

Forging Anticolonial Solidarity in the Hour of Genocide: Haki/Pláticas on Complicity, Dissent and Protest in a Belgian University

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on our recent experiences and involvement with mobilisations in campus, this chapter considers the meaning and implications of being university students and workers in this hour of genocide. We address these concerns in the form of a conversation. As university students and workers, we have all participated in the movement, in different ways and with different degrees of involvement. We come from different cultural and class backgrounds, and we are at different stages of our lives and careers, but we all share a commitment to justice for Palestine and against imperialism, colonialism and racism in all its forms. We feel that the conversation format is fitting to both initiate a critical dialogue that helps us to reassess campus protests over the past fifteen months and to contribute to the book's aim of building and sharing undisciplined knowledge in the face of ideological and material constraints in these dark times. To use the format of a conversation is also to pay tribute to the horizontal and democratic spirit and processes we have witnessed and experienced during student occupations across the globe – in contrast with our institutions' lack of transparency, censorship and unwillingness to dialogue. As such this contribution hopes to convey a story that highlights the disparity between the silence and repression imposed by academic authorities and the everyday radical praxis of students and university workers.

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On May 7, 2024, as part of a broad international movement in solidarity with the Palestinian people, dozens of students and activists occupied the B building of the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) in Belgium. The action was a response to the untenable institutional silence and bothsidesism on Israel's genocide in Gaza and was the result of years of mobilisations in campus and across the country to support the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) – with students and faculty advocating for severing relations with Israeli institutions and companies involved in the military occupation of Palestine. During the first general assembly, students renamed the occupied building Walid Daqqah in tribute to the Palestinian novelist and longest-serving prisoner in Israeli

jails who weeks earlier was killed by Israel's medical negligence (Addameer, 2004). Student demands to university authorities included the rupture of relations with Israeli universities and international corporations involved in sustaining the colonisation of Palestine until they abide by international law; transparency on partnerships with Israeli universities and on investments in companies complicit in sustaining military occupation in Palestine; and cancelling the first event planned by university administrators since October 7th which featured a former Israeli ambassador to France who in the early days of Israel's onslaught argued on France Info that "the simplest thing is to subject Gaza to a carpet bombing without asking any questions" (France Info, 2023). As part of the occupation, students established the Popular University of Brussels as an open space that welcomed everyone to contribute to a self-managed library and to participate in conferences, workshops, discussions, film screenings, protests and demonstrations, in and out of campus.

For three months, dozens of people lived and slept in the Walid Daqqah building organising community life, cooking, cleaning and creating a caring and inclusive environment for all. Notwithstanding the legitimate demands and an engaging and lively atmosphere of comradeship, solidarity and collective learning and organising, the occupation was since its establishment delegitimised, criminalised and slandered by university authorities, scholars, media pundits and far-fright organisations. The mobilisations bore sweet and sour fruits on May 23, 2024, when the administration took the decision to suspend its relations with Israeli universities. What was unique about the resolution was that the university decided to also boycott Palestinian universities by imposing unacceptable conditions for the signing of ongoing and future agreements. As the university statement noted, "It has been determined that no new institutional agreements are to be concluded with Israeli or Palestinian universities that do not demonstrate support for the measures and appeals stipulated in the ICJ's May 24 order" (ULB, 2024a). As such, Israeli and Palestinian universities were placed back-to-back in a sham of neutrality that applied a false equivalence between a colonising state and a colonised population, between victims and perpetrators of genocide. The decision prompted immediate and sharp responses from the academic council and the union of professors and employees at Birzeit University as well as an outcry amongst students and staff who now included in their demands the suppression of the appalling Palestine clause. Despite attempts to engage the administration through available administrative procedures, there was a refusal to even discuss the possibility of revisiting the vote which was taken (University Workers for Palestine, 2024a). Meanwhile, on June 25, 2024, at 6 in the morning, the police entered the occupied building while students were asleep and brutally expelled everyone (Université Populaire de Bruxelles, 2024). The removal of course did not signify the end of the student movement, as mobilisations continued in other forms during the summer and through the new academic year. In November 21, 2024, the university caved in and reversed its decision to break relations with Palestinian higher education institutions while upholding the suspension of research projects and collaborations with the Hebrew and Tel Aviv Universities (ULB, 2024b).

Drawing on our recent experiences and involvement with mobilisations in campus, this chapter considers the meaning and implications of being university students and workers in this hour of genocide? We come from different cultural and class backgrounds, are at different stages of our lives and careers, but we all share a commitment to justice for Palestine and against colonialism and racism in all its forms. Leila, Elsa and Omar are academic staff members while Jihane and Natan are graduate students. We feel that the



Figure 1. University students and workers express their support for the occupation of the Walid Daqqah, Building B, Université Libre de Bruxelles. June 4, 2024. Photo by the authors.

conversation format is fitting to both initiate a critical dialogue that helps us to reassess campus protests over the past fifteen months and to contribute to the book's aim of building and sharing undisciplined knowledges in the face of ideological and material constraints in these dark times. To use the format of a conversation is also to pay tribute to the horizontal and democratic spirit and processes we have witnessed during student occupations across the globe – in contrast with our institutions' lack of transparency, censorship and unwillingness to dialogue. As such, this contribution hopes to convey a story that highlights the disparity between the silence and repression imposed by academic authorities and the everyday radical praxis of students and university workers. One that allows us to explore the meaning of being at a higher education institution in times of genocide while teasing out the challenges of organising within universities that have largely refused to take a principled stand against and thus become complicit with a genocidal regime which has for decades denied Palestinians their inalienable rights.

In this conversation and in the subsequent writing of this chapter, we have been inspired by “plática”, a Chicana and Latina feminist methodology that derives from the verb *platicar* (to discuss, to chat), and the related Arab feminist methodologies of *haki* (to discuss) and *shahadat* (to bear witness) (Manal et al., 2020). These practices of speaking, sharing, bearing witness and analysing experiences of struggle have long been central in guiding our work and activism. *Platicar/Haki* is something most of us grew up with; it is the way our family, friends and loved ones share traditions and histories about dispossession, oppression and resistance. To tell, listen and transmit stories is to be together as co-producers of knowledge. Likewise, to be in conversation is to create an intimate space that simultaneously allows for sharing and healing while breaking through established narratives that attempt to cement the impossibility to think and argue otherwise. Being in *platica/haki* allows us to tell our own story from below, to document our collective experience of mobilisations

on our university campus at this historical juncture. While mindful of the specific context we are located in, we do hope this conversation speaks to and resonates with other students and university workers elsewhere.

Our conversations took place over the last months of 2024 and have been structured around six questions to reflect on our initial reactions and institutional responses to the genocide, the contradictions surrounding neutrality in higher education and the exceptionalism that underwrites Palestine in scholarly spaces. We also explore the role of student mobilisations, the criminalisation of solidarity with Palestinians and the broader and worrisome repression of dissent we have been witnessing and experiencing over the past years. Finally, we consider the lessons learned from a year of organising, including the challenges that remain ahead of us as well as successes like boycott motions at Belgian universities. Our dialogue engages with the role of academic institutions in global struggles for justice at a time of repression against scholarship, scholars and students working on and organising in support of Palestine across different continents.

