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Laurent Bonnefoy

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## ***French academia, Gaza and Israel after October 7, 2023. A critical assessment***

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Author: Laurent Bonnefoy

Centre de recherches internationales (CERI), Sciences Po/CNRS

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### **Abstract:**

Wars act as trying periods for a wide range of actors. The multifaceted effects of violent conflict on academic production in the social sciences have received little critical self-reflexive scrutiny. The object of this paper is to highlight the varied recompositions in academia in wartime by focusing on France and the war in Gaza that followed the October 7, 2023 attacks in Israel. While presenting the fields of Palestinian and Israeli studies in French universities as largely separate due to distinct institutional subcultures, the paper then highlights how recent developments are breaching the norms that structure the ordered production of knowledge. Interestingly, these violations are occurring less because of an extreme polarization within the field of academia, than because of the attitude of external actors, in particular French public institutions that are using both populist discourses denouncing woke ideologies in universities and anti-terrorism laws to put pressure on academics.

### **Keywords:**

Palestine – Israel – France – Academic freedom – war - warscape

### **Introduction:**

In conjunction to the terrible plight of civilians, military strategies, and the transformation of economies, wars reconfigure fields of academia and expertise. These can then be understood as yet another form of 'warscape' as coined by anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom in the 1990s as she studied Mozambique. The concept defines the variety of spaces characterized by political, social and economic disruption linked to violence, inviting to study the processes through which new orders may emerge<sup>1</sup>.

Among many other things, wars are then also trying periods for researchers, professors, and graduate students as they have an effect on the way scientific norms play out in the university and how knowledge is produced. Armed conflicts thus act as moments of crisis that need to be analysed self-reflexively and critically. Rather surprisingly, this is only rarely the case. Beyond the current issue of PARISS, a recent

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<sup>1</sup> Nordstrom, Carolyn. *A Different Kind of War Story*, Pittsburgh: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997, 272 p.

exception is a project launched in 2024 by Marc Lynch of George Washington University titled 'The war on Gaza and Middle East Political Science'<sup>2</sup>.

Actors of the scientific fields who focus on violence (whether as an object in itself or not) can relevantly be seen as part of what Carolyn Nordstrom calls an '*endlessly complex set of people and personalities, each of whom has a unique relationship to the war and a unique story to tell*'<sup>3</sup>. As such, they are also people who are interconnected to a given conflict and may to some extent depend on it, while also constructing specific narratives that have some degree of influence on the way the war is portrayed, framed, and then transforms. As researchers, professors or graduate students, they evolve in a space, or more precisely a field and sub-fields, that are themselves shaped and restructured by the war, generating new forms of interactions, social orders and capitals<sup>4</sup>.

In fact, for academics, wars can become (at times maybe unrequested) opportunities. One's object of research can suddenly become meaningful, if not interesting in the eyes of colleagues and institutions when it used to be seen as only peripheral. Symbolic resources and financial ones can arise as a consequence, giving birth to a specific economy of expertise and knowledge production that has been analysed critically in a number of situations like that of the Balkans during the 1990s, or linked to 'counterterrorism' after 9/11<sup>5</sup>. The context of Israeli-Palestinian conflict has also been described as one which produces a specific economy of expertise and '*peace business*'<sup>6</sup>.

These transformations generate a series of specific challenges: internal competition, political polarization and deep ethical matters linked for instance to the (il)legitimacy of foreign researchers, independence, collaboration with governmental institutions or the military, access to the field, etc<sup>7</sup>. New dilemmas are also induced as the very object of research may imply to seek to improve the coverage and analysis of a given conflict,

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the publications of the project, see: <https://pomeps.org/category/memos/the-middle-east-and-middle-east-studies-after-gaza-memos>

<sup>3</sup> Nordstrom, Carolyn, 'War on the front lines' in Robben & Nordstrom (eds.), *Fieldwork under Fire. Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, p. 137.

<sup>4</sup> Bacsko, Adam, and Gilles Dorronsoro. "For a Sociological Approach to Civil Wars", *Revue française de science politique*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2017, pp. 309-327.

<sup>5</sup> Literature on the topic is varied: Boyer, Dominic. "Thinking Through the Anthropology of Experts", *Anthropology in Action*, vol. 15, n°2, 2008, pp. 38-46. See also Miller, David and Mills, Tom, "Counterinsurgency and terror expertise: the integration of social scientists in the war effort", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 23, n°2, 2010, pp. 203-221 ; Rakowski, Cathy. "The Ugly Scholar: Neocolonialism and Ethical Issues in International Relations", *The American Sociologist* 24, 3-4 (1993), 69-86. and Bliesemann de Guevara, Berit (ed.). Knowledge Production in Conflict: the International Crisis Group, *Third World Quarterly (special issue)* 35, 4 (2014).

<sup>6</sup> Bouillon, Markus. *The Peace-Business. Money and Power in the Palestine-Israel Conflict*, London: IB Tauris, 2004, 272 p.

<sup>7</sup> Nordstrom, Carolyn, 'War on the front lines' in Robben & Nordstrom (eds.), *Fieldwork under Fire. Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, 310 p.

help voices from the field be heard. Wars which are deemed ‘hidden’ or ‘ignored’ by the ‘international community’ and ‘mainstream media’ add another challenge for external observers<sup>8</sup>. At the methodological level, situations of violence also frequently end up depriving researchers from access to the field, thus generating a paradox: demand for knowledge and analysis rises, while the capacity to carry out state-of-the-art firsthand accumulation of data is impeded if not jeopardized. Categories of expert, researcher and activist can also blur.

Knowledge is evidently controversial and, with good reason, can be understood as a component of domination, one that generally sees “Westerners” interpret a war in which “locals” are portrayed as pawns. The process ends up concealing many of its own ideological parameters within the guise of neutrality and empiricism. Such a critical approach (inspired in particular by analysis produced by Edward Said in his seminal essay *Covering Islam. How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*) has evident relevance. It thus remains much in our scope, yet the object of this article is somewhat different. It aims more specifically to delve into the transformed economy and field of research in a specific war context.

As a political sociologist with a more than two-decade spanning interest in contemporary Yemen, I both witnessed and analysed these transformations in my field in publications and oral communications. Armed conflicts have a deep impact on researchers, either foreign or originating from the country at war or targeted by an external enemy. While my own case-study, affected by an ongoing armed conflict which started in 2015, has only generated limited polarization among the field of international researchers<sup>9</sup>, other wars have a different impact. For example, that with a focus on Syria generated feuds with cross-accusations of complicity with the al-Assad regime or conversely with jihadi groups being thrown at colleagues during lectures or while anonymously reviewing papers for scientific journals. Much like Syrian society itself, the field of ‘Syrian studies’ is to a large extent destroyed, and full of tensions and acrimony.

The object of this paper adds another layer to the reflection on the effects of war on the production of knowledge by academics, and on what sociologist Robert King Merton labelled the ethos of modern science in the 1940s<sup>10</sup>. The paper focuses on the effects of public and political scrutiny within European and North American societies

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<sup>8</sup> Venayre, Sylvain. "L'art de choisir ses victimes. Ce que nous apprend l'histoire des guerres lointaines de l'Europe", *La revue du Crieur* 23 (2023), 6-21

<sup>9</sup> Bonnefoy, Laurent. "Revolution, War, and Transformations in Yemeni Studies", *MERIP*, 301, 2021, online.

<sup>10</sup> Early on in his career, Robert King Merton specified the four imperatives that determine "*the social structures which provide an institutional context*" for scientific development. He mentioned '*communism*' (favouring collaboration), '*universalism*' (existence of "pre-established impersonal criteria"), '*disinterestedness*' (acting for the benefit of common scientific knowledge), and '*organised skepticism*' (detached critical scrutiny). Through these he advocated for a sociological study of scientific institutions. Merton, Robert K. "The Normative Structure of Science (1942)", in Merton, Robert K. (ed.), *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973, pp. 267–278.

on what researchers and professors say or write on the war in Gaza and on violence in Israel since October 7, 2023. The purpose here is to analyse how comments and the study of this conflict (ongoing at the time of writing) by individuals who claim to have a specific legitimacy based on knowledge and experience – professors, researchers, PhD students and post-docs, are being put under pressure, breaching also what Merton called the norm of '*scientific universalism*'. It seeks to understand how this situation is affecting an already ill-secured academic freedom, and fostering more polarization, violating unwritten rules and traditions of academia in so-called liberal societies.

Since historical and social contexts are varied, and levels or forms of pressure may differ from one society to another, the article will focus on the case-study I am most familiar with and have directly practiced, that of contemporary France. How have the latitude of researchers there been affected by political, media and institutional pressures since the attacks of October 7 and their military aftermath in the Gaza strip and elsewhere in Palestine? More specifically, how are academic practices being constrained by ever-expanding accusations of antisemitism and alleged 'incitement to terrorism' in the context of an ever-lasting conflict with deep political ramifications and implications in terms of identity?

My reflection will build mainly on my own experience as a concerned observer more than an actor in the academic field of Palestinian studies; my own professional space – a 'warscape' in its own right, transformed by the decade long armed conflict in Yemen, is somewhat related, but largely separate. The article will feed on the trajectories of colleagues who publish on Palestine and Israel, on internal debates within the profession, a two-year long experience of managing a public research institute in the Palestinian occupied territories between 2010 and 2012, and also my participation to the editorial team of an online media *Orient XXI* which publishes widely on the Middle East, including short papers by academics. It will also feed on a set of similar debates addressed by colleagues like Alexander Cooley in a recent publication<sup>11</sup> or more broadly in a collective brainstorming published by PARISS<sup>12</sup>. Each of these is trying to make sense of what is happening to freedom of speech and academic freedom internationally in the context of the war in Gaza as it unravels.

