

Sawsan Zaher, Human Rights Adv., “Why are Israeli Campuses Silent on Genocide?”

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Introduction

Hello everyone, and welcome to *Eyes on Gaza*, our daily gathering that brings together protest and learning. I’ve been opening the meetings I moderate this way for the past four months. And now that something has changed—the ceasefire—we thought together with you about whether and how to continue. It seems to me there was almost full consensus that we cannot take our eyes off Gaza. And indeed, we will continue the project of documentation, inquiry, resistance, and reflection that we have all undertaken here. I’ll say a few more words about that at the end, but in the meantime, mark your calendars: every Monday and Thursday at two o’clock, on the usual link, we will continue to be here—with our eyes on Gaza.

Next week, the academic year will begin at universities across the country—at some, only a week later. For two years now, a heavy cloud of silence and silencing has hung over our campuses. And we’ve already spoken about that a bit here. To continue and better understand this context, we have invited today Attorney Sawsan Zaher, a specialist in human rights and international law, with a long record of activism and writing. She is also a lecturer at the Human Rights Clinic at Tel Aviv University. Sawsan knows the universities in Israel deeply, in part because since October 2023 she has represented many students who were silenced and brought to disciplinary proceedings within the system. Sawsan will speak with us about why there is silence—why the universities are silent in the face of the genocide. As usual, she will speak for eight minutes, and afterward we will allow questions in the chat. Thank you very much, Sawsan, for joining us today.

Presentation

Thank you, Ayelet and Ido, and hello everyone. I’ll keep the greetings brief so I can make the most of the eight minutes and focus on the content. I think the topic I chose to speak about—why there is no talk of genocide on Israeli campuses—actually combines the silence of academic institutions and of the education system in general, the deliberate silence, the intentional avoidance of speaking about genocide, together with the political persecution that has been directed at many Arab students, as well as Jewish students—or in fact, students in general—who wanted to criticize the government’s policy and the war of genocide on Gaza.

Some of the cases in which I represented students since October 7 and in the months that followed, as you know, centered on posts whose content was criticism of the war, expressions of solidarity with innocent people in Gaza, and various other things. But some also touched on the very use of the word genocide in publications posted on students’ personal accounts, and in a few cases also by lecturers—which led to persecution over the mere use of the word genocide. This, as you know, led to disciplinary prosecution for a disciplinary offense—not for “support of terror,” because that is a criminal offense—but for “offense to feelings,” “harm to dignity,” or “conduct unbecoming of a person affiliated with an academic institution.” And we all know how a hierarchy has developed between the feelings of the rightwing—or of the Jews, in fact, those who filed the complaints—which prevailed over the feelings of the Arabs, the critical feelings.

At the same time, alongside the persecution, there was also deliberate silence in the institutions of higher education. Except for one place—a research institute. That was the Minerva Center at the Hebrew University, which held a panel in December 2024 titled—I remember it well because I took part—“Gaza and International Law.” Not a word about genocide. Not a single panel on genocide. There was actually an attempt to fragment every element of the genocide—for example, starvation—to discuss it separately, as though it were an independent crime against humanity. Likewise, regarding the destruction of medical infrastructure, which was treated separately as a crime against humanity; likewise the killing, the destruction of other civilian infrastructure—but not as a comprehensive

crime of genocide. Other than that, there were no conferences. There was no discussion of it in law faculties: whether or not there *is* genocide, how it can be analyzed. Even if some lecturers personally believed there was an atmosphere of genocide—or that genocide might occur, at earlier stages—the institutions themselves did not address it collectively in conferences or academic discussions.

We also remember the process and then the arrest of Professor Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, which began with her signing a petition stating that genocide is taking place here and that she opposes the genocide. That was already in November 2023. And we remember all the proceedings taken against her. I think we must, of course, be aware of the difficulty on the side that refuses to accept, who denies. The denying side does not want us to talk about genocide, because it is an accusation of committing the gravest crime since the Holocaust against the Jews. Especially after the ratification of the UN Genocide Convention in 1950. It is, in essence, an accusation that Jews are committing genocide while upholding the slogan “we will never forget, and never again.”

The difference between speaking of crimes as crimes against humanity or war crimes versus genocide is that genocide requires proof of special intent. It must be proven that there was deliberate intent to destroy the Palestinians as a group or part of the group, and to deny them, in essence, the conditions for livable life conditions, as the Convention says. Therefore, if we are speaking of the existence of special intent, this immediately removes the act from the realm of ordinary severe crimes and undermines the claim that the war continues in the name of self-defense. Because one cannot say: “Sorry, this is self-defense,” and at the same time carry out the deliberate destruction of an entire group, in part or in whole.

Now, even though we are today after the ceasefire, I still believe that speaking about genocide—about all its components, about the element of special intent—is even more important than before. Because if we do not speak of this crime in academic terms—and here is my punch line—I do encourage the holding of academic discussions, conferences, and research on the very existence of the crime of genocide. Even if this comes at the price of persecution or disciplinary proceedings, the benefit far outweighs the harm, because we are now in a situation where, if we do not do this, we are ignoring the rulings of the highest judicial bodies, the highest international forums.

Let us not forget that there are arrest warrants against Netanyahu for committing genocide or its components, including starvation. We have the UN Inquiry Commission from August 2025, which determined that the legal components of the crime of genocide have been proven and are being carried out by Israel. International civil society organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International determined as early as November and December 2024 that genocide exists legally under the elements of international law, and Israeli organizations, including B’Tselem, and ‘Physicians for Human Rights’, joined them. Therefore, my argument is that continuing to speak about genocide, despite the cost, is a moral and legal obligation—because without accountability, without responsibility, without demanding the prosecution of those responsible, it is impossible to truly achieve a ceasefire and then peace, along with all that follows from it, including respect for the innocent victims—on both sides, though mostly on the Palestinian side.