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After October 7th many understood that the response by the Israeli state would be extremely harsh but perhaps few could anticipate the scale of the horror. Despite Israel's settler colonial history, the unspeakable violence we have been witnessing over the past fifteen months far exceeded our darkest imagination. We begin this conversation considering our initial reactions, how do we feel about the ways our institution responded in the first months and how are we grappling with the genocide as students and workers in a public university in Belgium?

Jihane: The first thing that comes to mind—and it was my initial thought—is guilt. I'm not entirely sure why, but it's this sense of guilt for having the privilege to be in a position where I can simply be a student or a scholar, especially during a time of genocide. This feeling of guilt, however, leads to a sense of responsibility—an awareness of the need to take action and stay active. It's about integrating this consciousness into every aspect of life: as a student, a citizen and a family member. It's about making every part of your life reflect an active commitment to talking about Palestine, staying involved and contributing in some way. Beyond guilt, I also see it as a form of empowerment—a tool or weapon we have the responsibility to use. As students, scholars and members of institutions and administrations, we are in a position to potentially drive change. But that guilt is hard to shake, especially when I reflect on conversations I've had with friends who share this experience. We talk about the privilege of being able to go abroad, to study in a different place and to broaden our perspectives, all while such devastating events are happening. Doing this during a genocide makes those privileges feel incredibly unsettling, almost unnatural, and it's hard to reconcile that with the reality of what's happening. I also feel that our involvement in the occupation served as a space to grapple with the enormity of what was happening, providing room for reflection among those who were struggling with similar feelings of guilt and powerlessness. It wasn't just about responding intellectually but about understanding the emotional weight of these events and how it motivates us to act.

Leila: I very much agree with this idea of guilt being intimately related to the necessity to act. These last months, I have felt that I couldn't keep my head low in academic spaces anymore. As a racialised person and a scholar developing critical and decolonial frames of thought, I felt my position was not always considered as legitimate. But now, the urgency is overwhelming, our responsibility to speak and to act has truly overcome this strategy I had to protect myself. I cannot do that anymore. I have – we have – to stand up and express that the genocide, what we are witnessing is not right. And it is not only about saying that Israel shouldn't bomb Gaza. It is broader than that. It is about the university itself, the coloniality that constitutes and underlines its silence and complicity.

Nathan: I was less shocked by the Belgium government and our universities' inaction than by the arguments justifying it. Historical, sociological and political knowledge has always been manipulated or ignored to legitimise inaction and ignore colonial realities. This is dangerous, especially in institutions claiming to be centres of critical thought. It's important to talk about genocide as a reality, but we must remember that forms of elimination are part of larger patterns of colonisation. Historically, genocide is the end result of settler colonisation. This is vital because we have undeniable, factual and material evidence of what settlement colonisation is and what it means. It's about the removal – the extermination – of an entire population. It shows the world what it means to be a coloniser: to replace one population with another, whether culturally or physically.

Moreover, I think by using the word genocide without the concept of colonisation alongside it traps us in a paradox. On the one hand, the term is crucial for emphasising the reality of the situation in Gaza and Palestine. However, the problem with using this term is that it risks depoliticising the issue. When we speak of genocide, especially from a European perspective, we tend to approach it from a humanitarian angle. It becomes about sending aid and framing the situation in terms of international humanitarian relief, rather than addressing it as a political issue rooted in the historical continuities, discontinuities and ruptures of colonisation. In this manner, we erase the relations of domination that generate genocidal violence. So, while the term "genocide" is important, it matters that we acknowledge both its potential and limits.

Omar: I feel that at this point there is still no possible answer to the question of how we are coming to terms with the unspeakable violence we have been witnessing during the last fifteen months. We have not even had time to grieve the loss of our loved ones, never mind the irreplaceable lives of every single child, mother, father, poet, doctor, writer, mason, electrician, baker, musician, student and fishermen that has vanished as a result of Israel's genocidal onslaught. Every day since October 2023 has been an incomprehensible and revolting encounter with horror as we listen to the stories of friends and family and witness the images and testimonies of a genocide live-streamed by its victims. It has been difficult to reckon with the fact that life after this historical watershed moment will never be the same: neither for the Palestinians and other communities in the region who have once more seen their lives, dreams and worlds turned upside-down; nor for every single one of us who will have to bear the consequences of

our collective failure to put an end to this horror. What has been particularly enraging is the cold, complicit and callous mindset of administrators at our workplaces who have refused to uphold the very universal values universities claim to defend and represent. As we were mourning, we have had to go through the appalling rhetorical acrobatics and twists administrators and colleagues have mobilised to refuse taking an unequivocal position for a ceasefire and against genocide. Nevertheless, it has been a moment of extreme political clarity. Particularly, regarding those whose careers have been built on critical social theory and decolonial scholarship yet have not utter a single word during this entire ordeal. Or those who have attempted to render this moment of unhinged imperialism and settler colonial violence as an affair that exclusively pertains to Palestine and Palestinians. This has all been done in broad daylight through the erasure of the historical record, the trampling of international law, and a total dehumanisation and lack of empathy with families in Gaza, Palestine and across the region. To stand against a long century of genocide and crimes against humanity is, should be, a concern of us all, no matter where we align politically. It should be uncontroversial to stand against the ravages of imperial wars and settler colonialism, whether in Palestine or elsewhere, and regardless of who commits these crimes.

Elsa: Being Jewish and a descendant of Holocaust survivors through my mother, I was raised with the idea of “Never again”. That’s why I’ve never found my place in a Jewish community, apart from my grandmother – since Jewish organisations in Belgium mostly support the State of Israel, I’ve always seen them as complicit in the atrocities committed by Zionism. So, immersed in the anti-racist movement since birth, I’ve always taken part in demonstrations and events for Palestine, against police, racial and colonial violence, and in recent years, within the decolonial movement. However, after October 7, something changed: my parents were gripped by fear and Zionist propaganda, our ancestors resurfaced, no longer to support the struggles for equality for all, but on the contrary, to justify the horror. At the same time, I see a growing number of deeply anti-Zionist, decolonial Jewish organisations around the world joining the global protest movement against the genocide in Gaza. I joined Tsedek in France in October 2023 and about a year later I became part of the Anti-Zionist Jewish Alliance in Belgium (AJAB). These action groups advance a decolonial Jewish path that challenges the Zionist project to defend diasporism and hereness – that is the right to be and to fight for justice and equality wherever we are. While witnessing the ongoing genocide and before joining these organisations, time felt unbearably long and I felt terribly helpless. Although I was full of hope that I found French comrades, at ULB I was experiencing isolation and powerlessness. Especially, after repeatedly hearing in academic circles things like: “What’s good about Gaza now is that we’re no longer going to talk about EVRAS”.¹ I could not go back to campus any more, except to

¹*Education à la vie relationnelle, affective et sexuelle* is a decree adopted on September 7, 2023, which makes the teaching of emotional and sexual relationships compulsory in French-speaking Belgian schools and has been widely criticized by Muslim associations, among others. This opposition led to numerous Islamophobic reflections in the educational sphere and in the media.

meet my students. In fact, I was thinking of going to Paris to support the movements in the universities there. So, it was a huge relief when I woke up one morning and heard about the occupation of the ULB. At last, it felt possible not just to be ashamed and isolated, but to do something at my own university.

