

Comments Prepared for the Pitzer Board of Trustees

February 16, 2018

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President Oliver and valued Trustees, thank you for this invitation to speak with you.

Let me say first that though the faculty has voted in support of the motion I introduced last fall, I have not vetted these comments with my faculty colleagues, and the thoughts I share with you today are my own.

Let me add that I speak to you with confidence that you, as Trustees, will set aside the controversy that surrounds the proposal to suspend our exchange program with the University of Haifa, and judge it in a calm, dispassionate manner.

For when you read the text of the motion, you will find that it is at once clear and measured.

This proposal seeks to suspend this exchange program for two reasons. First, because access to it, for Pitzer's students, exposes them to discrimination on the basis of ancestry and legitimate political speech—specifically speech in favor of the nonviolent pursuit of social justice. And in addition, the proposal looks outward beyond our Pitzer community and lends crucial support for academic freedom for Palestinian universities.

In regard to the first point—suspending a program because entry to it exposes our students to unjust discrimination—Pitzer has been there before and done the right thing. In 1990, we at Pitzer ended all connections with ROTC because its rules barred our lesbian and gay students. In calling now for the suspension of the Haifa program, your faculty have said, *we cannot say we are opposed to discrimination against our students on the basis of sexuality, and then turn around and say we are ok with discrimination based on Arab and Palestinian ancestry, or based on political speech in support of the human rights of Palestinians.*

In opposition to this proposal, you will be told that despite the serious issues with entry to Israel, and despite the Israeli state's blocking of academic exchanges with Palestinian universities, we should retain our existing exchange with Haifa because universities in Israel, and the University of Haifa in particular, are working within Israeli society, within the system, to promote tolerance and inclusion of Palestinians in Israel. Suspending our program is wrong, on this view, because doing so would undermine Israeli universities and the good work they do to make Israel a more tolerant and democratic society.

Yet however true it may have been in an earlier era that Israeli universities were important sites of progressive resistance to the State's illiberal oppression of Palestinians, this is hardly the case

in 2019. Indeed, neither in this decade, nor even in this century, is there convincing evidence for this view of Israeli universities.

A key case in point: this past October, US citizen Lara Alqasem was held in detention for over two weeks by the Israeli state, as she tried to pursue an MA program at Hebrew University, on the basis of the amended Entry to Israel Law of 2017, which makes legitimate political speech a basis for barring entry to Israel.

At that moment, the University of Haifa, like every Israeli university, had the opportunity to denounce the 2017 law as incompatible with ideals of academic freedom and free expression foundational to its mission. The University of Haifa instead chose silence. Hebrew University alone offered a legal brief to support Ms. Alqasem's entry, but its brief argued for her entry on the timid grounds that, before arriving in Israel, she had already been issued a valid visa by the consulate in Miami.ⁱ (In ordering her release from detention and allowing her entry, the Israeli supreme court similarly ruled on narrow, albeit different, grounds—rather than the Court overturning the Law or even parts of it.ⁱⁱ)

So too, when some two years ago, Israel ended the partial loop-hole that had permitted some foreign faculty and students to do academic semester and year-long exchanges at Palestinian universities not a single Israeli University acted as an ally, to resist this further, intensified assault on the academic freedom of Palestinian universities.ⁱⁱⁱ

Put simply, rather than working within Israeli society to end unequal treatment of Palestinians and Palestinian universities, Israeli universities are for these reasons—and others still—complicit institutions.

These are the realities of now, about which you must inform yourselves, before you judge the proposal to suspend our exchange program with Haifa. The Israel of 2019 is not the Israel you thought you knew; it is not the Israel of your childhood. For all of this century, Israel has steadily eroded and perverted the once democratic aspects of its Basic Laws. The apex to date has been the new nation-state Law, passed last July—which led the leading Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*, to write an editorial naming Benjamin Netanyahu as “the apartheid prime minister.”^{iv}

In opposition to the proposal to suspend our Haifa exchange, you will be told that suspending this program will end our engagement in this region. Seriously? This Haifa exchange has enrolled roughly one Pitzer student per year, and on numbers alone then, it can hardly be characterized as providing significant engagement with Israel and Palestine. In addition, if you examine the Haifa program, you will find that it does not provide any real engagement with Palestinian lives and perspectives, nor could the program plausibly be a vehicle to provide such

engagement, given (a) the realities for Palestinian students at Haifa and (b) the fact of the university's chosen alienation from Palestinian universities and Palestinian civil society groups.

Moreover, as with almost all parts of the world, the bulk of Pitzer's engagement with the region is not through study abroad programs, but—as it should be—through classroom teaching here at Pitzer, grounded in the best scholarship. Ending our one-person-per-year exchange with Haifa will neither end, nor by any fair measure even diminish, our engagement in the region: our great courses on Palestine and Israel here in Claremont will remain in our curriculum, and the suspension has real promise of opening up for our students unprecedented opportunities for engagement with social justice organizations within Israel and Occupied Palestine alike.

