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Statement on educide - English translation

Dear members of the Board of Directors of the Flemish Interuniversity Council ([VLIR](#)),

On Wednesday January 17th, the Israeli army blew up [Al-Israa University](#) in southern Gaza City. The video of the blast caused international outrage. The army destroyed not only the campus, but also an attached [national museum](#) that had housed more than 3,000 artifacts, now presumed [stolen](#) by the Israeli army. Yet, the university itself posed no immediate threat. Up to that point in Israel's onslaught on Gaza, the university's buildings had reportedly served mainly as [a base for the Israeli army's](#) own operations.

This devastating attack is, of course, not an isolated event. In December last year, [the Faculty of Medicine](#) of the Islamic University was blown up by the Israeli army in a similar and [skilfully planned manner](#). Earlier, this same university, Gaza's oldest, had been the target of air strikes. A month earlier, [Al Quds Open University](#) was also used as an Israeli army base and then [blown up afterwards](#).

All university campuses in the Gaza Strip are now either permanently damaged or even completely destroyed. UNICEF spokesman [Jonathan Crick](#) stated that, "there is absolutely no form of education or schooling in the Gaza Strip at the moment," and that Gaza's more than 600,000 students and pupils, including 90,000 university students, can no longer attend school. Nevertheless, the right to education is embedded in international human rights and humanitarian law, even in times of war and armed conflict. According to [the Geneva Convention](#) on the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (Article 50), children should be able to attend school and occupying powers must cooperate with national and local authorities to "facilitate the proper functioning of [all institutions dedicated to the care and education of children](#)".

In the [South African Application](#) before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), an 84-page dossier, we read that in addition to targeting all universities in Gaza, Israel has also murdered several Palestinian intellectuals and fellow academics, [including](#), Sufian Tayeh, the director of the Islamic University, and the well-known poet and writer, Professor Refaat Alareer, from the same university. Irish lawyer Blinne Ní Ghrálaigh, one of the representatives of the South African government at the hearing in The Hague, confirmed in her statement before the Court that hundreds of academics and educators have since been murdered, [including at least 94 university lecturers](#). In addition to an unprecedented number of [journalists killed](#), some [experts](#) say the Israeli army also appears to be deliberately [targeting prominent intellectuals](#) in Gaza.

It is not only higher education that has fallen victim to Israel's ruthless military campaign, but also Gaza's education system as a whole and the wider knowledge sector in general. The Israeli

army has destroyed Gaza's main libraries, along with many bookstores, publishing houses and hundreds of other knowledge institutions. On December 29th, [the UN](#) reported that 352 schools in Gaza had been damaged, more than 70% of Gaza's educational infrastructure.

These recent attacks on the education system in Gaza fit within [a much broader history](#) of systematic attacks and institutional discrimination against [the Palestinian education system](#) under Israel's occupation and [apartheid](#). Universities have also repeatedly been bombed, raided and attacked in previous Israeli military campaigns across the occupied Palestinian territory. But the violence against education also goes far beyond direct military attacks. Gaza's universities and their staff and students have been [cut off from the rest of the worldwide university community](#) by the [16-yearlong Israeli blockade](#). The Israeli occupation also systematically [prevents](#) international colleagues from accessing Palestinian universities, both in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The entire Israeli occupation infrastructure of [checkpoints](#), the so-called "security fence," as well as repeated arbitrary arrests of students and [colleagues](#), [military raids](#) on campuses, etc., have all systematically undermined Palestinian education for decades, both in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. According to [The Right to Education Campaign](#) by our colleagues at Birzeit University, this "not only violates the human rights of individuals, it is an attack on the development of Palestinian society as a whole."

Additionally, in Israel itself, the right to education for Palestinian students and teachers is being systematically undermined and thwarted. Israel discriminates against Palestinian students on a structural basis, including via certain social and economic benefits that are [exclusively linked to army service](#). [Language discrimination](#) is also a major barrier for Palestinian-Israeli students. In other words, [discrimination](#) has been going on [for much longer](#), but since October 7th, [repression and censorship](#) against Palestinian students and teachers have only increased. A recent report [by Palestinian NGO Adalah](#) documented systematic disciplinary measures, suspensions, interrogations, intimidations and [even arrests](#) of [Palestinian students](#) on Israeli campuses in the wake of the October 7th attacks. In addition, the few lecturers at Israeli institutions who are critical of the occupation, be they Palestinian or Israeli, are often persecuted for their views. Examples include Prof Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Prof Nurit-Peled Elhanan and Dr Uri Horesh – as was also denounced by the American Middle East Studies Association (MESA) in [an open letter](#) to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and relevant ministers within his government.

This systematic undermining and destruction of the right to education brings to mind similar crimes 20 years ago. After years of sanctions against Iraq and the subsequent US invasion in the beginning of the 21st century, the Iraqi education system was also nearly completely destroyed. In the context of that illegal invasion, [academics from Ghent University and KULeuven](#), together with their Iraqi colleagues, described these crimes as a form of '[educide](#)' (a portmanteau of 'education' and 'genocide').

That term is also applicable today to Gaza and the broader situation of the Palestinian education system. Testimonies from Gaza show that it is not only the physical infrastructure of the education system that has been destroyed. Thousands of students no longer have access to education. Hundreds of our colleagues there no longer have jobs. Valuable [archives](#) and years

of research by many Palestinian scholars have also been permanently lost. The current military campaign is therefore also a direct attack on the intellectual work, collective memory and history of the Palestinian people. These war crimes and acts of "ethnic cleansing" were also listed and corroborated by [MESA](#) on Thursday, January 26th, in a new open letter addressed to the Israeli Prime Minister and his government.

