

Open letter from Sumud to the leadership of the University of Helsinki

This letter is addressed to the Rector Sari Lindblom, Vice-Rectors Kai Nordlund, Anne Remes, Jouni Hirvonen, and Hanna Snellman, and the board of the University of Helsinki.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, extending its occupation of Ukrainian territory, the University of Helsinki rightly [condemned](#) the aggression, stopped cooperation with Russian institutions, and expressed its [support](#) to Ukraine and its academic community.

As part of the European University Association, the university [called](#) on "its members and academic communities more generally to do whatever they can to denounce and press for an end to the war, and to provide assistance through whatever means possible to support university communities and all those affected by this conflict".

In taking such a stance, the university rejected the idea that it or its members should be apolitical or remain neutral when faced with massive violations of international law.

We are dismayed that the university has not taken a similar position with regard to the ongoing Israeli attacks against the Palestinian people, particularly in Gaza. The situation could hardly be more serious, and the university has a moral duty to speak out.

Several high-level independent United Nations experts have repeatedly warned of genocide in Gaza. The latest [warning](#), delivered on November 16, stated that the evidence points to a "genocide in the making". The experts noted that "intentional starvation amounts to a war crime", and observed increasing genocidal incitement, overt intent to "destroy the Palestinian people under occupation", colossal death toll and destruction of life-sustaining infrastructure.

The experts noted that the international community, "including not only States but also non-State actors such as businesses, must do everything it can to immediately end the risk of genocide against the Palestinian people".

In his [resignation letter](#) on October 28, Director in the New York Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Craig Mokhiber called Israeli actions in Gaza a "text-book case of genocide".

A number of [prominent](#) UN institutions have stated that Israel is besieging and attacking an entire population, denying it access to "the essentials of survival", and bombing it in their homes, shelters, hospitals and places of worship. The list of organisations includes OCHA, OHCHR, UNDP, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, among others.

In the two months following the attack by Hamas into Israel, which killed 1 200 people, the Israeli attack [has killed over 18 000 Palestinians](#), the vast majority of them civilians, including more than 6 000 children. The roots of the violence trace back to over a century of European colonialism, 75 years of ethnic cleansing, persecution, and dispossession, a history well-documented in research. Gaza has been under siege for over 16 years, endured multiple military invasions, and has for many years faced almost daily attacks by Israeli forces.

In [comparison](#), in Ukraine at least 10 000 civilians, including 560 children, have been killed since February 2022 by the Russian attack.

Israel has [attacked](#) at least five out of the six universities in Gaza. Its attacks have damaged [more than 200](#) schools in Gaza. Due to Israeli colonial violence, [including](#) attacks on universities, universities on the West Bank have had to stop on-site teaching.

António Guterres, the United Nations Secretary-General, has [noted](#) that "**we are witnessing a killing of civilians that is unparalleled and unprecedented in any conflict since I have been Secretary-General**". (Emphasis in the original UN text.)

From such high-level UN officials, these are extraordinary statements.

In line with the gravity and urgency of the situation, the professed ideals of the university, and its stand on the Russian attack on Ukraine, the university could have been expected to take action rapidly.

However, not only has the university stayed silent, it has suppressed students who have appealed to the university to uphold its values. During a peaceful sit-in of the Students for Palestine on November 17, the university cut off electricity and asked the police to disperse the peaceful gathering calling for an end to the genocide. On November 29 the university again responded to a protest by calling the police, who detained 13 protestors.

This contrasts with how the university negotiated with students protesting cuts to education, who even stayed overnight in the university premises. The university must remain a place of critical thinking, where students feel safe to protest and show their opinions.

Palestinian and other Arab students, in particular, suffer from watching the genocide unfold day after day, while their pleas to the university are silenced. This pain builds on years of Arabs being dehumanised in Europe and beyond. The university's indifference to mass killing of hundreds of Palestinians per day shows neglect of students' safety and wellbeing, in striking contrast to how the university reached out and offered support to Ukrainian students and staff.

We are dismayed at this dereliction of duty. The university is not only betraying its stated [values](#) of moral conscience and democratic empowerment with regard to Palestine. In doing so, it also calls into question whether its stand on Ukraine was based on any principles, and tarnishes its future statements on morality, international law, and responsible action. It is not too late for the university to reverse course and uphold its values.

As the eminent academic Edward Said argued, "Beginning is not only a kind of action. It is also a frame of mind, a kind of work, an attitude, a consciousness."

We stand in support of Students for Palestine - Finland, and other activists and students who work for the upholding of universal values at the University of Helsinki, Aalto, UNIarts, Tampere, Turku, and other universities. We call on the University of Helsinki (and all other Finnish universities) to:

- 1) Condemn the ongoing genocide in Gaza, as it condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and call on the Finnish government to work for an immediate ceasefire.
- 2) Provide support to Palestinian students, as it provided to Ukrainian students, and stop repressive measures against peaceful protest.
- 3) Express their support for Palestine and the Palestinian academic community, as it did in the case of Ukraine.
- 4) Immediately cut all ties and announce an end to all cooperation with Israeli academic institutions that are complicit in the [apartheid regime](#), following the [guidelines](#) established by Palestinian civil society.

We await your response in this urgent matter.

Sincerely,

Board of Sumud - The Finnish Palestine Network