The question of neutrality has been historically mobilised by university administrators and workers to avoid taking a political stand on Palestine. Neutrality often gets conflated with objectivity in an attempt to sustain that impossible separation between science and knowledge production and the social and political world we study and live in. How has neutrality manifested at our institution? And in what ways has this brought to the front a series of contradictions that stand in radical opposition to the supposedly core mission of universities as sites for critical learning, debate and the upholding of social justice values?

Leila: Multiple times, authorities have used the principle of neutrality or objectivity (which are different!) to justify their inaction or indefensible stances. This neutrality, or in certain cases objectivity, attempts to display a semblance of balance and moderation that is in fact expressed by bothsidesism. Indeed, universities often argue how they receive pressures from “both camps” and do their best to find a balanced way of dealing with what they describe as the complicated and delicate question of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Ignorance under the cover of neutrality in academia however isn’t just a lack of knowledge; it’s an active refusal to see and acknowledge the historical record. It is constructed to maintain whiteness and colonial hierarchies. For example, during the student occupation we challenged the university’s authority over the definition of truth by refusing, for instance, the traditional hierarchised dichotomies during the general assemblies (teachers/students, academics/non academics, scholars/activists). That’s why the repression was so severe—we disrupted the university’s monopoly on knowledge production.

Let me give an example. During the encampment, the rector came with her team to meet and have a dialogue with students, staff and activists, during what was a historical general assembly. The way the authorities mobilised fallacious arguments and showed a great lack of knowledge on anticolonial struggles was not just ignorance, it was a conscious political decision, a way to promote whiteness. Charles W. Mills explains in *The Racial Contract* how whiteness (as a political system of domination of white people over non-white people) constructs this ignorance by pretending race and coloniality (i.e. violence, death, dispossession, disposability, appropriation) are not the basis of our societies. The question of Palestine crystallises all these issues related to coloniality and whiteness. Throughout this past year, we have clearly witnessed this process in the ways the university has refused to see the centrality of colonialism to understand where we are on Palestine. Recognising Palestine as a colonial issue implies the recognition of Israel as a settler colonial entity, and thus answers the question of the legitimate resistance to oppression. The white saviour complex is another aspect of whiteness observable in the way university authorities have treated the question of

Palestine. For instance, when we were told that the best thing the university could do was “offering scholarships” to Palestinian students and scholars under the condition that Palestinian universities condemn the resistance. However, Palestinian colleagues from Gaza wrote a compelling and very clear call stating that what was needed in this moment is support to rebuild Gaza university infrastructures (Gaza Academics and Administrators, 2024). It seems that those voices have not been heard by our university authorities.

This constructed ignorance regarding the colonial/decolonial aspect of the question of Palestine is also questionable from the position of the university on decolonisation issues and their commitment to “decolonise” the university. Our university launched a “Decolonise ourselves” working group, it participated in an inter-university committee on the colonial past. As a scholar interested in colonial issues in education, I am always suspicious of “decolonial” claims made by institutions themselves, as the non-performative effect of these claims have been analysed by Sara Ahmed in the case of diversity and anti-racism. This banalisation of decolonisation depoliticises and empties the term of its meaning, and that is precisely what we witnessed during our encampment. While university authorities have a claim to be open to “decolonising the university,” they have refused to engage in any stance or act that would logically result from a decolonial approach. In other words, to support Palestinian rights, Palestinian institutions and to boycott Israeli institutions.

Elsa: Like Leila, I was shocked by the reaction of university colleagues and authorities with my involvement in various resistance movements during my studies – including, the right to asylum for Iranians, the regularisation of undocumented migrants, the refinancing of education, the war on Iraq, and the privatisation of university services. Part of my thesis in the field of education studies consisted in retracing the history of the depoliticisation of the university, from its creation until the second half of the 20th century. I have the impression that, at the ULB, this is a question that certainly needs to be explored in greater depth. Particularly because I think it’s no coincidence that the principle of *libre examen* (free examination) was incorporated into the University’s statutes at the end of the 19th century in a context of very strong political and epistemological tensions between the positivists and the spiritualists, the “progressive” liberals and the path of liberalism that Foucault would describe as juridical-deductive. It is as if *libre examen* became the weapon of the positivist expert, the holder of legitimate knowledge, conferring on him the right to determine who has the right to speak and who will not be heard.

We saw this clearly when the student occupation at the ULB called for the cancellation of the university’s invitation of the former Israeli ambassador to France for a discussion on “Israel-Palestine”. In the name of free examination, an unprecedented police apparatus was set up to ensure that nothing disturbs the liberal white middle class, who made up a significant proportion of the participants that attended the event. While students had been researching, working, debating and learning together in an inclusive way for weeks, the experts locked themselves away outside the university with a former ambassador, protected by an absurd military apparatus to keep out

the noise of those who are confronting them with their responsibilities. So, I think that this question of the *libre examen*, which is very specific to the French speaking context, is really a tool to silence that we need to further examine.

Nathan: For me the concept of “extreme centre,” as developed by Pierre Serna and Alain Deneault, is useful to consider these questions (Serna, 2005; Deneault, 2017). Extreme centre refers to a political stance that seeks to abolish the traditional left-right spectrum, presenting its views as the only rational, neutral and balanced ones. This stance claims moderation while maintaining the status quo and serving the ruling classes. It disguises itself as objective and detached. It frames political issues not as a confrontation of power dynamics, but as technical, expert deliberations. Emerging alongside neoliberalism in the 1980s, the extreme centre has become hegemonic, with its most recent expression in Macronism. Although opposition to it has grown in the past decade. The extreme centre has a particularly powerful effect on the mindset of some academics, as they are often called upon as experts to deliberate rationally and reasonably on social issues and power dynamics, which always contain a political dimension. The influence of the extreme centre as a structuring axis of thought made them temporarily – hopefully – incapable of recognising the intersection between knowledge and politics. Therefore, their inability to understand what we were saying is, in part, a result of the structuring force of the extreme centre. This framework has shaped the thinking of university administrators and colleagues to the point where they are unable to grasp the political and social dimensions of the issues we raised, reducing them to mere technicalities to be analysed from a neutral, detached perspective.

This was further reinforced by the way the idea of the *libre examen* so cherished by our university has been mobilised by the administration. It suggests that scholars need to examine all arguments before taking a position on an issue, with the aim of ensuring the rejection of appeals to authority and the preservation of independent judgment. It’s a noble principle. However, university authorities and faculties distorted it during our negotiations. *Libre examen* is an instrumental principle and not a value. As such, it is a tool to build knowledge, to reach a conclusion, and not an end in itself. In this regard, the notion of examination in *libre examen* inherently involves judgement and so taking a position, deciding between different options or values. However, authorities and academics have attempted to transform this instrumental principle into a core value. When it is treated as a value, the pursuit of arguments becomes a goal in itself, rather than serving any practical resolution or research purpose. As a result, the focus moves from using arguments to reach an independent conclusion to merely accumulating arguments endlessly. This never-ending quest for arguments, in turn, allows the university to avoid taking a stance that could challenge its colonial foundations. Finally, this reinterpretation of *libre examen* as a value leads to a paradox. It depoliticises the subject at hand by employing a tool that, by nature, requires a political or value-based judgment based on the available arguments.

