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Dear Prof Alistair Fitt, (Vice-Chancellor)

We are writing to you as a local, Oxford-based charity that is concerned with human rights for all Palestinians, not just those living under occupation in our twin city of Ramallah.

We are very disturbed that the president for Ben Gurion University, in the Negev (BGU), which has such close ties to the Israeli military establishment, has been invited to speak at Brookes whilst that same military is engaged in repeated violations of international law. Earlier this month the International Court of Justice ruled that Israel's increasingly brutal and repressive military occupation of the Palestinian West Bank is illegal and must be ended as soon as possible. There is no sign of Israel doing this. In Gaza over 43,000 people, mostly civilians and women and children, are known to have been killed by Israeli forces. A UN special commission has just said that methods being used and acts committed by the Israeli Defence Forces, in the Gaza Strip, are consistent with the horrific crime of genocide.

Ben Gurion University's links with the Israeli military are deep and extensive. It houses the Israeli National Security Institute which has strong partnerships with leading Israeli arms companies. The Israeli army is currently building an IDF technology campus next to the existing BGU campus, which the president of BGU recently announced has the aim of further strengthening those ties between the university and the military. It is hard not to see this event as an Israeli propaganda exercise intended to portray Israel as a benign, liberal state, caring for all its citizens. The reality is quite different.

The title of the lecture, '*Paradigm for inclusive diversity under fire*' is insensitive, inaccurate and at odds with the lived experience of students of local Bedouin and other Palestinian identities since Oct 7 last year. Some safe spaces for conversation were created in BGU for students to voice their

feelings in a limited way. However, the harassment of minority students by BGU leaders has continued unabated including suspensions and bullying of Palestinian students

For years now, BGU has congratulated itself on the programmes developed to improve access to education for the local Bedouin community, particularly women. The problems of poverty and deprivation in these communities are frequently depicted by the Israeli authorities as if they were just part and parcel of being Bedouin, inherent in the culture.

In fact, the Bedouin population of the Negev are citizens of Israel yet they do not enjoy equal rights with the Jewish Israelis who live alongside them but are segregated from them. They receive much less support from the state. This inequality and discrimination characterises the 'diverse' nature of the Negev population as described in the words accompanying the lecture invitation.

According to Amnesty International, Israel imposes "*a system of oppression and domination against Palestinians across all areas under its control, **including Israel***". It is a system which Amnesty says '*amounts to apartheid as prohibited in international law*'. Although Palestinian citizens of Israel have more freedoms than Palestinian residents of the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, they are nevertheless subjected to "*discriminatory laws, policies and practices which affect their legal status, access to land, resources and services, and ultimately their human development*". For example, The Admissions Committee Law (2011) allows hundreds of small towns built on state land to select applicants for housing units and plots of land based on their "social suitability". The law is used to exclude Palestinian Citizens of Israel and an amendment from 2023 expands the law to include more communities. An unequal system.

Amnesty also points out that this discriminatory and oppressive system has left Palestinians '*fragmented geographically and politically, frequently impoverished and in a constant state of fear and insecurity*.' This certainly applies to the Bedouin of the Negev who have been dispossessed and displaced multiple times. Discrimination against the Palestinian population in Israel is nowhere clearer than in the Negev.

Most of the Negev region was ethnically cleansed of the local Bedouin/Palestinian population in 1948 to make room for new Jewish immigrant communities. Out of 92,000 Bedouin living in the Negev in 1947, only 11,000 remained after the foundation of the state of Israel. They were very harshly treated and confined to living under martial law in designated

reservations. Many Bedouin lands were confiscated under the Land Rights Settlement Ordinance Law of 1969. Those who fled the area were never allowed to return to their homes. The dispossessed owners, who still live in the Negev are termed 'present absentees' by the Israeli state, and have never had their lands and property returned to them. This is the historical context to this 'diverse' community. The Israeli authorities continue to create new Jewish settlements here at the expense of the existing Bedouin residents.

Today the Bedouin population in the Negev numbers some 200,000 living in just 5% of their original lands. As part of ongoing and aggressive Israeli state policies of 'urbanising the Bedouin', and 'judaising of the Negev', over half of this Bedouin population have been coerced into living in overcrowded Arab-only townships, no longer able to follow a traditional herding lifestyle.

The remainder, some 80,000 - 90,000, live in 35 'unrecognised' villages, under constant threat of eviction or forced displacement by authorities. It is practically impossible for them to build where they live. Being 'unrecognised' means not existing on the official maps, not being connected up to the water supplies, the electricity grid or sewage systems, not being allowed polling stations in their communities, or being able to apply for planning permission for new homes for growing communities. Some of these villages have existed since well before the establishment of the state of Israel, and some came into existence when the Israeli military confiscated traditional grazing land belonging to Bedouin tribes in the 1950s. This land was never returned to them. Whole Bedouin villages have demolition orders hanging over them. When the bulldozers come accompanied by armed police, the demolitions can be very frightening and violent, mirroring Israeli state-sanctioned forced displacement of herding communities in rural areas of the occupied West Bank. The extremely difficult living conditions imposed on 'unrecognised villages' effectively coerce the villagers to move to designated townships or otherwise segregated zoned areas of the city and split up their communities and families. Others face forced eviction under the guise of urban planning development such as freeing up land for roads and other infrastructure. Most recently, at the beginning of November, after a twenty year long legal struggle, the Negev village of Umm al Hiran, was finally destroyed to make way for a new orthodox Jewish community. Some of the 400 residents of Umm al Hiran had to demolish their homes themselves to avoid being charged the cruel and exorbitant demolition costs as demanded by law.

Given such brutal treatment of the Negev Bedouin, it is hard not to see this talk by the president of BGU, at this time, as anything other than a propaganda exercise on behalf of the Israeli state.

This is a long letter but this is a long and difficult history not only for the Bedouin of the Negev but for all Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem. We hope you will make the time to read and understand the implications of the points we have made.

We have included a link to a factsheet that provides further figures.

https://www.adalah.org/uploads/uploads/Primer_Palestinian_Citizens_of_Israel_July_2024.pdf