

PRESS RELEASE

## **Belgium at the Forefront of the Global Academic Boycott Against Israel: Historic Call for Action**

*Brussels, January 15, 2025*

In an unprecedented move, nearly 7,000 university staff and students from all Belgian universities across the linguistic divide have signed an [open letter](#) demanding an end to academic collaborations with Israeli institutions. Addressed to the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) and the Conseil des rectrices et recteurs (CRef), the letter represents the largest collective outcry against Israel's human rights violations in Gaza and Palestine to ever come out from Belgian academia.

Among the [signatories](#) there are 29 faculty deans, 64 department directors, 1,107 professors, 1,518 researchers, 634 administrative, technical and educational staff, and 3,290 students. World-renowned scholars, artists, and activists who have received honorary doctorates from Belgian universities have also joined the call, including Ken Loach, Greta Thunberg, Brian Eno, Didier Fassin, Nancy Fraser, Françoise Vergès, Paul Gilroy, Marlene Dumas, Frank Mugisha and Alain Platel. As argued by Itamar Shachar, Professor at Hasselt University, this collective effort is an unprecedented and historic call to Belgium Universities to align their policies with international law by terminating partnerships with Israeli universities and advocating for Israel's exclusion from European funding programs.

The open letter comes amid Israel's ongoing genocide in Gaza and its long-standing violations of international humanitarian law, crimes against humanity and other grave offenses against Palestinians. Landmark rulings by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC) have brought Israel's impunity into sharp focus. The ICJ has deemed Israel plausibly in violation of the Genocide Convention while reaffirming the illegality of its occupation of Palestinian territories and its breaches of international law. Furthermore, in a groundbreaking decision in November 2024, the ICC has issued arrest warrants for crimes against humanity against Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's Prime Minister, and Yoav Gallant, former Israeli Minister of Defence.

### **A legal and moral imperative**

The letter highlights the binding nature of these international rulings, emphasizing that Belgian universities, as public institutions, have a legal obligation to terminate collaborations that contravene international law. This includes ending agreements with Israeli institutions directly or indirectly involved in violations of human rights, as well as suspending Israel's participation in European research and education programs. By continuing collaborations with Israeli institutions, we risk not only complicity in crimes but also undermining the very foundations of international law.”, the initiators of the letter state.

As put by Gert Van Hecken, professor at the University of Antwerp and one of the letter's initiators, "for too long, neutrality has been invoked by academic institutions as a shield to justify inaction, effectively enabling complicity in the face of grave human rights violations. Yet, what Belgian academics and students are now demanding is a commitment to true neutrality, a neutrality that refrains from supporting or collaborating with Israeli universities shown to be complicit in human rights violations perpetrated by the Israeli state". True neutrality, as the letter emphasises, requires adherence to international law and the refusal to legitimize or support institutions entangled in violations of the Genocide Convention and other peremptory norms of international law. As ULB research fellow Barbara Van Dyck argues, "now is the time to match principle with action".

The letter also underscores the well-documented complicity of Israeli academic institutions in violations of international law. Numerous international reports and experts have documented the role of Israeli academia in military research, policy development, and in providing intellectual cover for the Israeli state's apartheid policies and systematic violence against Palestinians. During the past 14 months, despite international court rulings and resolutions by the United Nations, Israeli institutions have directly facilitated military activities such as the establishment of an "engineering war room" by Tel Aviv University to assist the Israeli army.

### **Belgium's leadership in academic boycott**

While Belgium was quick to pose sanctions and demand its academic institutions to suspend collaborations with countries like Iran and Russia, the country's government refused to take similar steps against Israel despite massive protests from civil society. As Prof. at Ghent University Koenraad Bogaert argues, a consistent approach is required concerning Israel and Belgian universities are well positioned to urge European partners to suspend Israel's participation in EU-funded programs. Omar Jabary Salamanca, research fellow at the Université Libre de Bruxelles and Ghent University and one of the initiators of the open letter, argues that "This overwhelming support from across Belgian universities is perhaps the strongest collective academic demand for justice to the Palestinian people to emerge in recent years."