Omar: I would also like to add some thoughts about the pernicious ways neutrality and the refusal to take a political stance vis-à-vis Palestine becomes codified as a question of academic freedom. Academic freedom is often brought up to preserve the

status quo with Israeli institutions which, as has been thoroughly documented, are profoundly entangled in developing the knowledge, technologies and political clout necessary to reproduce the conditions of settler colonialism, military occupation and apartheid in Palestine, from the river to the sea. University administrators insist that to sever these institutional partnerships implies curtailing the academic freedom of Israeli scholars at a time when they most need our support. Two flawed assumptions underlie this claim. First, as the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel has made clear over and over again, pressure against institutions complicit in systematic violations of human rights is not the same as targeting individuals. Second, to uphold the exclusive privilege of Israeli scholars to academic freedom without considering the violation of the most fundamental Palestinian basic rights is in itself a very clear political stance. This is particularly egregious at a time when universities, schools, libraries and museums in Gaza have been ransacked and completely destroyed; as colleagues and students in the West Bank and Jerusalem are imprisoned and denied the right to move freely to attend courses and do research or to travel abroad; and when Palestinian scholars and students in Israeli institutions are disciplined and dismissed for speaking out; and more crucially, when Palestinians are denied their collective right to self-determination and to live in peace, dignity and equality. Academic freedom is not above all other freedoms, particularly in colonial contexts like Palestine where populations do not have the luxury to lay claim to rights as these are themselves structurally denied. We should thus be wary of the principle of academic freedom when understood as a liberal notion exclusively bounded with individual rights. To be meaningful, academic freedom needs to be linked to broader struggles against the ravages of colonial capitalism, imperialism and growing authoritarianism. Put differently there can be no genuine freedom in academia if there is no freedom in society at large.

Related and equally worrisome are the ways academic freedom and *libre examen* has come to define the boundaries of “proper” research subjects and politics. As has been mentioned, notions of academic freedom are bound up with academic containment in institutionalised ways which are undermining spaces of critique within universities. For instance, people doing research on Palestine often experience how their work is casually deemed as “political” or “militant” by colleagues and university administrations. This is not trivial. Such allegations serve to delegitimise scholars and discredit work and knowledge that counters the institutional consensus on the question of Israel. We have seen these appalling attacks before, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11 when scholars who dared challenging the consensus on US wars and overseas occupations were targeted by universities and governmental intelligence agencies. What we are witnessing in the case of Palestine continues and prefigures the narrowing of the field of possible dissent in universities. Germany is a good example with their weaponisation of antisemitism to cancel, repress and dismiss students, scholars, intellectuals and artists, including Jewish anti-Zionist voices who demand the end of genocide and the liberation of Palestine. Those who seek to uphold what they regard as standards of objective inquiry attempt to reinforce their own power by

retaining ownership over the term *political* while mystifying the university as a neutral place where science and knowledge is assumed as objective. This phenomenon is of course not specific to Palestine, for these forms of censorship have been a historical means for silencing dissent and suppressing freedom of expression since our late fascist times.

Over the past decades, the Palestine exception has dominated academia, media and policymaking in ways that distort history and obfuscate the political realities on the ground. This exceptionalism manifests as an institutionalised reluctance to assume and locate Palestinian social, political and cultural conditions in relation to similar contexts – as if Palestinians were not a part of a larger Arab regional and universal context. Exceptionalism also shields the State of Israel from accountability for its crimes, presenting it as a democratic ally of the West’s civilisational values. How does this untenable exceptionalism manifest in our institution, and what challenges does it pose for teaching, speaking about, mobilising and organising for Palestine in Belgium?

Omar: The question of exceptionalism is intimately woven to our discussion on neutrality and academic freedom. Similar to American exceptionalism, Israeli exceptionalism has functioned as a way to imagine the history of Zionism outside of history. Exceptionalist claims about nationalist, settler colonial and supremacist movements are however notoriously unexceptional. In Palestine, this mythical and linear narrative has manifested as a history of Jewish return to empty lands, socialist dreams, cultured modernity, technological and scientific sophistication, moral uniqueness, ethical militarisation and a villa of civilisation and democracy in a jungle of barbarism and darkness. Although this simplistic, familiar and ahistorical story has been consistently debunked, it has nevertheless produced a coherent and enduring narrative with no apparent contradictions: one that simultaneously erases the imperial interests and antisemitism that gave birth to Israel while negating the settler nature of the Jewish state and the violence it necessitates to reproduce itself by relentlessly displacing Palestinian communities from their lands. When brought into comparative histories of empire and colonialism, Israel however appears less as an exceptional state and more as a late case of settler colonialism at the dawn of decolonisation which both replicates and innovates old technologies of native management and elimination.

The question of course is not how Zionism sees itself or what stories are told about this supremacist ideology – Palestinian and international scholars, intellectuals and activists have long set the record straight in this regard. The problem rather is that Israel’s exceptionalism goes hand in hand with an orientalist and visceral Islamophobia that renders Palestinians, and Arabs more generally, as a static culture equated with religious zeal, frozen in time, authoritarian and inimical to democratisation and change. Exceptionalism therefore complicates our ability to simultaneously break through this constructed history of a chosen people that make deserts bloom and a people struggling for liberation depicted as terrorists. Together with effective material, political and imperial support by the US, UK, Germany or France, this powerful

narrative sustains what Leila said about *white ignorance* while it positions the Israeli state above and outside both domestic and international laws making it immune to criticism and unaccountable to its long history of genocidal violence – despite its long record of documented crimes against humanity in Palestine and its complicity in the genocides of Guatemala, Serbia, Rwanda or Myanmar. Ultimately this racist and supremacist view of imperial subjects has historically enabled the dehumanisation of Palestinians while paving the way for past and ongoing genocidal onslaughts.

In our universities as in the cultural sector, this exceptionalism translates into a repository of familiar tactics used by administrators, often with the complicity of colleagues, that attempt to stifle and censor scholarly work, critical debate and organising around Palestine in campus. Although this has been going on for decades, in recent years we have seen a disturbing intensification of suppression of academic freedom and free speech. This Palestine exception takes multiple forms including the nightmarish ordeals of scholars working on Palestine to get and maintain tenure, official denunciations and outright dismissals of colleagues for speaking out on Palestine, the misuse and weaponisation of antisemitism for character assassinations, administrative sanctions, disciplinary procedures and criminal lawsuits, and so on and so forth. There are however other, more subtle but equally harming mechanisms through which colleagues and students are intimidated when engaging with Palestine. For instance, by casually and informally warning peers about the career risks of researching certain topics or taking particular positions; deeming certain persons to be political and militant as a way to discredit our scholarship and voice; bullying students about the choice of speakers or the use of particular words and slogans in the organisation of their events; or taking at face value the idea that Palestine is too controversial, sensitive and complex. Together these forms of pressure collectively speak to a chilling reality of (self-) censorship which should be of concern for us all, not just those pre-occupied with the liberation of Palestine. In the increasing authoritarian times we live in, the normalisation of these forms of criminalisation will come to bite us sooner rather than later. As Martin Niemöller once wrote, first they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out, because I was not a Jew.