This contribution will first describe how academic fields focusing on either Israel or Palestine in the humanities have structured over decades in France and gradually polarized in the context of the enduring conflict. The paper will then focus on more recent transformations which occurred after October 7th, 2023 and embody a shrinking space for freedom of expression and research, for access to the field, and for informed epistemic debates, highlighting worrying processes.

## 1) Fragmented fields

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<sup>11</sup> Cooley, Alexandre. "The Uprisings of Gaza: How Geopolitical Crises Have Reshaped Academic Communities from Tahrir to Kyiv", *Political Science Quarterly* (2024), online.

<sup>12</sup> PARISS Collective. "Biographical Reflections On Academic Freedom—Part One", *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences (PARISS)* 5, 1 (2024): 5-37.

a) *An unwritten etiquette*

Interest for the Levant among academics in France is part of an old tradition. Starting with Christian congregations which developed projects in archaeology in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, orientalists serving as diplomats such as Paul-Emile Botta helped gradually establish French institutions, based in Israel and Palestine, that are still active today. These have funded, trained or accompanied generations of specialists of the history and societies of the region that is typically called the Near-East in France.

The Ecole biblique et archéologique française (established in 1890) headed by Dominican friars in East-Jerusalem, the Institut français du Proche-Orient (IFPO, originally established under another name in 1922 in Damascus, and with a dedicated branch in the Palestinian territories), and the Centre de recherche français de Jérusalem (CRFJ, originating in 1952, and which encourages research on Israeli history and society) all contribute to fostering a field of specialists in all disciplines of the humanities. The last two are government funded (managed jointly by the CNRS (Centre national de la recherche scientifique – my own employer) and the French ministry of Foreign Affairs) and have few equivalents in these territories except the Kenyon Institute which acts as the Jerusalem branch of the Council for British Research in the Levant. The two French public research centers offer access to the field as well as scholarships, organize conferences, maintain specialized libraries, and manage collective projects, including ones funded by the European Research Council. They operate mainly in collaboration with French or European universities, as well as with local academic institutions. While they are not the exclusive actors operating in the French academic field - some researchers may prefer to carry out work independently, or through other channels, including ones linked to political or religious movements, they play an important role in structuring the field and embody the ethics of public research in France, guaranteeing a standard level of academic freedom (free choice of research object, anonymity of informants if necessary, possibility to develop critical approaches, including of public policies and institutions).

Active researchers, whether historians, anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists, like Veronique Bontemps, Sylvaine Bulle, Sarah Daoud, Alain Dieckhoff Kamel Doraï, Stephanie Latte-Abdallah, Vincent Lemire, Sbeih Sbeih, Yann Scioldo-Zürcher, Frédérique Shillo, and Dany Trom have all at some point been affiliated or collaborated with either of these two research centres. Their works continue to feed the bibliography in French, English, Arabic and other languages on a wide range of scientific objects.

Due to the areas they operate in and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict itself, both the IFPO and the CRFJ are dominated by a seemingly antagonistic institutional culture that is evidently politically loaded, and can involve biases. Despite being located only a few kilometres away in Jerusalem (but on each side of the so-called 'Green line' separating East and West which serves as the basis for the border between the Occupied Palestinian territories and Israel according to UN resolutions), being affiliated with one or the other can mean very different things when it comes to analysing the conflict, creating bonds with informants and academic institutions or think-tanks. While some of the successive directors of IFPO and CRFJ and researchers may have tried to

bridge differences, polarization due to the almost century old conflict has its own implications on the way the fields of Israeli and Palestinian studies, to a large extent separate, are structured in France.

When they intersected or collided, the unwritten etiquette of academic production and the claim to maintain debates at a so-called rational level have yet for long controlled the division in departments or research centres with a focus on Middle Eastern studies. Mertonian norms of modern science appeared to be preserved. A generally “pacific coexistence” prevailed and it did not entail accusing colleagues of infamy or illegitimacy, at least not within universities. It however episodically did not prevent the cancellation of events organized for instance by student unions in solidarity with Palestinians like in Aix-en-Provence University in November 2022, despite the participation of renown academics.

#### *b) Research, expertise, activism*

Evidently, intersections with activism exist among researchers affiliated with French academic institutions working on either Israel or Palestine due to the political context and their personal trajectories and identities. Focus on international law, colonial practices, debates on apartheid or calls for an academic boycott of Israel are then present, although probably less structured than in North America. These favour the emergence of specific ‘activist scholars’<sup>13</sup>, probably more active in the sub-field of Palestinian studies due to the structuration of an active civil society and important political mobilizations. The dilemmas induced by such a position are neither specific nor new. They have been the object of much methodological and epistemic debates recently<sup>14</sup>.

The intersections between academic circles focusing on Palestine and Israel with the field of expertise, which has developed an important access to public space, also exist. A number of figures often heard in French media and solicited by public institutions (like the ministry of Foreign affairs or the presidency) can claim an affiliation with a university, often as a teacher, but have a production that is poorly linked to disciplinary standards, in particular in terms of methodology and connections to the field, and often rightly seen as biased<sup>15</sup>. In the eyes of the public, their interventions can blur the borders between a scientifically informed knowledge, one that sticks with a scientific

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<sup>13</sup> Bird, Gemma, and Liska Bernet. "Reflections from ‘the Field’: the Activist and the Activist Scholar in Conversation", *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences (PARISS)* 3, 2 (2022): 144-167

<sup>14</sup> Bashiri, Farzana. “Conceptualizing Scholar-Activism Through Scholar-Activist Accounts.” In *Making Universities Matter*, 61-. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2024. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-48799-6\_4.

<sup>15</sup> Frédéric Encel is a good example. A specialist in geopolitics, formerly a member of Zionist extreme-right groups such as the Betar, he teaches at Sciences Po and is a regular speaker on public radio on issues linked to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In parallel, he participates to pro-Israeli lectures. One of these, organized in late May 2024 by an NGO called Diploact France which aims to “reshape the global narrative on Israel” presented on its invitation Frédéric Encel as a “professional in the defense of Israel”. <https://x.com/DidierBillion/status/1790260984025665762>

ethos, and politically loaded commentary. These can negatively affect conceptions of what academic production actually is and entails, for example in terms of peer-reviewing and data collection, protection and disinterested sharing.

These intersections can help define a number of structural differences between categories of expertise and academia. The aim here is certainly not to engage in a blame-game or to stigmatize the production of expertise by think tanks or in-depth reporting from certain media whose journalists have become specialists of so-called 'Palestinian' or 'Israeli' affairs, or of the 'conflict of the Near-East', nor to claim the alleged purity of scientific research. The production of knowledge (understood in a broad sense as the accumulation of data and its analysis, most often along implicit subjective lines and values) is always structured around dilemmas and mixed methods, at times even taking the form of political activism. Nevertheless, expertise can be defined as an instrumental production of knowledge intended mainly to guide decision making, be it in public institutions or in companies. Research, for its part, is embedded in disciplinary questions and mostly based on long-term fieldwork, implying an overspecialization on objects and areas as well as the belonging to a self-delimited epistemic community. Its main focus is ideally independent from demands formulated by political powers – although it remains at times permeable to these, in particular in political science and international relations. Yet, one of the cornerstones of research, in particular when it projects itself as 'critical', is self-reflexiveness. The fact researchers remain tied to "their" field for decades implies specific challenges when it comes to transparency and ethics, also generating frequent mechanisms of sympathy and friendship. The management of these feelings built in the long run becomes a significant issue in war-torn societies.

### *c) Researchers under Israeli pressure*

Building on such conditions of knowledge production, for academics focusing on Palestinian and Israeli societies, the attacks of October 7, 2023 on civilians and the military in the vicinity of the Gaza strip were hardly surprising. Research on Palestinian political mobilizations had widely highlighted the persistence of activism and armed militancy despite repression by the Israeli state and the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian issue was still very much depicted as alive regardless of its disappearance from the international media and diplomatic agendas over the decade before. Publications focused on how Islamist and nationalist movements had restructured around a new generation of militants and a military wing created within Hamas and other armed groups, in and out of the Gaza strip. The livelihoods of Palestinians (concerned for example by what Stéphanie Latte-Abdallah labels a 'prison web' and the fact that around 40% of the adult male population has at some point been held in custody by Israelis<sup>16</sup>) was generating desperation and frustration. The Israeli repression of pacific marches in 2018-2019 which had left 270 Palestinian protestors dead and 25,000 wounded (including more than 7,000 by bullets shot by the Israeli

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<sup>16</sup> Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, *A History of Confinement in Palestine: The Prison Web*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 416 p.



army) over the course of a little over a year according to UN figures was undoubtedly feeding violence. In parallel, the political field in Israel was 'radicalizing' election after election, and the state was being appropriately analysed through its all-encompassing colonial structures.

A global epistemic community of researchers, with an increasing implication of Palestinian academics and some Israelis like Ilan Pappé and Eyal Weizman, was already confronted to restrictions coming from the Israeli government in terms of mobility and access. Gaza itself was generally out of bounds for foreign researchers due to the policy of Israel which fully controlled entries, repeatedly refusing to grant entry to academics. Over the years, numerous French academics working on the Palestinian territories were barred entry into Jerusalem, rejected access to the Ben Gurion international airport, imposed entry through the Allenby Bridge between Jordan and the West Bank – but under Israeli control, expelled, and almost systematically questioned for hours by Israeli officials at border crossings or at checkpoints. They had their phones, computers and personal items searched in the name of security, often ending up in their underwear for a body search. While journalists affiliated with Western mainstream media would consider this policy as a clear violation of the freedom of press, this remains the standard experience of academics who focus on Palestinian society and of ones seen as critical of Israeli policies. It highlights the urgency of mechanisms of protection for academics in all contexts, including in ones described as democratic.