### **A call for accountability beyond a ceasefire**

While the ongoing genocide in Gaza remains a focal point, the signatories stress that the concerns extend beyond immediate events. They caution against complacency in the event of a ceasefire, emphasizing the systemic nature of Israel's military occupation and apartheid policies, which have been declared illegal by the ICJ. As said by Edina Dóci, Prof. at UCLouvain, "The international community must hold Israel accountable to ensure that violations of international law are not normalized. Failure to act will further erode the global legal order, leaving all nations vulnerable."

## Appendix: Quotes from signatories

Petra De Sutter (UGent): “Het is onze morele en wettelijke plicht te doen wat nodig is om het oorlogsgeweld in Gaza zo snel mogelijk te doen stoppen. Business as usual staat gelijk aan medeplichtigheid aan één van de grootste schendingen van het internationaal humanitair recht van onze tijd. Ook de academische wereld heeft hier een verantwoordelijkheid te nemen, en daarom teken ik met overtuiging deze open brief.”

Brigitte Herremans (UGent): “The acceptance of Israel's genocide in Gaza and the defeatism about the occurrence of international crimes, also within academic circles, is deeply troubling. The non-action by academic institutions sends a message that Israel can continue destroying the Palestinian education system, and that our institutions will find a way to accommodate or legitimize ongoing cooperation with Israel. I object to the failure of Belgian universities to take meaningful action to avoid complicity in Israel's internationally wrongful acts.”

Anne Morelli (Professeure honoraire de l'ULB) : "Les historiens des prochaines décennies découvriront que la communauté universitaire n'est pas restée muette devant les horreurs perpétrées par Israël à Gaza. Elle a, au moins, essayé, avec ses moyens, de faire quelque chose pour alerter l'opinion publique et faire changer la politique belge envers la Palestine "

Philippe Van Parijs (UCLouvain): Killings, destructions and humiliations may help provide some short-term security. But even those who admire Israel's achievements must acknowledge that the indignation and hate these actions trigger can only make the prospects of a lasting piece even more elusive and undermine the legitimacy of the very existence of the state of Israel. The letter calls for suspending all institutional academic collaboration with Israeli universities, appropriately not with individual Israeli academics. Signing it is most unlikely to do much to halt the folly. Hardly more than an anonymous participation in a demonstration. But it is the very least we can do.

Eva Brems (UGent): 'Ik ben er trots op dat mijn universiteit haar samenwerkingsprojecten toetst aan mensenrechten. Wat we hier vragen, ligt in het verlengde daarvan. Mensenrechten kunnen maar een duurzaam project zijn als iedereen er binnen zijn eigen mogelijkheden verantwoordelijkheid voor opneemt. We kunnen meer dan we soms denken, als individuen en als universiteiten!'

Marleen Temmerman (UGent): “Al 14 maanden zijn we getuige van de ergst mogelijke schendingen van het Internationaal Recht, waaronder ook doelgerichte aanvallen op ziekenhuizen, gezondheidswerkers en humanitaire hulpverleners. Zwijgen terwijl dit geweld voortduurt, is onaanvaardbaar. De academische gemeenschap kan en moet een voorbeeld stellen. Om die reden ondersteun ik deze open brief met heel mijn overtuiging.”

Geert Molenberghs (UHasselt/KUL): Als biostatisticus, werkzaam in volksgezondheid en hoger onderwijs, vind ik het ondraaglijk dat de gezondheids- en onderwijsinfrastructuur van een gans volk vernietigd wordt, samen met de culturele identiteit en fysieke en

mentale integriteit van het Palestijnse volk. Dit gebeurt, verhoudingen in acht genomen, op een ongeziene schaal. Als academische gemeenschap mogen we niet lijdzaam toezien.