In opposition to this proposal, you will hear also that adopting it will alienate Jewish-American high school seniors who would otherwise apply to Pitzer. Here too, we should not live in the past. In 2019, large—and increasing—numbers of young Jewish Americans are saying: not in our Jewish name, we as Jews oppose the Occupation, we as Jews oppose Israel's oppression of Palestinians. And these social justice young people—who are exactly the sorts of students that have made Pitzer "Pitzer"—will only find Pitzer more attractive for standing steadfast with our core values of social justice, even when it is controversial, even when these are inconvenient truths.^v

In this regard, let me add this. For some half dozen or more years, I have been one of two faculty advisors for Claremont Students for Justice for Palestinians. And I can tell you that from that group's founding until now, no student organization in Claremont has more consistently and vigorously spoken out against Antisemitism than SJP; and too, I can tell you that in recent years, Claremont SJP has been a vibrant intersectional coalition involving many Palestinian-American and Arab-American students *and* many Jewish student allies—as well as other students.

This is now. This is the future. We should embrace it.

In opposition to this motion, you have been told that adopting it will provide but "paltry" support for Palestinians suffering under Israeli state oppression. But this is not a view you will hear from many if any Palestinians—as is clear from the letter we have received from the Palestinian Federation of Unions of University Professors and Employees.^{vi}

Indeed, from early in this century, Palestinian civil society groups have spoken with great unity in asking social justice allies around the world to support their struggle for freedom and justice through non-violent measures of the sort found in the proposal to suspend our exchange with Haifa. Palestinians have asked for such support, particularly from those of us in the United States, because they understand that Israeli state apartheid will continue as long as the Israeli

public and the Israeli state believe they have unconditional support from the United States, in money and weapons^{vii}, regardless of how much suffering the Occupation inflicts on Palestinians, and regardless of how many hundreds of thousands of illegal settlers the Israeli state permits and encourages to stream into the West Bank.^{viii}

When, instead, faith-based groups, colleges, and universities, signal that US support for the oppressive status quo is waning, then and only then will the Israeli state do what it has not done with any seriousness in this century—which is to come to the negotiating table and join the pursuit of a just peace for all our sisters and brothers, in both Palestine and Israel.

And only then, let me add, will Israel become a safe haven for Jews; the status quo is not a “positive peace,” nor is it sustainable.^{ix}

President Oliver and valued Trustees, I have spoken to you as a proud Jewish American who last summer travelled throughout the West Bank engaging with students, scholars, social justice activists, and random persons I met in cafes, shops, and refugee camps; listening to this array of Palestinians, I was inspired and humbled by the depth and breadth of the Palestinian commitment to peace and co-existence based—I heard again and again and again—on nothing more radical than equality.

President Oliver and valued Trustees, I have spoken to you with confidence that you will set aside the sound and fury that surrounds this motion, and examine it calmly, recognizing it for what it is—a measured act in opposition to discrimination and in support of academic freedom.

And I have spoken to you knowing how important it is that you, our Trustees, understand the proposal to suspend this exchange program, but also with confidence that you, our Trustees, will understand the grievous damage it would inflict on the College if the democratic will of College Council were to be set aside by nullification.

Thank you for your attention, and thank you, each of you, for all the good work you have done for the College we all serve and love. Working together, and embracing the indivisibility of justice, we will make Pitzer College stronger and better still.

Endnotes

ⁱ “Israel Left Hebrew University No Choice but to Oppose Lara Alqasem’s Deportation in Court,” *Haaretz*, 12 Oct. 2018. Along with identifying the narrow grounds on which Hebrew University supported Ms. Alqasem’s release from detention, the same article in *Haaretz* reported that the heads of other universities had sent a confidential letter to the cabinet minister responsible for Alqasem’s detention, adding plaintively but unrealistically: “One can only hope the decision not to publish the letter or speak out on this issue isn’t due to self-censorship.”

ⁱⁱ Katherine Franke, “The Pro-Israel Push to Purge US Campus Critics,” *New York Review: NYR Daily*, 12 December 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ Even prior to two years ago, the Israeli state had not been granting visas for academic exchanges with Palestinian universities (while granting them to Israeli universities). The expedient, or loop-hole, that previously provided a partial work-around to this unequal treatment of Palestinian universities was that foreign students and faculty could obtain a 90-day tourist visa and then after 90 days in Palestine leave for, say, a weekend in Amman, and then obtain a second 90-day tourist visa from the Israeli state, to be able to return to complete a semester or year-long academic program. But starting around two years ago, these renewals have systematically been denied. This resulted, for instance, in foreign students and faculty being forced to abandon in midstream, courses at Palestinian universities. It also resulted in the suspension of the Bard program at Al-Qud University, through which Pitzer had arranged to send our students to study in Palestine—before even a single Pitzer student could participate.

^{iv} “*Haaretz* Editorial: The Apartheid Prime Minister,” *Haaretz*, 30 July 2018. On Israel’s descent on an illiberal path for many years prior to the nation-state law, see Peter Beinart, *The Crisis in Zionism* (2012).

^v The generational shift in views on Palestine and Israel among Jewish Americans, starting earlier in this century, was notably discussed in Peter Beinart, “The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment,” *The New York Review of Books*, 10 June 2010

^{vi} “Open Letter to Pitzer College Council from the Palestinian Federation of Unions of University Professors and Employees,” 4 February 2019.

^{vii} David Shulman, “Israel’s Irrational Rationality,” *New York Review of Books*, 22 June 2017.

^{viii} On the increase in and far-reaching consequences of the vast numbers of illegal settlers and settlements that Israel has permitted and encouraged in the West Bank, see Adam Antous, “The Maps of Israeli Settlements that Shocked Barack Obama,” *The New Yorker*, 9 July 2018.

^{ix} For the phrase, “a positive peace,” see the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King’s, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” 16 April 1963.