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SILENCING PALESTINE AT SWEDISH UNIVERSITIES

Preliminary observations



ACADEMICS FOR
PALESTINE | FRONTPAGE



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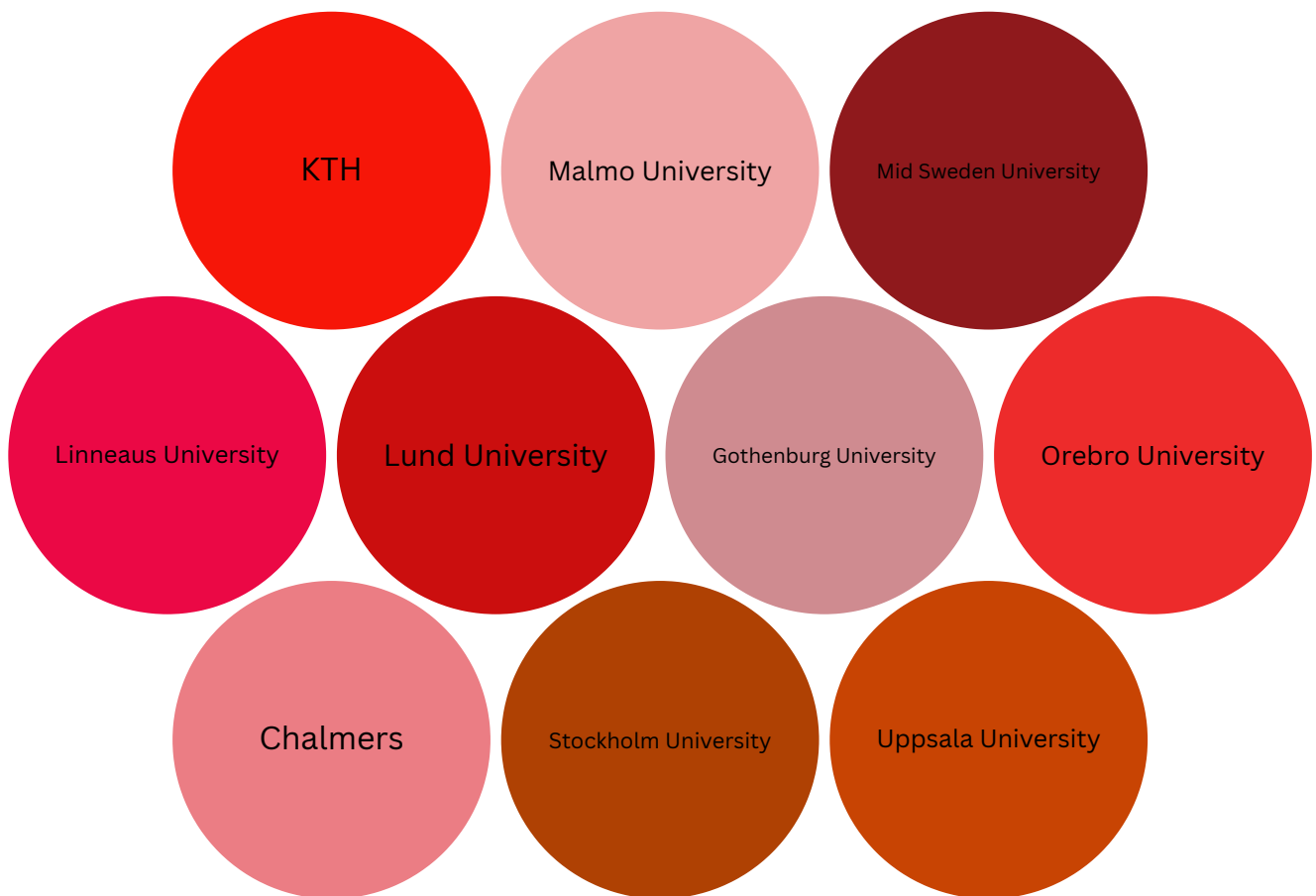
ERASING PALESTINE FROM THE AGENDA

an introduction to the report content

This report presents the preliminary findings of reported censorship and silencing of Palestinian support at Swedish higher education institutions. Most of the incidents that were reported concerned events after October 2023, and specifically, attempts to raise the question and facilitate discourse on Palestine and the ongoing genocide within the official infrastructure of the university.