Jihane: I would also point out that the exceptionalism surrounding Palestine often leads to the minimisation or even erasure of narratives about colonial violence. The dominant discourse tends to isolate specific events and frame them in ways that delegitimise Palestinian resistance, reducing it to decontextualised acts of violence. This selective focus diverts attention away from the broader historical and political context in which such actions take place. In my view, it is important to consider October 7 within the larger history of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination. Understanding this event requires acknowledging the decades-long context of displacement, oppression and systemic violence that Palestinians have endured. One way to approach this is by recognising October 7 as a moment that forces the world to confront the ongoing reality in Palestine—one that has persisted since 1948, when mass displacement and dispossession first began. Rather than viewing it as an isolated event, it can be seen as part of a continuum of resistance against colonial rule and an effort to reclaim

agency in the face of decades of occupation and colonisation. From this perspective, it becomes clear that the objective behind such actions may not be solely about the immediate outcomes but also about bringing Palestine back into global political consciousness, ensuring that the Palestinian struggle is not forgotten or sidelined.

It is crucial to understand that for Palestine, the experience of colonisation and the struggle for liberation are ongoing realities, not confined to specific dates or singular events. The framing of October 7 within a broader lens helps to counter the tendency to separate recent events from the decades of resistance and resilience that preceded them. By situating it within this continuum, we can begin to challenge dominant narratives that present Palestine as an isolated or exceptional case, instead recognising it as part of a wider global movement against colonialism and for self-determination. Ultimately, it is vital to resist the narrative that positions Palestine outside of the broader struggles for justice and liberation seen across the world. Highlighting the continuity of colonisation and resistance allows us to better understand the motivations and context behind it.

Nathan: I will also add a point about the ways the creation of Israel on the lands of other people has often been mobilised as a means for European states to absolve themselves of responsibility for Nazi crimes. For Europe's ruling classes, Palestinians are irrelevant. The focus has always been on "repairing" the wrongs of the past, but in a way that shifts the burden onto Palestine – by creating the Israeli State. By outsourcing Europe's Jewish question to Palestine, Europeans deflect attention from their own historical responsibility for antisemitism, fascism and colonialism – products of European modernity – shifting the focus away from their role in creating these injustices by leaving Palestine to Zionism and, thus, creating a historical injustice. In doing so, Europe perpetuates a narrative that positions Palestinians as a problem to be managed rather than as a people with legitimate rights and claims, and this gives a moral escape to the West for its own coloniality.

During the initial months of Israel's genocidal campaign in Gaza, we saw massive organising to break the deafening institutional silence and to denounce the complicity of national governments and international institutions. Student mobilisations in university campuses offered a spark of hope amidst the unfolding horrors with encampments emerging from New York to Delhi. Belgium was no exception, and throughout the country all universities saw occupations and actions to push institutions to take a stance. How significant were the student movements in response to Gaza? What were their demands, and how were they received or misunderstood? What have they achieved?

Jihane: The occupation was transformative, not just in its solidarity with Palestine but in its capacity to reclaim agency and create a different kind of university space. It was about more than Palestine; it was about resistance, about showing that collective action can challenge institutional inertia. During the occupation, there was a palpable sense of liberation – within that space, Palestine was free, and so were we. It

was a manifestation of the belief that the liberation of Palestine is tied to our collective liberation. Despite its imperfections and the inherent power dynamics, student occupations showed the potential for collective resistance to disrupt oppressive structures.

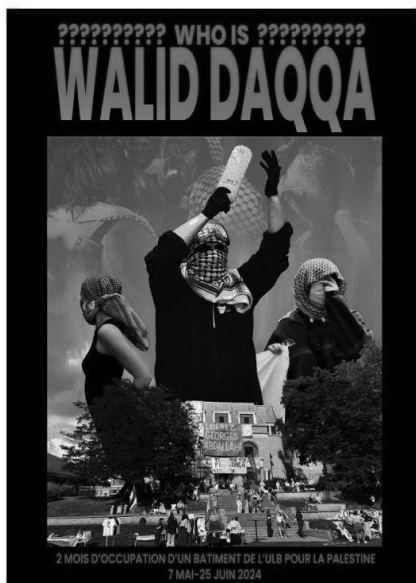
I was also part of the BDS Committee at the ULB² before the occupation began. While this university group had been active for years, the occupation gave it a new and vital impulse, amplifying its reach and intensity. After very long and arduous negotiations, we achieved several milestones. The first was the cancellation of links with Israeli universities – a bittersweet victory tainted by a shameful clause demanding Palestinian universities call for a ceasefire and the release of Israel hostages or face a similar severance of ties. Despite that, weeks ago, we finally achieved a full institutional boycott of Israel, marking a significant victory for the campaign. This long and painful struggle underscores how deeply entrenched colonial logics are within our universities. The institutional resistance we faced at every step laid bare how these spaces are complicit in perpetuating global systems of oppression. Universities claim to be bastions of knowledge and justice, yet their hesitance to stand unequivocally with Palestine revealed their entanglement with colonial power structures.

I have also come to the conclusion that it was during the occupation that we had to, in some kind of way, acknowledge that we are being active also to release our conscience and to get back the power rather than feeling that we are powerless and cannot do anything. Instead of resigning ourselves to powerlessness, we actively worked to disrupt the structures that sought to silence us. Reclaiming power meant organising collectively, forming a community and refusing isolation. It meant channelling our anger and frustration into strategic action – putting sustained pressure on the university, gathering and mobilising data, negotiating with administrations and forging alliances within and beyond academic spaces. But more than that, it was about decolonising the university from within – challenging institutional complicity, exposing its ties to oppressive systems, and forcing it to reckon with its responsibilities. By speaking out, by educating, by making Palestine impossible to ignore, we reclaimed not only our agency but also the very space of the university as a site of resistance. And then there was this kind of sense that Palestine will eventually be liberated, and for me it's also a question of faith. I have faith in the liberation of Palestine and I do believe in it. I cannot say it in a very logical way, but I do believe that Palestine will be liberated, one way or another, one day or another. But still, I know that it will be liberated by the Palestinian people and not really by us.

Nathan: I am very much compelled by this idea as well. By occupying the building and taking direct action, we weren't just fighting for Palestine's liberation; we were also

²The BDS ULB circle was founded in 2012 after intense debates and institutional hurdles for its creation. The committee advocates for ending academic ties with Israeli institutions complicit in the occupation, while also engaging in awareness campaigns, mobilisation and advocacy to denounce Israeli apartheid and support Palestinian solidarity. It campaigns for the respect of international law and the respect of human rights by Israel, in particular the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people and the right of return of refugees. To learn more about the group's activities see www.instagram.com/bds_ulb/

liberating ourselves, reclaiming power in a tangible way. In that space, Palestine was free – and so were we. It was a reflection of the belief that when Palestine is free, we all will be. It was about mutual liberation, all supporting each other. That said, I think that, at times, we reproduced some domination dynamics. It wasn't perfect, but it was a step in the right direction – one we shouldn't overlook. We constantly challenged those dynamics, sometimes succeeding, sometimes not, unlike a society that never even tries. This question of mutual liberation, both of Palestine and of ourselves, is illustrated in the excerpt from the fanzine of the movement reproduced below. The idea was to build another world where all living beings on this planet would enjoy emancipation. In this sense, the struggle for emancipation was meant to help us construct our own liberation against the relations of domination we face here in Belgium. To achieve this, we were committed to creating mechanisms for discussion, translation and exchange, so that everyone could express themselves and participate fully in decision-making. We also sought to generate knowledge by blending scientific and activist approaches to create knowledge geared towards action. Moreover, we aimed to develop a space for the production, dissemination and action of knowledge that transcended age, gender, race and other divisions. The ultimate goal was to experiment with new ways of living and acting, producing knowledge that could help us emancipate ourselves through the struggle for the liberation of the Palestinian people. Perhaps the clearest expression of these ideas was reflected in the text we published in the fanzine of the Popular University of Brussels two months into the occupation.



