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From Police Violence to (Self) Censorship: Mapping the Continuum of Criminalization of Student-Led Palestine Solidarity Activism in the Netherlands

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Abstract: This article explores the criminalization of student-led solidarity activism in the Netherlands. Self-identified as the "student intifada" this activism has taken place in university campuses around the world including in the Netherlands and has faced varying levels of criminalization. Through applying a criminalization lens to the student intifada in the Netherlands the article asks questions such as: Through what processes are political ideologies, movements, and acts of resistance, such as BDS campaigns, student-led protests, and broader forms of solidarity, constructed as criminal by political, legal, and institutional actors? What mechanisms, discourses, and tactics are mobilized to suppress these forms of activism, and why? Why is solidarity with Palestinians so often met with accusations of terrorism, antisemitism, or threats to public order and security? And what are the broader implications of this repression, not only for freedom of expression, assembly, and association, but also for the future of political solidarity and resistance itself? In answering these questions, the article employs a "criminalization continuum" lens in documenting the various forms criminalization of solidarity with Palestine has taken in the Netherlands, from arrests and police violence to surveillance, censorship, and stigmatization. Such measures not only mirror the broader global crackdown on political dissent more generally, and on Palestine solidarity activism in particular, but also reflect and reinforce the criminalization of Palestinian resistance itself. We argue that such tactics undermine the democratic principles that universities claim to uphold and perpetuate a culture of intimidation, fear and apathy that endangers critical engagement and solidarity, and call for an urgent and critical evaluation of how universities, governments, and societies at large respond to pro-Palestinian activism, arguing that the criminalization of the student intifada is a litmus test for academic freedom, democracy, and justice.

Introduction

Over the past two years, student protests have taken place across the world calling for an end to the ongoing genocide in Gaza, including an end to apartheid, colonization and the occupation of Palestinian territories. While student activism in solidarity with Palestine is anything but new (Solomon & Palmieri, 2011; Davis, 2016; Ferguson, 2017; Maira, 2018), it has been the genocide in Gaza streamed in real time on news channels and social media and with no end in sight, that has left students around the world angry (Shahid, 2024). As Abdel Fattah (2024) has written, "[e]ach day has been a horrifying chronicle of industrialized genocide, domicide, scholasticide, infanticide, femicide, medicide, and ecocide." This anger is being directed at universities, demanding they divest from collaborations with weapons manufacturers, disclose all ties to Israeli higher education institutions, and boycott them (Wind, 2024). These demands are situated in a decades long Palestinian resistance, more particularly the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), which in 2004 called for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions, a non-violent appeal aiming to isolate Israeli institutions complicit in state violence and apartheid and to pressure Israel to comply with international law[1]. This student-led Palestine solidarity movement, self-identified as the "student intifada", has taken place in university campuses around the world. From North America to Europe, from Australia to South Africa, students have transformed their campuses into sites of resistance: erecting encampments, occupying buildings and staging protests (Luppu, 2024; Marques, 2024; Marshi, 2024; The People of Hind's Hall, 2024).

As inspiring as the student-led Palestine solidarity movement has been, as striking has been its repression. Across the world, the movement has been met with punitive tactics of censorship, repression, stigmatization, delegitimization, surveillance and criminalization (Guatri, 2024; Hearst, 2024; CIVICUS Monitor, 2024; Tatour, 2024; Sen, 2024; Hassan & Hellyer, 2024; Fúnez-Flores, 2024a; Bayeh & Riemer, 2024; Achenbach, 2024; Deeb & Winegar, 2024; Chrisafis, 2024; Younes & Al-Taher, 2024; Casey, 2024). Universities, instead of sanctuaries of critical thought, have become sites of suppression, where administrators actively curtail expressions of solidarity with Palestine. This repression has frequently taken the form of brutal police crackdowns, arrests, and institutional retaliation. Beyond direct repression, the movement has also been censored, stigmatized, delegitimized, vilified and as argued in this article, criminalized. Various actors, including a hostile media, politicians, and Zionist lobby groups, have all worked in concert and contributed to this. The intentions and tactics of student organizers have often become objects of obsession for many commentators, endlessly dissected and distorted. Media, higher education institutions, municipalities and governments have framed student-led Palestine solidarity activism as violent, antisemitic and disorderly, frames used to justify its repression. It has been also quite striking to observe how the criminalization of student-led Palestine solidarity activism echoes, mirrors, reinforces and complements Israel's criminalization of Palestinians and their resistance (Tatour & Tatour, 2023). The repression of the movement has also shed light on the global proliferation and export of Israeli systems of control, including surveillance technologies and policing tactics, ranging from militarized campus security and surveillance drones to protest suppression strategies like mass arrests, blacklists, and legal intimidation (Loewenstein, 2023). A particularly dangerous trend is the growing use of antisemitism accusations to silence Palestine solidarity. Under the guise of combatting antisemitism, governments and institutions have began cutting funding to universities, conflating antisemitism with legitimate expressions of Palestine solidarity and principled political dissent[2].

