill (Amendment- Dismissal of Faculty Members for Incitement to or Support of Terrorism and Budget Cuts), 2024. [Knesset](#). [In Hebrew]

37. Detel, Lior. (2024, June 17). Forum of University Presidents: Student Union Presents 'Shutting the Mouths of Lecturers'. [The Marker](#). [In Hebrew]

38. Odem, Yael. (2024, November 10). Since October 7: More than 300 academic boycotts against Israeli researchers. [Mako](#). [In Hebrew]

39. Kadari-Ovadia, Shira. (2025, February 25). Universities report hundreds of cases of academic boycotts and difficulties in cooperation worldwide. [Haaretz](#). [In Hebrew]

40. The author was present, as a coordinator of the Joint Student Committee, at several of these meetings.

Arab students at all the country's academic institutions, with the University of Haifa, Ben-Gurion University, the Hebrew University and the Technion even appointing an Arab vice president responsible for a department of Arab student integration.

These projects fall under a five-year plan valued at 15 billion shekels (US\$ 4 billion) approved by the Israeli government to "develop" the Palestinian community inside the Green Line in the fields of education, industry, support for local councils, housing, and domestic security. This institutional strategy aims at the economic containment of the members of this community, intended to curb their political and national activism, particularly the youth.⁴¹

The Joint Committee of Arab Student Blocs

It was against this backdrop that the Joint Committee of Arab Student Blocs was formed, amid the ongoing war on Gaza, during which Palestinian students at Israeli universities within the Green Line endured significant hardship. Having anticipated what was coming, with the onset of the disciplinary committees and the massive campaign of incitement against them, student activists initiated the establishment a unified student body composed of all 27 active student movements, with the main objective of addressing the complex circumstances faced by Palestinian students at Israeli universities.

The Joint Committee was officially launched on October 14, 2023 at a meeting held at the offices of the High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel. The aim was to organize students, protect them, make their voices heard, and form a body able to cooperate with legal and international organizations to oppose the broad campaign targeting Palestinian students from inside the Green Line studying at Israeli universities. The committee's founding declaration covered several key issues, primarily: "Building and organizing local student committees at various universities, to include all student movements, to expand communication, unify efforts, and exert pressure on relevant universities and colleges with the aim of preventing their complicity in the campaign against Arab students, and to build a partnerships with global student movements in order to prevent the targeting of Arab students at Israeli universities".⁴²

Following the meeting and the Joint Committee's founding statement, a series of meetings were held at various universities and colleges, leading to the formation of local student committees on each campus. These committees operated in coordination with the High Follow-Up Committee and the Arab Emergency Committee, which worked intensively throughout the war and during the incitement campaign against Arab students, in an

41. Israeli Prime Minister's Office. (2016, July 26). The government approves the Arab sector plan: The cost of the plan is around 15 billion shekels. [Israeli Prime Minister's Office](#). [In Hebrew]

42. Joint Student Committee. (2023, October 14). Founding Statement. **Joint Student Committee**. (Author's archive). [In Arabic]

effort to institutionalize and restore the former credibility of representative student bodies.⁴³

The Joint Committee comprised 27 active student movements in various universities, and, as stated in its founding declaration, it worked to protect students and coordinate efforts to build a safety net for them. Its most significant endeavor was international advocacy, which it carried out through communications with numerous international bodies, partner universities of Israeli universities, as well as ambassadors and diplomats, with the aim of halting the campaign targeting Arab students in Israeli universities for their views or social media posts.⁴⁴ This step marked a significant shift in Arab student activism, which had long been confined to university campuses, but now took on an international dimension, and went some way towards curbing the campaign of persecution against Arab students. One of its main achievements was securing the return of students in Netanya to their dormitories, reversing the initial decision by the dormitory administration not to allow them back following their assault by fascists. Netanya Academic College's change of decision was the result of both local legal pressure and international pressure from its partner universities.⁴⁵

These moves succeeded due to the fear of a boycott among Israeli academic institutions and of the suspension of their joint scientific and academic projects with universities around the world. The Joint Committee attempted to leverage this as a key pressure point, one that has also begun to concern Israeli state institutions more broadly.

