

Prof. Giacomo Pignataro

Rector

Catania University,

15 March 2016

Dear Prof. Giacomo Pignataro

I write on behalf of the British Committee for the Universities of Palestine (BRICUP).

BRICUP is an organisation of UK-based academics, set up in response to the Palestinian Call for Academic Boycott. Its twin missions are:

- to support Palestinian universities, staff and students, and
- to oppose the continued illegal Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands with its concomitant breaches of international conventions of human rights, its refusal to accept UN resolutions or rulings of the International Court, and its persistent suppression of Palestinian academic freedom.

We are writing to express our concerns about recent efforts by Italian university heads to prevent criticism of Israel and discussion of the campaign to boycott Israel. The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign against Israel (BDS) is a global campaign for the rights of Palestinians and a legitimate form of non-violent resistance against a back-drop of more than 20 years of failed peace making. Censorship of criticisms of and opposition to Israel constitutes a violation of academic freedom and amounts to a transparent attempt to repress growing challenges to Israel's abuses of Palestinian human rights and almost 50 years of illegal occupation of Palestinian land.

Last year in Rome a conference hosting the world-renowned historian Ilan Pappé, a known critic of Israel, was cancelled after the President of Roma Tre University withdrew permission for the organizers to use university facilities. Last month, the University of Cagliari refused permission for "Israeli Apartheid Week", an international

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event which draws attention to Israel's systematic oppression of Palestinians, through seminars, talks and film screenings, whilst the University of Turin prevented a debate on the "Stop Technion" campaign, which calls for the suspension of research collaboration between Italian universities and the Israeli research centre Technion on the basis of the latter's complicity with the Israeli occupation. [1] At the University of Rome "La Sapienza", Israeli Apartheid Week-related initiatives were targeted by the Israeli Embassy,[2] and the President, Prof Eugenio Gaudio, stated that the signatories of the "Stop Technion" campaign should be punished.[3]

At the University of Catania, where the annual congress of the Italian Society for Middle Eastern Studies is due to take place in a few days time, a panel on the implications of academic and cultural boycott campaigns against Israel, meant to take place during the conference, has been removed from the official conference programme.[4]

These multiple occurrences suggest a worrying pattern of an organised campaign to disrupt and prevent the open discussion of key human rights issues – exactly the sort of liberty which should be second nature to universities. Complicity in this campaign of censorship threatens to bring the whole Italian university system into disrepute. BRICUP calls on all Italian universities to protect academic freedom and end all forms of censorship of criticisms of Israel. We also express our solidarity with the signatories of the "Stop Technion" appeal. In particular, we call on you as the President of Catania University to allow the discussion of academic and cultural boycott of Israel within the programme of the Italian Society for Middle Eastern Studies annual conference.

Yours sincerely,

[1] http://www.sardegnaoggi.it/Cronaca/2016-02-24/31661/A_Cagliari_Israeli_Apartheid_Week_ma_lUniversita_nega_i_locali.html;

<http://www.lastampa.it/2016/03/01/cronaca/caso-technion-niente-assemblea-luniversit-nega-laula-3jxtKebyfmdGJwrd0c29qJ/pagina.html>

[2] <http://moked.it/blog/2016/03/02/odio-anti-israeliano-in-aula-lultima-parola-al-rettore/>

[3] <http://www.osservatorioantisemitismo.it/articoli/il-rettore-delluniversita-la-sapienza-a-favore-del-boicottaggio-del-bds/>

[4] <http://www.sesamoitalia.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Panels-timetable-aggiornata.pdf>