

## **Rehabilitating and Strengthening Shared Life in Academia in Israel**

### **Policy paper**

In this paper we present the repercussions of the events that have afflicted the region since October 7, 2023 on Jewish and Arab students, academic faculty and staff, as well as the impact of these events on shared life within Israeli institutions of higher education. In this policy paper we present data regarding developments in academic institutions, specifically around allegations of incitement to terror before and after October 7. Further, we examine the significance and implications of the situation on academic institutions, and provide recommendations for action.

Since October 7, 2023, Israeli society has been in a terrifying and protracted state of shock and emergency. The high numbers of people murdered, kidnapped, and wounded, as well as the many stories of despair, have taken their toll on Israeli society. Such unprecedented circumstances have dealt a severe blow to all areas of life, including shared society, and have spread a great deal of pain and loss. This situation did not leave institutions of higher education unscathed. Students and faculty members have lost homes and loved ones, many are on the frontlines and on the home front, and many more are experiencing tremendous emotional and physical difficulties and challenges. The academic year did not begin on time because of the war and its start has been delayed over and over, posing difficult questions for students, faculty, and staff alike. Classes began on 31 December 2023, roughly two-and-a-half months behind schedule in most institutions.

Some of the challenges and uncertainties that have troubled institutions of higher education hover around questions of shared life in the academic space. One of the most pervasive issues that students and lecturers have faced relate to attacks on their freedom of speech. Mainly Arab students, as well as many Arab lecturers, have faced harassment and persecution on social media and at campus for speech interpreted as incitement and in support of “terrorism”. According to data provided by Kav Mashve, 78% of the Arab students said they do not feel safe expressing their views on social media, and 66% feel that the academic institutions discriminate against them in favor of Jews during wartime.<sup>1</sup>

This is a harsh blow to the positive trends we have seen during the past years, including an accelerated integration of Arab society in higher education and the labor market. Such

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<sup>1</sup> See footnote 2.

accomplishments were the result of many years of work by academic institutions and the Ministry of Education to prevent racism, remove obstacles and make institutions for higher education accessible to Arab society and strengthen shared life.

Nevertheless, since October 7 and the ensuing war, legitimate speech has been interpreted as support and incitement to “terrorism”. Despite statements by the Ministry of Education clarifying that the war is not against Arab citizens<sup>2</sup>, we have witnessed an alarming trend of widespread suspicion towards Arabs, who are deemed to be “supporters of terrorism”. According to data presented by the Office of the State Attorney on December 6, 2023<sup>3</sup>, there has been a 400% increase in the number of cases opened for alleged incitement to terror since October 7, 2023.

This increase is accompanied by a rise in the number of incidents of allegations of incitement to terror in academia. On October 11, 2023, the National Union of Israeli Students launched a new complaint mechanism designed to enable reporting incitement offenses online<sup>4</sup> - including a special reporting form for social media posts allegedly involving incitement to terror. The National Union of Israeli Students claims that 3,000 complaints have been lodged – all concerning speech by students and faculty from the Arab society.<sup>5</sup> In most cases, posts flagged and reported were published in previous years – before the war and are now being taken out of context or do not violate what is permitted under freedom of speech as defined by law.

This situation strengthens the fear, estrangement and alienation experienced by Arab students in Israeli higher education institutions. According to Kav Mashve’s data from November 2023,<sup>6</sup> 56% of Arab students said that they do not feel safe returning to campus to study, 7% chose to freeze or cease their studies following the war, and 4% are expected to pursue their studies in institutions abroad. The fear of Arab students and faculty is not unfounded. According to NGO Adalah’s data<sup>7</sup>, between October 7 – November 25, 2023, 133 students from 33 institutions of higher education in Israel approached them due to a disciplinary proceeding concerning their social media activity. Of these cases, 8 students were suspended without a hearing, 53 were temporarily suspended prior to disciplinary

<sup>2</sup> [Link to the hearing at the Committee on Education on the Knesset website](#) (Hebrew)

<sup>3</sup> [Website of the Department for Governance and Social Affairs on the inter-community round table](#). an official protocol is pending (Hebrew).

<sup>4</sup> [Link to a post published by the National Union of Israeli Students](#) (Hebrew).

<sup>5</sup> [Link to the hearing at the Committee on Education on the Knesset website](#) (Hebrew).

<sup>6</sup> [Survey of Arab Students during Operation Iron Swords](#)– Kav Mashve, Employment Leadership, November 2023 (Hebrew).

<sup>7</sup> [Infographic Report: Palestinian Students Persecuted in Israeli Academic Institutions](#), Adalah, November 2023.

proceedings, and 51 students were in the process of disciplinary proceedings pending a decision.

Adalah provided legal representation in 93 of complaints, of which 51 cases are pending a hearing or the decision of the hearing committee, and 42 cases resulted in a decision by the hearing committee: 17 were fully acquitted (due to absence of proof or because the complaint was withdrawn), 5 received a so-called educational penalty, 11 were suspended for a semester or a year, and just 9 cases resulted in indefinite suspension from studies.

Simultaneously, there is a campaign of incitement and persecution on social media, including petitions calling non-Arab students to refuse to study with Arab students and to fire Arab lecturers. Such campaigns also include posts featuring abusive content that reveal the full names and addresses of Arab students or faculty, accompanied by calls to boycott, cancel, and socially exclude Arab students or faculty. Some posts even call for physical violence against Arab students and faculty members, as terrified students experienced in Netanya College's student dorms on 29 October 2023.<sup>8</sup>

These circumstances required immediate interventions during the current academic year, along with long-term measures. The Rowad (Gate to Academia) Program with the Council for Higher Education mapped the concerns and needs of Arab students.<sup>9</sup> Rowad reported that Arab students expressed feelings of anxiety and fear, fear of being in shared spaces, feelings of instability and more. They also stated the expressed needs of Arab students, including:

- The need to get a better understanding of the institutions' proceedings, standards and expectations from the students.
- A personal contact with the administrative and academic faculty.
- Financial and emotional support.
- Accessible services for Arab students (also in terms of language and cultural sensitivity).
- Proactive support and assistance to enable their safe involvement in campus activities.