The youth from here and elsewhere have taken it upon themselves to remind the world, without complacency or pause, of the appalling injustice and monstrous barbarity that Palestine has suffered for 76 years. In Brussels, from May 7, 2024, to June 25, 2024, they organized a popular university and gathered under a glorious name: Walid Daqqa, a hero of the Palestinian resistance who died a martyr in the prisons of the Israeli colonial regime.

From a building in Brussels, they became the voice of a just liberation struggle for a people subjected, since October 2023, to the heinous crime of genocide. They did so because the institutions of their countries have abandoned the Palestinian people, leaving them exposed to threat and danger, and because, once again, they allow a colonial power to annihilate an entire people with complete impunity. They did so because, in the face of cowardice, they demand courage. They did so because, in the face of atrocious crimes, they demand the most unyielding justice.

Thus, for 48 days, they joined the international academic boycott movement and created a balance of power capable of making solidarity with the Palestinian people the number one priority on media and political agendas.

A desire to escape and an unrelenting will have led us to this placeless place, where ordinary social relations are, if not suspended, at least temporarily subdued. The mind's tension is at its peak. Our goal is to offer free and open access to knowledge for all, without distinction of educational background or social status. This knowledge also serves as a guide in the decisive moment of direct action.

The Popular University is a tool of emancipation and a hub for the fight against oppression. Each morning, the auditorium, temporarily transformed into a clandestine meeting room, hosts a conference. At this very moment, some comrades are conspiring against capital. They will not close their eyes tonight.

Lovers of perilous quests, of infinite possibilities among irrational numbers: they are the guilty conscience of the era. The Popular University has no other aim than to experimentally create the conditions for the transcendence of all domination relations. The human reclaiming of their history holds the meaning of freedom: this passionate inhabiting of one's life is rooted in an ethic of adventure.

From us to you, here is the Popular University of Brussels.

Figure 2. Cover and text fragment of the fanzine published by the Popular University of Brussels two months into the occupation of the Walid Daqqah, Building B, Université libre de Bruxelles. June 25, 2024.

Omar: The student encampments and occupations that erupted in response to Israel's ongoing genocide in Gaza and Palestine have been historical. University protests of this scale have not been seen since the long 1960s, when student movements across the world came out in support for the anticolonial and anti-imperial war of liberation in Vietnam or South Africa. I would even say that this past wave of campus protests pales in comparison with what we have seen in the current juncture. During these horrific times, it has been heart-warming to be part of this massive popular support and solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza and beyond, both in campus and in the streets. The occupations have truly been a poetic insurrection with tents pitched across world campuses symbolising the Palestinian refugee condition and their century-old struggle for liberation. It is thanks to them that the insufferable collective silence and inaction of our universities was broken after the first seven months of Israel's war of extermination. Politically, they have brought Palestine as a central concern while exposing the contradiction of universities' claims to universal values, social justice and decolonisation. Mobilisations have also brought together a critical mass of students, staff and university workers creating, in many instances, critical spaces to organise for Palestine where previously there were none. This has been of course not without controversy. Colleagues, institutions and media have often shown disdain and paternalism towards students and their demands when not all together maligning students as radicals for their efforts to demand a ceasefire and an end to the genocide. Ironically, more often than not, students have been better organised, informed and articulated in their demands and statements than university administrators. While many encampments and occupations disbanded (often by force) before accomplishing all their demands, students in Belgium have won significant victories by getting their institutions to pass motions and resolutions to boycott and divest from Israeli universities and research projects. It is also important to recognise that this has been possible thanks to the long-term work of student and staff organisations such as the BDS Circle at the ULB or the Palestine Solidarity Network in Belgium, which has been organising consistently across Flemish universities since the outbreak of the Unity Intifada in 2021. To acknowledge these trajectories of organising and infrastructure building is essential as we continue to work for imaging universities otherwise.

Amid widespread student protests and occupations, systemic repression of Palestinian solidarity has intensified, with students and staff facing disciplinary actions and protests restricted on campuses. Similar repression has affected cultural institutions, with censorship and cancellations. How has this criminalisation manifested in our workplace? What narratives support it, and why is this trend alarming for global social justice struggles in an era of rising authoritarianism?

Omar: The criminalisation of student organising in university campuses has been enraging. We have seen universities across the globe normalising calling the police into campuses to intimidate, repress and expel student protests. Students have been disciplined and dismissed, even when those decisions implied deportation for

students on visas. Mainstream media has either neglected or vilified the occupations with slanderous accusations of antisemitism or bogus accusations of criminalisation by association. In places like the US and France, we have seen police raids in the private homes of colleagues who work and have been vocal on Palestine. After the summer, universities in the US and Holland have issued new legislation to restrict protests in campuses. At the ULB, we have seen more than ninety students, and some members of staff, called by the Brussels public prosecutor's office to declare on fallacious charges of incitement to racial hatred. Universities have either collaborated or tolerated police infiltration in our campuses. This is evidently unacceptable but what is shocking is that administrations have deployed these intimidating tactics as a form of bullying students into fear to demobilise and pre-empt campus protests that merely call on our universities to take a principled stand. Equally concerning is how university researchers, faculty and staff members with firm convictions about the need to stop the ongoing genocide in Palestine have been reprimanded and dismissed in worrisome numbers – for posting on social media, participating in teaching-ins, hosting conversations, including readings in their course syllabi, or for signing petitions on Palestine. These tactics not only constitute a breach of the very academic freedom our institutions claim to defend, they also mean to keep us busy and worn down with bureaucratic and legal procedures that disrupt our right to protest for demanding accountability, transparency and justice.

Elsa: I'd like to focus on the question of the narratives involved in criminalisation, and the lessons I draw from this for the future of the movement. Since the early days of the student occupation, the systematic assimilation of anti-Zionism to antisemitism has been skilfully nurtured by the ULB authorities and the media, feeding the antisemitic idea that Jews share common political convictions and are intimately linked to the State of Israel (University Workers for Palestine, 2024b). What should be a struggle alongside other anti-racist struggles – for equality for all – is now being instrumentalised for the benefit of racist governance in defence of the Zionist colonial project. It thus becomes a tool of authoritarian governance, targeting in particular Muslims and those who resist the ethnic cleansing, occupation and apartheid practiced by Israel in Palestine for 76 years. Because Zionists claim to act in the name of antisemitism, it is essential for me, as a Jew, like all Jewish decolonial collectives today, to affirm that Israel and Zionists have never represented us. I refuse to let Israel continue to trample on the memory of our dead and to carry out a colonial project of ethnic cleansing in our name.

