

Academic Space

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July 2026

For the Alternative Lexicon for Palestine-Israel

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Shared Homeland Paradigm project.

Part 1: Academic Space Under the Separation Paradigm

Higher education is commonly regarded as a crucial pathway to social and economic mobility, while academic institutions are not neutral spaces - they reproduce existing political, social, and epistemic inequalities. Universities can reinforce colonial power structures by privileging Western forms of knowledge while marginalizing indigenous perspectives (Nuseibeh et al., 2024). Academic space, as used in this paper, refers to the institutional, epistemic, and the environment of higher education - the site that determines who may learn, who may teach, and whose knowledge is recognized as legitimate (Mbembe, 2016; Smith, 2012).

The globalization of Western knowledge has consolidated the notion that Western epistemologies represent the only legitimate knowledge forms, while knowledge originating from other traditions is perceived as "oriental" or "foreign" and thus inferior - an epistemic hierarchy that underpins colonial projects and asserts control over what counts as legitimate knowledge (Smith, 2012).

Consequently, indigenous communities are systematically excluded from academic centers of knowledge production, a dynamic particularly acute in settler-colonial contexts (Arvin, Tuck and Morrill, 2013). This exclusion operates not only through explicit policies but through the very organization of academic space itself - determining which languages, histories, and epistemologies are granted institutional visibility, and which are rendered structurally absent.

Israeli academia operates within what Kotef (2020) describes as a political system "defined by an attachment to space that rests on a primordial act of ethnic cleansing and the many forms of violence that follow" - a structure in which universities become not merely sites of learning but institutions embedded within the ongoing project of territorial and epistemic dispossession (p. 19). In this sense, Israeli universities are not neutral institutions that happen to exist within a settler-colonial reality - they function as a constitutive part of that reality, reproducing their spatial and epistemic conditions within their own walls. In the Palestinian Israeli context, these dynamics are both foundational and ongoing. From its earliest institutional formation, Israeli academia was embedded within the Zionist state-building project: the Hebrew University and the Technion were established not only as educational institutions, but as instruments intended to sustain and legitimize broader Zionist political objectives (Pappé, Dana and Naser-Najjab, 2024). These institutions have played a central role in shaping collective identities and delineating the boundaries of legitimate knowledge, reinforcing asymmetrical power relations between Jewish and Palestinian populations - a structure that persists through the centralized regulation of higher education by the Council for Higher Education to this day (Arar and Mustafa, 2011).

Israeli academia does not merely reflect state power, but actively participates in its production. Israel is one of the world's largest exporters of weapons, promoting rapid iterative design and real-time testing of military technologies in the occupied territories, particularly in Gaza, which functions as a laboratory for the development of battle-proven weapons (Musleh, 2018).

In the era of "High-tech Zionism," the traditional Zionist figure of the pioneer has increasingly been replaced by the weapons designer and military engineer, and universities have become part of this militarized national project. Professors, students, and researchers are integrated into the development of military technologies, presented by the Israeli Ministry of Defense as "a skilled and militarily experienced multi-disciplinary workforce," designing "pioneering, operationally proven" weapons (Musleh, 2018, pp. 37-38). Several Israeli universities, including Tel-Aviv University, the University of Haifa, and Ariel University, have further participated in archaeological excavations across the occupied West Bank - projects linked to the national narratives production that support territorial claims and settlement expansion, illustrating how academic space becomes intertwined with broader state and military infrastructures (Wind, 2024). This entanglement extended further during the 2023-2026 ongoing genocide in Gaza: Israeli universities did not merely remain silent but actively participated - fundraising for bullet-proof vests for combat soldiers, offering scholarships and course credits to reservists returning from Gaza, and expanding academic exemptions for soldiers throughout continuous deployment (Wind, 2024).