This article focuses on the criminalization of the student-led Palestine solidarity activism in the Netherlands, which we deem to be an interesting case for multiple reasons. First of all, the country has been legally accused of complicity in the genocide in Gaza on the basis that it provides Israel with key components for F-35 fighter aircraft, used in Israeli airstrikes to bomb Palestinians (The Rights Forum, 2023). At the same time, Dutch police and military forces maintain close partnerships with Israeli arms

1 See: https://bdsmovement.net/pacbi/pacbi-call

2 For example in March 2025, the Trump administration revoked $400 million in federal funding to Columbia University, citing its alleged failure to protect Jewish students (See: https://www.acenet.edu/News-Room/Pages/Funding-Cuts-Columbia-Dangerous-Precedent.aspx). A similar pattern is emerging in Australia, where a new report by the Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism recommends withholding funds from institutions deemed inadequate in addressing antisemitism, raising serious concerns about academic freedom and political expression (See: https://www.theage.com.au/politics/federal/landmark-antisemitism-report-demands-change-from-universities-media-20250710-p5mdve.html)

manufacturers, including Elbit Systems, BAE Systems[3] and Bagira Systems, as well as with the Israeli military and police apparatus itself (Indy Media, 2023). The Dutch government has also faced criticism for its failure to prevent citizens from joining the Israeli military during the war on Gaza (Middle East Monitor, 2024). In October 2024 The Dutch House of Representatives approved a resolution calling on the Dutch government to designate Samidoun Palestinian Prisoner Solidarity Network as a terrorist organization and ban its activities in the country, in an attempt to delegitimize and criminalize Palestinian resistance[4]. While the suppression of Palestinian solidarity activism in the Netherlands is nothing new (see for example European Legal Support Center, 2021), in May 2025, the country attracted international attention because of the excessive police violence used to repress student-led Palestine solidarity activism (Al Jazeera, 2024; Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 2024; Deutsch, 2024; AP News, 2024; Ngendakumana, 2024).

By focusing on the Netherlands as a case study, this article aims to shed light on how criminalization unfolds along a continuum through a spectrum of tactics that range from overt police violence and arrests to more insidious forms of repression, such as surveillance, stigmatization, silencing and (self) censorship. The research contributes to a growing body of work that raises concern about the increasing criminalization of social, political, and environmental dissent and activism, including of student activism and of the Palestinian solidarity movement (Power, 2012; Bessant & Grasso, 2018, 2019; González-Sánchez & Maroto-Calatayud, 2018; Watts, 2020; Vegh Weis, 2021; Pali, 2022; Selmini & Di Ronco, 2023; Visser & Pali, 2025; Malaj & Pali, 2024). Examining measures that extend beyond police violence and legal punishments and that are "noncriminal in form but punitive in nature" (Selmini & Di Ronco, 2023: 26) helps us shed light on the diverse ways in which Western liberal democracies like the Netherlands suppress activism and dissent while maintaining a democratic façade.

The article begins by clarifying what is meant by a "continuum of criminalization" lens. It then maps how this continuum operates in the context of student-led Palestine solidarity activism in the Netherlands. Next, we provide a brief reflection on the political and ideological forces that in our view drive this intensifying repression, and conclude with some reflections on what its possible implications might be.

A "Continuum of Criminalization" Lens

Criminalization, in its broadest sense, refers to the social, legal and political processes through which certain behaviors, actions, or groups are constructed as criminal, dangerous, illegal, or harmful to society and thus deemed in need of control, punishment, or sanction. The study of criminalization of activism and dissent in Western liberal democracies has largely operated within a narrow legalist framework, focusing primarily on state responses that fall within the explicit boundaries of criminal law. Among the different perspectives of understanding criminalization, we find particularly useful those that conceptualize it as a continuum. This approach captures both the formal dimension, where actions breach criminal law and may result in legal sanctions, and the informal, more diffuse mechanisms of repression. These include the regulation and punishment of behaviors that violate non-criminal rules or social norms, often carried out by a range of actors beyond the state (Selmini & Di Ronco, 2023). Scholars working within this broader framework have highlighted how dissenting voices and practices that threaten dominant political or social orders are subjected not only to overt legal control but also to subtle, and often hidden, forms of punishment, ranging from judicial prosecution to stigmatization, surveillance, institutional discipline, and public vilification (Lacey, 2009; Quilter & Hogg, 2018; McNamara et al., 2018; Vegh Weis, 2021; Selmini & Di Ronco, 2023). Adopting this expanded lens enables us to trace the less visible contours of repression, to make legible the ways in which liberal democracies, under the guise of legality and order, curtail dissent and discipline resistance beyond the courtroom or prison cell.