The fact that over a hundred students and colleagues are now accused of belonging to a group advocating discrimination or racial segregation – very serious accusations used to disqualify all those who take a stand against the ongoing genocide – is a clear symptom of this. Unlike most of the struggles I took part in during my studies at ULB, assimilation has been fought by the Popular University of Brussels from the very beginning. During the general assemblies of the student occupation, students have unanimously reaffirmed over and over again the commitment against all forms of antisemitism showing a radically anti-racist and inclusive perspective.

Some people have even found themselves excluded for their conspiracy speeches, because they didn't want to admit their potentially antisemitic nature. Thus, against all the propaganda of the rectoral team, the media and Zionists groups, we have always been warmly welcomed by the student occupation as Jews. I think one of the lessons of the occupation is that we must no longer leave the fight against antisemitism to Israel's supporters – in the broadest sense of the term, from the institutional left to the extreme right – but make it an issue of political anti-racism in all our struggles.

Nathan: Our movement faced severe repression, including legal prosecution, media defamation, censorship and false accusations, with racism playing a key role in both the repression and the narratives surrounding the Palestinian struggle. One key reason for the intensity of the university's repression is that our occupation didn't focus on typical demands like improving student conditions or lowering tuition fees – issues the authorities are accustomed to addressing. Instead, we directly challenged the university's monopoly on determining what is true or real. We did so from a political perspective, highlighting the importance of politics in the production of knowledge. This challenge struck at the core of the university's authority, which helps explain the severity of the repression we faced.

Jihane: Absolutely. I also believe that the intensity of the police and media repression we faced stems from more than just our support for a mere academic boycott to aid the Palestinian struggle for dignity. But in our will that this struggle contributes, in turn, to challenge the very foundations of the racial, social, economic, gendered and ableist order that underpins our society. By doing so, it threatens the broader structures of power and domination, which is why it became a target for heightened repression. It underscored the challenges of fighting for justice within systems designed to suppress it. One of the clearest signs of this fear of systemic change was the decision, the first one imposed by academic institutions, to implement a boycott of Palestinian universities until they formally condemned the events of October 7. By conditioning academic engagement on a selective form of political allegiance, institutions revealed their function as gatekeepers of knowledge production, reinforcing the idea that only certain voices – those that conform to the dominant order – deserve recognition. The absurdity of this position was striking: universities, which pride themselves on fostering free thought, instead imposed a loyalty test on the colonised. This decision was not only absurd in its logic but also deeply revealing of the university's alignment with structures of power. By doing so, the university was not just attempting to enforce a politically motivated stance – it was sending a message: we do not want you to challenge the coloniality embedded within the academic system. The decision, framed as “neutral,” was in fact a deeply political manoeuvre, reinforcing the very structures of domination that we seek to dismantle. This bothsidesism resolution however did not go unchallenged. We immediately pushed back, exposing its contradictions and relentlessly reminding the institutions of the colonial reality in Palestine. We refused to let the university's framing erase the asymmetry of power, the decades of occupation and the systematic violence faced by Palestinians. We tried to force the conversation

beyond the sanitised discourse of neutrality, making it impossible for academic leadership to ignore the fundamental injustice at the core of their decision.

This colonial logic is deeply intertwined with the repression faced by students and staff. As Palestinian solidarity movements gained momentum, repression escalated – not only through disciplinary actions and protest restrictions but also through surveillance, media vilification and outright criminalisation, by our own university. The same universities that claimed to protect “open debate” swiftly moved to silence dissent, punishing those who dared to challenge the structural violence embedded within academia itself. The decision to boycott Palestinian universities was not an isolated act but part of a broader pattern of institutional policing, one that seeks to neutralise any movement exposing the political investments of academic institutions in maintaining colonial hierarchies.

Despite the ongoing genocide and the repression, students and university workers continue to organise globally. While setbacks have occurred, there have been victories worth celebrating, especially in Belgium, where some universities have passed boycott motions. As we conclude, let’s reflect on the highs and lows of the past year, what have we achieved and what needs to be done?

Elsa: It’s hard to draw any lessons, as we are witnessing a genocide that has been transmitted live for over a year, and the most basic demand for a direct and immediate ceasefire still seems a long way off. On the bitter side, several elements of this new episode at the ULB have finally taken away all faith in the possibility of influencing the colonial, racist and police character of the university institution. Particularly the fact that in a university that claims to be committed, members of the academic council can in these circumstances agree in a meeting to be the only university in the world to have decided to boycott Palestinian universities. Or that colleagues still question whether it’s useful to talk about genocide more than a year into live-streamed mass violence. This new confrontation with inhumanity, twenty years after my experiences in student struggles, has forced me to see that nothing has really changed. I fear more and more that our university will never be *engaged*, other than as a marketing slogan.

If I have to think of something positive during this past year, it’s first and foremost my personal encounters with decolonial Jewish comrades on the one hand and colleagues involved with me in the support committee of the Popular University of Brussels on the other. Since October, despite the unspeakable horror, anti-Zionist Jews like myself are living a historic moment because the time of isolation is over. We are determined to make our voice heard and to shake up those who refuse to take responsibility. I am also excited about University Workers for Palestine ULB, the collective that has emerged at the ULB after organising with colleagues to support the student occupation.³

³University Workers for Palestine at the Université Libre de Bruxelles is a collective of teachers, researchers and staff who came together in May 7th, 2024, to support the liberation of Palestine through education, advocacy and action. It collaborates with colleagues from several Belgian, European and international universities, and supports and amplifies student and trade union mobilisations on campus in solidarity with Palestine. <https://universityworkersforpalestine.wordpress.com/>

The collective has given me new ways to engage with the colonial situation in Palestine and the ongoing genocide. The question of educational and scholastic relations of domination, whether of gender, race, class or age, has been at the heart of my research since my university studies. So far, I've worked mainly on the colonial context of the Belgian Congo, but today I'm thinking of starting research on scholasticide in Palestine, or on how it is (or isn't) talked about in French-speaking schools in Belgium. Maybe this really is a way of responding to the demand: Don't stop talking about Palestine!

Leila: I agree. One year of mobilisation in the context of the speeding up of genocide leaves me with a bitter taste. Of course, the university as an institution will never be committed to meaningful social struggles, because it is, precisely, an institution embedded in the legacies and structures of racial capitalism, the very same system that produces colonisation, dispossession, disposability and death. I am not expecting the institution to change or to take a brave stance against Israeli settler colonialism. What I think is important is to consider and be alert to the following. First, the mobilisation for Palestine will be co-opted in a way that fits the institution, a commitment for liberal peace disconnected from the idea of justice, and disconnected from any material issues that could challenge the complicity of the university in the larger system of racial capitalism. Second, the university will be the framework in which some people will instrumentalise the question of Palestine on their path to success and professionalisation. As a teacher, this can be a way of getting closer to the university authorities by personifying a “moderate” position on the “conflict”; as a student organiser, it can be a way to gain resources and network to access professional positions in unions or university bodies. We are witnessing some of these processes already, and I am convinced we will see more and more in the months to come.