The findings are presented through different thematic summaries that answer the question: *How* does silencing and censorship happen? This report deals with qualitative data and aims to map the experiences of repression that students and staff face. Furthermore, it aims to serve as a reminder that our experiences are not exceptional events but rather part of a systemic effort to silence dissent within Swedish higher education. Furthermore, we encourage faculty and students who hasn't done so to fill out this survey (see page 16). We have read stories from almost all Swedish universities. The accounts describe incidents of formal reprimands, police interference, and racism. What we are seeing raises questions about the free university and the overall possibility of morality within the Swedish higher education system. It also encourages us not to stay quiet, because we have the democratic right to demand that our places of study and work not be complicit in a genocide.

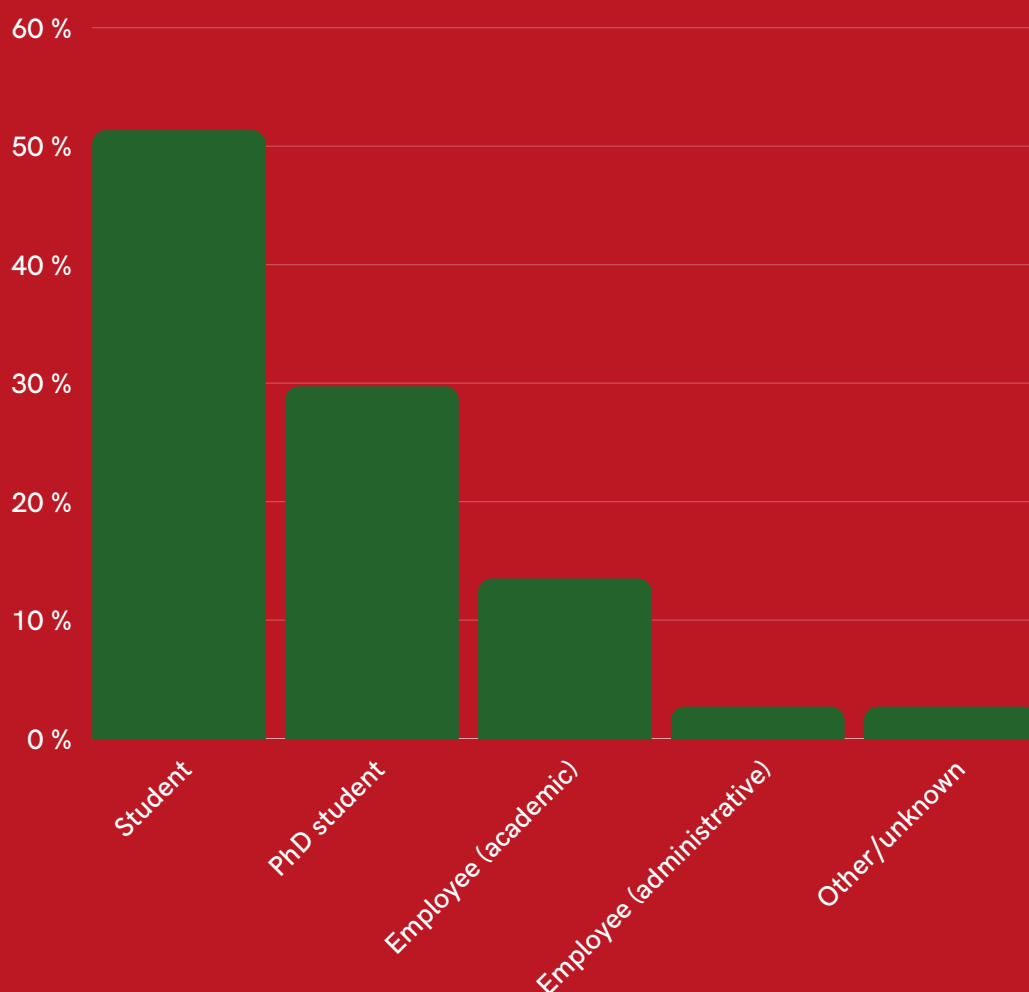
At the time of writing this report, there has been total scholasticide in Gaza, 97,000 Palestinians have been displaced, 54,000 Palestinians have been killed, and 122,000 wounded. The severity of the suffering of the Palestinian people is not separate from Swedish universities; rather, it is enabled and encouraged by material ties and the ongoing censorship of solidarity efforts. We encourage everyone who has experienced an incident of silencing or censorship to report it. Because we conclude that within Swedish universities, Palestine is not allowed on the agenda.