Applying a criminalization lens to Palestine solidarity activism invites us to address questions such as: Through what processes are political ideologies, movements, and acts of resistance, such as BDS campaigns, student-led protests, and broader forms of solidarity, constructed as criminal by political, legal, and institutional actors? What mechanisms, discourses, and tactics are mobilized to suppress these forms of activism, and why? Why is solidarity with Palestinians so often met with accusations of

3 In 2001, BAE Systems Rokar has been acquired by Elbit Systems (See: https://elbitsystems.com/pr-new/elbit-systems-acquires-bae-systems-rokar/)

4 See: https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/10/11/dutch-parliament-votes-to-designate-pflp-front-samidoun-as-a-terrorist-group/

terrorism, antisemitism, or threats to public order and security? And what are the broader implications of this repression, not only for freedom of expression, assembly, and association, but also for the future of political solidarity and resistance itself? While these questions are vast, this article narrows its scope to examine how criminalization materializes in the specific context of student-led Palestine solidarity activism in the Netherlands. Rather than attempting a comprehensive survey, we focus on mapping distinct modes of criminalization through a set of illustrative examples, each chosen to highlight a particular tactic or logic of repression. In doing so, we also offer a brief reflection on the deeper political and ideological forces that in our view drive this criminalization.

Criminalization of Student-Led Palestine Solidarity Activism

Police Violence

In the Netherlands, police violence against university students, staff and other protesting in solidarity with Palestine has become the most visible expressions of state repression. As mentioned previously, the country drew international attention especially during the May 2024 Palestine solidarity protests which took place at the University of Amsterdam (Al Jazeera, 2024; Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 2024; Deutsch, 2024; AP News, 2024; Ngendakumana, 2024). When students and staff set up a short-lived encampment on campus grounds, and in the protests that followed the aftermath of its forceful demolition, the response of the police was significantly disproportionate and brutal. Riot police, police dogs and even bulldozers were deployed to dismantle the barricades, beat and arrest the protesters (Loick & Talbot, 2025; UvA Scholars and Staff for Palestine, 2024a; VPRO, 2024). The scenes of violence were traumatic for the academic community and reminiscent of the bulldozers rolling over the rubble of Palestinian homes or of the sight of Israeli security forces beating up and brutalizing Palestinians.

The university's choice to call in the police to deal with the student protests was troubling and signaled deep failure. In opting for displays of force under the banner of "security", the administration cast aside its responsibility to safeguard academic freedom and open political expression in university campus. The crackdown failed to enable dialogue and address legitimate grievances of staff and students (Pallister-Wilkins & Pali, 2024; Loick & Talbot, 2025). It was not surprising therefore that the heavy-handed police interventions did what police interventions usually do in such contexts: amplified tensions, failed to ensure safety and even ruptured the social fabric of the university community. The violence left behind a visibly shaken, betrayed, and angry community (UvA Scholars and Staff for Palestine, 2024a, 2024b). As Dutch Scholars for Palestine (2024) wrote in their press release following the demolition of the encampment at the University of Amsterdam,

> "The decision to mobilize police to clear the camp with bulldozers and criminalize students and scholars constitutes a clear breach and breaking of trust between administration and the academic community they are obliged to protect."

At the same time, this violent suppression sent a chilling message: when it comes to the issue of Palestine, universities expect obedience, rather than critical engagement or expressions of solidarity (Pallister-Wilkins & Pali, 2024). Police violence has also occurred at other universities across the Netherlands, including Utrecht University[5], TU Delft[6], Radboud University[7], and the University of Groningen[8], among others. During more recent protests taking place at Radboud University in May 2025, several students were severely injured. One student was hospitalized due to a police dog bite that caused serious flesh wounds, while another needed urgent medical care, after police injured their kneecap.[9]

