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## **(UN)SILENCED: What doesn't kill us makes us louder: A Visual Ethnography of Academic Censorship and Palestinian Resistance**

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# **(UN)SILENCED: What doesn't kill us makes us louder**

*A Visual Ethnography of Academic Censorship and Palestinian Resistance*





# Universiteit Leiden

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I thank Students for Palestine for teaching me there is no compromise in justice.

I thank Leiden University for making me louder.

## **Abstract**

Academic freedom is a core value of Western higher education, with freedom of speech and research being its main pillars. When it comes to Palestinian rights, however, these principles are often applied selectively or fail to materialize at all. By conducting qualitative ethnographic research on and in collaboration with Palestinian advocacy groups in the Netherlands, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of how and why anti-Zionist dissent is often silenced in the context of Dutch academia. This multimodal research focuses on one particular event of academic censorship that resulted in the cancelation of a panel discussion organized by “Students for Palestine” (SfP). The visual output shows my main interlocutors gradually reconstructing what happened through a decolonial lens; they bear upon colonial and orientalist practices in order to deconstruct this specific incident. I then elaborate on these practices in this article, in order to provide a deeper understanding of what laid the foundation of this censorship case. I do this by looking at the impact that orientalist and neoliberalist practices have on the institutional censorship of Palestine. The written output also more accurately discusses the aftermath of this event, that is the way the student group resisted this discrimination case by means of an academic boycott. Moreover, both the visual and text portions of this thesis offer a thorough analysis of what it means for minoritized and racialized voices to be silenced and delegitimized, and how censoring attempts affect Palestinian identity. Finally, the article provides a reflexive analysis that is meant to gauge the extent to which internalized sentiments of fear and paranoia within the movement at large influenced my own ability to gain access and trust throughout the realization of this study.

*Keywords: Academic freedom, censorship, decoloniality, silence, orientalism, delegitimization, neoliberalism, boycott, paranoia, reflexivity.*

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## *Praesidium Libertatis, Palestinium Exceptionalis: Introduction*

*“Do you really want me to be neutral on themes of racism and apartheid? Of course, I am not”.  
“But how would I make students feel unsafe?”. “Would we want to create a safe space for people  
who are racist and pro-apartheid? Is that what universities have become?”*

Dina Zbeidy



The very first time I heard of Leiden University’s motto “Praesidium Libertatis” (*Bastions of Liberty*), it was in relation to its alleged infringement. Following the cancellation of a panel discussion on *Apartheid, Racism and Intersectionality*, the Hague-based collective “Students for Palestine” (SfP) took the streets to denounce Leiden’s violation of its own pillar of academic freedom: a core concept of contemporary academia and an essential bulwark of democracy; the idea

<sup>1</sup> Image retrieved from: <https://www.mareonline.nl/achtergrond/verboden-discussie-te-voeren/>

that academic knowledge can be produced free of external interferences and controls, particularly from the state (Riemer 2023). Nevertheless, academic freedom was never absolute and is, by no means, secure worldwide (Altbach 2001). Since the early establishment of Leiden University (LU) in 1575, freedom of speech was considered a core value of education; Almost 500 years later, students started calling attention to the colonial and imperialist mentality that presumably fuelled Leiden's recent episodes of institutional discrimination.

According to the university board, the event that was meant to take place at Wijnhaven campus in March 2022 was cancelled due to the moderator's "lack of impartiality". SfP's chosen moderator, Dina Zbeidy, is a Dutch/Palestinian anthropologist and researcher, and an expert on Palestine-related matters; however, her Palestinian roots and critical views on the human rights violations of Palestinians in occupied territories, were apparently enough of a reason for Leiden's security officer to deem her "an unsuitable as well as unsafe moderator". During an interview with me, Dina explains that, according to the board, their motivation for censoring the event was due to the intense criticism that they received after allowing previous events and panel discussions on Palestine. Furthermore, they claimed that even panel discussions on Ukraine saw equal participation of both Ukrainian and Russian speakers. Whereas the University takes pride in organizing neutral and unbiased political discussions on campus, pro-Palestine anti-colonial movements interpreted this as yet another attempt to undermine Palestinian solidarity through the employment of delegitimizing and racist discourses. As stated by Hall (2015), higher education institutions tend to promote Western colonial thought through a system based on 'epistemological injustice' (Lebakeng et al., 2006). This basically means that knowledge is reproduced by colonial frameworks that promote Western ideology as offering absolute and superior truth, thus silencing and mitigating indigenous knowledge through forms of epistemic violence (Haringsma 2021). By means of cultural events, academic panel discussions, and direct actions, the student collective aims at bringing attention to the Eurocentric biases that are thought to define Western academia, in order to decolonize Western colonial thought and prevent the consequent silencing of non-Western indigenous knowledge.

Although my research focuses on one particular case of censorship that took place at LU, the Leiden case is merely one of many episodes of pervasive institutional censorship in Western academia. Shwaikh and Gould (2019) argue that the problem indeed lies with identifying such episodes as isolated cases of censorship, thus failing to see how this pattern of silencing anti-colonial dissent is, instead, incited by institutionalized racialization and imperial domination. Ironically, academic freedom is in itself "a medium through which traditional power dynamics are reproduced" (Reynolds 2020: 157), and the way Palestinian discourse is treated within academia is



a fitting example. Smeltzer and Hearn (2014) identify two main threats to freedom of expression in contemporary academia: the increasing corporatization and neo-liberalization of higher education institutions on one hand, and their related securitization on the other. As a matter of fact, since universities have gradually become extremely dependent on donations from both public and private donors (Axelrod 2021), ensuring safety within the university has become a main concern; which in turn has resulted in a gradual depoliticization of student activism. It has been commonly argued by those advocating for unbiased “safe” spaces that universities should not take overtly political stands, and that individual academics should stay out of political debates in order to ensure academic objectivity and safeguard institutional neutrality (Altbach 2001: 207). Newly established student activist collectives, however, vociferously reject these notions, further stating that Leiden University’s silencing of Israel-critical speech indicates the existence of institutional complicity with Israeli apartheid. According to Deeb and Winegar (2016: 18), “compulsory Zionism” has spread within academia, “expecting scholars, administrators, and students to support the political view of Israel as a Jewish State”, and thus preventing anti-Zionist debate from taking place. Such normalized institutional complicity reflects the way academic standards of neutrality and depoliticization are, indeed, applied selectively. As Kapitan (2011) states, these notions are often abused with the ultimate purpose of suppressing criticism and academic speech around the topic (p. 269). As stated by one of my film’s main protagonist, Itai, this colonial approach to Palestine not only represents a breach of academic freedom, but actually reveals Leiden University’s direct involvement in systematic discrimination and human rights’ violations.

