



Conversations in Urban Education

The role of universities in Israeli apartheid and genocide, and the movement for a free Palestine

Abstract

Following the 2024 publication of her book *Towers of Ivory and Steel: How Israeli Universities Deny Palestinian Freedom* (Verso), scholar and activist Maya Wind contextualizes the Israeli genocide in Gaza within a larger historical frame of Israeli and U.S. universities' role in Israeli settler colonialism and military occupation in Palestine. Wind responds to questions about the "Palestine exception" in the Western academy; how policing, surveillance, and incarceration are deployed to target students and educators in the movement for Palestinian liberation; and the importance of solidarity organizing across universities and colleges in support of Palestinian and collective liberation.

Keywords

[Palestine](#), [liberation](#), [academic boycott](#), [solidarity](#), [censorship](#)

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Figure 1. "Our Voices Will Never Be Silenced" by Artist Anonymized

For historical context, we're having this conversation on May 7, 2024, 212 days into the U.S.-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza, including attacks against Palestinians in the West Bank. We're reading reports of another mass grave of nearly 300 executed children, women, and men—many with hands bound and in medical dressings—near Nasser Hospital; ongoing airstrikes killing families in Rafah; young men being systematically detained; and the total decimation of every single institution of higher education in Gaza, plus over 50 schools. This is all part of the long-time apartheid of what Palestinian organizers call "scholasticide."

We are also seeing ongoing Palestinian resistance and international leadership in an increasingly broad movement, not only to end this genocide but also to align with the Palestinian struggle for the full liberation of Palestine. In the last several weeks, this movement has inspired over 40 student encampments on U.S. university campuses, including City College New York, Cal Poly Humboldt, UCLA, Columbia, and NYU. As of May 6, [more than 2,000](#) people across the U.S.—including students, staff, and faculty—have been arrested on college campuses in brutal police sweeps of encampments. These mass arrests have been carried out at the direction of university leaders who are using the false cover of addressing antisemitism to roll out repression and obscure university investment in the corporate military apparatus between the U.S. and Israel. In New York specifically, on Tuesday, April 30 the NYPD arrested over 300 people in a massive assault on student protests at City College and Columbia, and university leadership from NYU and elsewhere continued to wholly dismiss student demands to disclose, divest, and end ties with both Israel and NYPD. And, in the face of this, a relentless, consistent assertion from student organizers not to get distracted and keep our eyes on Gaza, on Rafah, on the West Bank, and the purpose of these solidarity actions.

For many people in the Palestine solidarity movement, this moment of U.S. mass protest in solidarity with Palestine seemed like an impossibility as recently as last year. This seems to be a popular response to the humanitarian crisis of the genocide, an opening of mass political consciousness about the occupation of Palestine and settler colonialism more broadly, and the result of decades of Palestinian-led and solidarity organizing including the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement, Students for Justice in Palestine groups, and Academic Boycott campaigns specifically.

Can you describe the “Palestine exception” in university contexts in terms of surveillance, censorship, and policing? From your perspective as a long-time organizer in these movements, can you tell us about the role and significance of student and university-sited organizing?

For decades, a Palestine exception has been enforced in the Western academy. This has not only been upheld through what Umayyah Cable and others have called “compulsory Zionism”—the U.S. hegemonic demand to support the Israeli state in the realm of culture, education, and politics—but also through material mechanisms of surveillance, policing, and punishment (Cable, 2022; Deeb & Winegar, 2015).

The policing of Palestine discourse and organizing has taken both overt and subtle forms. Most blatantly, faculty and researchers have lost tenured and adjunct positions, have been disinvited from residencies, fellowships, and talks, and have been censored or penalized by their university administrations for scholarship or expression critical of Israel. In its less obvious manifestation, this policing takes the form of advice, passed down from senior to junior scholars, about the threat of job loss, grant revocation, or other mechanisms of isolation that may bear down on those who wish to critically investigate Israeli violence and Palestinian life-making and resistance. Graduate students and others in conditions of precarious employment are advised to steer clear of the topic until tenure, or perhaps another horizon in which it might be possible, one day, to write and speak of Palestine.

For student organizers, the Palestine exception has meant mobilizing under conditions of heightened repression. For over two decades, Students for Justice in Palestine have faced distinctive bureaucratic hurdles as their events are flagged for additional security vetting, the militarization of their gatherings as the presence of campus security is imposed upon them, and the singling out of their groups for suspension and punishment for alleged infractions of university policy. Student organizers have also faced doxing and smear campaigns, surveillance from university administrations and infiltration from the state, and the criminalization of their advocacy through the expanding slate of anti-BDS laws (Palestine Legal and the Center for Constitutional Rights, 2015).