5 See: https://www.dutchnews.nl/2024/05/riot-police-end-utrecht-university-protest-erasmus-closes-doors/
6 See: https://nos.nl/artikel/2524627-politie-ontruimt-universiteitsgebouw-delft-acties-gaan-op-andere-manieren-door
7 See: https://nos.nl/artikel/2522156-mobiele-eenheid-beeindigt-demonstratie-in-gebouw-radboud-universiteit-nijmegen
8 See: https://legalnewsfeed.com/2024/06/19/tensions-rise-at-groningen-university-as-pro-palestine-protests-continue-after-police-clearance/
9 See: https://raffia-magazine.com/2025/05/12/i-dont-feel-safe-at-all-intimidation-surveillance-and-police-brutality-social-safety-or-terror-at-radboud-university/

Arrests, Charges, and Prosecutions

The number of students protesting in solidarity with Palestine in the Netherlands arrested, charged and/or prosecuted remains uncertain. Due to time constraints, we were unable to conduct in-depth research necessary to gather comprehensive data, nonetheless because any accurate and up-to-date information would require access to Dutch law enforcement or Ministry of Justice records, a process that demands significant time, resources, and formal research protocols. As such, the figures we present here are based solely on media reports and should therefore be understood as incomplete snapshots of a much broader picture.[10]

In Amsterdam, arrests began as early as March 2024, with 17 people detained, but peaked during the protests in early May, with 169 people detained overnight between May 6 and 7, followed by 41 additional arrests between May 8 and 17. In Utrecht, 95 arrests took place between May 7 and 15. Other incidents included 2 arrests in Nijmegen on May 27, over 15 arrests in Delft on June 3 during a building occupation, and approximately 30 arrests in The Hague on June 4 during a protest at an academic association building.

It is important to highlight that most of those arrested have been released on the same day or night. Nevertheless formal charges have also been brought against some protesters including fines, community service and prison sentences. The charges brought have generally involved accusations of violence, threats, destruction of property, or resisting arrest. One particularly troubling case unfolded in February 2025, when a Chinese student at the UvA was sentenced to two-months in prison for alleged "violence" during a protest in Amsterdam, after clearly being framed by the Dutch media and left without adequate legal support during the criminal proceedings.[11]

Surveillance

A disturbing pattern of surveillance targeting students and staff involved in Palestine solidarity protests has emerged across Dutch universities. The most common and reported tactic has been the deployment of undercover police wearing keffiyehs and Palestinian flags to blend in with the protestors.[12] At the same time, activists wearing visible Palestinian symbols like the keffiyeh have reported heightened scrutiny such as being photographed, filmed, followed, asked for identification, and in some cases, singled out for intimidation.[13] For example, students at Leiden University who had been staging a teach-in were intimidated during the event, and later escorted off the campus and followed by security personnel, deep into the city (Reid & Tros, 2023). The university also faced public backlash for employing plainclothes security personnel and even financially incentivizing students to spy on their peers and give "security" reports (Hoger Onderwijs Persbureau, 2024; Vermeer, 2024; Rubio, 2024). These individuals reportedly eavesdropped, photographed students, and in some cases, even inspected personal belongings without consent, raising serious concerns about privacy and trust on campus and prompting strong criticism from The Hague City Party, Amnesty International, Privacy First and the Dutch National Student Union[14] (Havinga, 2024).

In addition to eroding trust within academic communities, such invasive, unethical and illegal tactics disproportionately target students of color and Middle Eastern, Arab, and Muslim students who have been at the forefront of Palestinian solidarity movement. Racial profiling and extra scrutiny during protests on campuses create an environment where these students feel both racialized and politically marginalized[15] (Bongers, 2024). In a broader context of nationwide tightening of protest rules and crackdown on protest

10 See: "2024 University of Amsterdam pro-Palestinian campus occupations" summary on Wikipedia, which contains a list of all the media that have reported arrests, charges and prosecution at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_University_of_Amsterdam_pro-Palestinian_campus_occupations
11 See: https://www.at5.nl/nieuws/231152/van-vrijspraak-tot-2-maanden-cel-voor-uva-demonstranten-die-politie-bekogelden
12 See: https://universonline.nl/nieuws/2024/05/13/police-violence-on-campus-is-unacceptable-students-are-fighting-for-justice/
13 See: https://www.dagelijksestandaard.nl/binnenland/universiteit-leiden-zet-student-spionnen-in-wat-is-dit-voor-bizarre-ddr-praktijk
14 See: https://haagsestadspartij.nl/leiden-university-spies-on-their-own-students/
15 See: https://dekanttekening.nl/nieuws/universiteit-leiden-bespioneert-studenten-krenkt-vertrouwen/

rights[16], other universities across the Netherlands have also intensified surveillance. At the University of Groningen, for instance, 12 surveillance cameras were installed on the Broerplein.[17]