*“These institutions that we are targeting, in order not to be held accountable for the crimes against humanity that they are historically built on because of colonialism, and for the act of colonial role they are still taking, they try to put every little barrier in front of people, so not to have to talk about it.”*

Itai van de Wal

In 2017, in the UK only, there had been a wave of media attacks, smear campaigns, and institutional censorship of Palestine-related events, which were linked to the UK government’s adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism (Shwaikh and Gould 2009: 752). This is a particularly problematic type of definition, as it affirms that any criticism of the State of Israel is, also, anti-Semitic. As stated by Robinson and Griffin (2017), anti-

Semitic allegations are commonly employed by pro-Israel advocates and lobby groups in order to silence Palestinian activism and anti-Zionist criticism. Although the Dutch government refused to adopt the aforementioned definition because it does not clearly differentiate between antisemitism and criticism of the Israeli government, the university's board still equates the two by treating Palestinian activism as something that is inherently harmful to Jewish students. In so doing, it continues to apply unjustified security measures to Palestinian-led panel discussions on campus.

By posing the question, "*How do student groups in solidarity with Palestine navigate silencing dynamics in the context of neo-liberalized Western academia?*"; this thesis aims to understand how the instrumentalization of academic freedom to silence anti-colonial dissent delegitimizes pro-Palestinian student activism in the Netherlands. Then, through a framework of engaged anthropology, it shows how these activists wrestle with paranoia and self-censorship while working to reassert their own academic freedom. By actively engaging with SfP through means of collaboration and activist involvement, I was able to experience first-hand the subtle censoring tactics employed by the University. In fact, as stated by Susser (2010), this "activist" type of approach attempts at voicing criticism and challenge social injustices through direct forms of engagement: "Research that emerges from and for particular struggles challenges academics to think beyond the politics of knowledge production to address the potential and necessity of its mobilization" (Urla and Helepololei 2014: 439). As a matter of fact, engaged anthropology is an approach that aims at using advocacy, intervention and activism in the pursuit of social justice (Lamphere 2018: 64)<sup>2</sup>. This additionally entails an actual deconstruction of the colonial and orientalist frameworks that were understood by my participants as lying at the core of this case of institutional censorship. My main goal with this research was, indeed, that of shining a light on a pattern of institutional silencing that directly affects pro-Palestinian voices within Western academia, thus potentially helping activist groups to mobilize the latter towards a radical shift.

As a matter of fact, according to Speed (2006), critical engagement brought about by activist research is both necessary and productive, as it can transform the discipline by addressing the politics of knowledge, and in so doing, decolonize the research process. In other words, my active engagement with the student group, on one hand, enabled me to gain deeper insights as a consequence of my genuine involvement with the cause, while on the other, it allowed for an analysis of the intrinsic supremacist nature of Western academic discourse. Such objectives resonate with what Frampton et al. (2006) define as "institutional ethnography", an approach that shows how ethnography studies can be used to denounce ruling institutions while returning the gaze, "so that

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<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from Research Proposal p.14

oppressed people can look back at their oppressors to see how the oppression they live is socially organized” (p. 6). In a similar manner, my research aims to offer the grounds to understand the deeper social reasonings behind the institutionalized censorship of pro-Palestinian voices, while giving priority to the activists’ own gaze and personal judgment.

In order to achieve such a goal, I resorted to a number of different methodologies, such as semi-structured video interviews, observational filmmaking, active collaboration and observation, and digital ethnography. Due to a combination of these four approaches, I was able to gather a large amount of data, which I then analysed through an extensive and detailed process of data logging. I did so by implementing *open coding*, a preliminary process by which data – in the form of events/actions/interactions – are compared with others for similarities and differences, and then conceptualized and grouped together to form categories and subcategories (Corbin and Strauss 1990: 12)<sup>3</sup>. I then proceeded by making connections between categories and subcategories by means of *axial coding* (p. 96), so that codes can then be linked to patterns of interaction, contexts, and causes (Bryman 2016: 574)<sup>4</sup>. Finally, by means of *selective coding*, I was able to identify three main categories. The first category exposes the way silencing tactics, consisting of narratives of academic neutrality and objectivity, are employed by Western higher education institutions to silence anti-Zionist dissent. The second category analyses the way silencing dynamics and overall dehumanizing practices affect Palestinian voices by inducing feelings of paranoia in them, ultimately leading to self-censoring and self-editing behaviours. Lastly, the third section emphasizes the activists’ agency, by looking at the way pro-Palestine student collectives in the Netherlands resist institutional censorship by means of an academic boycott and legal strategies.

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<sup>3</sup> Retrieved from Research Proposal p.18

<sup>4</sup> Retrieved from Research Proposal p.18

## *They are almost humans*

*“I think a lot of the dehumanization comes from being recognized as human only if you are white and you challenge the system through white ways. To be human you have to talk in a suit.”*

Layla Kattermann



My participants identified the concept of dehumanization as the main factor bolstering the institutionalized silencing of pro-Palestinian activism. In order to be able to understand where the dehumanization of Palestinians and the Palestinian struggle originates from and, more specifically, what it entails, it is necessary to provide an overview of how the Palestinian liberation movement is

racialized through systematic orientalist practices. Accordingly, this section shows the common ways through which tactics of *racial gaslighting* and *denial* are employed to censor anti-Zionist dissent in Western academia.

Said (1978) defines *Orientalism* as a Western practice involved in the *othering* of non-Western groups. This *othering* tradition is based on the socially constructed conceit that sees European Western identity and knowledge as intrinsically superior to all non-European peoples and cultures (15). The concept of the *Other* thus originates from a perception of the Orient as someone that is far from the ideal Western. According to Bunch (2015), epistemic violence is at the core of the process of othering marginalized groups. In her essay “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*” (1994), Spivak defines epistemic violence, or epistemic injustice, as being “the result of an interested desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject” (66). In other words, epistemic violence must be understood as a direct consequence of colonialism, which entails that common narratives of Western hegemony were created by colonizers themselves in order to delegitimize other forms of knowledge-production that did not align with dominant narratives and existing colonial projects. When it comes to Palestine, its demonization and otherization are performed to ultimately maintain and consolidate a pro-Israel agenda both in the political and public sphere; thus, continuing to both undermine the possibilities of Palestinian advocacy, as well as reinforce academic distance from the subject (Bazian 2015: 1058).