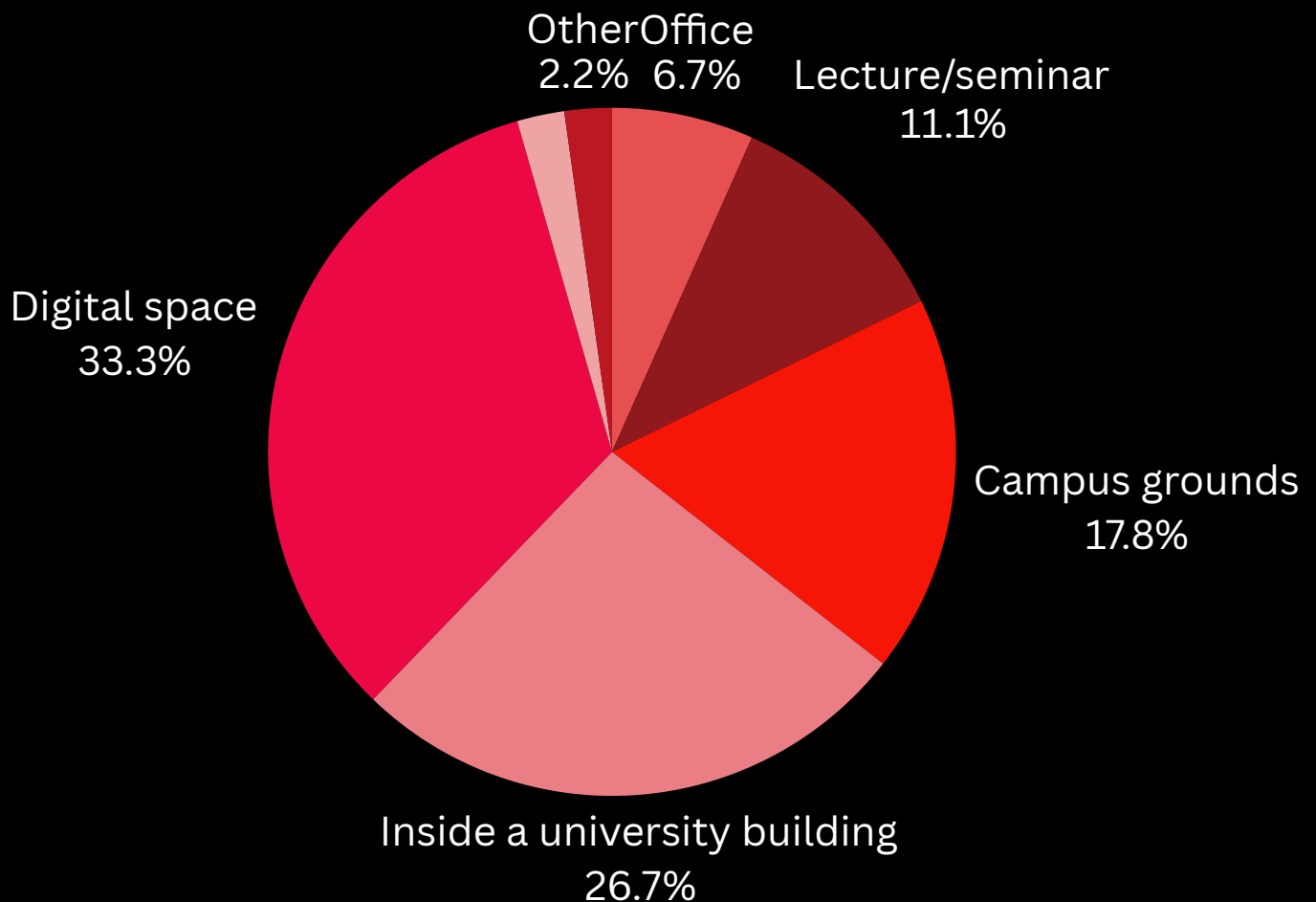
At 10 Swedish universities students and staff have experienced censorship on Palestine