What is remarkable about the current student uprising is that it has ushered in a new U.S. campus in which the Palestine exception no longer holds. The student

movement for Palestine has been building toward this for over two decades and has finally reached a critical, emboldened mass. The encampments reflect an inflection point, in which there is such an outpour of organizing, writing, and speech for Palestine that the censorship can no longer be sustained and has been irreversibly breached. Students across encampments are simply refusing to inherit the university as it currently exists: a university that is not only implicated in genocide but that punishes its own community members for speaking out against this complicity.

And this student uprising is not only shattering the Palestine exception in the academy. It is spilling out into the streets and interrupting key mechanisms of censorship in the media and in government. As the full force of the U.S. police state bearing down on the student encampments makes clear, universities are sites of power. Sites where silence can be effectively enforced or forever broken.

You've written an extraordinary new book *Towers of Ivory and Steel: How Israeli Universities Deny Palestinian Freedom* on the role of Israeli universities in establishing and reproducing infrastructural and ideological colonial occupation and violence; as well as the vibrant, brilliant organizing efforts against academic apartheid from Palestine, amongst some Israeli academics, and in the U.S. and elsewhere. Many of the examples and context you're sharing here can be found in the book with ample evidence and further detail for interested readers.

Can you introduce us to the Israeli University system's role historically and presently in establishing and maintaining apartheid and genocide?

From their founding, Israeli universities have served as critical pillars of Israeli racial rule. This begins with the very physical infrastructure of their campuses. Israeli universities were established as land-grab institutions, built on Palestinian lands and served to further Palestinian dispossession in regions of particular strategic concern to the Israeli state. Their campuses and programs sustain the twinned projects of Palestinian land expropriation and Jewish settlement expansion, a program officially called "Judaization." In the Galilee, the most populous Palestinian region within Israeli state borders, the University of Haifa plays a key role in interrupting Palestinian territorial contiguity and facilitating

Palestinian land theft. Likewise in the Naqab, the region most sparsely populated by Jewish Israelis, Ben Gurion University anchors Palestinian Bedouin displacement and replacement. In the occupied West Bank, Ariel University furthers Palestinian land appropriation and anchors the expansion of the illegal settlement of Ariel.

Within their halls, dominant paradigms in diverse academic disciplines have subordinated their research agendas to the requirements of the Israeli state, aiding the Israeli government in maintaining apartheid rule over decades. The discipline of archaeology constructs evidence to substantiate Israeli state narratives through erasure of Arab and Muslim history and facilitates Israeli use of excavations to expand Jewish settlement and expropriate Palestinian land. The discipline of Middle East studies produces racialized, militarized knowledge that offers a framework to legitimize Israeli violence against Palestinians and commits regional and linguistic expertise and academic training to the Israeli military and security state. The discipline of legal studies—including ethics, law, and criminology—creates the discursive and legal infrastructure to justify Israeli violations of international human rights law, continually developing legal interpretations that shield the Israeli state from accountability for its illegal military occupation and for its war crimes in military offensives in the Gaza Strip, beginning in 2008 and up to the present genocide.

On other corners of Israeli campuses, academic knowledge production and expertise are steered toward direct military applications. Israeli universities design and run tailored academic programs to train soldiers and security forces to carry out the work of maintaining an illegal military occupation, merging Israeli military and academic training. Rafael, Elbit Systems, and Israel Aerospace Industries—Israel's largest weapons producers and global exporters—were not only birthed by Israeli universities but continue to be sustained by them to this day. Campuses serve as laboratories for the development of technologies and weapons used against occupied Palestinians and later sold abroad as “battle proven.” Some technologies and weapons developed by these same companies were tried for the first time in Israel's genocidal campaign in Gaza, and already displayed in international expos (Scharf, 2024). Over the past eight months, Israeli universities have not only continued to train Intelligence Corps and combat battalion soldiers, but have offered special benefits, scholarships, and even course credit to soldiers returning from Gaza to their classrooms.

What role can and do U.S. universities play in the apartheid system and ongoing genocide in Palestine? What power do U.S. academic boycotts have in this landscape, and can you share any successful organizing examples?

One of the most direct forms of U.S. universities' complicity in apartheid and genocide in Palestine is their support for Israeli universities. U.S. universities have conferred upon Israeli institutions an exceptional status, offering them a broad range of funding opportunities, joint research ventures, and study-abroad programs, when no such parallel collaborations exist with Palestinian universities or any other university system in the Middle East. For funding, publications, and legitimacy, Israeli universities are deeply reliant on the U.S. system of higher education. This gives those of us reproducing U.S. universities—students, staff, and faculty—a critical opening to effectively intervene, and at the very least end our own direct complicity in Palestinian unfreedom.