While these political and social dynamics were being highlighted in academic publications, lectures and interventions in the media, they were also faced with accusations by pro-Israeli government outlets or in the social media – outside of academia itself. Manifest attempts by certain groups and organizations, including members of French Parliament and members of government, to create an equivalence between the critique of Israel and of Zionism with antisemitism repeatedly put pressure on public speech and on the expressions of academics<sup>17</sup>. World renown sociologist Edgar Morin, an active resistant to Nazism during the Second World War, had been sued in 2002 by pro-Israeli government groups for an op-ed in *Le Monde*. It took four years of procedure to decide that his critique of Israeli policies had to do with the freedom of expression, and not with antisemitism.

As elsewhere in Western Europe and North America, the polarization of the academic fields was certainly growing. It appeared to be somewhat cyclical, connected to the state of the stalemate in the Near-East and then often fuelled by public intellectuals or political activists more than between academics themselves, or by students. No equivalent to the infamous *Campus Watch* in the United States which serves since 2002 as an aggressive pro-Israeli government whistle blower in universities<sup>18</sup> appeared to exist in the French scene. As a consequence, despite evident fragmentation and

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<sup>17</sup> Vidal, Dominique. *Antisionisme = antisémitisme ? Réponse à Emmanuel Macron*, Paris: Libertalia, 2018, 128 p.

<sup>18</sup> Benin, Joel. "The Israelization of American Middle East Policy Discourse", *Social Text* (2003) 21 (2 (75)): 125–140.

polarization, the space of academic expression and ethos were then to a certain extent preserved in what may have seemed like an ivory tower.

## 2) Increased pressures after October 7

### a) *Beyond sideration*

The coordinated attacks of October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023 in Israel left many in shock. The military response by the Israeli army, leaving tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians dead and the whole of the Gaza strip turned to rubble generated massive debates and criticism, including among Israelis, and within international academic circles. The successive rulings by the International Criminal Court calling for Israel to halt its war highlighted the plausibility of genocide and yet had little if any effect on the military strategy of the Israeli government. It did not either transform the policies of most governments, North American or European, which supported Israel's so-called right to self-defence – a category specialists of international law frequently view as specious<sup>19</sup>. Both the attack of 2023 and the subsequent war – chapters of a century old confrontation, appear to have deep implications, transforming the 'warscape' of French academia on Palestine and Israel. The level of preservation of the scientific ethos was then evidently put to test, less because of internal competition to the field than because of external interventions. The most manifest implication is linked to the rise of institutional scrutiny on what academics say or publish, pushing forward an ever-extensive definition of what antisemitism and support for 'terrorism' mean. While mobilizations in solidarity with Palestinians by students in universities across the globe deserve a specific scrutiny, pressures on academic freedom are somewhat different as they target actors with a status linked to their domain of expertise and potential support by a community of peers.

The days following the attacks launched by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups against civilians and military which left 1,143 dead and 251 hostage became a trying period. Instantly, ministries advised local authorities in France to be especially cautious. On October 9<sup>th</sup>, the minister of Higher education Sylvie Retailleau in particular sent a directive to the presidents of public universities inviting them to transfer the names of people (teachers, reserachers, employees and students) who could be seen as supporting Hamas, developing non-conforming ideas and ideological "drifts" ("*dérives*"). Such a letter was paving the way for denunciations, as well as self-censorship among academics. Three days later, the chairman of the CNRS, Antoine Petit, wrote a letter to all of the 32,000 CNRS employees stating: "*CNRS employees may speak publicly. They have complete freedom of expression, provided they do not use their position to express their personal political or philosophical opinions.*" He then added that "*any infringement of memory laws (lois mémorielles<sup>20</sup>), apology for*

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<sup>19</sup> Rezagui, Insaf. «Israël a-t-il, le droit de se défendre?», *Yaani*, April 25, 2024 : <https://www.yaani.fr/post/isra%C3%ABl-a-t-il-le-droit-de-se-d%C3%A9fendre>

<sup>20</sup> In France, these *lois mémorielles* generally refer to four distinct laws adopted by parliament that acknowledge the uncontested reality of specific historical events in particular massacres and slavery. The most significant of these laws is the 'loi Gayssot' adopted on July 13, 1990 which restricts the expression

*terrorism, incitement to hatred or violence or any other breach of the law, may be subject to criminal and disciplinary proceedings*". No such direct clarification of the latitude of researchers affiliated with the CNRS had ever occurred before. The timing and its link to one specific event, that of October 7 attacks in Israel, was in itself indicative of the types of offenses that could be targeted, expressing a certain form of pressure of researchers by public institutions.

Consequently, a number of academic meetings that were due soon after the attacks were postponed, more or less spontaneously by the organizers or by host institutions. Some were cancelled pure and simple following demands by the police. Such was the case of a lecture in Montpellier by Joseph Daher formerly affiliated with the European University Institute of Florence and with the University of Lausanne. Fayard the publisher since 2008 of the French translation of Israeli historian Ilan Pappé's seminal work *Le nettoyage ethnique de la Palestine* on the forced displacement of over 700 000 Palestinians in 1948 suddenly retrieved the monograph from its catalogue without giving explanations. Rights were transferred by the author to an alternative publishing house La Fabrique.

In at least two instances, specialists of the contemporary Arab World were denounced by colleagues and faced serious consequences. The first, was forced to resign from a number of collective positions, for a post on social media that was interpreted as support for Hamas. Despite a swift removal of the post and public excuses, his reputation was durably affected. Another scholar, an anthropologist with a long-lasting interest for Palestinian society, faced internal charges by the CNRS for forwarding a text on a professional list of her university that linked the attacks of October 7<sup>th</sup> to acts of resistance. She was tried in a "disciplinary procedure" of the CNRS and sanctioned, confronting her to a range of insults and threats as her case was made public. This very example highlighted a manifest breach in the unwritten etiquette or ethos of academic debate with colleagues denouncing colleagues for a political matter, then rejecting the Mertonian principle of organized skepticism and implicitly calling for an academic 'witch hunt'.

A month after the beginning of the Israeli offensive in Gaza, another breach in the unwritten etiquette of academia occurred between renown academics following the publication by Didier Fassin (professor at the Collège de France in anthropology, thus himself not a specialist of Palestinian history) of an article which drew a parallel between the genocide of the Hereros in Namibia in 1904 and the war in Gaza<sup>21</sup>. Days later, in the same online journal, AOC, colleagues of Fassin, including sociologists

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of doubts regarding the existence of the crimes against humanity as defined by the International Military Tribunal of Nuremberg. Its adoption followed a controversy around the publications of Robert Faurisson, a lecturer in literature at Université Lyon II, who negated the existence of the Holocaust of the Jews. Since then, making such claims is considered a criminal offence in France. Many prominent historians have however been critical of these laws. See: Sébastien Ledoux, *Les lois mémorielles en Europe*, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2020, 264 p.

<sup>21</sup> Fassin, Didier. « Le spectre d'un génocide à Gaza », AOC, November 1, 2023 :

<https://aoc.media/opinion/2023/10/31/le-spectre-dun-genocide-a-gaza/>

Dany Trom and Luc Boltanski wrote a slanderous response accusing him of “*reactivating a classical antisemitic gesture*”<sup>22</sup>. In another format, the same Didier Fassin further analysed the processes through which the criminalization of solidarity as well as the construction of consent for the massacre of civilians in Gaza were a form of moral defeat and a historical renunciation of French society and elites<sup>23</sup>. His essay published a year after the beginning of the war, triggered controversy but was yet important as it came from a prestigious academic external to the field of Palestinian studies. Still, the context generated widespread self-censorship among the community of specialists of Palestine in the social sciences, many feeling that the situation was an infringement of their academic freedom.

#### *b) Academic freedom at risk*

Breaches grew deeper as the whole of the public space was being constrained by a number of accusations against discourses seen as pro-Palestinian. Constraints imposed by public authorities in France coalesced both conservative discourses against the so-called woke ideology as embodied by the Observatoire du décolonialisme (which was rebranded Observatoire des ideologies identitaires involving academics such as historian Pierre Vermeren and sociologist Nathalie Heinich), and ‘antiterrorism laws’.

Indeed, pressure put on voices seen as sympathetic to Palestine, including among academics, were put into effect through the recycling of a 2014 law against the ‘apology of terrorism’. While the law had been voted in the context of the transfer of over a thousand French citizens to the armed front in Syria and Iraq in the mid-2010s and as a way of preventing the spread of such jihadi ideology, it became years later a tool to pressure not only civil society actors, including for example members of workers’ unions and local Muslim leaders, but also academics<sup>24</sup>. Renown international specialist of Islamist movements, François Burgat, a former director of IFPO, was summoned for interrogation by the police in July 2024 allegedly for a tweet. At the time of writing, exact charges held against him for ‘apology of terrorism’ had not been made public. In the context of repression of freedom of expression in solidarity with Palestinians, he publicly considered that such an accusation was a “*badge of honour*”.

This form of public pressure unfolded at a specific time. In early 2021, French university had been attacked by the intellectuals close to the Observatoire du décolonialisme, allegedly for being dominated by “*islamo-leftists*”. The accusation had even been mentioned by the minister of Higher education Frédérique Vidal as she claimed universities were “*turned gangrenous*” by this ideology, consequently calling for a

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<sup>22</sup> Collective. « Un génocide à Gaza ? Une réponse à Didier Fassin », AOC, November 13, 2023 : <https://aoc.media/opinion/2023/11/12/un-genocide-a-gaza-une-reponse-a-didier-fassin/>

<sup>23</sup> Fassin, Didier. *Une étrange défaite. Sur le consentement à l'écrasement de Gaza*, Paris : La découverte, 2024, 198 p.