Censorship and Silencing

Dutch universities have also canceled, silenced, and censored academic discussions, events and teach-ins, while also suppressing various expressions of solidarity with Palestinians. These actions, which infringe upon the academic freedom, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and freedom of demonstration of students and staff, have often been justified by the universities as efforts to "mitigate polarization", engage in "constructive and respectful dialogue", ensuring a "safe environment" or "safe space" for hearing "the other side" or "the other party" (Bot, 2023). This language has often reduced the reality of genocide to little more than a "war of emotions" (Zbeidy, 2024) and significantly blurred the line between discomfort and actual harm (Rudolph, 2024). Strikingly, these "social safety" discourses used to criminalize Palestine solidarity have originated from diversity agents and offices who have remained silent in the face of rising anti-Palestinian racism. As Lennard (2024) argues, institutionalized liberal diversity politics in Western higher education institutions have too often reinforced structures of oppression rather than dismantled them. In addition to "safety" and "security" reasons, banal reasoning has also been cited such as "logistical constraints", and tactics such as withholding the event location, event relocation away from central campuses, and altering or removing promotional materials.

Radboud University was among the first to draw national attention for censoring discussions on Palestine. In November 2023, a planned lecture series on the Israel-Palestine conflict was reoriented to focus on academic freedom after the university imposed numerous restrictions, reportedly following complaints from students with Israeli background (Decates & Leise, 2023). The restrictions included postponing the event, restricting attendance to students of social geography, instructing lecturers not to share the event location, and even modifying posters because they featured a watermelon. The organizers criticized the university for its attack on academic freedom. As Michiel Bot, associate professor of Law and Humanities at Tilburg Law School and a speaker in the lecture series, remarked: "The university should not have to give us permission to educate people about this conflict. That is part of our academic freedom." (ibid.) Scholars also emphasized the importance of addressing uncomfortable topics in education. Anya Topolski, associate professor of Ethics and Political Philosophy at Radboud University, and expert in racism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia, emphasized the dangers of censorship:

> "It is important to understand how racism works and can even lead to genocide so that we can prevent it. We cannot achieve that if we are silenced from above, especially not in the name of social safety. Social safety concerns misconduct, not whether students learn about uncomfortable topics [...] How can it be that a university censors its experts in conflict studies, racism, colonialism, politics, and history during times of conflict?"

Another event that made the news in the Netherlands was "Architecturing Destruction in Gaza, Palestine". Scheduled at TU Delft's Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, the event was abruptly cancelled just two working days before it was to take place (BK Scholars for Palestine, 2024a).[18] The Dean cited vague concerns over "social safety" and the inability to guarantee a "constructive and respectful dialogue" but provided no specific justification for the assessment and decision. The cancellation left the organizers and participants disheartened and angry, but mostly unclear about where the unsafety concerns were coming from. "Was it our safety or the safety of others? Were we the target or the threat?" is what the organizers asked in the BNieuws Magazine, the independent periodical of the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment (BK Scholars for Palestine, 2024b). The cancellation was preceded and followed by acts of vandalism, including the tearing down of posters and online harassment and intimidation against the organizers, who were visibly recognizable. The event was intended to host renowned Palestinian scholars discussing the undisputed destruction in Gaza and the role of architecture in this destruction, including one of TU Delft's own Palestinian PhD students. The cancellation sparked outrage among students and

16 See: https://www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/en/current/news/directive-for-protests-at-research-universities-and-universities-of-applied-sciences

17 See: https://ukrant.nl/cameras-en-schijnwerpers-op-broerplein-tegen-pro-palestijnse-acties/

18 With the weekend in between, the organizers managed to still hold the event in another location outside of the campus -in an art center called Radius CCA- something that the organizers have considered to be a "displacement", a reflection of the way Palestinians were displaced from their land.

staff, in whose view it undermined the university's commitment to academic inquiry and solidarity. The organizers asked,

> "Was our event and its group of highly qualified and scholarly Palestinian speakers a threat? What was so dangerous about a group of scholars sharing parts of their research into the history of Palestine, the history of the Gaza Strip, and the history of Palestinian refugee camps, backed up by evidence, archival documents, facts, and figures from the ground, citing the reports of various international and humanitarian organizations, such as the ICJ, which has found that what is happening in Gaza is a plausible genocide?" (BK Scholars for Palestine, 2024b).

