Scholars at Risk Ireland

Statement on threats to members of academic communities arising out of the ongoing conflict in Israel/Palestine

The ongoing conflict has led to serious threats to scholars, students and other members of academic communities and to academic freedom, in Gaza, Israel/Palestine and further afield. It has also led to the damage and destruction of academic infrastructure.

On 7 October 2023, Hamas launched an indiscriminate and brutal attack on Israel, killing approximately 1400 people and taking more than 200 hostage. Following this attack, Israel has imposed a complete siege on Gaza and carried out an incessant bombardment, killing more than 10,000 people, including more than 4400 children. A UN Commission of Inquiry states that 'all parties to the conflict in Israel and Gaza have shown reckless disregard for civilian life and must comply with international law to prevent atrocities from continuing' and nine United Nations Special Rapporteurs have warned there is a risk of genocide in Gaza.

The conflict is threatening a humanitarian catastrophe. The United Nations General Assembly has expressed 'grave concern at the catastrophic humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip' and called for a ceasefire.

Academic freedom and the right to education are among the many casualties of this catastrophe. This has included **attacks on higher educational facilities, students and staff**. University students were among those killed in the Hamas attack on 7 October (here and here). Israel's bombardment of Gaza has included attacks on educational facilities. ReliefWeb, a service provided by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, reports that more than 625,000 students and 22,564 teachers in the Gaza strip have had no access to education for 25 days (as of 31 October 2023). Education International quotes United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNWRA) reports that at least 88 educational institutions have been directly targeted. The Israeli Defence Forces have attacked higher education institutions in Gaza including the Islamic University of Gaza and Al-Azhar University, alleging Hamas has put these to military use. The Times Higher Education cites reports that more than four hundred students and staff have been killed and that 11 higher education facilities have been partially or completely damaged by the Israeli Defence Forces. The conflict has made education impossible in Gaza and much more difficult on the West Bank. The nature of legislation prior to this immediate period has raised concerns about threats to students' academic freedom posed by both Israel and the Palestinian authority. These attacks on higher education institutions in Gaza are in the context of 'decades of occupation, war and blockade'.

We have also seen **interferences with free expression and academic freedom**. Examples include:
- Dozens of Palestinian students have been expelled without due process from universities or colleges in Israel for allegedly showing support for terrorism.
- A UK Secretary of State writing to the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) mischaracterising posts by named academics and expressing a strong preference for the closure of an advisory group for equality, diversity and

inclusion. In response, UKRI suspended the activities of the advisory group. An open letter has been drafted in response by academics, with concerns raised by the University College Union.

- Reports of UK ministers monitoring the social media posts of academics.
- A minister in the Ontario legislature named an academic during a parliamentary debate and accused them of excusing rape, murder and hostage-taking.
- In the USA some Republican Party politicians have called for deporting international students who express support for Palestinian causes or criticise Israel.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has warned that there is also a **dramatic increase in hatred**, including antisemitism, Islamophobia and other forms of hate-speech. The London Metropolitan Police have reported significant increases in hate crime, including antisemitic and Islamophobic offences, since the start of October 2023. This trend has also manifested itself in attacks on members of academic communities, including:

- In Israel, rioters shouting 'Death to Arabs' threatened Arab students at a college dormitory. Human rights group Adalah and the Arab Student Union have demanded an investigation into this assault.
- The BBC has reported on a rise in antisemitism and Islamophobia on university campuses.
- In the USA, the Biden administration has warned of a rise in antisemitism and Islamophobia on campuses; specific instances include a hate crime investigation into the hit-and-run attack on an Arab Muslim student at Stanford and social media threats of antisemitic violence against students.

We join in the condemnation of violent conflict raised by many of our colleagues on the island of Ireland. In addition to civic action, some have called for all universities to sever partnerships or affiliations with Israeli institutions, and for academic citizens to join collectives such as Academics for Palestine.

As SAR-Ireland:

We support the calls for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

We call on all parties to the conflict to respect international law.

We call on all parties to the conflict to respect the civilian character of educational institutions and not to target them.

We call on all academic institutions and higher education bodies to consider how they can support scholars at risk from Palestine.

We call on all academic institutions and higher education bodies to commit to supporting the rebuilding of higher education in Palestine.

We call on all academic institutions and higher education bodies to defend and protect academic freedom.

We call on all academic institutions and higher education bodies to respect, protect and fulfil human rights, including the rights of free expression, education, equality and non-discrimination, and to protect members of academic communities from all forms of hate speech and hate crimes.

Scholars at Risk Ireland.
Scholars at Risk (SAR) is an international network of higher education institutions dedicated to protecting threatened scholars, preventing attacks on higher education communities and promoting academic freedom worldwide.

Scholars at Risk-Ireland is the Irish section of SAR. The SAR-Ireland committee has representatives from universities on the island of Ireland. The views here are those of the SAR-Ireland committee. For queries contact the chair of the committee for academic year 2023/2024, Prof Rory O'Connell (Ulster University).