By deliberately targeting and destroying educational institutions and intellectuals, Israel is knowingly attacking the future of Palestine. Educide is a term that describes using the disastrous destruction of entire educational systems as a weapon of war. Indeed, Palestinians themselves have long pointed out the many different forms of destruction visited upon their living conditions (e.g. [ecocide](#), [urbicide](#), [spatiocide](#), [sociocide](#),....). These are all forms that are closely linked to educide and that speak to the Palestinian conditions at the center of the South African court case against the State of Israel in the Hague.

Many of our international colleagues explicitly condemned the recent destruction of Al-Israa University. We join them in their outrage and condemnation. Balakrishnan Rajagopal, the [UN Special Rapporteur](#) on the right to adequate housing, also explicitly referred to the blowing up of the university as a form of 'educide'. We, therefore, urge the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) and the various boards of our Flemish universities to speak out explicitly against these crimes of the Israeli government, crimes that are also systematically [facilitated and supported](#) by [Israeli universities](#). They are crimes explicitly aimed at destroying the mission, vision and moral values we stand for and defend as an academic community.

We are convinced that our institutions have a leading role to play. We also believe that the VLIR and the Flemish universities can make a substantial difference with concrete actions in the context of such crimes. We therefore urge that our institutions assume their responsibilities, as they have done in the recent past with regard to Iran and Russia. We therefore ask:

- 1) **That VLIR clearly and explicitly condemns the deliberate destruction of Palestinian educational institutions and the ongoing discrimination against Palestinian students and scholars.** Through [VLIR-UOS](#), our universities actively engage in development cooperation and the strengthening and building of academic environments in other parts of the world. As such, VLIR [aims](#) to "engage in innovative responses to global and local challenges." A logical consequence of this stated international commitment is therefore that, as a university community, we cannot simply look away from the targeted destruction of knowledge institutions elsewhere. As Flemish universities, we ourselves have direct institutional partnerships with Palestinian universities, such as [Birzeit University](#). They are also targeted (e.g. the Israeli army invaded Birzeit University's campus as recently as September 2023 - i.e. before the October 7th attack - and arrested several students).
- 2) **Mobilizing financial resources for the reception and protection of Palestinian students and academics currently at risk.** For example, the VLIR could explore the possibility of an additional financial effort under the [international Scholars at Risk](#) (SAR) programme. In autumn 2021, Flanders' five universities decided to significantly increase their commitment within the SAR programme and set up the SAR Flanders department.

The importance our universities attach to human rights was cited as an explicit reason for this increased commitment. VLIR now has a unique opportunity to show that it holds this commitment very dear. The VLIR should also urge the Flemish government to release additional funds for the SAR programme, as it has done in the past.

- 3) **A suspension, with immediate effect, of all academic cooperation with Israeli knowledge institutions and other public and private partners as long as the destruction of the Palestinian education system and the systematic discrimination and attack on Palestinian academics and students continues.** In 2018, the VLIR [unanimously decided](#) to suspend cooperation with Iranian institutions as long as the fundamental human rights of colleague Ahmadreza Djalali, on death row in Iran and affiliated to the VUB, were not guaranteed. The United Nations has already repeatedly stressed that [no one and nowhere](#) is safe in Gaza. Therefore, the lives of our Palestinian colleagues are in great danger. This includes a colleague affiliated to the Department of Conflict and Development Studies (UGent), who is currently living in a tent in southern Gaza after his original neighborhood in Gaza City was destroyed by the Israeli army. This suspension would also be in line with the VLIR decision [to stop all institutional cooperation with Russian universities](#) that supported the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In November 2023, [UGent's Human Rights Commission](#) already decided to stop (future) cooperation with universities that are found to be in "violations of human rights and international humanitarian law" and/or complicit in the military campaign in Gaza. In addition, the UA Faculty of Law also decided to suspend its cooperation agreement with [Bar-Ilan University](#). With the current evidence around 'educide', it seems obvious to us that the individual efforts at the UGent and UA should be further expanded and brought to the level of the VLIR.
- 4) **The establishment of an Inter-University Working Group on the issue of 'educide'** to conduct a more thorough investigation into the extent, and more detailed empirical basis, of the current destruction of the education system in Palestine. This committee should also examine the extent to which the current 'educide' fits within or is linked to a more historical continuity of 'educide' under the occupation. The publication of the findings of this working group may also benefit the debate on educide among our European partners. Likewise, it could inform our democratic representatives at the Belgian and [European levels](#) as they seek to raise the issue of educide at their respective policy levels.

In an [opinion piece](#), VUB rector and current president of the VLIR, Jan Danckaert, stressed that universities should not and cannot be neutral: "A university is de facto dedicated to the public good, to democracy and to human rights". Universities, according to the VUB rector, should above all be objective, look at the facts and take seriously the reports and findings of international institutions such as the European Union and the United Nations. It is, therefore, in light of the facts that an institution like the UN, along with many other knowledge institutions and human rights organizations, has been documenting for months, that we, as signatories of this letter, urge the VLIR to act according to its own principles and in line with its previous commitments.

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