According to Bunch (2015), epistemic violence comes in two forms: *reduced credibility* and *silencing*. Colonial authorities reduce the credibility of indigenous populations by rendering them into a racialized minority group understood only through socially constructed stereotypes. Then by employing the discriminatory practice of silencing, they exclude the minoritized group from participating in the process of knowledge production (12). In this research, the concept of silencing was used to specifically describe a pattern of exclusion of pro-Palestinian voices in the context of Western academia. In my audiovisual output, I make subtle use of sound to symbolize this silencing. The opening scene shows Layla giving a speech in front of The Hague’s Wijnhaven Campus to expose LU’s censoring attempts and colonial compliance. However, her speech is often disrupted by the passing of a tram behind her. Therefore, I decided to purposely integrate the tram’s disruptive noise as a way to emphasize the structural repression of Palestinian voices, thus amplifying this invisible agent of oppression. According to Suhr (2013), the invisible can, indeed, be shown by means of montage, that is through symbolic combinations and repetitions. The inspiration came from Elia Suleiman’s movie “*The Time that Remains*” (2009), in which the notorious Palestinian director relies on silence to symbolize the loss of his Palestinian/Arab identity.

According to Chion (1994), the expressive and informative value of sound enriches a given image, thus creating an audiovisual illusion (p.5)<sup>5</sup>. In so doing, sound can have an impact that is overall way more “visceral” than the visual (Henley 2007: 54)<sup>6</sup>.

When it comes to reduced credibility, this particular censorship case shows how this concept was used by the University to delegitimize Dina’s professionalism and expertise on the basis of her Palestinian roots. By extending the critique of these orientalist stereotypes in the context of academic exclusion, I employ the concept of *racial gaslighting* as the driving force of this pattern of silencing. According to Abu-Laban and Bakan (2022), racial gaslighting, or structural gaslighting, is a process designed by those in power in order to maintain dominance over marginalised groups (510). In relation to Palestine specifically, racial gaslighting is constituted by acts of *denial* and *victim-blaming*. The first dimension specifically refers to a denial of collective memory. Pro-Zionist agendas heavily rely on a historical narrative that blatantly denies the existence of a land called Palestine prior to the establishment of Israel. While the Zionist settler-colonial project on former Palestinian land started decades before the proper establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the Israeli War of Independence is understood by Palestinians as the *Nakba* (“catastrophe” in the Arabic language), which led to the ethnic cleansing and displacement of thousands of Palestinians from their land. Denial of the *Nakba*, which continues to be spread by the Israeli government and its allies worldwide, is a type of narrative based on the assertion that the land was empty, that Palestinians did not exist, and that opposition to Israel can, therefore, only be motivated by racist and fascist ideologies (Abu-Laban and Bakan 2022: 511).

In this specific case, a narrative of denial is used to racially gaslight Palestinians by making them look like the oppressors rather than the victims. In fact, Palestinians are also additionally blamed for actively resisting the apartheid system to which they are subjected, which is even recognized by international law. Abu-Laban and Bakan (2022) claim that the victim-blaming of Palestinians consists in portraying Palestinian resistance as anti-Semitic, and by designating advocacy organizations in solidarity with Palestine as terrorists, effectively disallowing these to operate legally (515). Since the very beginning – meaning since the age of British imperialism – the Palestinian anticolonial struggle was, indeed, largely disregarded by a Eurocentric conception that considered it as being compromised by fascist sympathies (Swedenburg 1995: xxii). All these tactics overall reflect an orientalist practice that hinders the recognition of the settler-colonial occupation of Palestine as a legitimate struggle. At the very basis of such delegitimization, there is

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<sup>5</sup> Retrieved from Research Proposal p. 16

<sup>6</sup> Retrieved from Research Proposal p.16

what Mignolo (2017) would define as the “colonial matrix of power”; a Eurocentric notion of superiority that lies at the very foundation of Herzl<sup>7</sup>’s Zionist project. In fact, according to Hixson (2020), the latter’s mission was to bring civilization to the backward Islamic world, through the establishment of a Jewish nation-state.

This orientalist view that differentiates “The modern from the savage, and the West from the Rest” (Kenfack 2017: 551), is still quite present in Dutch academia, as it was clearly noticeable throughout this research. In fact, such institutionalized colonial mentality is particularly noticeable in the way that Palestinian advocacy groups and their initiatives on campus are constrained by silencing tactics such as unanticipated security measures, and by the board’s labelling of such initiatives as controversial, unneutral and unsafe. Moreover, according to my participants, by excluding the Palestinian struggle from the academic curriculum, the university actively denies the colonial nature of its occupation and military oppression, thus directly differentiating it from other contemporary struggles such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, to which the university has not been applying the same discriminatory measures.

For this very reason, my participants have been denouncing the way Leiden University has been applying double-standards of academic neutrality and institutional objectivity to the Palestinian struggle. This thesis examines instances of this institutional behaviour to demonstrate why the self-determination of the Palestinian people is still an “unthinkable fact in the framework of Western thought” (Trouillot 1995: 82). By doing so, my ultimate purpose is to show how a colonial discourse is still predominant in Dutch society (Wekker 2016), and how this, in turn, fuels inequality within academia.

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<sup>7</sup> Theodore Herzl: founder of Zionism.

## ***Silencing***

*“I would like to believe that universities are still the driver of social change; that they can still support anti-colonial struggles, and expose the systematic flaws that there are, instead of just feeding them.”*

Layla Kattermann

As previously mentioned, Leiden’s case of censorship is not merely an exception but rather reflects a trend of institutional silencing aimed at censoring anti-Zionist dissent in Western academia. In fact, a similar episode happened at Harvard Kennedy School quite recently, when former Human Rights Watch head, Kenneth Roth, was denied fellowship following a storm of protest due to his obvious anti-Zionist position, as reported by *The Nation*.<sup>8</sup> This – together with the censoring instances reported by Shwaikh and Gould in their article “*The Palestinian Exception to Academic Freedom*” (2009) – indicates the existence of a broader political effort to silence criticism of Israel in the West, that goes much beyond the singular case of racist discrimination to which Dina was subjected by Leiden’s administrative board.

As Layla mentions in the quote above, universities seem to have shifted towards the embracement of those very systematic flaws that they claim to challenge. According to Aked (2020), “Increased financial pressures on universities amidst intensifying neoliberalization in higher education appears to constitute the enabling context for the growth of Israel Studies” (39), and the consequent silencing of anti-Zionist dissent. In other words, Western academia’s increasing reliance on private donors and funds has gradually come to undermine academic freedom, while simultaneously leading to an increase in surveillance and securitization. As Itai also stated during our video interview, “*Dutch universities have been made into these institutions that are, basically, only respected if they can get very large amounts of money and grants, and as many as possible*”. Aked (2020) further claims that Western universities’ commitment to maintaining economic ties with Israeli lobby institutions automatically led to the covert silencing of anti-Zionist voices in academia.

