

Letter to International Colleagues, regarding Lara AlQassem, October 8th 2018

Dear colleagues,

We – a group of Israeli academics – urge you to make your voice heard in the matter of Ms. Lara Alqasem. We believe that even in these troubling times in Israel and elsewhere, this may be a dangerous turning point when it comes to Israel's academia as a reasonably free, democratic, and independent group of academic institutions.

Lara Alqasem is an American citizen of Palestinian descent. She was admitted as a graduate student to the Hebrew University, and then applied for a suitable Israeli visa, which she did receive. Nevertheless, upon her arrival in Israel, she was denied entry, because of purported support for BDS. Since then, she's been detained pending a final appeal.

For some relevant items, see:

[US Student Denied Entry](#)

[While Israel Detains US student](#)

And the [Ha'aretz editorial](#) calling for her release

Such a measure – preventing an admitted Hebrew University student, holding a valid visa, and posing no credible threat, from entering Israel and pursuing her studies, on the grounds of beefed up allegations of (non-violent) support for the BDS, marks a new low for the Israeli policy on entry, and a new, clear, and very serious danger to the academic independence – and indeed, ability to function – of Israeli academia.

Perhaps for these reasons, Israeli academia has not been silent. The Hebrew University administration has been active, from the day this affair started to unfold, supporting Ms. Alqasem's legal efforts, and indeed joining her in her appeal to the court in request to overrule the decision denying her entry. Hundreds of academics have signed a [petition](#) urging the government to allow Ms. Alqasem's entry. The Hebrew University Senate has passed a decision explaining the absurdity and harm caused by this move, and urging Ms. Alqasem's immediate release (see below as an appendix).

We should note that Lara Alqasem's case does not stand alone - it is part of a process that gradually narrows the open space of free speech in Israel. Peter Beinart's detention at Ben Gurion airport is yet another example. The former head of Israel's Secret Service, the "Shin Bet", [Ami Ayalon asserted a few](#) days ago that questioning and detaining foreigners at the Israeli borders is not the beginning of a slippery slope but a very steep slope and that the Shin Bet which is responsible for this is becoming "a problem to democracy" (see for example also [this case](#)).

We are doing what we can and further protests are expected. Their precise nature will depend on how things proceed in this matter. But we need your help. In the past, the Israeli government has proved remarkably resilient to pressures from academics within, and yet more sensitive to similar pressure from abroad. We urge you to take the following actions

- 1) Join us in our demand to immediately allow Lara Alqasem entry into Israel and enable her to begin her MA studies at the Hebrew University:
"We urge the Minister of Interior, Mr. Deri, and the Minister for Strategic Affairs, Mr. Erdan, to immediately allow Ms. Lara Alqasem's entry into Israel and to safeguard academic freedom and the freedom of speech in Israel".
If you agree to this call please send your name and affiliation to:
ReleaseLaraAlQassem@gmail.com
- 2) Write a letter of protest to one of the Israeli diplomatic delegations
[Use this link](#) for the list in North America and UK, or [this link](#) for Germany.
- 3) Speak out in whatever public venues accessible to you in support of academic freedom in Israel, freedom of speech and democracy at large, to expedite the release of Lara Alqasem and to enable her to join us as a graduate student at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

We sincerely appreciate your personal involvement and voice,

David Enoch, Amos Goldberg, and Tamar Hess

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

The Hebrew University Senate's decision (an unofficial translation)

The Hebrew University Senate urges the Minister of Interior, Mr. Deri, and the Minister for Strategic Affairs, Mr. Erdan, to allow Ms. Lara Alqasem's entry into Israel. Ms. Alqassem is supposed to begin her MA studies at the Hebrew University in just a few days. We urge the court about to rule on her appeal to let her enter Israel and start her studies.

The Hebrew University is a place where ideas are exchanged, and knowledge is created and acquired. It is not a place that fears controversy, and it thrives on the multiplicity and diversity of voices. The minister's decision not to allow a student's entry into Israel merely because of her opinions constitutes a threat to everything the institution of the university represents. This arbitrary treatment of Ms. Alqasem – who has come to Israel bearing a valid visa from the Israeli consulate in Florida – may deter international researchers and students from coming to Israel. Such an extreme measure may only be considered if motivated by strongest, clearest reasons – reasons having to do with the prevention of violence and of expected violations of the law. No such claims have been made in the case of Ms. Alqasem. Claims have been made about Ms. Alqasem's support for the academic boycotting of Israel. But her decision to come to Israel and pursue graduate studies at the Hebrew University testifies to her reservations about such boycotting, as do testimonies from academics who know Ms. Alqasem from her undergraduate studies. If anything, it is the Minister's decision – a decision that undermines claims about Israeli academia's independence of government policy – that strengthens any such boycott far more than Ms. Alqasem's studies. We urge Israeli authorities to promptly change the said decision, and to avoid the harm this decision will cause to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the rest of Israel's research institutions.