



Euro-Med Monitor
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Subject: Protesting the EU Commission President's acceptance of Ben Gurion University's honorary doctorate

EU Parliament,
Bâtiment Paul Henri Spaak
Rue Wiertz 60, 1047
Bruxelles, Belgium
email: maria.arena@europarl.europa.eu

H.E. MEP Maria Arena, Chair of the Subcommittee on Human Rights

19 June 2022

Dear MEP Arena,

I am writing, on behalf of Euro-Med Monitor, regarding the EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's acceptance of an honorary doctorate from the Ben Gurion University (BGU) in Israel last week. We fear that this could regrettably signal condoning the role Israeli academic institutions, particularly BGU, play in the ever-entrenched occupation of Palestinians. We believe that Ms. Von der Leyen should return the honorary doctorate to BGU.

BGU and the Israeli military complex are deeply intertwined, where the former is strongly complicit in enhancing the army's capabilities and increasing its recruits while condoning its systematic oppression and violations against Palestinians.

Aiding and Collaborating with Israel's Army

In a clear example of collaborations and resource sharing between the University and the Israeli Defense Force (IDF), BGU has Israel's first technology park situated on a university campus. The park is divided into civilian and military sections, with a portion set aside to house a government-developed training facility for the IDF. The BGU technology park also houses Intelligence, Communications and Training bases of the IDF and has served to initiate the transfer of major army bases from the center of Israel into the Negev.

In 2019, Israel's Defense Ministry and BGU inaugurated the first building of the IDF Technology Campus in Be'er-Sheva, next to the BGU Advanced Technologies Park. This is part of a project aimed at building a 150,000 square meters campus that would serve the needs of thousands of soldiers from the most elite IDF units, which according to IDF Brig. Gen. (res.) Itzik Cohen, would have "the ability to reinforce the military's operational capabilities," and "turn the Negev into Israel's cyber capital."

The year before, Israel's government allocated \$15 million to Ben-Gurion University to specifically accommodate and absorb thousands of active Israeli soldiers into technology-related subjects, as the IDF continues to transfer its technology units to the Negev region, where the university is located.



Euro-Med Monitor
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

The IDF's technology units include the Negev-based Unit 8200, which specializes in collecting signal intelligence (SIGINT) and code decryption. Unit 8200 is known for maintaining covert listening units in the Palestinian territories, which in 2014, prompted 43 veterans of the unit to sign a protest letter decrying the 8200 unit's abusive gathering of Palestinians' private information.

In that sense, not only is BGU offering space and facilities to IDF units implicated in violations against Palestinians, but BGU is also working with the Israeli defense establishment to incentivize Israeli students who undertake academic studies while serving in IDF intelligence and computer corps to enroll in technology-related subjects to enhance their qualities and expertise during their military service.

Providing Exclusive and Discriminatory Benefits to IDF Soldiers

Furthermore, BGU has traditionally aided and provided academic scholarships and support Israeli army reservist students and active-duty soldiers. For instance, during Israel's 2008 war on Gaza, known as operation Cast Lead, in which Israel killed about 926 Palestinian civilians, BGU offered scholarships and extra tuition to students who served in active combat units. The University similarly offered a special grant for each day of service to students who went on reserve duty, in addition to other benefits.

BGU provides "Application Fees Refund" to students who possess a "Certificate of Fighting" issued by the IDF. The university is one of higher education institutes falling on the periphery of the Negev, Galilee, Judea and Samaria that provides the first schooling year free to students who have completed military or national service in the IDF. It also provides a specialized fast-tracked program to Israeli Airforce Pilots to obtain bachelor's degrees in one year.

Such exclusive benefits to Israelis serving the army not only provide incentive for enlisting in the IDF, including in the occupied territories, but they also discriminate against Arab citizens of Israel who do not serve in the IDF.

These issues have prompted the University of Johannesburg in 2011 to sever its ties with BGU after a lengthy investigation has shown damning evidence of BGU's institutional complicity and active collaboration with the Israeli occupation, its military and apartheid practices.

Silencing Legitimate Criticism of Israeli Actions and Policies

While collaborating with Israel's army and providing support to its soldiers, BGU has been accused of aligning its policies and practices with the Israeli state's restrictions on academic freedom and the right to protest and voice dissent.

For instance, in 2009, BGU Professor Neve Gordon, who then headed the politics department, faced opposition from the University's president, Professor Rivka Carmi, for supporting the non-violent boycott of Israeli companies and institutions



Euro-Med Monitor
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

which profit from or are complicit in the Israeli occupation. Professor Carmi argued that Professor Gordon's views threaten the existence of BGU as a "proudly Zionist Institution" and compromise its sources of funding, and consequently worked on passing a resolution through BGU's senate that sets boundaries on lecturers' freedom of expression. The said resolution states that "the university is entitled to control the lecturers' political or religious expressions, even though they are part of their civilian liberties, so that teaching and research will not be used for the sake of political or religious goals." This sets a prohibition on lecturers that prevents them from voicing their political opinions during classes, as well as using their university titles when speaking publicly about politics or their personal opinions.

In late 2010, two BGU students were reprimanded by a disciplinary tribunal for taking part in a protest over Israel's attack on the Gaza Freedom flotilla that was seeking to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza. The BGU tribunal stated that it would suspend the students if they repeated their actions. In December of the same year, BGU prohibited students from the "Solidarity Against Fascism" student organization from distributing flyers that criticized a series of proposed Israel laws while other Israeli universities had permitted the flyers to be distributed. Furthermore, multiple BGU students have complained about the university's security guards photographing and intrusively monitoring anti-occupation political activists.

Finally, BGU has been collaborating with the Weitzmann Institute and the Public and Diaspora Affairs department in Israel to counteract the activities of Israeli Apartheid Week (IAW) in Britain. For instance, in 2011 BGU was amongst stakeholders that funded a student delegation to go together with local pro-Israeli groups and Israeli representatives in Britain to counter the IAW week of activities.

In light of such concerning facts and many other examples of BGU's complicity and active collaboration with the Israeli military and occupation, we demand that the European Parliament exerts pressure on Ms. von der Leyen to return the honorary doctorate to BGU as a statement of support for Palestinian rights and opposition to their oppression. We also demand that you question the commission over the circumstances that led to Ms. von der Leyen's acceptance of the doctorate in the first place.

Please accept the assurances of our highest consideration.

Kindest regards,

Dr. Ramy Abdu
Euro-Med Monitor Chairman
Ramy@euromedmonitor.org