<sup>24</sup> Bonnefoy Laurent. “In France, freedom of speech flouted and repressed”, *Orient XXI*, November 17, 2023: <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/in-france-freedom-of-speech-flouted-and-repressed,6883>

public inquiry. The CNRS itself, as well as the Conference of presidents of universities, had responded that no such thing as “*islamo-leftism*” existed, giving a temporary halt to these somewhat absurd, but politically loaded accusations.

Universities were further put under pressure as of late September 2023 when the Union des étudiants juifs de France (UEJF) funded a study by Ipsos, one of the main French polling institutes, to measure antisemitism within higher education. In the weeks and months after October 7, the report served to dramatize and politicize incidents that would otherwise have gone unnoticed: a professor making bad jokes or the stupid comments of a student. It was followed in mid-2024 by a report by the higher chamber of Parliament, the Senate, to support accusations of widespread antisemitism among students as well as faculty in French universities. The authors of the report, coming from a multipartisan background, gave direct relevance to an impressionistic concept of “*atmosphere antisemitism*” as described by the UEJF in its testimony before the senators.

All these enquiries served to portray a university that was complicit with racist biases against Jews and accused it of turning a blind eye to the issue. It was in this context that a series of lecturers, none with permanent academic positions though or specializing on the Middle East, were sacked paving way to often defaming media campaigns. One teacher had for instance called for academic boycott of Israel in front of his students – some of whom had recorded him to later have it broadcast by a pro-Israeli government social media account Sword of Salomon, then forcing members of government to react.

A highly inflammable object in its own right due to its function as the institution which traditionally (re)produces the political elites in France, Sciences Po embodied in the spring of 2024 the direct involvement of the French government in the stigmatization of universities and social sciences in the context of the war in Gaza. On March 13th, 2024, only weeks after being nominated as Prime Minister, Gabriel Attal popped up uninvited during a board of administrators of Sciences Po to scold the institution, claiming it embodied the impression “*that a fish always rots from the head [ie. its elites]*”<sup>25</sup>. His intervention was allegedly a reaction to a mobilization by students in support of Palestinians that had given way to poorly substantiated accusations of antisemitism by other students. The pressure put on Sciences Po, irrespective of academic freedom, served as a means by the government to show its commitment to tackle what it labelled anti-Jewish discourses. It also was meant to pay lip-service to anti-elite and anti-woke discourses that had been widely broadcast among conservative mass media and frequently targeted Sciences Po. It defamed students that had mobilized and called for internal disciplinary procedures. Conservative parties followed suit with the head of the Ile-de-France region, Valerie Pécresse, deciding to defund the university (suspending a one million Euro budget line) due to a “*radicalized minority advocating for the hatred of Jews*”. She then called for a necessary “*outburst of authority*”. In April and May 2024, and then again in October 2024, police interventions to evacuate student camps

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<sup>25</sup> Bayart, Jean-François. “Sciences Po, Université bananière?”, Le club de Mediapart, March 16, 2024: <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/jean-francois-bayart/blog/160324/sciences-po-universite-bananiere>

supporting Palestine (a kind of security measure that had never been taken at Sciences Po before despite numerous student mobilizations and occupations over its 150 year long history) shocked the academic community. In October 2024, as a new academic year had started and a new director of the university had been elected, four students were accused of chanting pro-Palestinian slogans at a gathering with companies, thus allegedly defaming the University. As they were waiting for a disciplinary committee to gather, they were barred entry in the premises of the university for weeks, forced to study on-line. For the new director, such a measure was apparently a sign of his willingness to prove his authority in the eyes of the mass media and decision makers, as well as in those of private donors. The whole situation highlighted just how universities are weak institutions in the face of the state (and private companies), most often largely incapable of generating their own financial resources, and then subject to such pressure.

These discourses and decisions stigmatizing universities further ended up putting into question the scientific production of academics, irrespective of the fact no examples of problematic articles or contributions by specialists of either Israel or Palestine within the university, Sciences Po or more generally, could ever be quoted. It also put into question the quality of teachings and of the knowledge transferred to students, implying these were biased and were feeding antisemitism or even 'terrorism'. The whole of the sequence clearly highlights just how academic freedom is fragile and how the specific dimensions of research and knowledge production are increasingly instrumentalized by political figures with a populist agenda.

### *c) In defence of academic freedom*

Unsurprisingly, public scrutiny and pressure on the academic field following October 7 triggered reactions within the academic field. Petitions in support of the defense of academic freedom were signed to by impressive numbers either to defend colleagues specifically<sup>26</sup>, or general principles<sup>27</sup>. An informal newsletter called *Libertés Académiques sur la Palestine* (Libacapal) was created by young researchers, aiming to document breaches in academic freedom in France but also beyond. It for instance gave updates on the case of professor of law Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian suspended by the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and briefly detained by the police following statements on Zionism.

Among academics in France, the surprise intervention of Gabriel Attal at Sciences Po was also rather unanimously criticized. Professor of public law at Panthéon Assas

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<sup>26</sup> Collective, "François Burgat. Soutien à la liberté d'expression et de recherche", L'Humanité, July 12, 2024: <https://www.humanite.fr/en-debat/libertes-publiques/francois-burgat-soutien-a-la-liberte-dexpression-et-de-recherche>

<sup>27</sup> Collective, "Défendre les libertés d'expression sur la Palestine. Un enjeu académique", Le club de Médiapart, November 15, 2023: <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/les-invites-de-mediapart/blog/151123/defendre-les-libertes-dexpression-sur-la-palestine-un-enjeu-academique>

University, Olivier Beaud described it as a “*blatant violation of academic freedom*”<sup>28</sup>. Within Sciences Po, a series of texts published by departments and research centres following the Prime Minister’s visit also defended students from blunt accusations of antisemitism and rejected political instrumentalization. These called for an increased role of researchers to ease tensions, contextualize and historicize rather than for a public scrutiny of academic discourses. Members of the faculty in Sciences Po were themselves very much aware of issues linked to academic freedom at the international level following the incarceration by Iran of two colleague researchers, Fariba Adelkhah and Roland Marchal. The former had been liberated in mid-October 2023 after more than four years in custody, while the latter had spent nine months in the jails of the Islamic Republic.

Gradually, mobilizations and debates among academics highlighted how much the link between Gaza and academic freedom goes beyond matters related to tensions within the fields of Israeli and Palestinian studies in France, and to the pressure being put on students by public institutions. A different framing gradually emerged, one that highlighted the destruction of all twelve universities in Gaza and a wide range of schools because of the bombings of the Israeli army. The spread of a new concept, ‘scholasticide’ (as coined by Palestinian scholar Karma Nabulsi in 2009) or ‘educide’, turned the focus on the experiences of Palestinian academics and students and on the fact the war was obliterating their capacity to participate to the international academic community<sup>29</sup>. In France programmes funded by universities to offer safe havens for Gazan academics, in particular one called ‘Pause’, were little more than symbolic, in particular as invited academics most often had no possibility to leave Gaza.

The focus on ‘scholasticide’ and the context which had in 2022 favoured an almost unanimous and instant boycott of Russian scientific institutions following the invasion of Ukraine only seemingly legitimized discourses on the boycott of Israeli universities. The debate, as structured by the wider BDS movement (Boycott, divestment, sanctions), had been only marginal in French context in the years prior to 2023. It is still met with resistance from many in the academic community, often using rational argumentation<sup>30</sup>. The possibility to address the complex issue of such an academic

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<sup>28</sup> Beaud, Olivier, “L’intrusion de Gabriel Attal dans le conseil d’administration de Sciences Po est une flagrante violation de la liberté académique”, *Le Monde*, March 21, 2024:

[https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2024/03/21/l-intrusion-de-gabriel-attal-dans-le-conseil-d-administration-de-sciences-po-est-une-flagrante-violation-de-la-liberte-academique\\_6223249\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2024/03/21/l-intrusion-de-gabriel-attal-dans-le-conseil-d-administration-de-sciences-po-est-une-flagrante-violation-de-la-liberte-academique_6223249_3232.html)

<sup>29</sup> Ibrahim S.I Rabaia and Lourdes Habash, *The Hidden War on Higher Education: Unmasking the ‘Educide’ in Gaza*, POMEPS memos, April 2024:

<https://pomeps.org/the-hidden-war-on-higher-education-unmasking-the-educide-in-gaza>

<sup>30</sup> Von Buzekist, Astrid, “Boycott des universités israéliennes: ‘Divorcer des meilleurs critiques du gouvernement Nétanyahou serait une grave erreur’”, *Le Monde*, May 21, 2024: [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2024/05/21/boycott-des-universites-israeliennes-peu-d-universitaires-serieux-defendent-la-poursuite-de-l-occupation-des-territoires-en-cisjordanie\\_6234613\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2024/05/21/boycott-des-universites-israeliennes-peu-d-universitaires-serieux-defendent-la-poursuite-de-l-occupation-des-territoires-en-cisjordanie_6234613_3232.html)

boycott, despite being informed for instance by the existing connections between certain partner universities like Bar-Ilan and the Israeli army, and also by international conventions<sup>31</sup>, remained largely elusive and to a large extent taboo. This fact generates many misunderstandings with students who mobilize in solidarity with Palestinians since October 7, and also at the international level<sup>32</sup>. They willingly highlight the biases that structure the dominant response of public institutions and the media in France facing the war in Gaza.