This entanglement with state power shapes who may speak, which histories are recognized, and what forms of knowledge are considered legitimate. Palestinian faculty members remain severely underrepresented, constituting only 5.35% of academic staff (Nuseibeh et al., 2024). Palestinian students face structural and cultural obstacles: discrimination, alienation, and exposure to curricula that embed Zionist and military-related frameworks, particularly in social sciences and humanities (Mansour, 2024). During periods of armed conflict, these conditions intensify: universities have responded to campus tensions by restricting political expression and limiting solidarity with Palestinians, contributing to a political climate of surveillance and constrained academic freedom (Hager, Khalaile and Jabareen, 2025). Critical engagement with Palestinian political realities and the history of dispossession has increasingly become subjected to institutional sanction - academic institutions have launched disciplinary proceedings against Palestinian students and lecturers over expressions of political opinions, creating an oppressive climate that fundamentally curtails the conditions for free academic inquiry (Hager, Khalaile and Jabareen, 2025).

Within this framework, displacement is understood as being not only geographic but epistemic as well. Palestinians, whether refugees, those in diaspora communities, or citizens of Israel - are excluded not merely from physical access to academic

institutions, but are also disenfranchised from the capacity to produce, circulate, and legitimize knowledge concerning their own collective histories and individual experiences. Academic space, under the separation paradigm, thus functions as a regulated domain that determines whose knowledge, language, and history receive institutional recognition - and whose remain structurally absent.

Part 2: Academic Space Reimagined - Towards a Shared Homeland Paradigm

The following sections propose a reimagining of academic space through four interconnected dimensions: language and identity; curriculum and knowledge production; political climate, and the right of return. Together, these dimensions do not merely reform academic space - they reconstitute it as a site of academic right of return, grounded in equality, shared epistemic foundations, and genuine partnership.

2.1 Identity and Language

Drawing on Bourdieu's (1991) concept of "legitimate language" and Fanon's (1986) insight that "to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" (p. 38), language within institutional space is never neutral. It is a mechanism of power that determines whose identity, history, and way of knowing are recognized, and whose are erased.

However, language is never only about words. It carries calendar, faith; it holds rhythm of life. I know what it means to leave a classroom in a middle of a lecture alone to break my fast-during Ramadan, without any institutional considerations nor acknowledgement. That experience was not only personal, but it also reflected political power structure: the university calendar is shaped around the Jewish majority community, rendering Palestinian students' religious and cultural identity in which are invisible within the very space that claims to serve them (Mansour, 2024, pp. 271, 278).

A reimagined shared academic space ought to recognize Arabic not as a guest language but as a foundational one present in signage, curricula, administrative communication, and pedagogical practice because students comprehend concepts more clearly, participate more actively, and experience less alienation when instruction acknowledges their linguistic reality (Mutongoza et al., 2023, pp. 96-102). No student should have to carry alone what the institution refuses to recognize. Palestinian cultural and religious identities must be constitutive of academic life, not peripheral to it: the academic calendar should reflect both communities, not one by default and the other by exception (Mansour, 2024).

This transformation, however, cannot be symmetrical. Given the weight of history, Arabic in Israeli universities requires active restoration rather than inclusion. The imposition of a dominant language reshapes identity and selfhood in the image of the powerful (Spivak, 1988) and undoing that requires more than equal treatment.

Hebrew in Palestinian universities does not carry the same obligation (at least not for a long time) though Palestinians, for example in Gaza, have already chosen to learn it, not as normalization, but as a strategic necessity: to navigate checkpoints, understand Israeli media, and know the occupier (Bishawi and Aburaida 2025). Within a shared academic space, Hebrew can be taught from an entirely different place through trauma-informed pedagogy (Becker, 2026), through art, music, sport, or shared histories not as submission, but as a bridge. Digital platforms and cross-institutional archives offer concrete pathways to building this connection across the asymmetry, without forcing it.

2.2 Curriculum and Knowledge Production

Decolonizing academic spaces requires more than revising reading lists; it calls for a fundamental transformation in which students from disenfranchised communities are recognized as knowledge producers rather than passive recipients of inherited academic frameworks. This means restructuring whose questions are asked, whose methodologies are legitimized, and whose communities are treated as sources of knowledge rather than subjects of it.