However, what is particularly concerning about this trend in contemporary Western academia, is the way principles of academic freedom are being instrumentalized to reinforce existing power

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/hrw-harvard-israel-kennedy-school/>



dynamics and maintain colonial dominance over minoritized groups. Anti-Israel criticism was and continues to be censored by Leiden University on the basis that it is not neutral, and therefore a peril to academic freedom. Accusations such as this were labelled by Layla “*usual bureaucratic traps*”: these are worth untangling one by one to understand why Leiden’s exploitation of such narratives is discriminatory and delegitimizing towards the Palestinian liberation movement. The main goal of “Students for Palestine” is, indeed, that of decolonizing the University by shining a light on the double standards that are implemented by LU to undermine Palestinian activism on campus.

Dina’s role as moderator was rejected by the University’s board on the premise that her lack of academic objectivity (due to her anti-Zionist stance) would be harmful to Jewish students, and that academic events should remain politically neutral. According to my participants, this argument is problematic on multiple levels. On one hand, it racializes Palestinians by reinforcing the orientalist idea that their identity is “*inherently a threat to Jews*” (Itai) – thus also exploiting anti-Semitism to silence anti-colonial dissent; On the other, it shows compliance with a settler-colonial state while preaching political neutrality. As stated by Aked (2020), neutrality is, in fact, an obsolete concept in contemporary universities, as the pressure of neoliberalism is increasingly transforming these institutions into marketplaces where “those with buying power can dominate the ideological environment” (60). That is why, *silencing* is, according to my interlocutors, nothing but a strategy employed by institutions to hide, and at the same time, preserve existing power dynamics through the instrumentalization of academic freedom. According to Reynold (2020), academic freedom has, indeed, “operated in specific instances to defend work that distorts the legacy of historical colonialism and to insulate the status quo in spaces of ongoing colonization” (156).

The academic repression of pro-Palestinian discourse is, therefore, fuelled by economic interests, and further preserved and secured by institutionalized orientalist ideologies. This is particularly noticeable when looking at the way academic panel discussions on Palestine are regulated by the University. As Layla claims, it is indeed quite hard to organize events about Palestine on campus. Whenever SfP tries to hold an academic discussion on campus, their efforts are severely constrained by unprecedented security measures which, as stated by my participants, do not seem to be applied to other academic events. For instance, in order for this March’s panel discussion to go through, SfP was obligated by the board to provide a list of online-registered participants, whose identity documentation would be additionally checked by the security personnel upon entrance to the conference room that the University had rigidly imposed on the event. Originally, SfP requested the “Spanish steps” for the event, the big staircase at the entrance of Wijnhaven campus in The Hague,

where several academic discussions on different topics had previously been held. One of the collective's main goals is, indeed, that of creating more visibility for Palestine on campus. Therefore, holding the event at the entrance of the building is, according to SfP, one way to make the Palestinian struggle more accessible to a wider public. However, LU firmly rejected this request due to safety reasons. As claimed by SfP's co-founder, Marthe, during last March's panel, "*Safety is a common excuse that the University has been using against us for a while now*" and, according to Itai, "*It ties into this racist, Islamophobic kind of preconception that the Palestinian struggle is, somehow, an incredibly controversial and unsafe thing, and therefore, it requires extra security measures*".

Even more recently, another panel discussion was organized by SfP on the similarities of apartheid systems in Palestine, Namibia, and South Africa. However, after receiving new constraints from the University, the students refused to comply with the censoring measures and cancelled the event as part of a larger boycotting action. In fact, by means of an academic boycott, SfP aims to shed light on this pattern of institutionalized racialization and censorship of the Palestinian liberation movement, with the ultimate purpose of decolonizing Western academia.

## ***Self-censorship***

*An assortment of colourful Palestinian dips sits on the table while the sound of frying halloumi blends with the Arabic tunes coming from Layla's laptop. An incense stick burns on the shelf; The air is dense and Layla is tense. It is obvious from the way she is handling her bread, dropping everything on the ground while wondering what her fellow Arabs are going to think of her after seeing that pitiful scene. We laugh. Everything in the rooms screams Palestine: the way she is proudly wearing a Palestinian traditional belt above her waist, the powerful artworks on the white walls, the tunes, the smells. Her belongings speak louder than her words. Her words are weapons but she is too scared of the recoil so she refrains from using them. She is aware but she can't overcome it, she turns up the music instead.*

On the day of our video-interview, Layla was visibly worried. She was so anxious about it that I had to sit next to her to make her feel calmer and more at ease. Once we started talking, I noticed she would ponder a lot about the answers she was giving me. Knowing this behaviour was common among pro-Palestine advocates, I pointed it out and she admitted that she was indeed trying to be as careful as possible with her phrasing. In her case, being overly cautious meant resorting to academic language. When I asked her to further elaborate on that, she mentions how she normally hides behind academic terminology to avoid her words being taken out of context and used against her. She also confessed how she would unconsciously increase the volume of the music in the background as a way to feel safer when discussing *controversial* topics. For this reason, I decided to not lower the volume of the music in the editing too much, once again relying on the use of disruptive sounds to symbolize the silencing of Palestinian voices.

It is quite normal for pro-Palestine activists, but mostly Palestinians, to always be careful about the way they express themselves. According to Bar-Tal (2017), this self-censoring tendency is a socio-political-psychological phenomenon that partly originates from one's need for self and collective preservation. In other words, the common feeling of paranoia that Palestinians learn to internalize as a consequence of the racialization and structural gaslighting to which they are subjected, pushes them to practice self-censorship, often unconsciously. As stated by Zureik (2016), intensive colonial surveillance, which is intimately linked to the denigration and racialization of the *Other*, does indeed result in a common state of paranoia and fear among Palestinians. During our interview, Layla helped me reflect on how dangerous it is for Palestinians to be outspoken about the

oppression they experience, especially considering the extensive military controls that they are forced to go through whenever they travel back to Palestine. Other members of the activist group come from countries that are just as authoritarian and therefore share similar experiences. As Bar-Tal (2017) states, “The more society members feel their individual and collective security threatened, the more they practice self-censorship to protect their groups” (60).

During fieldwork, I had the amazing opportunity to interview Sammy, a Palestinian-German living in the Netherlands and founder of the Dutch BDS committee, initially known as “DocP”. One thing I noticed right away is how confident he felt discussing historical events and political strategies. I had a very similar feeling when talking to other students and advocates. It is, in fact, quite a fundamental requirement that everything Palestinians share with the wider public is based on legally supported and verified facts. According to Itai, this urge is motivated by the constant delegitimization that they experience. Their confidence, however, drastically diminishes when asked about the way self-censorship affects their own activism and daily lives. Sammy, in particular, became visibly more worried when I initiated this discussion. At first, he suggested we skipped the question, so I tried providing him with some examples from my own personal experience of self-censorship, to try to make him feel safer about sharing. He then opened up about his experience as a Palestinian in the Netherlands. He told me about that one time he was sitting in a bar, making conversation with a Dutch-Israeli Zionist, who accused him of being a terrorist and blatantly said to him, *“It is an honour to kill Palestinians; I love having your blood on my hands”*. Sammy explains how, although it is not at all uncommon for him to encounter such situations, his natural response is always that of shutting down completely, rather than reacting like a normal person would. He said that *“As a Palestinian, you always have to be hyper-aware of your surroundings and keep calm, and call back all of your emotions, even in the most shocking and horrible situations”*.