### **Conclusion:**

French academia focusing on Israel and Palestine has undergone restructuring in the context of violent conflict since October 7. The most manifest evolution in the 'warscape' of academic production is linked to breaches in norms and an implicit etiquette that structure the ordered production of knowledge in the contemporary social sciences. These violations, as worrying and problematic as they are, are occurring less because of an extreme polarization within the field of academia, than because of the attitude of external actors: public institutions, lobby groups, and the media. These are surely putting pressure on academic freedom, generating great unease. Such a process highlights first of all the illiberal dynamics that are unfolding in western democracies and which target universities and academics. The process also embodies the weakness of scientific culture in advanced societies. A misunderstanding regarding how the production of knowledge and analysis function is growing and academics are increasingly being left alone to defend the scientific ethos and their institutional conditions of existence.

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<sup>31</sup> Wind, Maya. *Towers of Ivory and Steel: How Israeli Universities Deny Palestinian Freedom*, New York: Verso, 2024, 288 p.

<sup>32</sup> Uddin, Tasnima and A H Misbach, "Gaza has shown European universities are no longer places of free inquiry", *Al Jazeera English*, September 1, 2024 :

<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/9/1/gaza-has-shown-european-universities-are-no-longer-places-for-free-inquiry>



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Author: Laurent Bonnefoy

PARISS Special Issue

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**Abstract:**

Wars act as trying periods for a wide range of actors. The multifaceted effects of violent conflict on academic production in the social sciences have received little critical self-reflexive scrutiny. The object of this paper is to highlight the varied recompositions in academia in wartime by focusing on France and the war in Gaza that followed the October 7, 2023 attacks in Israel. While presenting the fields of Palestinian and Israeli studies in French universities as largely separate due to distinct institutional subcultures, the paper then highlights how recent developments are breaching the norms that structure the ordered production of knowledge. Interestingly, these violations are occurring less because of an extreme polarization within the field of academia, than because of the attitude of external actors, in particular French public institutions that are using both populist discourses denouncing woke ideologies in universities and anti-terrorism laws to put pressure on academics.

**Keywords:**

Palestine – Israel – France – Academic freedom – war - warscape

**Introduction:**

In conjunction to the terrible plight of civilians, military strategies, and the transformation of economies, wars reconfigure fields of academia and expertise. These can then be understood as yet another form of ‘warscape’ as coined by anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom in the 1990s as she studied Mozambique. The concept defines the variety of spaces characterized by political, social and economic disruption linked to violence, inviting to study the processes through which new orders may emerge<sup>33</sup>.

Among many other things, wars are then also trying periods for researchers, professors, and graduate students as they have an effect on the way scientific norms play out in the university and how knowledge is produced. Armed conflicts thus act as moments of crisis that need to be analysed self-reflexively and critically. Rather surprisingly, this is only rarely the case. Beyond the current issue of PARISS, a recent exception is a project launched in 2024 by Marc Lynch of George Washington University titled ‘The war on Gaza and Middle East Political Science’<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> Nordstrom, Carolyn. *A Different Kind of War Story*, Pittsburgh: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997, 272 p.

<sup>34</sup> For more on the publications of the project, see: <https://pomeps.org/category/memos/the-middle-east-and-middle-east-studies-after-gaza-memos>

Actors of the scientific fields who focus on violence (whether as an object in itself or not) can relevantly be seen as part of what Carolyn Nordstrom calls an '*endlessly complex set of people and personalities, each of whom has a unique relationship to the war and a unique story to tell*'<sup>35</sup>. As such, they are also people who are interconnected to a given conflict and may to some extent depend on it, while also constructing specific narratives that have some degree of influence on the way the war is portrayed, framed, and then transforms. As researchers, professors or graduate students, they evolve in a space, or more precisely a field and sub-fields, that are themselves shaped and restructured by the war, generating new forms of interactions, social orders and capitals<sup>36</sup>.

In fact, for academics, wars can become (at times maybe unrequested) opportunities. One's object of research can suddenly become meaningful, if not interesting in the eyes of colleagues and institutions when it used to be seen as only peripheral. Symbolic resources and financial ones can arise as a consequence, giving birth to a specific economy of expertise and knowledge production that has been analysed critically in a number of situations like that of the Balkans during the 1990s, or linked to 'counterterrorism' after 9/11<sup>37</sup>. The context of Israeli-Palestinian conflict has also been described as one which produces a specific economy of expertise and '*peace business*'<sup>38</sup>.

These transformations generate a series of specific challenges: internal competition, political polarization and deep ethical matters linked for instance to the (il)legitimacy of foreign researchers, independence, collaboration with governmental institutions or the military, access to the field, etc<sup>39</sup>. New dilemmas are also induced as the very object of research may imply to seek to improve the coverage and analysis of a given conflict, help voices from the field be heard. Wars which are deemed 'hidden' or 'ignored' by the 'international community' and 'mainstream media' add another challenge for

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<sup>35</sup> Nordstrom, Carolyn, 'War on the front lines' in Robben & Nordstrom (eds.), *Fieldwork under Fire. Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, p. 137.

<sup>36</sup> Baczko, Adam, and Gilles Dorransoro. "For a Sociological Approach to Civil Wars", *Revue française de science politique*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2017, pp. 309-327.

<sup>37</sup> Literature on the topic is varied: Boyer, Dominic. "Thinking Through the Anthropology of Experts", *Anthropology in Action*, vol. 15, n°2, 2008, pp. 38-46. See also Miller, David and Mills, Tom, "Counterinsurgency and terror expertise: the integration of social scientists in the war effort", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 23, n°2, 2010, pp. 203-221 ; Rakowski, Cathy. "The Ugly Scholar: Neocolonialism and Ethical Issues in International Relations", *The American Sociologist* 24, 3-4 (1993), 69-86. and Bliesemann de Guevara, Berit (ed.). Knowledge Production in Conflict: the International Crisis Group, *Third World Quarterly (special issue)* 35, 4 (2014).

<sup>38</sup> Bouillon, Markus. *The Peace-Business. Money and Power in the Palestine-Israel Conflict*, London: IB Tauris, 2004, 272 p.

<sup>39</sup> Nordstrom, Carolyn, 'War on the front lines' in Robben & Nordstrom (eds.), *Fieldwork under Fire. Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, 310 p.

external observers<sup>40</sup>. At the methodological level, situations of violence also frequently end up depriving researchers from access to the field, thus generating a paradox: demand for knowledge and analysis rises, while the capacity to carry out state-of-the-art firsthand accumulation of data is impeded if not jeopardized. Categories of expert, researcher and activist can also blur.

Knowledge is evidently controversial and, with good reason, can be understood as a component of domination, one that generally sees “Westerners” interpret a war in which “locals” are portrayed as pawns. The process ends up concealing many of its own ideological parameters within the guise of neutrality and empiricism. Such a critical approach (inspired in particular by analysis produced by Edward Said in his seminal essay *Covering Islam. How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*) has evident relevance. It thus remains much in our scope, yet the object of this article is somewhat different. It aims more specifically to delve into the transformed economy and field of research in a specific war context.

As a political sociologist with a more than two-decade spanning interest in contemporary Yemen, I both witnessed and analysed these transformations in my field in publications and oral communications. Armed conflicts have a deep impact on researchers, either foreign or originating from the country at war or targeted by an external enemy. While my own case-study, affected by an ongoing armed conflict which started in 2015, has only generated limited polarization among the field of international researchers<sup>41</sup>, other wars have a different impact. For example, that with a focus on Syria generated feuds with cross-accusations of complicity with the al-Assad regime or conversely with jihadi groups being thrown at colleagues during lectures or while anonymously reviewing papers for scientific journals. Much like Syrian society itself, the field of ‘Syrian studies’ is to a large extent destroyed, and full of tensions and acrimony.

The object of this paper adds another layer to the reflection on the effects of war on the production of knowledge by academics, and on what sociologist Robert King Merton labelled the ethos of modern science in the 1940s<sup>42</sup>. The paper focuses on the effects of public and political scrutiny within European and North American societies on what researchers and professors say or write on the war in Gaza and on violence in Israel since October 7, 2023. The purpose here is to analyse how comments and

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<sup>40</sup> Venayre, Sylvain. "L'art de choisir ses victimes. Ce que nous apprend l'histoire des guerres lointaines de l'Europe", *La revue du Crieur* 23 (2023), 6-21

<sup>41</sup> Bonnefoy, Laurent. "Revolution, War, and Transformations in Yemeni Studies", *MERIP*, 301, 2021, online.

<sup>42</sup> Early on in his career, Robert King Merton specified the four imperatives that determine "*the social structures which provide an institutional context*" for scientific development. He mentioned '*communism*' (favouring collaboration), '*universalism*' (existence of "pre-established impersonal criteria"), '*disinterestedness*' (acting for the benefit of common scientific knowledge), and '*organised skepticism*' (detached critical scrutiny). Through these he advocated for a sociological study of scientific institutions. Merton, Robert K. "The Normative Structure of Science (1942)", in Merton, Robert K. (ed.), *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973, pp. 267–278.

the study of this conflict (ongoing at the time of writing) by individuals who claim to have a specific legitimacy based on knowledge and experience – professors, researchers, PhD students and post-docs, are being put under pressure, breaching also what Merton called the norm of '*scientific universalism*'. It seeks to understand how this situation is affecting an already ill-secured academic freedom, and fostering more polarization, violating unwritten rules and traditions of academia in so-called liberal societies.

Since historical and social contexts are varied, and levels or forms of pressure may differ from one society to another, the article will focus on the case-study I am most familiar with and have directly practiced, that of contemporary France. How have the latitude of researchers there been affected by political, media and institutional pressures since the attacks of October 7 and their military aftermath in the Gaza strip and elsewhere in Palestine? More specifically, how are academic practices being constrained by ever-expanding accusations of antisemitism and alleged 'incitement to terrorism' in the context of an ever-lasting conflict with deep political ramifications and implications in terms of identity?