In December 2023, the Joint Committee conducted a survey of more than 800 Arab students at various Israeli universities and colleges. Approximately 50% of participants expressed a lack of trust in the universities they attend, and more than 70% reported that they felt harassed there as Arab students. Additionally, over 65% of students stated that the universities and their administrations had treated them unfairly, and that they had experienced clear racism. More than 90% of those surveyed said the NUIS did not represent them, despite the fact that they are obliged, at many universities, to fund the union annually through their tuition fees.⁴⁶

Despite the important work done by the Joint Committee, its efforts have been limited to self-defense and attempts to halt the onslaught against Arab students at universities. For the first six months of the war on the Gaza Strip from October 2023, it did not

43. For an example of a local student committee, see: a group of Arab Students at the University of Haifa [الطلاب العرب في جامعة حيفا]. [n.d.]. [Facebook](#).

44. Arab48. (2023, October 29). The Joint Committee internationalizes the issue of the persecution of Arab students at colleges and universities. [Arab48](#). [In Arabic]

45. Kadari-Ovadia, Shira, and Abou Laban, Nadin. (2023, November 30). Student dormitory management at Netanya Academic College begins returning Arab students evicted under pressure from the municipality. [Haaretz](#). [In Hebrew]

46. Arab48. (2023, December 27). Poll: 76% of Arab students do not trust university or college administration. [Arab48](#). [In Arabic]

initiate any political action, protest, or demonstration on university campuses, as had been customary in previous years. This likely reflects the current state of nationalist student activism, which was once focused on raising political awareness and political mobilization of the student population, but has since entered a period of retreat, fear and contraction in the face of the ongoing wave of repression in the country, in which university students have been among the hardest hit.

The Spark of a Revival

The spark of Arab political action and mobilization returned to Israeli campuses with a student protest held at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem on March 14, 2024. It began as a vigil to protest the arrest of Professor Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, a lecturer at the university,⁴⁷ but quickly evolved into a cry against the war on the Gaza Strip, with students singing the patriotic Palestinian song "*Mawṭinī*" ("My Homeland") and voicing their opposition to the war from within the university campus in Jerusalem. Indeed, this event may be seen as a spontaneous attempt to change the new rules of the game that the Israeli authorities were attempting to impose, at a time when demonstrations by students were no longer allowed, then or since, within university campuses. It was followed by other actions, including an event at Tel Aviv University to commemorate the *Nakba*.⁴⁸ Though modest in scale, and held during the university vacation, it was nonetheless significant given the prevalent atmosphere of fear and intimidation amid the ongoing war on Gaza. The police prevented students from raising the Palestinian flag during the protest, but the *Nakba* commemoration event at Tel Aviv University went ahead despite incitement and attempts by the police to block and restrict it.

In May 2024, the Joint Committee of Arab Student Blocs organized one-hour strikes and sit-in protests at most universities, including the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv University, the Technion, and Ben-Gurion University. In a public statement, the committee said the action was intended "to oppose the ongoing genocide and massacres being committed against our people in Gaza".⁴⁹

With this, the student movement shifted from a defensive posture to taking the initiative. However, Israeli universities responded to these initiatives with bans and denials of permit requests for student political activities, whether open or behind the scenes.

Universities attempted, in one way or another, to form networks through which to pressure students using various means, including lecturers, administrative bodies, and campus

47. Arab48, (2024, March 14). Protest against the suspension of Professor Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian from the Hebrew University. [Arab48](#). [In Arabic]

48. Panet; &Panorama Newspaper. See footnote 15.

49. Arab48. (2024, May 27, 2024). Joint Student Committee calls for a student strike in response to massacres in Gaza. [Arab48](#). [In Arabic]

security staff. They frequently deployed threats, warning that any political activity would come at a very high price and would be met by force, even if it required deploying police on campus (in violation of university regulations). This prompted student movements to reconsider some of the activities they had announced in the weeks following the strike.⁵⁰ At the same time, there was an escalation in attempts by universities to contain Palestinian students during this period. University administrations stepped up their calls for dialogue meetings with representatives of student movements, in an attempt to "embrace" them. These efforts aimed at mitigating the potential harm to the universities' global standing, given growing fears within their administrations over the international student movement, which put Israeli universities on a defensive footing.

The policies pursued by the Israeli academic establishment toward Arab students reflect a typical carrot-and-stick approach. On the one hand, it does not want them to be active or engaged with Palestinian national issues on Israeli university campuses, which have effectively been transformed into military barracks, with firearms regularly carried around, especially during wartime. On the same hand, however, it is keen to retain these students, since they provide a significant source of revenue for the universities. Added to this is the looming threat to the global standing of Israeli universities resulting from their policies of harassment and persecution targeting Arab students.