This is particularly important because the call for the academic boycott is in fact the *foundational* BDS call. A full year before the Palestinian Boycott National Committee issued its call for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions, the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) called to boycott the Israeli academy as a pillar of Israel's "regime of oppression" (BDS, 2024).

The response to PACBI's call for the academic boycott has been growing across the U.S. academy. Many dozens of resolutions to endorse the boycott were passed by undergraduate student councils, graduate student unions, and academic associations over the past decade. Yet despite these clear articulations of the will of the university community—the students, faculty, and staff—material change has been slow to follow. Administrations, executives, and boards of universities and academic associations have largely ignored these democratic resolutions, or have at best partially implemented them. But it is precisely here that we are now seeing a momentous shift.

The relentless student, staff, and faculty organizing and the student encampments have compelled university administrations to seriously engage their demands and to make material concessions. Over the past eight months, dozens of universities across the West have severed ties with Israeli universities, with dozens more committing to do so, and many more to follow. In the U.S., associated student funds in the UC [University of California] system won

divestment, Brown University and Wesleyan University have pledged to work with student groups toward endowment divestment, and Pitzer College closed its study abroad program at the University of Haifa. This growing list of wins is the culmination of years of groundwork laid by student organizers who understand ending their university complicity in Israeli apartheid as a critical first step in the broader movement to decolonize higher education, from Turtle Island to Palestine.

The frame of this journal issue focuses specifically on the contradictory intersections between universities and prisons. We know that central to the Israeli occupation is the systematic policing and check-point apparatus that controls everyday life and mobility for Palestinian people—Gaza has been called an “open-air prison” as a result of this militarized containment—and there is tremendous intellectual repression (I’m thinking of Walid Daqqah particularly today), and the mass detention, often without trial, and torture of Palestinian people in Israeli prisons.

Thanks to the organizing work of Palestinians on the ground there, and campaigns like Jewish Voice for Peace’s “End the Deadly Exchange,” we know that these techniques and technologies of policing and counterinsurgency are systematically shared between U.S. and Israeli forces. For example, members of the NYPD were in Israel for one of these trainings on October 7, and New York City Mayor Eric Adams has traveled there as well and vocally supports strengthening the lethal sharing of police tactics with Israel. In U.S. contexts, this of course has resulted in very direct escalations of certain forms of police violence primarily against Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color—in just one example, leading officers in the St. Louis Police Department in Ferguson were trained by Israeli forces and have been targeted for boycotts against the “deadly exchange” since 2018.

Could you speak about the role that police and prisons play in the apartheid system, and perhaps your thoughts on the need for or role of international movements against policing and prisons?

PACBI’s long-standing analysis, as well as the current student uprising, offer us

particular insights about the entanglements of universities with policing apparatuses and prisons. In calling for a boycott of the Israeli academy, PACBI has long called attention to the violence that is constitutive of the university as an institution. And in demanding divestment and academic boycott in response to the Palestinian call, students across U.S. universities have been themselves subjected to this very violence.

Incarceration has always been a central tool of Israeli military governance and a mechanism to subdue Palestinian resistance to occupation and apartheid. Because of the crucial role students have played in the Palestinian liberation movement, incarceration has particularly targeted student organizers across Palestinian university campuses. Since 1967, Israel has declared 411 Palestinian student groups and associations unlawful. Dozens of organizers in the student councils and these associations are abducted every year by the Israeli military from their campuses by day, or from their homes in the middle of the night. These students are often held in administrative detention, by which Palestinians can be indefinitely incarcerated in Israeli military prisons without charge or trial, based on undisclosed evidence. Israel subjects the majority of Palestinian students to torture and ill-treatment during their detention, including beatings, stress positions for prolonged periods of time, and threats of long detainment that would derail their academic studies.

Israel has in fact criminalized Palestinian education itself. Since their founding, Palestinian university campuses have been obstructed, raided, and bombarded by Israel. This has been conceptualized by Karma Nabulsi as “scholasticide,” Israel’s intentional destruction of Palestinian centers of education (Ahmad & Vulliamy, 2009). Israel has always escalated its repression of Palestinian universities in tandem with Palestinian popular uprisings. When the First Intifada erupted in 1987, Israel immediately targeted universities, labeling them sites of rebellion. Between 1988 and 1992, the Israeli military ordered the closure of Birzeit University, along with all Palestinian institutions of higher education. Palestinian faculty and students were forced to take their universities underground and continue their collective study, which Israel called “cells of illegal education” and were continually surveilled and raided. As its former president Gabi Baramki has shown, Birzeit University and all Palestinian institutions of higher education have become sites of continued struggle. The Israeli government has waged persistent campaigns to curtail Palestinian education and repress resistance to its military rule, while Palestinian students

and faculty have repeatedly defied Israeli military orders and continue to insist on their inalienable rights to education and to academic freedom (Baramki, 2009).

