

ICSU Committee on Freedom and Responsibility in the conduct of Scienceⁱ

Statementⁱⁱ on scientific freedom and responsibility and the Israel-Palestine conflict

Since its inception in 1931, the International Council for Science (ICSU) has endorsed and vigorously upheld the Principle of Universality of Science which affirms the right of scientists throughout the world to participate in scientific activity without any discrimination on the grounds of ethnic origin, religion, citizenship, language, political stance, gender, sex or age. It firmly believes that the processes of scientific research and scholarship benefit all mankind. These processes are dependent on the freedom of scholars to communicate, to meet, to travel to conferences, to publish their results and to proffer advice. It is, therefore, in the interests of governments, institutions and individuals – whether they are scholars or not – to support this principle and its inherent values of non-discrimination and equity. However, in times of political and/or armed conflict, this support often wavers and it is easy for scientists and their institutions to get drawn into positions and actions that undermine the Principle of Universality. The conflict between Israel and Palestine is one situation in which, regrettably, this has happened. At the same time, it is also a situation in which a number of positive initiatives have been taken by the scientific community to build bridges in education and research.

The security policies of Israel make it enormously difficult for Palestinian students and scholars to access education and travel outside of, and between, the occupied territories (West Bank and Gaza Strip). A small annual quota on the number of students from the West Bank who are allowed to study in Israel is strictly maintained, despite it being opposed by many Israeli Universities and the Israeli Academy of Sciencesⁱⁱⁱ. No students are accepted from the Gaza Strip and, during extended periods, all exits from the Gaza Strip have been closed and even students with scholarships to third countries have been refused permission to leave. Putting aside the Principle of Universality, it might be argued that Israel has the right to limit access to its own territory and universities. But, in addition, isolation of the Gaza Strip and the dissection of the West Bank by settlements, associated access roads, and numerous roadblocks frequently prevent Palestinians from travelling within their own territory and to their own universities. Scholars and researchers working in Palestinian research institutes have to overcome huge logistical obstacles to maintain any kind of international cooperation, including with colleagues in Israel. From the perspective of the Israeli government, national security over-rides all other concerns and its policies have been developed to ensure the primary objective of protecting Israeli citizens. The policies are not specifically targeted at students, scholars, and scientists; but nor do they make general exceptions to accommodate these groups.

There have been repeated calls from some sectors of the academic community in a number of countries, including the UK and Ireland, for boycotts of Israeli scientific institutions. Israeli job applicants have been refused consideration for scientific posts abroad and Israeli scientists have been refused attendance at international scientific meetings. There is at least one instance where Israeli scholars have been removed from the editorial boards of academic

journals because of their nationality. Several countries have a ‘no visa’ policy towards Israel, which affects scientists. Some of these actions have been promoted or supported by well-intentioned scientists, who wish to demonstrate their opposition to the political position of Israel and the actions of the Israeli Government *vis-à-vis* Palestine. The primary intention has not been to punish Israeli scientists, although in practice that is what they do.

In considering these issues the scientific community should stand solidly behind the Principle of Universality and:

1. Refute any discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin, religion, citizenship or political stance;
2. strongly support free circulation of Palestinian scientists and oppose boycotts of Israeli science;
3. promote bi-lateral cooperation between Israel and Palestine in education and research and actively work to remove the barriers to effective cooperation;
4. strengthen international scientific cooperation and embrace both Israel and Palestine as equal partners in the global scientific enterprise.

With respect to 3 and 4, a number of very worthy initiatives^{iv} already exist and strengthened support for these efforts is urgently required.

“In situations of strife and conflict, it is surely the duty of scientists to promote international understanding and cooperation – not to penalize each other for the shortcomings of their governments.” Bengt Gustafsson, CFRS chairman, in Nature, 447, p 908, 2007

ⁱSee http://www.icsu.org/5_abouticsu/STRUCT_Comm_Poli.html#CFRS for the membership and terms of reference for CFRS.

ⁱⁱ This statement is the responsibility of the Committee on Freedom and Responsibility in the conduct of Science (CFRS) which is a policy committee of the International Council for Science (ICSU). It does not necessarily reflect the views of individual ICSU Member organizations.

ⁱⁱⁱ They have urged that in cases where security considerations are deemed to require placing restrictions on a person’s movement they should be adjudicated as such, on an individual basis and with all due consideration for a person’s human rights.

^{iv} For example, the Israeli-Palestinian Science Organisation (IPSO, <http://www.ipso-jerusalem.org/>) supports joint projects between scientists in the region. Similarly, there are a number of joint science activities being conducted within the Framework of the Association of Middle East and United States National Academies of Sciences, involving Jordan as well as Israel and Palestine.