According to him, that is something Palestinians are naturally programmed to do to prevent people from holding on to their racialized conception of the angry, savage Palestinian. In fact, their fear of being dehumanized stops them from being able to express themselves in public circles. As Sammy said, *“You just kind of have to try and not be human, not have emotions, be a robot, get through it, and move on”*. This is a form of internalized oppression caused by colonial violence, that has self-doubting effects on the psyche of the colonized individual (Hilton 2011). In other words, the dehumanization and structural gaslighting that Palestinians are conditioned by, further pushes them “to internalize the racist stereotypes and ideologies perpetuated by the White dominant society” (Pyke 2010), thus leading to the practice of self-censorship. Particularly striking was the way

Sammy kept on constantly self-editing himself during our on-camera interview. He actually pointed out how, similarly to Layla, he could not stop himself from thinking twice about his words and expressions. For instance, when discussing the way student groups handled the censoring attempts, he retrieved from using the expression “*They killed it*”. As he explained, the connotation that the word “kill” holds, made him reflect on how that would sound if a “savage terrorist Palestinian” were to use it. And therefore, he decided not to use that expression.

Moreover, as also reported by the European Legal Support Centre (ELSC 2021) – where both Itai and Layla currently work as legal researchers – silencing tactics, such as smear campaigns, and terrorist and anti-Semitic allegations, have a “chilling effect” on the freedom of expression of university teachers as well. As stated by the report (ELSC 2021), such intimidating tactics undermine professors’ freedom to educate students on the Palestinian issue, thus “hindering the right of the Dutch public to receive accurate information about Israel and the Palestinian people”. Dina mentions how, in her opinion, self-censorship is also very present among professors at LU, as discussing the colonial occupation of Palestine comes at the risk of being smeared and discredited. She further noted how, in order to prevent their professional careers from being undermined by such delegitimizing practices, a large portion of professors within Dutch universities seems to be refusing academic involvement with the issue altogether. According to Layla, however, colonial and orientalist practices within Western academia cannot be challenged without a real institutional engagement with anti-colonial movements and struggles and, therefore, without a proper decolonization of the academic curriculum.

## ***Paranoia: the invisible gatekeeper***

The intimidation, the fear, and the induced paranoia, all significantly shaped the realization and outcome of this thesis. I embarked on this project knowing it was going to be challenging. Nevertheless, the fact that I had already conducted (digital) ethnographic research on the silencing of Palestinian voices earlier on, gave me the confidence and motivation to build on my previous research, this time by focusing on academia rather than online platforms.<sup>9</sup> My confidence is also derived from the fact I am myself a fierce supporter of Palestinians' right to self-determination. From a very young age, my mother would tell me all about her few, but meaningful, travels in the MENA region. I remember I understood very little about it at the time: being surrounded by very conservative relatives my whole childhood also did not help my confusion, but it certainly fuelled my curiosity. At sixteen years old, I decided I finally wanted to experience my mom's stories on my own skin. And so, I spent one year in Southern Turkey, far from all the prejudices and stereotypes that once contaminated my narrative. The experience opened my eyes in many ways, first and foremost, by allowing me to see the *Other* as myself. It is hard to express why I feel so close to the Palestinian struggle, but I do believe that part of the reason lies in having had the chance to connect and understand a culture that was always heavily misrepresented in my own country.

At first, I thought my personal and genuine involvement with the Palestinian cause would have sufficed to establish a relationship of trust with my participants. However, my position of privilege made me underestimate the perils that pro-Palestinian activists face by being so exposed. This research made me realize how profoundly ingrained paranoia is in the Palestinian solidarity movement. The many stories I have come across during my research opened my eyes to the countless psychological burdens that activists in solidarity with Palestine are obliged to bear, which inevitably had a huge impact on the realization of the research itself.

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<sup>9</sup> I refer to my Bachelor Thesis "The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: A Digital Ethnographic Approach"

*The protest ends and the music is quickly replaced by a confused noise of voices echoing in the square. I can see some of them frantically distributing fliers to the remaining crowd while others quickly roll up their banners and flags. As I find the courage to approach one of them, I already prepare myself for an almost certain rejection. I have seen Ghali many times at previous protests and events, I know him but he doesn't know me. I walk up to him, and I tell him I want to conduct ethnographic research on their organization. Perhaps not the best approach on my part, I admit. He is excited and way more interested in my project than I would expect. He gives me his number and asks me to send him more details so that he can share them with the other members of the organization. We meet again a week later. This time Ria joins as well. Apparently, Ghali had understood that I wanted to film their meetings and other members felt instantly threatened by that. Ria comes to make sure Ghali misunderstood my intentions. I reassured them I would never share anything against their will. They do not seem too convinced but they tell me they will vote on it before they decide. I knew it. What was I thinking? Asking a pro-Palestine activist group to let me in? "That's almost impossible" – I was told – and at that point I thought it was true. But actually, they were happy to have me on board. They welcomed me to their first meeting with open arms. That was the first time I went to Layla's house, I felt like I belonged. Little did I know the rejection was yet to come.*

*Two months have passed and the coalition weekend <sup>10</sup>was right around the corner. I have been waiting for that for so long, mostly because I could not wait to become part of a bigger group; Not just any group, but one that I fully related to and that made me feel comfortable like any other before.... But they felt different about it. To them, I was a threat, a danger to keep away. They stopped me from joining the meeting, fearing that I would disclose secret information and make other activists feel uneasy. Their internalized paranoia prevented them from seeing the good in what I was doing, the positive change my research could have brought to the cause. I felt sad, angry, frustrated. Even worse, I felt like I could never bring out the truth because the people who possessed it were too scarred by their traumas to let that truth be heard. How can one hear if the other is unable to speak?*

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<sup>10</sup> The "coalition meeting" is a monthly gathering that sees pro-Palestine student organizations from all over the Netherlands come together to discuss future plans and strategies.