Similar censorship has been reported at VU Amsterdam[19], Maastricht University[20], and others. One of the most common tactics has been quietly relocating events away from central or visible campus locations. A telling example involved a lecture by Professor Neve Gordon, an Israeli Jewish scholar critical of Israeli policies. Organized by Dutch Scholars for Palestine and originally planned for Utrecht University's city center, the lecture was relocated to the Utrecht Science Park under new university guidelines that imposed strict restrictions: pre-registration, security clearance, limits on attendance, and a clear distinction between "educational" and "political" events. More specifically, the guidelines,

> "[c]oncern political gatherings in the city centre, such as those about Gaza and Israel. They must now be registered in advance with the Campus & Facilities department or with Security and may only happen in places approved by Security. There is a limit of 40 to 50 participants, with mandatory pre-registration and access control on-site. Finally, a distinction is made between education-related events and political activities."[21]

The university's decision to relocate events related to Israel-Palestine from the city center to the Utrecht Science Park has sparked debate and faculty members and students have argued that the restrictions endanger academic freedom, describing the measures as direct censorship (Spadaro, 2024). According to Alessandra Spadaro, assistant professor of Public International Law at Utrecht University, what is absurd is that "the application of the new rules to Neve Gordon's lecture seems to imply that this was a "political" event, rather than an academic one. However, the topic of the lecture constitutes the object of Professor Gordon's ongoing academic research" (ibid.). While the rationale for the new rules was to "prevent further occupations", according to Spadaro (2024) intentionally linking and conflating academic events with protests is baseless and deeply problematic as it undermines academic freedom.

Self-Censorship

Beyond the overt disciplining of students and staff through institutional crackdowns, securitizing discourse, and visible surveillance, a quieter, but equally consequential, process is unfolding within the academy itself: the internal disciplining of educators (Mertens, 2025).[22] Faculty members are increasingly self-censoring and retreating from public and pedagogical engagement with Palestine out of fear. This climate of fear has reshaped the everyday practices of teaching and scholarship. Expressing solidarity, referencing Palestinian history in the classroom, or sharing a critical article on social media can be seen as professionally risky or even career-ending. Some educators have withdrawn from public discourse, abandoned planned lectures or posts, or turned to anonymous writing to voice their perspectives. Academic conferences are becoming quieter on the topic; syllabi are carefully sanitized.

This internal disciplining of educators is not only shaped by top-down administrative interventions but also by the mobilizations of Zionist student groups, whose formal complaints can lead to investigations, institutional warnings, public reprimands, or educators being coerced into apologies. As a result, educators find themselves in a paradoxical position: committed to fostering critical inquiry, yet constrained by fear of institutional reprisal or reputational damage. The stakes are even higher for scholars of Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim backgrounds, whose voices are frequently scrutinized, racialized, and preemptively discredited. For many of them, self-censorship becomes a means of professional survival.

19 See: https://advalvas.vu.nl/en/campus-culture/teach-in-about-gaza-not-allowed-on-campus/
20 See: https://www.observantonline.nl/english/Home/Articles/id/60922/genocide-posters-and-an-occupation-maastricht-feelings-also-run-high-over-gaza-war
21 See: https://dub.uu.nl/en/news/pro-palestinian-lecture-moved-due-new-uu-rules
22 We are very grateful to Charlotte Mertens for her comments on this point, and on the article more generally.

This quite repression, the policing of thought and pedagogy, has far reaching implications and raises urgent questions: Can educators still guide students in thinking critically about empire, race, and resistance when Palestine is rendered a taboo subject? The classroom, once imagined as a space of intellectual openness, collective learning and critical inquiry, risks becoming yet another site of surveillance and silencing around the topic of Palestine (Fúnez-Flores, 2024a).

Stigmatization and Vilification

Student-led Palestine solidarity activism in the Netherlands, as elsewhere, has faced extensive stigmatization and vilification. Rather than being recognized as a legitimate form of political engagement, this activism is frequently cast under a shadow of suspicion, framed as a threat to public order or even linked to extremism. Reports of universities mentioned previously, such as Leiden University, employing undercover security personnel and student informants to monitor campus demonstrations have increased feelings of mistrust and stigmatization among Palestine solidarity activists, undermining the idea of academia as a safe space for political expression. As highlighted previously, Palestine solidarity demonstrations are often subject to stricter scrutiny and policing compared to other forms of protest. Activists have reported feeling intimidated by heavy police presence, restrictions on public gatherings, and heightened monitoring of their activities. This unequal treatment reinforces the perception that Palestine solidarity activism is viewed as a public order and even global security issue rather than a matter of conscience and legitimate exercise of free speech.