Comparative models offer instructive precedents. In South African higher education, the African concept of Ubuntu - emphasizing shared humanity and interconnectedness - has been adopted as a guiding principle of decolonial pedagogy. Students critically analyzed existing syllabi to expose how curricula privilege empirical data while neglecting discussions of power and epistemic hierarchy, and learning was restructured around group discussions and community-based projects, recognizing community members as producers of knowledge rather than objects of study (Dalvit, 2024). Within the shared academic space envisioned in this paper, Palestinian communities must be repositioned as active contributors to knowledge production, not objects of research.

Curricular decolonization must therefore be a collective institutional responsibility, operationalized through mechanisms such as the "equity audit" (Pete, 2018, p. 202): a systematic examination of how frequently departments include the scholarship of marginalized scholars, distributing the burden of reform across all faculty. This includes ensuring that Palestinian scholars are not structurally excluded from academic publishing due to resource asymmetries (Lockley, 2018).

"Building Palestinian knowledge - not only critiquing its absence - is both the process and the goal. What was systematically destroyed in Gaza must be (systematically) rebuilt: scholars have termed this destruction scholasticide - the deliberate erasure of educational institutions, knowledge systems, and intellectual life (Pratt, 2025; Wind, 2024). According to UNESCO, 95 per cent of Gaza's higher education campuses have been affected (UNESCO, MOEHE and AWRAD, 2025)."

Reconstruction, therefore, needs to extend beyond rebuilding university buildings to restoring Gaza's intellectual, cultural, and scientific life the conditions necessary for teaching, study, knowledge production, and international academic exchange. This includes scholarships, academic positions, and the training of a new generation of Palestinian scholars. Such reconstruction should be Palestinian-led, while Israel bears material and financial responsibility for enabling and funding it - not as a voluntary gesture, but as part of a broader framework of reparative justice.

2.3 Political Climate and Militarization

Several universities developed close institutional ties with the state and security establishment: the Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University was founded in cooperation with military bodies, while scholars at the Hebrew University simultaneously held academic and governmental roles. The Hebrew University was built on the ruins of the Palestinian village of Sheikh Badr, Tel Aviv university on the ruins of Sheikh Muwannis; and following 1948, tens of thousands of Palestinian books were reclassified as "Abandoned Property" (Wind, 2024, pp. 56, 72-74). In March 2026, the Gender Studies programme at Tel Aviv University promoted its courses through imagery of armed soldiers with the tagline "Women in the Barrel - Now More Than Ever" (Tel Aviv-University, Facebook, March 2026); and in May 2026 the university's Career Development Centre hosted a recruitment fair featuring the Mossad, Shin Bet, and the Ministry of Defense as career destinations for students (Tel-Aviv University Career Centre, May 2026). These two recent examples illustrate that militarization is not a structural legacy alone - it is an ongoing institutional practice. Following the massacre events on October 7th, 2023, and the genocide in Gaza since, these conditions intensified sharply. Institutional censorship sought to control "certain words, topics and teaching materials" (p.10), producing a broader atmosphere of silence and fear (Hager, Khalaile and Jabareen, 2025). Adala 2024 documented 124 cases of disciplinary proceeding against Palestinian students across 36 Israeli universities and colleges, 47% of which ended in suspension or expulsion, with 79% of cases targeting female students. A particularly striking illustration of how universities actively determine the boundaries of permissible scholarship is the case of Professor Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian - arrested by Israeli police in April 2024 following her suspension by the Hebrew University and police interrogation of her published academic work (Adalah, 2024).

A reimagined academic space ought to extend its role beyond its own students. Rather than promoting militarized programmes such as *Erez* and *Havatselet* (Wind, 2024), universities could redirect institutional resources toward genuine shared-life education - programmes that engage critically with contested histories and teach in a decolonizing way. In Northern Ireland, university-led research on shared education reached hundreds of schools, demonstrating that higher education institutions can actively shape the next generation's values of justice and shared life rather than

reproduce militaristic ones (Queen's University Belfast, 2019; Colwill and Gallagher, 2008:416). Within the Shared Homeland paradigm, universities must take institutional responsibility for this transformation rather than leaving it to civil society alone.