The way I initially decided to approach the issue definitely caused confusion within my chosen student collective. The first time I talked to some of the members of the organization, I failed to explain that my research would, as a matter of fact, focus on academic censorship rather than the collective itself. By saying that my intention was – contrary to what I had envisioned – that of conducting ethnographic research on SfP, I made them feel like they would have been the object of this research, rather than potentially acting as collaborators to expose an issue that affects pro-Palestinian advocacy more generally. This definitely taught me a lot about the way pro-Palestine activist groups should be approached when conducting research. By making them feel like the spotlight would have been on them rather than on the issue itself, I unconsciously scared them and pushed them further away from me as well as my research.

For this reason, it has been quite challenging to obtain access at the beginning. It took me at least five months to gain their trust: that is because, at first, they were seriously concerned that I would turn out to be someone who was interested in distorting their narrative rather than emphasizing their voices. The unfortunate experiences they had to face before my arrival incentivized their inner paranoia toward my presence. Only months later, during my interview with Layla, I found out that the reason why they were so cautious and hesitant to let me in, was due to a past infiltration case that occurred to another Dutch pro-Palestine organization the year before. As a matter of fact, it is not at all uncommon for Palestinian solidarity movements to experience infiltration; Therefore, SfP's initial response to my research was motivated by a broader issue concerning the larger anti-Zionist movement. This is in itself quite a substantial finding, as it perfectly represents the common sense of paranoia that advocates in solidarity with Palestine are used to experiencing, and which leads to self-censoring behaviours.

For a time period of eight months, I have attended their private weekly meetings, and taken part in the decision-making and knowledge production processes. While most of the information shared during those meetings was sensitive and classified, my direct participation helped me gain a deeper understanding of their motives and goals, which served as a fundamental starting point for conducting one on one semi-structured video interviews with a couple of chosen participants within and outside the student group later on. Once I realized that my simple involvement with the Palestinian cause was not at all enough to prove my pure intentions, I had to find other ways to gain their trust. That is why I started engaging in informal conversations and interactions with members of the group, and I started sharing things about myself and my past research project to let them get to know me better.



Unlike what I had envisioned in my proposal, namely the idea of using the camera as a “can-opener” that would allow me to forge connections with my participants (Pink 2021: 61)<sup>11</sup>, I soon realized that the camera was, on the contrary, acting as a huge obstacle to achieving closeness with these people. Moreover, my initial intention was to rely on observational filmmaking as a way to visualize the inner world of my subjects (Carta 2015: 1). One way I envisioned myself doing so was by implementing Lawrence’s research approach, which consists in “allowing the camera to linger for longer”, in the hope that doing this would lead to important discoveries and spontaneous behaviours (Lawrence 2020: 92)<sup>12</sup>. I tried making use of this approach by leaving the camera on a tripod during our long banner-making sessions, as a way to emulate Suhr’s filming approach in “*Descending with Angels*” (2013), where the camera is indeed treated as a “mechanical observer” that can allow for a multitude of visions to emerge (Suhr 2018: 379).<sup>13</sup> However, my participants did not seem to feel comfortable knowing they were being recorded, thus failing to let such a multitude of visions emerge. That is why I spent most of the fieldwork period creating connections and building trust, rather than filming.

Once I was sure they could finally trust me and the goals of my research, I started conducting focus groups. However, the condition for filming the focus groups was that the interlocutors would remain anonymous. At first, I thought this could be easily done by implementing a number of cinematographic techniques, such as those used by Isobel Blomfield in her five-minute ethnographic film “*Mouth of a Shark*” (2018), where the filmmaker uses close-ups of the protagonist’s hands, as a way to preserve the interlocutor’s anonymity while still disclosing her emotions and allowing viewers to connect with her story.<sup>14</sup> However, after trying this approach two or three times, I realized it was hindering my research rather than enriching it. My intention was to raise awareness on a topic whose relevance is still very underestimated and neglected. In my opinion, awareness can only be achieved through familiarity: the public will not start caring about something if they cannot relate to it. Therefore, I realized that, in order to achieve that goal, I had to give a face to the organization. That is why I abandoned the idea of filming anonymously, and instead, I focused on two students from two different organizations who basically act as the spoken people and mediators of these groups: Layla and Itai. Sherif Fathy’s documentary film “*Palestina Amore*” (2011), was particularly inspiring for the structure of my own film. In fact, Fathy’s film focuses on a group of Italian activists in solidarity with Palestine and the way their life experiences

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<sup>11</sup> Retrieved from Research Proposal p. 13

<sup>12</sup> Retrieved from Research Proposal p. 15

<sup>13</sup> Retrieved from Research Proposal p. 16

<sup>14</sup> Retrieved from Research Proposal p. 17

impacted their activism. In terms of structure, the film mostly relies on observational footage and interviews. Similarly, my own documentary aims to show the inner world of my interlocutors while emphasizing their agency in fighting for justice.

While I was collecting substantial data through observational filmmaking and qualitative interviewing, I continued to engage with all of SfP's activities. At the same time, I collected online information such as tweets and mail correspondence between the student groups and LU's executive board. What really made a difference, however, was the gradual shift that my collective made toward me and my research. The subtlety and lack of transparency through which the institution was acting eventually made them realize how fundamental it is to record events and actions when fighting silencing dynamics. As Emad Burnat's and Guy Davidi's film "*5 Broken Cameras*" (2011) shows and emphasizes, cameras can indeed act as quite powerful weapons<sup>15</sup>. Once my participants came to this realization, they started looking at me and my filmmaker role as an asset rather than a menace: a turning point for the successful realization of this research.

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<sup>15</sup> Retrieved from Research Proposal p. 16

## *What doesn't kill us makes us louder*

*“What happened at Leiden was such a clear discrimination case, and also such a colonial approach to Palestine that it was very easy to not fall for any of the usual ‘bureaucratic traps’ (...)*

*For the last few years, what students fell into were, indeed, these traps of thinking these security measures are normal when they are applied to Palestine; or thinking that, as long as events can still happen, it doesn't matter how much they interfere with the content. But now we are like ‘NO’, we are not going to keep defending ourselves, NO, we are going to attack you for the things you demand we protect ourselves from!”*

Layla Kattermann



Regardless of how psychologically challenging this situation has been for the students, they soundly refused to allow any silencing attempt to come in between their hunger for justice. They showed extraordinary resilience, giving rise to a new era of boycotts, and calling attention to the imperialist and colonial role Dutch universities seem to have been overtly embracing.

Boycotting has always been one of Palestinians' most desirable strategic tools to practice non-violent resistance and express political dissent. In fact, "Boycotts have a long history in colonial contexts, and are most widely associated to Palestine, especially after the issuance of its 2005 civil society call for Boycott, Divestments and Sanctions (BDS)", (Takriti 2019: 58). However, boycott strategies had already been implemented much earlier. As a matter of fact, the boycott of the State of Israel took inspiration from the previous boycott movement against South African apartheid, and it is based on three main demands: first, the ending of the colonization of the Palestinian territories that were occupied in 1967; second, the recognition of the fundamental right to full equality of the Palestinian citizens of Israel; and third, the right of return of Palestinian refugees that were expelled following the establishment of the State (Hawari 2020: 183).