So we see how the university of the colonized harbors tremendous liberatory potential, and because of this, it becomes a site of brutal repression by the policing apparatuses of the colonizer. And then the other side of this entanglement is how the university of the colonizer serves as a pillar of colonial governance. With its call for the academic boycott, PACBI's analysis illuminates the imbrication not only of the Israeli university but also of the U.S. university with colonial violence. And with the student uprising since October of 2023, the central role of the U.S. university in sustaining U.S. imperial violence has fully revealed itself.

There has been important thinking and organizing around this nexus of the carceral state, the U.S. university, and Palestine for many years now. I was privileged to be a member of the team that researched and wrote the report to anchor Jewish Voice for Peace's Deadly Exchange campaign (Researching the American-Israeli Alliance, 2018). In the course of that work, we discovered how tactics and technologies of repression used by Israel to sustain its apartheid regime circulate to police departments across the U.S. and inform their repression of social movements, including student organizing. In some cases, even U.S. campus security forces join delegations to Israel and participate in these trainings. In student campaigns to end this "deadly exchange," organizers have interrupted the carceral circuit that connects the Occupied Palestinian Territory and the U.S. university campus.

As coalitions across social movements for decolonization, demilitarization, and abolition across the U.S. have shown, our struggle is against diverse manifestations of a single system of violence. This is the project of the U.S. settler empire and its outposts, such as Israel, sustained by diverse institutions—from the prison, through the police department, to the university. Including the university in this list is crucial. That universities are themselves embedded in the very carceral apparatuses that curtail the right to education and academic freedom is a key insight that PACBI has offered our movements, and is now being reflected in the political education, community agreements, and resolutions articulated across student encampments.

This is a very important contradiction to raise about the role of

universities in movements. This conversation is happening via a university-run journal, and we are committed educators who daily navigate the extraordinary contradictions within higher education. Universities are just one site where intellectual work happens and which can support political development, and, certainly, they are not always the best site for this, but they are infrastructure and social gathering places that provide important space for the work of sharing and developing different kinds of knowledge (whether sanctioned or unsanctioned). This contradiction is also reflected in the demands of current student protests, which as of an image I just saw from the McMurdo Station in Antarctica are now happening on all seven continents, insisting on reclaiming the principles and values of what universities claim to be, and maybe can be, as places for collective learning and change.

Broadening out a bit, could you share your thoughts about the liberatory potential of education and access to education in this historic moment? Where do you see, if any, the radical political potential of higher education institutions?

I have spent the last several months participating in conversations and organizing meetings with students and faculty across campuses in North America and Europe. And in this context, I have had the tremendous privilege of visiting encampments and witnessing how they are already transforming the university.

Students are putting to use the very skills they honed at the university, and which the university purports to celebrate—critical thinking, research, and writing—and using it against the injustices of the institution. They are turning the critical gaze inward, exploring their university archives to examine histories of student mobilizing on their campus, filing FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] requests and unearthing their university investment portfolios and international academic collaborations, and scrutinizing their university charters and policies to hold the institutions accountable to their own governing documents. This is a striking example of how students can subvert higher education and transform it into the infrastructure of liberation movements.

The encampments are the material embodiment of the liberatory potential of education, what Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2022)

have conceptualized as “rehearsals for living.” Students are organizing collective forms of care, including food and shelter, interrupting the alienation of the corporate university. They are designing new formations for collective decision-making and horizontal study, challenging undemocratic university governance and traditional institutional hierarchies. They are building libraries from books excluded from their current institutional collections, and designing new syllabi and political education programming that include Palestinian scholarship, writing, and critique that has been omitted from their curricula. And most crucially, students are interrupting the ways the university reproduces itself through its violence, by refusing to allow business as usual and rejecting the university which they have inherited. In putting their studies, access to dorms and meal plans, and diplomas on the line, and in their willingness to subject their own bodies to police violence and incarceration, they are ushering in the new university. Through their organizing, students are leading us not only in imagining what the university can and must be but in already making it so.

I keep returning to the chants we heard in protests of solidarity with Palestine on the streets of Cairo months ago, which have since been echoed across the world: “We are not liberating Palestine; Palestine is liberating us.” This is an articulation of a core truth we are all coming to grasp, which is being illuminated particularly clearly across student encampments. Not only are students in Western universities committing themselves to the struggle for Palestinian liberation, but it is, in fact, only through committing to this struggle, that students can set themselves free.

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