



## **Tel Aviv University: A Direct Response to Boycott Criticisms**

The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement within academia seeks to undermine the standing of Israeli universities as part of its broader political agenda. As a result, Tel Aviv University (TAU) has long been the target of misinformation, with misleading and unfounded claims circulating well before October 7, 2023. In recent months, however, the frequency and intensity of these falsehoods have escalated. While TAU previously outlined its principles in an open letter, [Setting the Record Straight: The Truth About Tel Aviv University](#), we have been reluctant to address the lies circulated about us. Given the outright cruelty and falsity of many of these claims, we assumed they would not be taken seriously; however, in recent months, we have come to realize that misinformation, when left unchallenged, can take hold.

TAU is, first and foremost, an academic institution committed to the principles of scholarly inquiry, critical thinking, and freedom of expression. This commitment is reflected in TAU's ranking in the top 20% globally for protecting academic freedom, according to the [2024 Academic Freedom Index](#)—placing it ahead of universities in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. With a diverse community of over 30,000 students and 1,200 researchers, TAU fosters an environment that embraces a plurality of perspectives and backgrounds. Notably, 16% of our students are Arab, alongside many faculty members. At present, for example, two of our nine Deans are Arab, the Dean of Life Sciences and the Dean of Social Sciences.

TAU maintains full academic independence from both the Israeli government and the military. No student or faculty member has ever been penalized for expressing anti-war or pro-Palestinian views. The university has a well-documented history of advocating for peaceful coexistence and equality, as detailed in our [open letter](#). TAU has never shied away from protesting the government on any matters threatening human rights in Israel, and we never will. Nevertheless, our detractors continue to propagate misleading narratives to suit their agenda. Below are four responses to the most prevalent accusations casting a shadow on TAU.

### **Popular Attacks on Tel Aviv University**

**Attack #1. One of Tel Aviv University's research institutes is the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). INSS employs ex-military members as academics and is directly responsible for the Dahiya Doctrine, which advocates for using disproportionate force in conflict.**

The assertion that TAU is intrinsically tied to the war effort due to its affiliation with the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) is both misleading and intellectually dishonest. INSS is not part of TAU; it is an independent think tank that maintains an



affiliation with the university, much like similar policy institutes associated with leading academic institutions worldwide. Its researchers are not TAU faculty members. For instance, Gadi Eisenkot—the individual frequently cited in discussions of the Dahiya Doctrine—has never held a professorial position at TAU. Any suggestion to the contrary deliberately misrepresents the facts.

Furthermore, criticisms of INSS are based on selective and reductive interpretations of its work, disproportionately focusing on the views of a small, unrepresentative group of contributors. This overlooks the fact that INSS explicitly states in every publication that the opinions expressed are solely those of the individual authors. At the same time, this ignores INSS's extensive contributions to diplomatic and conflict resolution strategies. A recent example is the publication [Time for a New Arab Peace Initiative](#), which explicitly outlines a framework for regional diplomacy, renewed negotiations and stabilization efforts that could facilitate an end to the war in Gaza. The omission of such scholarship reflects a deeply agenda-driven approach to assessing INSS's role.

**Attack #2. Tel Aviv University trains soldiers through its Erez Program, aiming to turn them into highly skilled combat soldiers who will kill many Palestinians.**

The claim that TAU “trains soldiers to kill” through the Erez Program is a gross misrepresentation of both the program’s purpose and the reality of Israel’s mandatory military service. The Erez Program is largely an initiative of TAU’s Faculty of Humanities, designed to equip young soldiers with a broader humanistic education—one that fosters critical thinking, ethical reasoning and an understanding of history.

Unlike in many other countries, military service in Israel is compulsory for nearly all young people. This is not a policy of aggression—it is a national security reality dictated by Israel’s geopolitical circumstances. TAU remains committed to fostering future generations that understand the human cost of conflict and are guided by principles of ethical responsibility. This is the intent behind our [course offerings like Dugri](#) and [other coexistence efforts](#), and this is the spirit with which we teach in the Faculty of Humanities and beyond, Erez included.

**Attack #3. Tel Aviv University’s engineering faculty acts as a feeder school for the defense industry and proudly produces war technologies responsible for the deaths of many thousands of Palestinians.**

This characterization of TAU’s Faculty of Engineering is distorted on many levels. It is true that, as with many universities around the world, TAU’s researchers do collaborate across a wide range of industries—including defense—just as [Stanford runs its Technology for Defense Program](#) and [MIT partners with the Pentagon on AI research](#). Europe, moreover, is significantly expanding defense-related research in response to the Russia-Ukraine



war, with [academics actively applying for funding through the European Defence Fund](#). The reality is that defense research is not unique to Israel, but a sad reflection that we are in an increasingly unstable global landscape.

At the same time, this characterization of TAU's engineering faculty ignores the majority of faculty work, which is dedicated to advancing global wellbeing through research in green energy, climate solutions, clean water, food security, medical diagnostics and more. TAU engineers have been at the forefront of regional collaboration, working alongside researchers in Jordan, Egypt and the Palestinian Territories. One engineering faculty member, for example, has actively partnered with Gazans on sewage and waste management solutions, working closely with Palestinian collaborators to improve environmental and public health conditions. To label the Faculty of Engineering as complicit in "war crimes" is not just viciously untrue but an insult to our many scientists and engineers whose work improves lives across the region and beyond.

**Attack #4. Tel Aviv University is a 'Hasbara'/propaganda machine for the government and military – after all, only a couple of months into the war and they're offering a whole course justifying what Israel is doing to Gaza and Gazans.**

The accusation that TAU is a "Hasbara" propaganda machine is not only false but ignores the institution's long-standing commitment to academic integrity, rigorous scholarship and free thought. TAU is not a mouthpiece for any government or military body. On the contrary, it has often been at the forefront of defending democracy and human rights against the current Israeli government coalition. When the government proposed a law criminalizing the display of the Palestinian Authority flag on campus, TAU's president publicly declared the university would not comply with such an unconstitutional law. When the judicial overhaul threatened to weaken minority rights and judicial independence, TAU's leadership was among the most vocal in defending Israel's Supreme Court.

During the ongoing war, TAU has not engaged in propaganda but in academic inquiry—with the President holding the first conference on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and planning a symposium to examine the Palestinian humanitarian situation today and other aspects of the Israeli operation in Gaza. These discussions reflect the university's commitment to addressing complex issues through scholarship, not slogans.

The Lowy International School's course on the war, which is often misleadingly labeled as "Hasbara," was actually developed not to justify any government action but to provide international students with historical context and critical analytical tools (the Lowy School is TAU's international home). Many of these students had arrived from abroad with little understanding of the region's complexities and were struggling to process unfolding events. The course, led by Dr. Nimrod Rosler, who also [runs the Peace Index at TAU as well as its international program in conflict resolution](#), featured diverse speakers,



including Dr. Khalil Shikaki, from the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, who discussed [Palestinian society during war](#).

### **The Truth of These Attacks**

The accusations leveled against TAU are not just distortions; they are deliberate attempts to undermine academic freedom and intellectual inquiry. TAU is, and has always been, a bastion of rigorous scholarship, pluralism and open debate—qualities that stand in stark contrast to the one-dimensional narratives imposed by our detractors. Attempts to delegitimize us will not change the reality of our values, our contributions or our dedication to building a better future through education and knowledge. As we move forward, we remain committed to working with our partners—across disciplines, institutions, and borders—to advance shared goals and create a better world.