As Sammy stated, "*BDS works through an internationally recognized legal route that aims at holding institutions and companies responsible for being complicit in occupation and apartheid, so as to make sure that no government, institution or company is incentivized to join or participate in oppression*". In order to achieve national liberation, and more generally to cease international support of Israel's oppression of Palestinians, BDS national committee calls for an economic, cultural, and academic boycott of the colonial state, thus pressuring Israel to comply with international law.<sup>16</sup> In fact, according to what was reported by main human rights organizations such as "Amnesty International" and "Human Rights Watch", Israel is guilty of practicing apartheid on its Palestinian population, and should therefore be held accountable for the crimes against humanity it perpetrates.<sup>17</sup> These official statements are, however, still highly neglected by Western institutions, including universities. And that is why, pro-Palestine student activist groups in the Netherlands consider boycotting academia a fundamental requirement for resisting colonial oppression and achieving Palestinian self-determination.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://bdsmovement.net/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/02/israels-apartheid-against-palestinians-a-cruel-system-of-domination-and-a-crime-against-humanity/>  
<https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/north-africa/israel/palestine#:~:text=Israeli%20authorities%20are%20committing%20the,forcible%20displacement%20and%20excessive%20force.>

It is particularly interesting to see how boycott is, indeed, recognized as a legitimate strategy and, therefore, employed by various countries and universities to disincentivize economic involvement with repressive governments. According to Riemer (2023), Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine led to various kinds of academic boycotts, including state-sponsored sanctions and divestment (70). The author also mentioned how Germany froze academic ties with Russia in order to examine Russian institutions' involvement with the invasion; While the Australian National University broke off all institutional ties with Russian universities (Riemer 2023: 70). Contrary to what LU's Rector Magnificus, Hester Bijl, stated in her public response following the cancelation of last year's panel, Leiden University took similar actions to Germany and Australia. In her tweet that Itai is shown reading out loud in my film, she clearly stated that panel discussions on Russia and Ukraine were held and moderated neutrally "so that even Russian students would feel comfortable". However, the Rector seemed to have purposely omitted Leiden's academic boycott of Russia, as reported on the University's official website.<sup>18</sup> Leiden University not only recognizes the absolute importance of boycotting as a political strategy, but it also fervently institutionalizes it.

When it comes to Palestine, however, boycott strategies acquire very different connotations. In Germany, for instance, the BDS movement is highly criminalized. As reported by the Middle East Monitor (2022), the German parliament voted to define BDS as "anti-Semitic", thus successfully outlawing any BDS-related events from being held in the city's public facilities, on the basis that, calling for the boycott of the Jewish State is "reminiscent of the most horrific phase in Germany history"<sup>19</sup>. While this approach actively delegitimizes Palestinians' right to self-determination, it also ironically perpetuates a very Eurocentric vision of the world, one that is shaped by White guilt. According to the founder of BDS International, Omar Barghouti (2021), this way of weaponizing anti-Semitism to hinder Palestinian rights advocacy is particularly dangerous to the Jewish population, as "it absurdly equates Israel with 'all Jews'" (116). Barghouti (2021) further claims that, "Since there is nothing Jewish about Israel's regime of occupation, siege, ethnic cleansing, and apartheid, there is nothing inherently anti-Jewish, then, about a non-violent, morally consistent human rights struggle to end this system of oppression" (116).

Even though it has been found that the country of the Netherlands provides a distinguished favourable environment for pro-Palestine advocacy groups (ELSC 2021), Leiden University's approach to Palestine is still greatly shaped by external Israeli influences. As reported by "Dutch

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/dossiers/war-in-ukraine/frequently-asked-questions#can-i-still-work-together-with-russian-and-belarussian-institutions-and-researchers>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220126-germany-federal-court-rules-anti-bds-policy-to-be-unconstitutional/>

Scholars” in collaboration with “Students for Palestine” on the online news platform, *Mondoweiss* (2023)<sup>20</sup>, LU and other Dutch universities have been shown to regularly participate in partnerships with Israeli universities and institutions, many of whom play an important role in the systematic oppression of Palestinians. The Hebrew University, for instance, is illegally built on occupied Palestinian land, thus contributing to the dispossession and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. Furthermore, Dutch universities also collaborated with Israeli companies that profit from oppression, such as water utility company “Hagihon”, Israeli spyware company “Verint Systems”, as well as a number of Israel Aerospace Industries (Mondoweiss 2023). All these projects that Dutch universities engaged with in collaboration with Israeli institutions and companies are, as stated by Itai, worth millions: *“Neoliberalism and the increasing privatization of universities have, therefore, encouraged Western universities to function on a competitive market basis in which they are forced to compete for funds, and so whoever gets the most funds, gets rewarded by the government; In neoliberal societies, in fact, the state has a way of introducing liberal market mechanics in public life, and then rewarding one’s participation in this kind of marketization”*. And that is why neoliberalism can be understood as one of the driving forces behind Dutch institutional complicity with Israeli companies and institutions.

After conducting extensive research on the universities’ relations with Israel, with the help of Dutch human rights organization, *The Rights Forum*, student groups submitted a set of Freedom of Information Act requests (FOIA) to all Dutch universities. Itai explains that, *“The purpose of doing this was to investigate their ties to Israeli universities, companies, government institutions, and pro-Israel organizations; But, most importantly, to check whether they run controls over the human rights policies of the entities they collaborate with”*. In other words, the students demanded Dutch universities to provide documents that “might reveal internal discussions about the human rights violations in which their Israeli partners are intimately involved” (Mondoweiss 2023).

However, Dutch universities, LU included, partly refused to comply with these requests, further leaking the FOIA to the press. What followed was a storm of smear campaigns toward *The Rights Forum*, by pro-Israel lobby institutions and news outlets calling on the universities not to comply with this Freedom of Information Request. While the universities did provide partial information about their previous projects, they firmly refused to give any type of information regarding their ties with pro-Israel organizations, as well as their human rights policies, on the basis that it would have been anti-Semitic to do so, since these are all Jewish organizations. However, as Itai explains, the

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<sup>20</sup> <https://mondoweiss.net/2023/05/dutch-universities-ignore-their-israeli-research-partners-complicity-in-human-rights-abuses/>

FOIA request only listed those organizations – such as the “Centre for Information and Documentation Israel” (CIDI), and “Christians for Israel” – that have a reputation for instrumentalizing anti-Semitism to undermine the efforts of pro-Palestine advocacy groups in the Netherlands. By submitting such requests, students’ ultimate goal was to demonstrate that Leiden’s censorship of Palestine is, indeed, motivated by external Israeli influences.