Beyond university walls, the media and political establishment in the Netherlands, have further entrenched this hostile environment. Public discourse has increasingly blurred the line between legitimate criticism of Israeli state policies and antisemitism, leading to unfounded accusations against activists.[23] For example, Prime Minister Mark Rutte wrote on social media that "The violence in Gaza is increasingly being blamed on Jewish Dutch people but this is unfair" adding that this "is a form of antisemitism that we must continue to fight loud and clear."[24] While antisemitism must be addressed unequivocally, the failure to distinguish it from legitimate critiques of Israel's actions enables a dangerous conflation that chills public debate, discredits grassroots movements, and even endangers the lives of Jewish citizens. The Dutch government's Strategy Against Antisemitism, introduced at the end of 2024, institutionalizes this blurring further. Though framed as a protective measure for Jewish communities, including students, the initiative risks becoming a tool to suppress dissent by positioning criticism of Israeli policies as inherently suspect or hateful. Such frameworks not only delegitimize Palestine solidarity organizing but also erase the presence and contributions of Jewish students and faculty who stand in solidarity with Palestinians. Ironically, they rest on the antisemitic assumption that Jewish identity is synonymous with support for the Israeli state and Zionism, a conflation that many Jewish activists themselves have rejected.

Making Sense of the Criminalization of Student-Led Palestine Solidarity Activism

Why does a country like the Netherlands, internationally reputed to be a 'tolerant' country for protest and political and social dissidence, go to such lengths to suppress and criminalize student-led Palestinian solidarity activism? We think there are many reasons for this.

First, there is a historical continuity in the criminalization of Palestinian resistance, which now extends to solidarity movements globally, including in the Netherlands. In other words, Palestine solidarity activism, regardless of its geographic or institutional context, is and has been consistently censored, stigmatized, and repressed (Sen, 2024). While the risks and violence faced by solidarity movements in the Netherlands and elsewhere are not equivalent to the systemic oppression inflicted on Palestinians, these struggles must be understood as interconnected, mutually reinforcing, and spanning across geographies. In Palestine, the surveillance and criminalization of everyday life are pervasive and unrelenting, serving primarily to monitor, control, and dismantle resistance, to delegitimize anticolonial struggle, and deepen fragmentation among Palestinians themselves (Tatour & Tatour, 2023). Moreover, the global proliferation of Israeli surveillance technologies and tactics, such as checkpoints, raids, spy tech, deportations, and militarized policing, field-tested on Palestinians, shows how these systems of control are exported and replicated beyond Palestine, entrenching mechanisms of state violence worldwide, including on Dutch university campuses (Grassiani, 2017, 2022; Loewenstein, 2023).

23 See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJWbOoNs480
24 See: https://www.dutchnews.nl/2024/05/pro-palestine-protests-are-going-too-far-says-dutch-pm/

Second, despite this historical and geographical continuity, the hyper-criminalization of Palestine solidarity activism has without doubt dramatically escalated since October 2023 and must be understood within a broader global authoritarian turn (Tanveer, 2025; Loos, 2023;. CAGE International, 2023). Across the world, and particularly in Europe, there has been a marked erosion of civic space, where dissent, activism, and solidarity are increasingly surveilled and suppressed (CIVICUS Monitor, 2024; Hearst, 2024; Guatri, 2024). Right-wing and post-fascist parties have seized on the issue to advance wider xenophobic and Islamophobic agendas. Aligning themselves with Israel not only reinforces their standing within the "West," but also provides cover for cracking down on leftist, migrant, and Muslim communities (Fekete, 2024). This convergence of geopolitical alignment and domestic repression demonstrates how support for Israel is leveraged to actually deepen authoritarian control. Mainstream media throughout Europe more generally, and right-wing outlets in particular, have played an important role in reinforcing Israeli narratives and suppressing Palestinian ones. Rather than serving as a watchdog, much of the media has become complicit in an asymmetrical information war that portrays Israel as a victim defending itself while erasing its ongoing occupation, genocide and apartheid practices (ibid.). This was evident during the Maccabi Tel Aviv events in Amsterdam, where clashes between locals and Maccabi fans were framed as antisemitic pogroms perpetrated by Muslims and Arabs, reinforcing racist stereotypes (Ní Bhriain, 2024).

