

How Haifa University's Students' Union conspired against Palestinians

Thursday 26 September 2024, by [ZOUBI Baker](#) (Date first published: 13 September 2024).

Palestinian students arrived at the union's office to submit their candidacy for elections. The administration slammed the door in their faces.

On Monday morning, students from various political factions arrived at the University of Haifa's Students' Union office. They were there to submit their candidacy for the upcoming campus election, but they hadn't had long to get themselves organized: usually held in December, this year's was quietly brought forward by the current administration, which had buried the announcement deep in the union's website.

After lists of candidates were hastily put together, the in-person registration process itself should have been a quick errand and mere formality. Yet instead, only a handful of students were allowed to register — [all of them](#) current union members seeking reelection — after they each spent around 40 to 50 minutes in the office filling out forms. "Shame! Shame!" shouted the crowd of students who were still waiting outside the office to submit their candidacy, after the union's administration [declared](#) the registration window closed three hours later, and slammed the door in their faces.



University of Haifa (Wikimedia Commons)

This is not, however, only the story of a corrupt student election. It also appears to have been a concerted plan to keep Palestinians out — who, despite making up around 50 percent of the University of Haifa's student body, are not represented in the current union administration at all. Lists aligned with the Palestinian parties Balad and Hadash and the Jewish-Arab socialist movement Standing Together, as well as several independent candidates, were all denied the chance to contest a fair election.

"The announcement that the window was open for submitting lists was published at the bottom of the union's website — we learned about it only five days before the deadline," Udi Ghanayem, head of the Hadash student group at the university, told Local Call and +972. "We managed to assemble a list of candidates from all departments and on Monday morning we arrived at the office to register. They were surprised to see us and wouldn't let us in.

"There were three other students in front of us, each of whom spent around an hour registering inside, even though registration shouldn't take more than a few minutes," he continued. "Then they

told us registration was closed, despite the fact that we were already there. In every election in the world, if you arrive before the deadline, you have the right to vote or participate. Here, they refused to let us register, and brought security personnel to remove us from the building.



Students wait outside the registration office, University of Haifa, September 9, 2024. (Hadaash at University of Haifa)

“The issue didn’t start today,” Ghanayem went on. “They know that Arab students are around half of the student body — and more than half of the eligible voters, because most Arab students pay membership fees to the union.”

Sawsan Zaher, a Palestinian civil and human rights lawyer, wrote to the dean of the university and the union’s election committee, requesting that they reopen the registration process and conduct the election in accordance with the law, and under external supervision. The university responded that the union is an independent organization that doesn’t answer to them; the union’s election committee, for its part, initially ignored Zaher’s messages before eventually stating only that it was looking into the matter. Zaher decided to escalate matters and filed an appeal with the Haifa District Court, which is scheduled for Monday.

“This is an attempt to rob students of the legal, constitutional, and fundamental right of running for office, with complete non-transparency and refusal to give the students any details about the elections,” Zaher explained. “No one knows who the members of the election committee are, even though this matter in particular should be very transparent.”

‘The union is a closed club’

Palestinian students who spoke to Local Call and +972 said this was far from the first instance of discrimination that they’ve faced at the university. “Since the beginning of the war, the union has been [persecuting Arab students](#), inciting against [us] and trying to prevent any of our activities, all while we have no voice in the union,” Moataz Odeh, who belongs to the Balad student group, explained. “This time the conspiracy was very clear.”

Israeli police officers arrest a Palestinian student ahead of a Nakba Day event at Tel Aviv University, May 15, 2022. (Tomer Neuberg/Flash90)

Following the incident, Academia for Equality, a group of left-wing faculty members at Israeli universities, sent a letter to the University of Haifa’s administration. “We are aware that the Students’ Union is an independent organization,” the letter read, which was signed by 130 lecturers. “But if there are substantial flaws in the union’s conduct to the point where there is a real concern that the elected representatives will not be able to adequately represent the interests of the students in the institution, then the university administration must intervene.”

It went on: “The Students’ Union [must] extend the registration period immediately, and allow open registration to any interested student,” while “the university administration must make it clear to the Students’ Union that if it does not immediately correct its ways, the upcoming elections will not be considered legitimate.”

Elijah Levin, a Jewish student who belongs to the university's Standing Together group, told Local Call and +972 that the election process was fishy from the very start. "The very decision to hold elections now, before the start of the school year, is suspicious, since a large number of the students are not at the university — some are even outside the country," she explained.

"Since April, we've been sending emails to the union asking for an election date, and they didn't answer," Levin continued. "Then suddenly we found out that they'd allocated 10 days to register, and the deadline was Sept. 9. They also added new guidelines, including denying eligibility to anyone who was not a member of the union last year, while simultaneously closing the possibility of registering for membership — in other words, a first-year student does not have the right to submit their candidacy. It's a strange law, proving that the union is a closed club."

Levin also believes the union is trying to ingratiate itself with the National Union of Israeli Students, which has been [leading the charge](#) in recent months to [restrict academics' freedom](#) to criticize Israel and Zionism. "The union in Haifa has good relations with the National Union, which is trying to impose an extreme right-wing agenda," Levin said. "They cooperate closely, and the union in Haifa does not want to lose that."

Local Call and +972 contacted the Students' Union at the University of Haifa for comment; their response will be added here as and when it is received.

Baker Zoubi

P.S.

- +972. September 13, 2024:
<https://www.972mag.com/haifa-university-student-union-election-corruption/https://www.972mag.com/palestinian-citizens-knesset-boycott-gaza-war/>

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A version of this article was first published in Hebrew on Local Call. Read it [here](#).

- Baker Zoubi is a journalist from Kufr Misr currently living in Nazareth. Baker has been working in the field of journalism since 2010, initially as a reporter for local Arab media outlets, and later as an editor of the Bokra website. Today, he also works as a researcher and editor for television programs on the Makan and Musawa channels. He writes and posts on his Facebook page various opinion pieces on politics and social issues related to Palestinian society. Recently, he also started writing for Local Call.

- Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war - the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas' murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel's retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are

seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

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