As declining such requests is a clear violation of the Freedom of Information law, the students and the ELSC proceeded by appealing against the universities’ decision. Although the interuniversity advisory committee recommended that the universities respond to the entire request, they once again firmly decided not to respond, in violation of the Open Government Act. A court trial will, therefore, follow.

## ***Conclusion & Further Research***

By employing an engaged ethnographic approach, the aim of this multimodal thesis project has been that of investigating Leiden University's academic censorship of Palestine-related events and student advocacy. In March 2022, The Hague-based collective "Students for Palestine", tried to organize an academic panel discussion on *Apartheid, Racism and Intersectionality*, that was meant to be held at Wijnhaven campus in The Hague. However, after receiving several complaints, the University decided to cancel the event based on the presumed impartiality of Sfp's proposed moderator, Dina Zbeidy. According to Leiden's executive board, all academic events should be politically neutral and should include opposite voices as a way to safeguard academic freedom. The board further added that, by allowing a one-sided discussion on Israeli Apartheid, the University would have failed to protect Jewish students. This silencing attempt was immediately followed by an intense backlash from students of Leiden University, who started calling attention to the institution's structural racialization and delegitimization of the Palestinian struggle.

By posing the question, "*How do student groups in solidarity with Palestine navigate silencing dynamics in the context of neo-liberalized Western academia?*"; I aimed to look into the cultural and economic motives behind LU's censorship, as well as the direct impact that racialization has on student activists and Palestinian identity specifically. I decided that, to be able to gain a deeper insight into this matter, I had to join the fight myself. For this reason, in September 2022, I became an active member of "Student for Palestine"; And, for a period of eight months, I actively took part in the making of cultural events, academic panel discussions, and direct actions.

Even though I immediately became part of the collective, gaining complete trust has been quite a challenge for the first six months. I noticed my presence would make them feel uncomfortable and insecure. They were quite hostile towards my research and quite averse to the idea of being filmed and recorded. That is why, for the longest time during fieldwork, I hadn't been able to successfully collect any substantial data on the organization itself, as I was being prevented from accessing very important information and decisions. Once I became aware of this internal dynamic, I proposed we made use of anonymous focus groups, as I thought that, perhaps, discussing sensitive topics together as a group would have gradually led them to open up to me. However, that also did not help; They would barely show up to our weekly group discussions, and when they did, their participation always seemed very forced and unnatural.



I, therefore, decided to find alternative ways to investigate this issue. I conducted one-on-one video interviews with some of the people that were involved with this case, and with Dutch pro-Palestinian advocacy in general. I ended up interviewing Dina Zbeidy, Gerard Jonkman (director of *The Rights Forum*), Erella Grassiani (Israeli professor and pro-Palestine advocate at UvA), and Sammy (founder of *BDS Netherlands*). Even though the time constraint of this project made it impossible for me to include all of these people's insights into my written and audiovisual outputs, their contribution has been essential to my understanding of institutional censorship.

In the meantime, I continued to participate in SfP's activities, thus gradually gaining their trust and confidence. Eventually, I managed to get closer to SfP's founder, Layla Kattermann, who luckily decided to grant me an informal interview. After several months, I also heard back from the ELSC and finally had the chance to interview junior legal researcher and activist Itai van de Wal. Both of their contributions represented a turning point for my research, as they provided me with very important insights into the issue of censorship, while also allowing me to understand how this impacts their individuality.

Even though the purpose of this research was to emphasize the agency of minoritized voices in the pursuit of social justice; It was, however, my intention to include opposite voices as well. For instance, by interviewing Leiden University's "Rector Magnificus", who has been quite vocal about this issue and Leiden's responsibility to ensure a safe and objective discussion. Unfortunately, the Rector never replied to my email. I also reached out to a professor (whose name I will not mention for privacy reasons) within the anthropological department, as I thought would be relevant to discuss the absence of Palestinian discourse in the present academic curriculum. Once again, I received no response. Finally, I was also interested in including the point of view of Dutch pro-Zionist lobby organization CIDI, as this has published several opinion pieces on "Students for Palestine", labelling the group as anti-Semitic and their events as "one-sided anti-jew propaganda".<sup>21</sup> However, after consulting Dina Zbeidy about it, I was advised not to proceed as exposing my research to the lobby group could have potentially compromised SfP's efforts to organize events without further obstacles. Luckily for my research, Leiden University decided to go completely public on this issue by making it clear on a number of social media such as Instagram and Twitter that they would not comply with SfP's demands. This luckily allowed me to collect a substantial amount of online data as well.

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.cidi.nl/universiteit-leiden-stelt-grens-bij-apartheidweek/>

After conducting extensive research, I was able to understand what lies at the core of these silencing attempts, and how these are implemented in Dutch academia. The Western racialization and *otherization* of Palestinians play an important role in the delegitimization of their struggle for self-determination. The way Leiden University decided to handle the cancellation of last year's panel would indicate that an orientalist perception of Palestinians is also strongly institutionalized in Dutch higher education. In fact, it seems that academic events on Israeli apartheid receive quite a different treatment compared to other events. The University, indeed, continues to apply extra security measures to SfP's academic discussions, reinforcing the socially constructed stereotype that the Palestinian struggle for national liberation is controversial and unsafe. By doing so, Dutch universities actively undermine Palestinian advocacy, further causing self-censoring behaviours among professors, advocates, and students. A behaviour that was also shown to have had a great impact on the realization of the project itself, as explained above.

This research also showed how neoliberalism and the increasing privatization of Dutch academia highly contributed to the institutional silencing of Palestinian advocacy. Through the submission of the Freedom of Information Act, student groups were able to demonstrate that Dutch universities, indeed, have been conducting several projects in collaboration with Israeli universities and companies. Furthermore, the universities' decision to not provide transparency about their ties with pro-Zionist organizations and their human rights policies, shows a clear compliance with Israel's oppression of Palestinians. By means of an academic boycott, SfP's ultimate goal is to shine a light on the way Leiden University instrumentalizes academic freedom to maintain existing power dynamics. According to the students, an academic boycott is, indeed, necessary to decolonize knowledge-production in Western academia. By hopefully also managing to include a number of opposite voices, my aim is to continue investigating this issue further. After showing my final cut to "Students for Palestine", I was glad to hear that their view on cameras had completely shifted. They were all very grateful for my effort and came to the conclusion that they should all put an effort into recording the development of this fight. Especially now that the court hearing could actually lead to a real change.

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