Conclusion

The campaign of repression described above marks the culmination of years of institutional, governmental and university-led attempts to stamp out Palestinian student activism and collective spaces within Israeli universities, whether through the legalization of fascist practices or through administrative measures adopted by universities. The latter have ranged from repressive policies resembling those employed by the police or courts of law, to attempts to tame and co-opt these movements, in keeping with educational integration programs and the launch of containment initiatives framed as efforts to "integrate Arabs into higher education".

The Palestinian student movement inside the Green Line is undergoing widespread persecution and ongoing attempts to restrict its activities or limit it to providing services and organizing social activities, while excluding any form of political engagement. Every national political activity undertaken by the student movement, particularly if related to the Palestinian cause, has been met with incitement and the targeting of students, including by arresting them. This response intensified markedly after the outbreak of Israel's war of genocide on Gaza on October 7, 2023, which was accompanied by a far-reaching campaign of incitement and intimidation against Arab students. One result has been a noticeable decline in anti-war political activism since the start of the war,

50. The author obtained this information through his role as a coordinator for the Joint Student Committee.

particularly in the student movement, but also more generally within Palestinian society inside the Green Line. In an effort to weather the crisis, most student movements chose to refrain from engaging in political activity. It can thus be argued that the campaign of political persecution largely succeeded in restraining the student movement during the 2023- 2024 academic year. Indeed, a several leading student activists have abstained from engaging in any political activity due to threats and intimidation—as well as pressure from their social circles in some case—and out of legitimate fears of political persecution and the heavy price they can expect to pay.

It is important to emphasize that this situation cannot be isolated from the campaign of incitement and targeting that the student movement faced prior to the war on Gaza. The student movement has long been subjected to active persecution, restrictions on activities, the targeting of its activists, and threats from fascist right-wing movements. In addition, Israeli political leaders issued threats from the Knesset itself, directed specifically at Arab students, and legislated laws that aim to curtail their activities and momentum, limit their capacity for political and national activism, and ban Palestinian symbols such as the flag.

The global student movement could have served as inspiration for the Palestinian student movement inside the Green Line, and its activists indeed did see it as a source of pride and motivation. However, these activists also recognized, to some extent, the surrounding reality in terms of the Israeli establishment and Israeli society more generally, in which calls for revenge, incitement, and persecution of any voice opposing Israeli crimes against Palestinians in Gaza are commonplace. They therefore understood that if they were to replicate in Israel the actions of the student protest movements in American and European universities, Palestinian students would be made to pay an extremely high price.

During this period, the Palestinian student movement inside the Green Line has experienced a significant decline, as many activists and organizers recognized, particularly during the first months of the war when the persecution of students was at its height. This decline coincided to a large extent with that of the Arab political leadership and political parties inside the Green Line. One can also not overlook the impact of the May 2021 uprising and the heavy price that dozens of young Palestinians subsequently paid. Many have faced harsh sentences of years of imprisonment, which the Israeli prosecution and establishment more broadly have diligently enforced as a deterrent to all Palestinian youth in the country. And nor should one ignore the lack of broad-based societal and political support for them and their families.

That said, in certain instances, the student movement has engaged in some open activities, in defiance of the Israeli establishment, and in solidarity with the wider Palestinian people and the challenges they are living through, while expressing their identity and sense of belonging to this people. Some have attempted to organize activities that reflect the national concerns and consciousness of Palestinian youth within the Green Line.

In the days ahead, the true test for the Palestinian student movement in particular — and perhaps for Palestinian political and national activism within the Green Line more generally— will be whether it can rise again, resume its activities, maneuver itself and avoid submitting or surrendering to the limitations imposed by the Israeli establishment, both prior to and after the outbreak of war on Gaza. This test will be particularly critical given the major shifts that are taking place within Israeli society, in terms of deepening fascism, racism and hostility toward all things Arab and Palestinian. Israeli universities have been an integral part of this shift, through their campaigns of silencing, persecution, and surveillance against students and lecturers alike. This all amounts to an immense challenge, one that may determine the future relationship between Palestinian students, the student movement, and Palestinian academics within the Green Line on the one hand, and Israeli academic institutions on the other.



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