The process of demilitarizing academic space is not without historical precedent. Post-war Japan demonstrated that systematic removal of militaristic content from universities - replaced by values of human rights and civic education - is institutionally achievable (Badawi, 2024; Yamamoto, 2004). The South African experience, however, offers a necessary corrective: demographic inclusion alone is insufficient - genuine transformation requires structural redistribution of institutional power (Reddy, 2006).

Matzpen - a radical socialist movement founded in 1962, bringing together Jewish and Arab activists in opposition to Zionism and occupation - demonstrated that such spaces are historically possible (Fiedler, 2020). More recently, Nakba commemorations organized by student unions and initiatives such as *Eyes on Gaza* offer fragile but real precedents (Eyes on Gaza, 2025). Reimagining academic space does not always require inventing something entirely new. The roots are already there. What is required is not imagination alone, but the political will to look backwards and sideways: to recognize what already exists, and to expand it. The shared academic space in this paper calls for is not a utopia to be built from scratch - it is a horizon made visible by what has already begun.

2.4 Epistemic Exile, Mobility and the Right of Return

The reimagining of academic space is not only a question of institutional reform - it is also a question of who is recognized as a legitimate producer of knowledge, and who is permitted to enter academic space at all. Palestinians who live in Israel may inhabit a condition of epistemic exile: physically present within academic institutions, yet structurally and politically estranged from their own history, language, and cultural memory. For Palestinians in the diaspora (in west bank and Gaza as well) this exclusion is twofold: epistemic expulsion - the absence of Palestinian knowledge, narratives, and interpretive authority within academic space - is compounded by physical exclusion from the space itself (Said, 2000).

The Israeli control over borders, visas, and residency permits significantly limits the ability of Palestinian scholars from the diaspora to participate in Palestinian higher education institutions. *Academia Undermined* (2013; 2018) documents systematic cases of denied entry and forced departures, creating structural instability in teaching and research (Right to Education Campaign, 2013). The regulation of movement functions not only as border policy, but as a mechanism of epistemic control.

Against this dual condition of epistemic and physical exclusion, I propose the concept of Academic Right of Return: the right of Palestinians - whether refugees reside

in the occupied Gaza and the West Bank, diaspora communities, or citizens of Israel - to participate in the production, circulation, and legitimization of Palestinian knowledge within a shared academic space, without this participation being contingent upon physical return to the land itself. Academic right of return extends this insight: Palestinian scholars based in London, Boston or Beirut carry knowledge, memory, and interpretive authority that belongs within - and can enrich - a shared academic space.

The academic right of return may evoke the early Zionist vision of the Hebrew University as a cultural center for diaspora Jews who might not themselves return to the land. The parallel, however, is not symmetrical. What I propose here is not a romantic or symbolic attachment to place it is a demand rooted in concrete historical fact: Palestinians were expelled from the very land on which Israeli universities now stand. Palestinian scholars do not imagine a homeland; many come from families who had lived on the very land on which Israeli universities now exist. The academic right of return is therefore inseparable from that physical history.

Conclusion: Academic Space as the Embodiment of the Right of Return

Within the Shared Homeland paradigm, the university is reimagined as a transboundary space of collective restoration - one in which Palestinian communities are repositioned as active producers of their own intellectual traditions (Said, 2000).

What does this look like in everyday academic life? It looks like syllabi that include Palestinian scholarship. It looks like Arabic offered not as an exception but as a foundational language of campus life. It looks like a university calendar that recognizes Muslim and Christian holidays so that no student is forced to leave a lecture alone to break their fast, or to sit through an exam on a day their community mourns or celebrates. It looks like shared knowledge production, equitable representation, and genuine partnership.

The future of shared academic space must be open to those who were forced out of it - built on the right of Palestinians to define, interpret, and represent their own knowledge and history. It must be committed to preserving the knowledge carried in exile and displacement a body of thought that is not marginal, but foundational. The academic right of return is, therefore, both a theoretical concept and a practical demand: that the university be structured not in the image of the power which excluded, but shaped by the knowledge that endured.

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