

אקדמיה לשוויון

أكاديميون من أجل المساواة

To:

Professor Ana Mari Cauce, President,
Professor Michael Richards, Provost,
Professor Paul G. Ramsey, Executive Vice President
University of Washington

From:

The Executive Board
Academia for Equality

Re: Protecting Academic Freedom in Israel Studies and Supporting Professor Liora Halperin

We are writing to you as Academia for Equality, an Israeli organization of over 700 academics, holding positions of all ranks in universities and colleges in Israel and around the world. We work together to promote democratization, equality and access to higher education, and struggle against silencing of critical voices and complicity with injustices in Academia.

We write with great concern and in support of Liora Halperin, Associate Professor of International Studies, History, and Jewish studies at the University of Washington, and of the program in Israel Studies under her leadership. We recently learned that the University of Washington decided to return a \$5 million endowment gift to a donor, Rebecca Benaroya and remove Professor Halperin from the endowed chair she held in Israel Studies. This decision has also created uncertainty about the funding status of the Israel Studies program and cast doubt on its ability to continue operating at existing levels. . Professor Halperin is an esteemed teacher and scholar whose work has influenced many of us who read and teach her work regularly. She has authored two highly regarded award-winning books in the field of Israel studies, *Babel in Zion: Jews, Nationalism, and Language Diversity in Palestine, 1920-1948* (Yale University Press, 2015) and recently *The Oldest Guard: Forging the Zionist Settler Past* (Stanford University Press, 2021). As we understand it, the decision to return the endowment to the donor and to dissolve Professor Halperin`s endowed chair in Israel Studies was instigated by the donor`s discontent

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over a letter that Professor Halperin signed together with numerous other scholars condemning violence against civilians in Gaza in May 2021.

Your decision to return the endowment, effectively cancel the chair position, and leave Prof. Halperin and her colleagues to scramble to determine whether and how the Israel Studies program will now be funded, is a regrettable capitulation to donor pressure and a dangerous precedent that undermines the principle of academic freedom. This radical decision reverberates outside the University of Washington. It renders the very idea of an “endowed chair” meaningless, and adds to a highly toxic environment of intimidation against engaged scholars who express their opinions, inform the public, and furthermore, draw on their deep knowledge and expertise about Israel and Palestine in doing so. It goes without saying that the goal of the Israel Studies program, like the goal of every academic program in a free and democratic society, is not to defend an ideological or political position of financial benefactors. Instead, it is to offer high-quality untainted research that would capture complexity, express diversity of opinions, and enable further critique.

As an organization of Israeli academics, we underscore our commitment to and the great need we see in an open, critical and unintimidated study of modern Israel, introducing innovative approaches and methodologies like the ones introduced in professor Halperin’s research, teaching, programming and mentorship of graduate students. We are concerned that your decision to effectively terminate—or at least deeply unsettle--this endeavor represents a failure to create a barrier between donors and faculty and to protect your faculty from external intervention, and is likely to have a chilling effect on the field of Israel Studies more broadly. We learned from recent statements that in response to mounting criticism, the university stated it now offers more research support and a new chair in Jewish studies to professor Halperin. These responses, while marking a positive direction, remain vague and do not reinstate the resources for the program in Israel studies.

We call upon the University of Washington to uphold the principles of free speech and academic freedom, and make clear to its donors, its faculty, its students, and to the wider public that higher education and academic research, in all disciplines and fields of inquiry, must stay independent and free from external influence and pressure for conformity. We shall not improve the scholarly literacy of our

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students nor contribute to general public discourse by succumbing to such pressures. We call upon you as leaders of the university to acknowledge the mistake and fully reinstate the resources that came with the endowed chair and the Israel Studies Program.

Sincerely,

The Executive Board

Academia for Equality