My reflection will build mainly on my own experience as a concerned observer more than an actor in the academic field of Palestinian studies; my own professional space – a 'warscape' in its own right, transformed by the decade long armed conflict in Yemen, is somewhat related, but largely separate. The article will feed on the trajectories of colleagues who publish on Palestine and Israel, on internal debates within the profession, a two year long experience of managing a public research institute in the Palestinian occupied territories between 2010 and 2012, and also my participation to the editorial team of an online media *Orient XXI* which publishes widely on the Middle East, including short papers by academics. It will also feed on a set of similar debates addressed by colleagues like Alexander Cooley in a recent publication<sup>43</sup> or more broadly in a collective brainstorming published by PARISS<sup>44</sup>. Each of these is trying to make sense of what is happening to freedom of speech and academic freedom internationally in the context of the war in Gaza as it unravels.

This contribution will first describe how academic fields focusing on either Israel or Palestine in the humanities have structured over decades in France and gradually polarized in the context of the enduring conflict. The paper will then focus on more recent transformations which occurred after October 7th, 2023 and embody a shrinking space for freedom of expression and research, for access to the field, and for informed epistemic debates, highlighting worrying processes.

## **1) Fragmented fields**

### **a) *An unwritten etiquette***

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<sup>43</sup> Cooley, Alexandre. "The Uprisings of Gaza: How Geopolitical Crises Have Reshaped Academic Communities from Tahrir to Kyiv", *Political Science Quarterly* (2024), online.

<sup>44</sup> PARISS Collective. "Biographical Reflections On Academic Freedom—Part One", *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences (PARISS)* 5, 1 (2024): 5-37.

Interest for the Levant among academics in France is part of an old tradition. Starting with Christian congregations which developed projects in archaeology in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, orientalist serving as diplomats such as Paul-Emile Botta helped gradually establish French institutions, based in Israel and Palestine, that are still active today. These have funded, trained or accompanied generations of specialists of the history and societies of the region that is typically called the Near-East in France.

The Ecole biblique et archéologique française (established in 1890) headed by Dominican friars in East-Jerusalem, the Institut français du Proche-Orient (IFPO, originally established under another name in 1922 in Damascus, and with a dedicated branch in the Palestinian territories), and the Centre de recherche français de Jérusalem (CRFJ, originating in 1952, and which encourages research on Israeli history and society) all contribute to fostering a field of specialists in all disciplines of the humanities. The last two are government funded (managed jointly by the CNRS (Centre national de la recherche scientifique – my own employer) and the French ministry of Foreign Affairs) and have few equivalents in these territories except the Kenyon Institute which acts as the Jerusalem branch of the Council for British Research in the Levant. The two French public research centers offer access to the field as well as scholarships, organize conferences, maintain specialized libraries, and manage collective projects, including ones funded by the European Research Council. They operate mainly in collaboration with French or European universities, as well as with local academic institutions. While they are not the exclusive actors operating in the French academic field - some researchers may prefer to carry out work independently, or through other channels, including ones linked to political or religious movements, they play an important role in structuring the field and embody the ethics of public research in France, guaranteeing a standard level of academic freedom (free choice of research object, anonymity of informants if necessary, possibility to develop critical approaches, including of public policies and institutions).

Active researchers, whether historians, anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists, like Veronique Bontemps, Sylvaine Bulle, Sarah Daoud, Alain Dieckhoff Kamel Dorai, Stephanie Latte-Abdallah, Jean-François Legrain, Vincent Lemire, Sbeih Sbeih and Frédérique Shillo have all at some point been affiliated or collaborated with either of these two research centres. Their works continue to feed the bibliography in French, English, Arabic and other languages on a wide range of scientific objects.

Due to the areas they operate in and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict itself, both the IFPO and the CRFJ are dominated by a seemingly antagonistic institutional culture that is evidently politically loaded, and can involve biases. Despite being located only a few kilometres away in Jerusalem (but on each side of the so-called 'Green line' separating East and West which serves as the basis for the border between the Occupied Palestinian territories and Israel according to UN resolutions), being affiliated with one or the other can mean very different things when it comes to analysing the conflict, creating bonds with informants and academic institutions or think-tanks. While some of the successive directors of IFPO and CRFJ and researchers may have tried to bridge differences, polarization due to the almost century old conflict has its own

implications on the way the fields of Israeli and Palestinian studies, to a large extent separate, are structured in France.

When they intersected or collided, the unwritten etiquette of academic production and the claim to maintain debates at a so-called rational level have yet for long controlled the division in departments or research centres with a focus on Middle Eastern studies. Mertonian norms of modern science appeared to be preserved. A generally “pacifist coexistence” prevailed and it did not entail accusing colleagues of infamy or illegitimacy, at least not within universities. It however episodically did not prevent the cancellation of events organized for instance by student unions in solidarity with Palestinians like in Aix-en-Provence University in November 2022, despite the participation of renown academics.

#### *b) Research, expertise, activism*

Evidently, intersections with activism exist among researchers affiliated with French academic institutions working on either Israel or Palestine due to the political context and their personal trajectories and identities. Focus on international law, colonial practices, debates on apartheid or calls for an academic boycott of Israel are then present, although probably less structured than in North America. These favour the emergence of specific ‘activist scholars<sup>45</sup>’, probably more active in the sub-field of Palestinian studies due to the structuration of an active civil society and important political mobilizations. The dilemmas induced by such a position are neither specific nor new. They have been the object of much methodological and epistemic debates recently<sup>46</sup>.

The intersections between academic circles focusing on Palestine and Israel with the field of expertise, which has developed an important access to public space, also exist. A number of figures often heard in French media and solicited by public institutions (like the ministry of Foreign affairs or the presidency) can claim an affiliation with a university, often as a teacher, but have a production that is poorly linked to disciplinary standards, in particular in terms of methodology and connections to the field, and often rightly seen as biased<sup>47</sup>. In the eyes of the public, their interventions can blur the borders between a scientifically informed knowledge, one that sticks with a scientific ethos, and politically loaded commentary. These can negatively affect conceptions of

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<sup>45</sup> Bird, Gemma, and Liska Bernet. "Reflections from 'the Field': the Activist and the Activist Scholar in Conversation", *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences (PARISS)* 3, 2 (2022): 144-167

<sup>46</sup> Bashiri, Farzana. "Conceptualizing Scholar-Activism Through Scholar-Activist Accounts." In *Making Universities Matter*, 61-. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2024. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-48799-6\_4.

<sup>47</sup> Frédéric Encel is a good example. A specialist in geopolitics, formerly a member of Zionist extreme-right groups such as the Betar, he teaches at Sciences Po and is a regular speaker on public radio on issues linked to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In parallel, he participates to pro-Israeli lectures. One of these, organized in late May 2024 by an NGO called Diploact France which aims to “reshape the global narrative on Israel” presented on its invitation Frédéric Encel as a “professional in the defense of Israel”. <https://x.com/DidierBillion/status/1790260984025665762>



what academic production actually is and entails, for example in terms of peer-reviewing and data collection, protection and disinterested sharing.

These intersections can help define a number of structural differences between categories of expertise and academia. The aim here is certainly not to engage in a blame-game or to stigmatize the production of expertise by think tanks or in-depth reporting from certain media whose journalists have become specialists of so-called 'Palestinian' or 'Israeli' affairs, or of the 'conflict of the Near-East', nor to claim the alleged purity of scientific research. The production of knowledge (understood in a broad sense as the accumulation of data and its analysis, most often along implicit subjective lines and values) is always structured around dilemmas and mixed methods, at times even taking the form of political activism. Nevertheless, expertise can be defined as an instrumental production of knowledge intended mainly to guide decision making, be it in public institutions or in companies. Research, for its part, is embedded in disciplinary questions and mostly based on long-term fieldwork, implying an overspecialization on objects and areas as well as the belonging to a self-delimited epistemic community. Its main focus is ideally independent from demands formulated by political powers – although it remains at times permeable to these, in particular in political science and international relations. Yet, one of the cornerstones of research, in particular when it projects itself as 'critical', is self-reflexiveness. The fact researchers remain tied to "their" field for decades implies specific challenges when it comes to transparency and ethics, also generating frequent mechanisms of sympathy and friendship. The management of these feelings built in the long run becomes a significant issue in war-torn societies.

### *c) Researchers under Israeli pressure*

Building on such conditions of knowledge production, for academics focusing on Palestinian and Israeli societies, the attacks of October 7, 2023 on civilians and the military in the vicinity of the Gaza strip were hardly surprising. Research on Palestinian political mobilizations had widely highlighted the persistence of activism and armed militancy despite repression by the Israeli state and the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian issue was still very much depicted as alive regardless of its disappearance from the international media and diplomatic agendas over the decade before. Publications focused on how Islamist and nationalist movements had restructured around a new generation of militants and a military wing created within Hamas and other armed groups, in and out of the Gaza strip. The livelihoods of Palestinians (concerned for example by what Stéphanie Latte-Abdallah labels a 'prison web' and the fact that around 40% of the adult male population has at some point been held in custody by Israelis<sup>48</sup>) was generating desperation and frustration. The Israeli repression of pacific marches in 2018-2019 which had left 270 Palestinian protestors dead and 25,000 wounded (including more than 7,000 by bullets shot by the Israeli army) over the course of a little over a year according to UN figures was undoubtedly

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<sup>48</sup> Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, *A History of Confinement in Palestine: The Prison Web*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 416 p.

feeding violence. In parallel, the political field in Israel was 'radicalizing' election after election, and the state was being appropriately analysed through its all-encompassing colonial structures.

