

## **Academic Freedom: For whom?**

The meaning of “academic freedom” is fairly obvious. It is something that is associated with democratic societies, and it is universally held in high esteem, even though its boundaries and limits are often unclear. Basically, where there is freedom to teach, study and carry out research in academic institutions, and to publish research-related books and articles, then academic freedom exists.

It is clear that there can be no real academic freedom in higher education unless it is possible to reach the institutions where one studies, teaches, and carries out research. Academics within the State of Israel are able to do this, but those working in the higher education institutions in the Occupied Palestinian Territories are not. There, checkpoints, blockades, walls and fences prevent thousands of students and teachers from leading a normal academic life, and lecturers with non-Palestinian passports, who wish to teach in those institutions, are prevented from staying for long enough to carry out meaningful continuous teaching.

The academic community of the State of Israel, which rightly demands academic freedom for its members both inside Israel and within the international academic community, has generally disregarded the demand for a similar freedom for Palestinian academics in the Occupied Territories for which the State of Israel is responsible. Because of this, and in view of the rapidly deteriorating situation in the Territories during the last couple of years, we approached all the senior faculty members in the major higher education and scientific research institutions in Israel: Bar Ilan University, Ben Gurion University, Haifa University, The Hebrew University, The Open University, the Technion (Israel Institute of Technology), Tel Aviv University, and the Weizmann Institute for Science. We sent them the following letter and petition:

*Dear colleagues:*

*As academics and citizens of the State of Israel, whatever our political opinions may be, we see ourselves as having a duty to fight for the academic freedom of our Palestinian*

*colleagues. We call upon the Government of Israel to honour and implement the right of freedom of movement, academic study and instruction in the State of Israel and the territories controlled by it. Academic freedom is not divisible and cannot be selective. The State of Israel and we its citizens are directly responsible for upholding that freedom.*

*We call upon you to actively accept that responsibility and to add your support to the attached petition, which is being distributed among all senior staff members in all institutions of higher education in Israel. After the signatures have been gathered, we intend to seek the support of the Committee of University Presidents and members of the Israeli Academy of Science, and to submit the petition to the following government ministries: Defence, Education, Science, Foreign Affairs, and the Interior.*

*Sincerely,*

*The initiators of the petition:*

*Prof. Menachem Fisch, Tel-Aviv University*

*Prof. Raphael Falk, The Hebrew University*

*Prof. Eva Jablonka, Tel-Aviv University*

*Dr. Snait Gissis, Tel-Aviv University*

Text of the petition

**We, past and present members of academic staff of Israeli universities, express great concern regarding the ongoing deterioration of the system of higher education in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. We protest against the policy of our government which is causing restrictions of freedom of movement, study and instruction, and we call upon the government to allow students and lecturers free access to all the campuses in the Territories, and to allow lecturers and students who hold foreign passports to teach and study without being threatened with withdrawal of residence visas. To leave the situation as it is will cause serious harm to freedom of movement, study and instruction – harm to the foundation of academic freedom, to which we**

**are committed.**

We sent about 9000 emails, of which around 5000 were to senior faculty and the rest to emeriti and junior faculty at some of the institutions. These numbers should be reduced by about 5% to allow for the emails that were returned. In order not to misuse the internal all-university lists, all email addresses were manually downloaded from the open-to-the-public sites of university departments. A total of 407 people, 403 of whom are mostly active senior faculty, (but also include emeriti and junior staff) from the above institutions, as well as 4 signatures from senior faculty of Colleges who became aware of our petition, responded to our call and signed the petition. It is our intention to publicize the list of signatories on the web.

The number of signatories from each university is as follows:

Bar Ilan University 10

Ben Gurion University 77

Haifa University 20

Hebrew University 110

Open University 7

Technion 14

Tel Aviv University 155

Weizmann Institute of Science 10

Sapir College 2

Oranim 1

Bezalel 1

We received a number of letters objecting to our call: some of the authors sent reasoned responses, arguing their case against our petition; others chose to send insulting hate mail.

At the Weitzman Institute of Science, one of the heads of the departments sent a letter via the Academic Affairs Office to all the senior faculty of that institute. In it, he warned the faculty of the danger lurking in our call, basing his argument on very inaccurate rumours about the political stance of the initiators of the petition.

In March 2008 we wrote to the Committee of University Presidents and to the Directorial Board of the Israeli Academy of Science asking them to support our petition. So far, the only answer received has been that our request would be considered.

We are well aware that only rarely do petitions cause a change in a political state of affairs. However, we do not doubt that when there are enough people in the Israeli academic community who are prepared to voice their objection to the conditions under which their colleagues in Palestinian higher education institutions have to work, and do all they can to ensure that their Palestinian counterparts have the same academic freedom that they enjoy, we shall all benefit – Israeli and Palestinian academics alike.

Prof. Menachem Fisch, Tel-Aviv University

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