<sup>8</sup>

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestinian-students-trapped-hours-hundreds-israelis-chanted-death-arabs>

<sup>9</sup> [Mapping the situation and Needs of Arab Students during the Emergency State before Starting their Academic Studies](#) - Rowad (Gate to Academia) Program, November 2023 (Hebrew).

Similar responses were recorded in Kav Mashve's survey:<sup>10</sup> Students were asked about the actions that could help them at present and 89% selected the following: declarations issued by management and faculty calling for calm and security on campus for all students and particularly for Arab students; publishing institutional procedures for protecting all students; equal disciplinary proceedings against incitement of violence by Jewish and Arab students.

In line with the expressed concerns, needs and experiences of Arab students, we present recommendations to help prevent further harm to students and faculty, which can then reinforce a sense of security among all students and especially among Arab students. These actions and interventions are conducive to promoting diversity, partnership, and inclusion in institutions of higher education in Israel.

### **Sikkuy-Aufoq's Recommendations**

Recommendations for the immediate term:

1. The Council for Higher Education needs to call on all institutions that have a diverse Jewish and Arab student and faculty body to protect and preserve the shared space on campus and present a plan on how they will ensure this.
2. Academic institutions need to make their plans to ensure the protection and preservation of shared space within their institution public and widely available to students. We recommend the designation of specialized staff (such as Diversity and Inclusion Coordinators as well as the Dean of Students Office) to reduce tensions and increase a sense of security among all students.
3. If there are additional urgent needs, institutions should be invited to raise them at the Council for Higher Education's Emergency Wartime Forum to formulate professional, transparent, and appropriate responses and assistance.
4. Academic institutions must ensure fair and sensitive proceedings in the disciplinary committees. The institutions of higher education must create uniform, transparent and clear criteria that ensure proper representation. The work of these committees must be based on the principles of freedom of speech and equality.
5. Academic institutions must train their academic staff to cope with tensions in the relationships of Jewish and Arab students on campus and beyond as the academic

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<sup>10</sup> [Survey of Arab Students following the War Iron Swords](#) – Kav Mashve - Employment Leadership, November 2023 (Hebrew).

school year begins. Academic staff must be given tools enabling them to cope with complex social dynamics during the war, and with the social tension it generates.

6. We recommend that specialized training and guidance for academic staff be held in an organized manner through the Department for Academic Training at the Ministry of Education, and in consultation with Arab and Jewish staff and organizations working on this issue.<sup>11</sup>
7. We demand that the decision to freeze the call for Coordinators of Shared Life in Academic Institutions and the budget allocated for this purpose is immediately reversed. It is precisely because of the current situation that such measures are urgently required.

Recommendations for the long term:

1. We demand the implementation of the Vadmani-Inbar plan<sup>12</sup> and the directive issued by the Ministry of Education's Administration of Education Workers on educating for a shared society and educating against racism.<sup>13</sup>
2. The Council for Higher Education must establish a commission to review the application and implementation of its own recommendations on shared life in institutions of higher education in Israel.
3. The Council for Higher Education needs to work with academic institutions to establish special centers for advancing shared life in institutions of higher education. Their role will be to develop content, train, offer courses on shared life and the prevention of racism while monitoring and assessing the atmosphere on campus and adapting the program to emerging needs.
4. The academic institutions will expand recruitment of Arab administrative and academic faculty: integrating lecturers, administrative faculty, teaching assistants and pedagogical staff from Arab society in the various departments. A faculty that is diverse in terms of national, cultural and language identity is an academic and professional asset and can promote equality and partnership among Jews and Arabs on campus.

<sup>11</sup> [Shared life in Academic Teacher Training Institutions during Wartime](#) – Recommendations of the Forum for Shared Life, Mofet Institute, October 2023 (Hebrew).

<sup>12</sup> [The Vadmani-Inbar Plan – A reform in teacher and kindergarten teacher training in Israel](#), The Ministry of Education, Administration of Education Workers and the Department of the Supervisor of Academic Training and Liaison to the Council for Higher Education and Planning and Budgeting Committee, 2021 (Hebrew).

<sup>13</sup> [Communication: Education for a Shared Society and Educating against Racism](#), The Ministry of Education, Administration of Education Workers and the Department of the Supervisor of Academic Training and Liaison to the Council for Higher Education and Planning and Budgeting Committee, 2022 (Hebrew).

5. The academic institutions will encourage shared initiatives by committed faculty and students: Identifying existing joint experiences of learning, encounters and dialog resulting from lecturers and students' personal initiative. We recommend referring to the guide published by aChord Center and Abraham Initiatives on this matter.<sup>14</sup>

For further information on long term recommendations please refer to our joint research with the Academic College Beit Berl [\*Promoting education for shared life in student teacher training\*](#) (Hebrew).

Sikkuy-Aufoq is a shared Jewish and Arab nonprofit organization working since 1991 to advance equality and partnership between the Arab-Palestinian and Jewish citizens of Israel. We work with local Arab municipalities and the leadership of Arab society and engage in advocacy vis-à-vis government ministries, public bodies, the media, and the public at large for policy change that will bring about full and substantive equality, a shared society, and create inclusive spaces for the Arab-Palestinian and Jewish citizens, who live side by side.

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<sup>14</sup> [\*The Guide to an Inclusive Classroom in Academia\*](#) – aChord Center and Abraham Initiatives, October 2022 (Hebrew)