

Statement in protest of the removal of the “Palestine in Global Contexts” Lecture Course at the University of Vienna, Summer term 2024

On 5 March 2024, a group of scholars were meant to convene the lecture course (“Ringvorlesung”) *Palestine in Global Contexts - On Mobilities, Solidarities, and Memory Cultures* at the University of Vienna. It was organized by Birgit Englert from the Department of African Studies in cooperation with Maya Rinderer from the Department of Near Eastern Studies. Altogether, its program included twelve scholars whose work focuses on Palestine - seven from the University of Vienna itself, and five from other renowned institutions within or outside Austria. We also wish to note that five of the scholars were female Palestinian scholars whose perspectives would have made meaningful interventions into a male-centered and white, European-dominated University system. *Palestine in Global Contexts* was listed in the course directory from 1 February onward; and within one week, an already large number of students (54) registered for it. Reaching such a number in such a short time illustrates that students are particularly interested in learning about Palestine.

On 8 February, however, the rectorate of the University notified one of the organizers that the course would be taken off the program with immediate effect. On the very same day, the Vienna-based “think tank” MENA-Watch published a hit-piece, accusing the course of bringing anti-Israel propaganda into the University of Vienna and providing a stage for antisemitism. In particular, the blog post isolated two Palestinian guest lecturers (Anna Younes and Sarah El Bulbeisi) and attacked them for statements they allegedly made. The author promoted a false and harmful portrayal of the guest speakers, in an attempt to discredit their scholarship and tarnish their reputations. He also attacked one of the organizers (Maya Rinderer) on the grounds of her involvement with the leftist Jewish collective Judeobolschewiener*innen.

According to the administration of the University, they removed the course because it ostensibly failed to avoid one-sidedness and to reflect a diversity of perspectives. As its title clearly indicates, the course was focused on Palestine, not on Israel-Palestine relations. The course rather centered Palestine - its history, society, culture and politics. By virtue of having scholars from different academic fields (e.g. Near Eastern Studies, African Studies, Development Studies, Cultural and Social Anthropology, the Arts, English and American Studies, Theology), the course already offered a plurality of perspectives on Palestine (see [here](#)).

From the administrative side, they unilaterally ruled out the format of a lecture course - one which could be available to all students at the University. Instead, they conveniently confined the course to a seminar-like format, imposing a limit on the number of students able to register, and a mandate on obligatory attendance. Most importantly, they specifically demanded the exclusion of the Palestinian scholars attacked by MENA-Watch. Because the organizers refused to disinvite any of the speakers, and the majority of the guest lecturers declined participating in such a restrictive setting, the lecture course is no longer taking place in summer term 2024.

Many critical observers denounce MENA-Watch for its extreme pro-Israel bias and have long challenged its self-declared “independent” reporting. Their disinformation campaigns directly target Palestinian, non- and anti-zionist Jewish, and other dissident scholars and voices, labeling them as antisemitic and/or terrorism-affiliated. These character assassinations and campaigns destroy the already constrained spaces of critical thought within Universities and across society more broadly. For years (if not decades), such campaigns resulted in several notable cancellations at academic and cultural institutions. Yet, throughout the past five months, there has been a documented and alarming rise in the level of hateful attacks toward academics teaching Palestine in the West. This pattern occurs indeed while Israel has been charged with genocide *and* illegally occupying Palestine in front of the *International Court of Justice* (ICJ). Since October 2023, the Israeli Defense Forces have murdered more than 30.000 Palestinians, leaving about 2 Million people in horrendous conditions of depravity, starvation, and death. In fact, official reports from Oxfam and Save the Children calculate that children are being killed, starved, and maimed at a higher daily rate than in any other conflict in the 21st century. Furthermore, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 72 out of the 99 journalists killed worldwide in 2023 were Palestinians reporting on Israel's war on Gaza. To date, Israel has destroyed all Universities and many schools in Gaza and killed large numbers of academic staff, students, and teachers. At the same time, settlement expansions, pogroms, and settler violence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem are increasing.

It is against said backdrop, that the University of Vienna has deemed this an inappropriate time to provide students with a lecture course on Palestine. Furthermore, the University also decided yet again to disempower Palestinian self-representation and knowledge-production, and to ignore anti-Zionist Jewish voices. We are thus deeply worried that the rectorate seems to give authority to such an anti-Jewish, anti-Palestinian and anti-Muslim racist text, while dismissing the expertise of its own scientific staff working on Palestine. Although the struggle for justice in Palestine is not the only issue currently facing difficulties or erasure in higher education, it nevertheless occupies a specific role within larger conversations around decolonization and the legacies of coloniality in the Western world, especially in times of genocide. We are convinced that we will not achieve decolonization of the University without open research, teaching, and debate about the history and present of Palestine and therefore protest the ongoing pattern of silencing critical voices who study, teach, and research on Palestine.

In November 2023, more than 600 signatories protested against the cancellation of a teach-in series on Palestine by the University of Vienna (see [here](#)). Apparently the rectorate felt no need to take that protest note seriously. We find it necessary to archive these incidents of institutional violence and value open letters and signatory lists as tools of protest. However, given the state of affairs regarding popular dissent in higher education, and as some among us have had to experience, signatory lists are often abused to identify targets for further surveillance and recrimination.

We invite readers to share this statement widely, ensuring that these dangerous dynamics affecting the University as a whole are given more attention. It goes without saying that we are open for questions and welcome any open debate.

This statement has been collaboratively written by scholars who were scheduled to lecture in the course, and who are also the undersigned (in alphabetical order).

Sarah El Bulbeisi (invited speaker)

Birgit Englert (organizer, speaker)

Helmut Krieger (invited speaker)

Kevin Potter (invited speaker)

Maya Rinderer (organizer, speaker)

Leonardo Schiocchet (invited speaker)

Nour Shantout (invited speaker)

Kludia Wieser (invited speaker)

Anna Younes (invited speaker)

Vienna, 5 March 2024