A global epistemic community of researchers, with an increasing implication of Palestinian academics and some Israelis like Ilan Pappé and Eyal Weizman, was already confronted to restrictions coming from the Israeli government in terms of mobility and access. Gaza itself was generally out of bounds for foreign researchers due to the policy of Israel which fully controlled entries, repeatedly refusing to grant entry to academics. Over the years, numerous French academics working on the Palestinian territories were barred entry into Jerusalem, rejected access to the Ben Gurion international airport, imposed entry through the Allenby Bridge between Jordan and the West Bank – but under Israeli control, expelled, and almost systematically questioned for hours by Israeli officials at border crossings or at checkpoints. They had their phones, computers and personal items searched in the name of security, often ending up in their underwear for a body search. While journalists affiliated with Western mainstream media would consider this policy as a clear violation of the freedom of press, this remains the standard experience of academics who focus on Palestinian society and of ones seen as critical of Israel. It highlights the urgency of mechanisms of protection for academics in all contexts, including in ones described as democratic. While these political and social dynamics were being highlighted in academic publications, lectures and interventions in the media, they were also faced with accusations by pro-Israeli government outlets or in the social media – outside of academia itself. Manifest attempts by certain groups and organizations, including members of French Parliament and members of government, to create an equivalence between the critique of Israel and of Zionism with antisemitism repeatedly put pressure on public speech and on the expressions of academics<sup>49</sup>. World renown sociologist Edgar Morin, an active resistant to Nazism during the Second World War, had been sued in 2002 by pro-Israeli government groups for an op-ed in *Le Monde*. It took four years of procedure to decide that his critique of Israeli policies had to do with the freedom of expression, and not with antisemitism.

As elsewhere in Western Europe and North America, the polarization of the academic fields was certainly growing. It appeared to be somewhat cyclical, connected to the state of the stalemate in the Near-East and then often fuelled by public intellectuals or political activists more than between academics themselves, or by students. No equivalent to the infamous *Campus Watch* in the United States which serves since 2002 as an aggressive pro-Israeli government whistle blower in universities<sup>50</sup> appeared to exist in the French scene. As a consequence, despite evident fragmentation and polarization, the space of academic expression and ethos were then to a certain extent preserved in what may have seemed like an ivory tower.

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<sup>49</sup> Vidal, Dominique. *Antisionisme = antisémitisme ? Réponse à Emmanuel Macron*, Paris: Libertalia, 2018, 128 p.

<sup>50</sup> Benin, Joel. "The Israelization of American Middle East Policy Discourse", *Social Text* (2003) 21 (2 (75)): 125–140.

## 2) Increased pressures after October 7

### a) *Beyond sideration*

The coordinated attacks of October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023 in Israel left many in shock. The military response by the Israeli army, leaving tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians dead and the whole of the Gaza strip turned to rubble generated massive debates and criticism, including among Israelis, and within international academic circles. The successive rulings by the International Criminal Court calling for Israel to halt its war highlighted the plausibility of genocide and yet had little if any effect on the military strategy of the Israeli government. It did not either transform the policies of most governments, North American or European, which supported Israel's so-called right to self-defence – a category specialists of international law frequently view as specious<sup>51</sup>. Both the attack of 2023 and the subsequent war – chapters of a century old confrontation, appear to have deep implications, transforming the 'warscape' of French academia on Palestine and Israel. The level of preservation of the scientific ethos was then evidently put to test, less because of internal competition to the field than because of external interventions. The most manifest implication is linked to the rise of institutional scrutiny on what academics say or publish, pushing forward an ever-extensive definition of what antisemitism and support for 'terrorism' mean. While mobilizations in solidarity with Palestinians by students in universities across the globe deserve a specific scrutiny, pressures on academic freedom are somewhat different as they target actors with a status linked to their domain of expertise and potential support by a community of peers.

The days following the attacks launched by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups against civilians and military which left 1,143 dead and 251 hostage became a trying period. Instantly, ministries advised local authorities in France to be especially cautious. On October 9<sup>th</sup>, the minister of Higher education Sylvie Retailleau in particular sent a directive to the presidents of public universities inviting them to transfer the names of people (teachers, reserachers, employees and students) who could be seen as supporting Hamas, developing non-conforming ideas and ideological "drifts" ("*dérives*"). Such a letter was paving the way for denunciations, as well as self-censorship among academics. Three days later, the chairman of the CNRS, Antoine Petit, wrote a letter to all of the 32,000 CNRS employees stating: "*CNRS employees may speak publicly. They have complete freedom of expression, provided they do not use their position to express their personal political or philosophical opinions.*" He then added that "*any infringement of memory laws (lois mémorielles<sup>52</sup>), apology for*

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<sup>51</sup> Rezagui, Insaf. «Israël a-t-il, le droit de se défendre?», *Yaani*, April 25, 2024 : <https://www.yaani.fr/post/isra%C3%ABl-a-t-il-le-droit-de-se-d%C3%A9fendre>

<sup>52</sup> In France, these *lois mémorielles* generally refer to four distinct laws adopted by parliament that acknowledge the uncontested reality of specific historical events in particular massacres and slavery. The most significant of these laws is the 'loi Gayssot' adopted on July 13, 1990 which restricts the expression of doubts regarding the existence of the crimes against humanity as defined by the International Military Tribunal of Nuremberg. Its adoption followed a controversy around the publications of Robert Faurisson, a lecturer in literature at Université Lyon II, who negated the existence of the Holocaust of the Jews. Since

*terrorism, incitement to hatred or violence or any other breach of the law, may be subject to criminal and disciplinary proceedings*". No such direct clarification of the latitude of researchers affiliated with the CNRS had ever occurred before. The timing and its link to one specific event, that of October 7 attacks in Israel, was in itself indicative of the types of offenses that could be targeted, expressing a certain form of pressure of researchers by public institutions.

Consequently, a number of academic meetings that were due soon after the attacks were postponed, more or less spontaneously by the organizers or by host institutions. Some were cancelled pure and simple following demands by the police. Such was the case of a lecture in Montpellier by Joseph Daher formerly affiliated with the European University Institute of Florence and with the University of Lausanne. Fayard the publisher since 2008 of the French translation of Israeli historian Ilan Pappé's seminal work *Le nettoyage ethnique de la Palestine* on the forced displacement of over 700 000 Palestinians in 1948 suddenly retrieved the monograph from its catalogue without giving explanations. Rights were transferred by the author to an alternative publishing house La Fabrique.

In at least two instances, specialists of the contemporary Arab World were denounced by colleagues and faced serious consequences. The first, was forced to resign from a number of collective positions, for a post on social media that was interpreted as support for Hamas. Despite a swift removal of the post and public excuses, his reputation was durably affected. Another scholar, an anthropologist with a long-lasting interest for Palestinian society, faced internal charges by the CNRS for forwarding a text on a professional list of her university that linked the attacks of October 7<sup>th</sup> to acts of resistance. She was tried in a "disciplinary procedure" of the CNRS and sanctioned, confronting her to a range of insults and threats as her case was made public. This very example highlighted a manifest breach in the unwritten etiquette or ethos of academic debate with colleagues denouncing colleagues for a political matter, then rejecting the Mertonian principle of organized skepticism and implicitly calling for an academic 'witch hunt'.

#### *b) Academic freedom at risk*

Breaches grew deeper as the whole of the public space was being constrained by a number of accusations against discourses seen as pro-Palestinian. Constraints imposed by public authorities in France coalesced both conservative discourses against the so-called woke ideology as embodied by the Observatoire du décolonialisme (which was rebranded Observatoire des ideologies identitaires involving academics such as historian Pierre Vermeren and sociologist Nathalie Heinich), and 'antiterrorism laws'.

Indeed, pressure put on voices seen as sympathetic to Palestine, including among academics, were put into effect through the recycling of a 2014 law against the 'apology

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then, making such claims is considered a criminal offence in France. Many prominent historians have however been critical of these laws. See: Sébastien Ledoux, *Les lois mémorielles en Europe*, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2020, 264 p.

of terrorism'. While the law had been voted in the context of the transfer of over a thousand French citizens to the armed front in Syria and Iraq in the mid-2010s and as a way of preventing the spread of such jihadi ideology, it became years later a tool to pressure not only civil society actors, including for example members of workers' unions and local Muslim leaders, but also academics<sup>53</sup>. Renown international specialist of Islamist movements, François Burgat, a former director of IFPO, was summoned for interrogation by the police in July 2024 allegedly for a tweet. At the time of writing, exact charges held against him for 'apology of terrorism' had not been made public. In the context of repression of freedom of expression in solidarity with Palestinians, he publicly considered that such an accusation was a "*badge of honour*".

This form of public pressure unfolded at a specific time. In early 2021, French university had been attacked by the intellectuals close to the Observatoire du décolonialisme, allegedly for being dominated by "*islamo-leftists*". The accusation had even been mentioned by the minister of Higher education Frédérique Vidale as she claimed universities were "*turned gangrenous*" by this ideology, consequently calling for a public inquiry. The CNRS itself, as well as the Conference of presidents of universities, had responded that no such thing as "*islamo-leftism*" existed, giving a temporary halt to these somewhat absurd, but politically loaded accusations.

Universities were further put under pressure as of late September 2023 when the Union des étudiants juifs de France (UEJF) funded a study by Ipsos, one the main French polling institutes, to measure antisemitism within higher education. In the weeks and months after October 7, the report served to dramatize and politicize incidents that would otherwise have gone unnoticed: a professor making bad jokes or the stupid comments of a student. It was followed in mid-2024 by a report by the higher chamber of Parliament, the Senate, to support accusations of widespread antisemitism among students as well as faculty in French universities. The authors of the report, coming from a multipartisan background, gave direct relevance to an impressionistic concept of "*atmosphere antisemitism*" as described by the UEJF in its testimony before the senators.

