

Letter in support of Free Palestine Maastricht (FPM)

2 February 2022

To the kind attention of The Board of Deans
University of Maastricht

We would like to express our concerns about the inflammatory and unfounded allegations made against Free Palestine Maastricht (FPM), a student-led organization at the University of Maastricht. As Jewish and Israeli groups whose work is anchored in international human rights law, we are deeply concerned about these allegations and their implications for the students and academics of your university.

The growing trend of defaming advocates for Palestinian rights as ‘antisemitic’ in the Netherlands is alarming, as [documented in a report published by the European Legal Support Center \(ELSC\)](#). The case of FPM is illustrative of this. Jewish students and staff on campus have the right to be protected from antisemitic hate speech and actions, and supporters of Palestinian rights have the right to protest against Israeli actions and policies which are harming Palestinians. The key to balancing both sets of rights is the relevant articles of the European Convention on Human Rights, in particular article 10 of the Convention, adopted in the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights. The Charter protects freedom of expression as a fundamental right in a democratic society, providing it does not incite to racism or violence.

Distinguishing between antisemitism and legitimate criticism of Israel or Zionism has become a highly contested issue in recent years. Universities and other public bodies have to recognise that attempts to suppress criticism can masquerade as allegations of antisemitism just as easily as antisemitism can masquerade as criticism. There is a simple test to make the distinction within the terms of the Charter. That test is the language used. Criticism or protest has to be expressed clearly as being about what *Israel* actually does or did, or what *Zionists* actually historically did. It should not say or imply that Jews did something as Jews, or that it comes from supposed Jewish characteristics, or that it is responsible for all the ills of the world. If that test is met, then the criticism or protest is legitimate.

A dangerous by-product of the issue of antisemitism versus criticism of Israel is that people are starting to believe that most Jews support Israeli policies. That is simply

untrue. There is as much diversity of views about Israeli policies in the Jewish community as elsewhere.

Another dangerous by-product is an unhealthy concentration on antisemitism, which could be seen to be crowding out official concerns about other forms of racism. That cannot be allowed to happen, as all forms of racism are reprehensible and should be fought equally.

Both of these developments could lead to an increase in antisemitism if people begin to think that officialdom is privileging Jews above other minority groups.

Returning to the present case, there is a serious risk that staff and students of the University, especially those who are active on campuses, may find themselves preemptively discouraged from exercising their rights and fulfilling their academic work because of a fear of being subjected to smear campaigns, thus creating a chilling effect and self-censorship. Accordingly, legitimate academic work and student debate could be unduly restricted due to fear of being publicly stigmatized, as happened to FPM. As we said earlier, we believe the claims against FPM are unfounded but also that they feed a dangerous campaign in which students advocating for Palestinian rights are silenced.

The right to freedom of expression – centrally important to both academic life and democracy itself - is at stake here. Therefore, we ask you to stay vigilant when confronted with such claims of antisemitism and to publicly support students and academics that are subjected to these smear campaigns.

Sincerely yours,

Jaap Hamburger, Chair for Een Ander Joods Geluid ([EAJG](#))

Dr. Noa Roei, Chair for [Gate48](#), platform for critical Israelis in the Netherlands

Dror Feiler, Chairperson for European Jews for a Just Peace ([EJJP](#))

Corey Balsam, National Coordinator, Independent Jewish Voices Canada ([IJV](#))