Third, the criminalization of Palestinian solidarity activism must also be situated within the post-9/11 legacy of the Global War on Terror. the legacy of the Global War on Terror. Civilizational racism, anchored in Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis, continues to shape Western discourse, constructing Arabs, Muslims, and especially Palestinians as inherently violent, irrational, and opposed to "Western values" (Sen, 2024). In this schema which reanimates orientalist binaries, Israel is framed as a besieged democracy defending civilization, while Palestinian resistance is cast as barbaric, a logic that delegitimizes not only Palestinians, but also those who stand with them (Said, 1978). Anti-Palestinian racism in particular plays a central role in the silencing and erasure of Palestinian experiences and those who support their cause. This stigmatization creates a climate of fear, pushing individuals, especially in academia, culture, and activism, to distance themselves from Palestinian issues to avoid reputational harm or institutional consequences. It reinforces the notion that proximity to the Palestinian cause is toxic, abnormal, or dangerous (Ayyash, 2023).

Fourth, and most crucially, support for Palestine is treated as a uniquely illegitimate form of dissent. Unlike other human rights causes, which can often be safely absorbed into liberal frameworks, Palestine solidarity is frequently met with disproportionate repression. This exceptionalism reveals how profoundly the Palestinian struggle threatens prevailing global structures of empire and power. To stand with Palestine is not simply to dissent, but to confront and unsettle the imperial logics that structure global politics. In this sense, Palestinian solidarity emerges not only as a moral stance, but as a radical political act that exposes the fault lines of empire itself. To understand the intensity and persistence of the criminalization of the Palestine movement in the Netherlands, it is therefore also crucial to situate it within a broader geopolitical and historical framework. The Netherlands, as a longstanding NATO member and close ally of the United States, is deeply invested in the post-WWII liberal international order, an order in which Israel has long been positioned as a strategic outpost in the Middle East. This alliance reflects shared interests in maintaining Western dominance in global political and economic structures. The repression of Palestine solidarity must therefore be seen as part of a larger effort to align with and protect geopolitical allies and their interests, even at the cost of democratic rights and civil liberties. On the one hand, repressing Palestine solidarity at home thus aligns with maintaining Western geopolitical cohesion abroad, even at the expense of civil liberties and academic freedom[25]. On the other hand, the idea of the Netherlands as a multicultural, egalitarian, and "tolerant" society is deeply contested. As Gloria Wekker (2016) and others have argued, this self-image is sustained by a structural denial of racism and a refusal to reckon with the country's imperial past. The Netherlands' colonial entanglements continue to inform its contemporary racial and political hierarchies. Within this imperial and racialized framework, the criminalization of Palestinian solidarity is not an anomaly but a continuation of colonial logic, applied in a new register.

Conclusions

The criminalization of student-led Palestine solidarity activism in the Netherlands reflects both a broader global pattern of suppressing dissent and a historical continuity in the criminalization of Palestinian

25 We are very grateful to Max Ajl for his comments on these points in particular and on the article more generally.

resistance. By examining the Netherlands as a case study, this article shows how the criminalization of activism operates along a continuum, ranging from overt police violence and arrests to more insidious forms of repression: from overt measures such as police violence and arrests to more insidious forms of repression including surveillance, stigmatization, and the curtailment of academic freedom through silencing and (self-)censorship. Universities have used existing measures and policies and even introduced new ones that weaponize discourses of security, social safety and antisemitism (Fúnez-Flores, 2024a, 2024b) in order to limit Palestine related events and activities on their campuses, treating Palestine activism and scholarship as a threat and viewing it through a criminalized lens.

Besides deflecting attention from the genocide unfolding in Gaza, these disciplining tactics not only undermine the democratic principles that universities claim to uphold but also perpetuate a culture of intimidation, fear and apathy that shrinks space for critical engagement and solidarity in Dutch higher education (Pallister-Wilkins & Pali, 2024). The chilling effects of universities' responses to the student-led Palestine solidarity activism are tangible for both staff and students. With time, the disciplining and criminalization strategies end up being internalized, leading, as we argued, to self-censorship and even colonization of our minds (Mertens, 2025).

This case study calls for an urgent and critical evaluation of how universities, and the societies and governments they are embedded within, respond to Palestine solidarity activism. It urges a commitment, especially on behalf of the universities, to safeguarding academic freedom, the rights to protest and assembly, and a willingness to meaningfully engage with the grievances that animate student and staff dissent. As recently highlighted by UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Gina Romero, the brutal suppression of pro-Palestine campus protest movements poses a "profound threat to democratic systems and institutions," and universities must act immediately to safeguard the right to peaceful protest (Romero, 2024: 8). Ultimately, just as Palestine has been defined to be the litmus test for the world, for international law and human rights (Sultany, 2022; Albanese, 2024; Sirleaf, 2024), the criminalization of student-led Palestine solidarity activism is also a litmus test for academic freedom, democracy, and justice.

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