All these enquiries served to portray a university that was complicit with racist biases against Jews and accused it of turning a blind eye to the issue. It was in this context that a series of lecturers, none with permanent academic positions though or specializing on the Middle East, were sacked paving way to often defaming media campaigns. One teacher had for instance called for academic boycott of Israel in front of his students – some of whom had recorded him to later have it broadcast by a pro-Israeli government social media account Sword of Salomon, then forcing members of government to react.

A highly inflammable object in its own right due to its function as the institution which traditionally (re)produces the political elites in France, Sciences Po embodied in the spring of 2024 the direct involvement of the French government in the stigmatization of universities and social sciences in the context of the war in Gaza. On March 13th,

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<sup>53</sup> Bonnefoy Laurent. "In France, freedom of speech flouted and repressed", *Orient XXI*, November 17, 2023: <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/in-france-freedom-of-speech-flouted-and-repressed,6883>

2024, only weeks after being nominated as Prime Minister, Gabriel Attal popped up uninvited during a board of administrators of Sciences Po to scold the institution, claiming it embodied the impression “*that a fish always rots from the head [ie. its elites]*”<sup>54</sup>. His intervention was allegedly a reaction to a mobilization by students in support of Palestinians that had given way to poorly substantiated accusations of antisemitism by other students. The pressure put on Sciences Po, irrespective of academic freedom, served as a means by the government to show its commitment to tackle what it labelled anti-Jewish discourses. It also was meant to pay lip-service to anti-elite and anti-woke discourses that had been widely broadcast among conservative mass media and frequently targeted Sciences Po. It defamed students that had mobilized and called for internal disciplinary procedures. Conservative parties followed suit with the head of the Ile-de-France region, Valerie Pécresse, deciding to defund the university (suspending a one million Euro budget line) due to a “*radicalized minority advocating for the hatred of Jews*”. She then called for a necessary “*outburst of authority*”. In April and May 2024, repeated police interventions to evacuate student camps established in support of Palestine – something that had never happened at Sciences Po before despite numerous student mobilizations and occupations over its 150 year long history, shocked the academic community. It highlighted just how universities are weak institutions in the face of the state, most often largely incapable of generating their own financial resources and then subject to such pressure.

These discourses and decisions stigmatizing universities further ended up putting into question the scientific production of academics, irrespective of the fact no examples of problematic articles or contributions by specialists of either Israel or Palestine within the university, Sciences Po or more generally, could ever be quoted. It also put into question the quality of teachings and of the knowledge transferred to students, implying these were biased and were feeding antisemitism or even ‘terrorism’. The whole of the sequence clearly highlights just how academic freedom is fragile and how the specific dimensions of research and knowledge production are increasingly instrumentalized by political figures with a populist agenda.

### *c) In defence of academic freedom*

Unsurprisingly, public scrutiny and pressure on the academic field following October 7 triggered reactions within the academic field. Petitions in support of the defense of academic freedom were signed to by impressive numbers either to defend colleagues specifically<sup>55</sup>, or general principles<sup>56</sup>. An informal newsletter called Libertés

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<sup>54</sup> Bayart, Jean-François. “Sciences Po, Université bananière ?”, Le club de Mediapart, March 16, 2024: <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/jean-francois-bayart/blog/160324/sciences-po-universite-bananiere>

<sup>55</sup> Collective, “François Burgat. Soutien à la liberté d’expression et de recherche”, L’Humanité, July 12, 2024: <https://www.humanite.fr/en-debat/libertes-publiques/francois-burgat-soutien-a-la-liberte-dexpression-et-de-recherche>

<sup>56</sup> Collective, “Défendre les libertés d’expression sur la Palestine. Un enjeu académique”, Le club de Mediapart, November 15, 2023: <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/les-invites-de-mediapart/blog/151123/defendre-les-libertes-dexpression-sur-la-palestine-un-enjeu-academique>

Académiques sur la Palestine (Libacapal) was created by young researchers, aiming to document breaches in academic freedom in France but also beyond. It for instance gave updates on the case of professor of law Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian suspended by the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and briefly detained by the police following statements on Zionism.

Among academics in France, the surprise intervention of Gabriel Attal at Sciences Po was also rather unanimously criticized. Professor of public law at Panthéon Assas University, Olivier Beaud described it as a “*blatant violation of academic freedom*”<sup>57</sup>. Within Sciences Po, a series of texts published by departments and research centres following the Prime Minister’s visit also defended students from blunt accusations of antisemitism and rejected political instrumentalization. These called for an increased role of researchers to ease tensions, contextualize and historicize rather than for a public scrutiny of academic discourses. Members of the faculty in Sciences Po were themselves very much aware of issues linked to academic freedom at the international level following the incarceration by Iran of two colleague researchers, Fariba Adelkhah and Roland Marchal. The former had been liberated in mid-October 2023 after more than four years in custody, while the latter had spent nine months in the jails of the Islamic Republic.

Gradually, mobilizations and debates among academics highlighted how much the link between Gaza and academic freedom goes beyond matters related to tensions within the fields of Israeli and Palestinian studies in France, and to the pressure being put on students by public institutions. A different framing gradually emerged, one that highlighted the destruction of all twelve universities in Gaza and a wide range of schools because of the bombings of the Israeli army. The spread of a new concept, ‘scholasticide’ (as coined by Palestinian scholar Karma Nabulsi in 2009) or ‘educide’, turned the focus on the experiences of Palestinian academics and students and on the fact the war was obliterating their capacity to participate to the international academic community<sup>58</sup>. In France programmes funded by universities to offer safe havens for Gazan academics, in particular one called ‘Pause’, were little more than symbolic, in particular as invited academics most often had no possibility to leave Gaza.

The focus on ‘scholasticide’ and the context which had in 2022 favoured an almost unanimous and instant boycott of Russian scientific institutions following the invasion of Ukraine only seemingly legitimized discourses on the boycott of Israeli universities. The debate, as structured by the wider BDS movement (Boycott, divestment, sanctions), had been only marginal in French context in the years prior to 2023. It is

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<sup>57</sup> Beaud, Olivier, “L’intrusion de Gabriel Attal dans le conseil d’administration de Sciences Po est une flagrante violation de la liberté académique”, *Le Monde*, March 21, 2024:

[https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2024/03/21/l-intrusion-de-gabriel-attal-dans-le-conseil-d-administration-de-sciences-po-est-une-flagrante-violation-de-la-liberte-academique\\_6223249\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2024/03/21/l-intrusion-de-gabriel-attal-dans-le-conseil-d-administration-de-sciences-po-est-une-flagrante-violation-de-la-liberte-academique_6223249_3232.html)

<sup>58</sup> Ibrahim S.I Rabaia and Lourdes Habash, *The Hidden War on Higher Education: Unmasking the ‘Educide’ in Gaza*, POMEPS memos, April 2024:

<https://pomeps.org/the-hidden-war-on-higher-education-unmasking-the-educide-in-gaza>

still met with resistance from many in the academic community, often using rational argumentation<sup>59</sup>. The possibility to address the complex issue of such an academic boycott, despite being informed for instance by the existing connections between certain partner universities like Bar-Ilan and the Israeli army and by international conventions<sup>60</sup>, remained largely elusive and to a large extent taboo. This fact generates many misunderstandings with students who mobilize in solidarity with Palestinians since October 7, and also at the international level<sup>61</sup>. They willingly highlight the biases that structure the response of public institutions and the media in France facing the war in Gaza. Professor at the College de France and anthropologist Didier Fassin analysed the processes through which the criminalization of solidarity as well as the construction of consent for the massacre of civilians were a form of moral defeat and a historical renunciation of French society and elites<sup>62</sup>. His essay, which triggered controversy, was yet important as it came from a renown academic external to the field of Palestinian studies.

### **Conclusion:**

French academia focusing on Israel and Palestine has undergone restructuring in the context of violent conflict since October 7. The most manifest evolution in the 'warscape' of academic production is linked to breaches in norms and an implicit etiquette that structure the ordered production of knowledge in the contemporary social sciences. These violations, as worrying and problematic as they are, are occurring less because of an extreme polarization within the field of academia, than because of the attitude of external actors: public institutions, lobby groups, and the media. These are surely putting pressure on academic freedom, generating great unease. Such a process highlights first of all the illiberal dynamics that are unfolding in western democracies and which target universities and academics. The process also embodies the weakness of scientific culture in advanced societies. A misunderstanding regarding how the production of knowledge and analysis function is growing and academics are

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<sup>59</sup> Von Buzekist, Astrid, "Boycott des universités israéliennes: 'Divorcer des meilleurs critiques du gouvernement Nétanyahou serait une grave erreur'", *Le Monde*, May 21, 2024 : [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2024/05/21/boycott-des-universites-israeliennes-peu-d-universitaires-serieux-defendent-la-poursuite-de-l-occupation-des-territoires-en-cisjordanie\\_6234613\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2024/05/21/boycott-des-universites-israeliennes-peu-d-universitaires-serieux-defendent-la-poursuite-de-l-occupation-des-territoires-en-cisjordanie_6234613_3232.html)

<sup>60</sup> Wind, Maya. *Towers of Ivory and Steel: How Israeli Universities Deny Palestinian Freedom*, New York: Verso, 2024, 288 p.

<sup>61</sup> Uddin, Tasnima and A H Misbach, "Gaza has shown European universities are no longer places of free inquiry", *Al Jazeera English*, September 1, 2024 : <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/9/1/gaza-has-shown-european-universities-are-no-longer-places-for-free-inquiry>

<sup>62</sup> Fassin, Didier. *Une étrange défaite. Sur le consentement à l'écrasement de Gaza*, Paris : La découverte, 2024, 198 p.



increasingly being left alone to defend the scientific ethos and their institutional conditions of existence.

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