At the same time, I profoundly believe that our mobilisations are not in vain. As we have already said, more and more people are talking about Palestine, in an intensity not seen for long. They are not only talking about Palestine but talking about it in a way that doesn't erase the Palestinian narrative. For years, except in some activists and scholars' circles, I cannot recall how many times I have heard the term “Israel Palestine conflict”; today, I hear about “settler colonialism”, “the question of Palestine”, apartheid, genocide and resistance. This year of mobilisation on campus has also revealed an often-forgotten aspect of universities: universities are not citadels, they are not isolated from society, they are part of it. Student mobilisations and the encampments have opened the doors of university to society. The time and space of university has been used not only by students but more largely by activists for Palestine. Those activists have contributed to the struggle, with their actions, presence and knowledge. This also challenges the idea of universities spreading knowledge to the world. Students have learned not only from academic books but from freedom fighters, scholar activists, Palestinian individuals and so on. The very fact of having the encampment named Walid Daqqah illustrates how students were keen to learn from Palestinian themselves about their struggle for liberation.

Nathan: One of my worst memories is the experience of being despised, humiliated, defamed and dishonoured, both individually and collectively, by mediocre intellectuals.

These are individuals incapable of understanding the implications of their own work, having abandoned the pursuit of emancipation while pretending to guide us towards it. What they failed to realise was that we were already on that path, and with their writings in hand, it was a heart-breaking moment to have to leave them behind and, ultimately, to fight against them to build that path ourselves. I'm relieved we kept the Popular University of Brussels afloat over the summer despite uncertainty after our eviction, and I am proud we continue to support the fight for Palestinian dignity and to build our own emancipation. In this regard, I believe we must keep developing the Popular University of Brussels, where knowledge and politics can coexist productively. I envision it like the University of Vincennes, founded in August 1968 and destroyed by the French academic authorities in August 1980. This university welcomed everyone, regardless of age or academic credentials, offering evening and weekend lectures for workers, fostering a free and egalitarian relationship between teachers and students. Its anthem could have been the tune of Jacqueline Taïeb's *Qu'est-ce qu'on se marre à la fac de lettres* ("How much fun we have at the Faculty of Arts") – because indeed, the Popular University of Brussels has given us so much joy.

Jihane: Reflecting on the past year, I am struck by both the progress and the challenges we've encountered. The occupation demonstrated the immense power of collective action, creating a space where students, academics and activists could come together to challenge institutional complicity and push for justice. However, it also exposed the limitations of our efforts – whether due to systemic resistance, internal dynamics or the overwhelming scope of the issues at hand. One significant lesson is the importance of persistence and solidarity. Even in the face of setbacks, we must continue to educate, to organise, and to build networks that can sustain long-term movements. The fight for justice in Palestine is part of a broader struggle against oppression, and every action we take contributes to this larger goal. For me, the occupation was not just about Palestine; it was about reclaiming agency and demonstrating that change is possible, even in the most challenging circumstances. Moving forward, I believe we need to focus on consolidating our gains, learning from our missteps and expanding our efforts to include more voices and perspectives. The goal is not only to achieve justice for Palestine but also to create a "framework" for addressing systemic injustices everywhere.

Omar: What has been difficult during the last year is to come to terms with the fact that as scholars, activists, artists, workers and human beings we failed to put a stop to the genocide. We clearly were not ready for this despite the expressions of intent and the forms of mass violence we had all witnessed over the past fifteen years in the Gaza ghetto. It has been infuriating to see the empire again on full steam paving the way to justify and cover up unspeakable horrors. The resistance on the ground – whether in Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq or Yemen – is what has come closer to make a real influence on stopping the genocide. For some, it might take time to digest the fact that a state founded on the ashes of the Shoah and the Nakba has committed such barbaric atrocities in the name of Judaism while claiming a right to defend itself against a colonised people. Israel however has never been this fully disrobed and Zionism

has been irreversibly fractured (Jabary Salamanca et al., 2024). While this has been mostly Israel's own doing, I want to believe that the work and organising of hundreds of thousands in Europe and elsewhere has and will contribute to spell the end of Zionism and the liberation of Palestine in the long term. In this sense, I think it's critical indeed to claim our victories, even when it might feel like an embarrassment to celebrate while Israel continues to unleash hell on earth in Palestine, Lebanon and Syria. I do not mean this to be complacent but rather not to dwell on defeatism and draw lessons from organising in these dark times – hope is a discipline and we need to continue to mobilise but also to strategise about the challenges ahead.

In Belgium we have seen considerable successes with Ghent University and the ULB at the forefront of the Global Academic Boycott Against Israel. After years of mobilisations, students and staff have led successful campaigns to sever institutional and research collaborations with Israeli universities (Reuters, 2024; RTBF, 2024). More recently, staff and students led a historical call for action that gathered more than 7,000 signatures to demand universities across Belgium to take bold steps to boycott all relations with Israel, including from European funding projects, and to support the collective needs of Gaza universities during this emergency period in response to demands by our Palestinian colleagues. Among the signatories there are tens of world-renowned scholars, artists and activists who have received honorary doctorates at Belgium Universities as well as 29 faculty deans, 64 department directors, 1,107 professors, 1,518 researchers, 634 administrative, technical and educational staff, and 3,290 students. The letter represents the largest collective outcry against Israel's human rights violations in Gaza and Palestine to ever come out from Belgian academia.⁴ These accomplishments are testimony to the critical importance of organising and developing infrastructures of solidarity in scholarly settings. I believe this is key to demand that our institutions uphold social justice and refuse to be complicit in violations of human rights and crimes against humanity in Palestine or anywhere. Certainly, universities remain a central terrain of this struggle and I believe our work can ultimately make a significant contribution. What we do know and have learned the hard way however is that state, educational, research and cultural institutions will not willingly take an ethical, political stance and that every bit of the way of this long struggle for justice will have to be fought tooth and nail.

For our efforts to be successful it's important to collectively rethink how the infrastructures of solidarity that have emerged over the past years can be consolidated and expanded in the short and long term. This should be done in ways that are mindful of what is our role and the goal of our efforts and work in Europe, and how this becomes part of a global, coordinated effort to stop genocide, defeat Zionism and liberate Palestine. We also need to carefully consider the specificities of the current political moment that is undoubtedly one of regression and which takes the form of rising authoritarianisms and the consolidation of populist right-wing movements,

⁴To read the letter and learn more about the campaign see <https://belgianuniversitiesforpalestine.wordpress.com/>

encroachment of fundamental rights, censorship and criminalisation of free speech as well as precarity of subsistence, social relations and employment. These rapidly and unpredictable shifting conditions are undermining in worrisome ways the political space and fundamental work of individuals, communities and movements around the world. Again, what we are witnessing is not just an exclusively Palestinian concern, it is rather the silencing and criminalisation of actions and knowledges that engage with colonised, racialised and precarious communities organising liberatory geographies at the centre and in the peripheries during our late fascist times. The recent intensification of attacks presents an opportunity not for complacency or pre-emptive obedience but for a strategic intellectual resistance and defence of our best chances at building free and just futures (Estes et al., 2025). Our strength lies in continuing to support the steadfastness of the Palestinian popular struggle for universal freedom and dignity while increasing our coordination and solidarity with other internationalist movements for justice.

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