WHO IS RESPONDING?

This graph presents the distribution of the survey respondents' role within the university. This distribution does not tell us who these incidents are most likely to occur to, but rather who has had access and time to respond to the survey. We are aware that in the first round of the survey, more efforts could have been put into expanding the reach and stressing the necessity towards the academic community in Sweden.



INCIDENT LOCATION



While reading the reported experiences of silencing and censorship from students and staff, we have tried to make sense of where this is happening. What we note is that the majority of incidents happen in the official spaces for learning and teaching. This includes the cafeteria, the lecture hall, a professor's office or people's inboxes. While demonstrations have been happening across Swedish universities since October 2023, censorship is most often reported as happening outside of these political events. This is noteworthy and prompts us to ask the question: What are the limits of our democratic rights within the universities if students and staff are being silenced when they are acting within their prescribed roles of student and staff? What does it tell us about our possibilities for critical engagement within society?

HOW DOES IT HAPPEN?

Excessive scrutiny

Delegitimisation of the Palestinian cause

Bureaucratic ping-pong

Racism

Workplace intimidation

Palestinian erasure

Social condemnation

Police interference

The thematic summaries presented here map a picture of how censorship and silencing of Palestinian support happen at Swedish universities. The writers of this report systematically mapped the incidents we had received, and had several meetings deciding how to present the stories from fellow students and staff. Throughout this work, a revision of the original survey was also done to better capture and map further incidents in the future.

What has become clear over the last years is that repression takes many forms. The eight themes presented here can work as different windows into how, when talking about Palestine, the intersection of dialogue and political life renders critique of a genocide and the recognition of Palestinian struggle illegitimate within the Swedish university.

Excessive scrutiny

Palestine solidarity efforts on Swedish campuses have come under excessive scrutiny, marked by disproportionate administrative oversight and a growing climate of surveillance. Rather than fostering open debate and student engagement, universities increasingly monitor meetings and actions tied to Palestine activism. One respondent wrote: "We noticed admin staff were quietly attending our meetings". This heightened level of control not only undermines the ideal of free dissemination of knowledge and critical debates within academia but also reveals a double standard in how political mobilisations are treated, where solidarity with Palestine is met with suspicion rather than support. In another response, a student was informed that their name had been discussed in university board meetings and monitored throughout the semester after distributing flyers. This shows how institutions may use informal mechanisms of power and oversight, like internal meetings, undocumented surveillance, or reputational labelling, to manage and suppress certain forms of political speech. It shifts the burden of legitimacy onto the student, a commitment that should rest with institutions, which are to foster free academic debate. Distributing flyers is a common, low-risk form of student political engagement, generally protected by the right to speech and expression. For such an action to trigger discussion in high-level governance settings (e.g., board meetings) is excessive unless there is a clear and present threat, which this example does not suggest. No other comparable political advocacy (e.g., pro-Ukraine, climate justice) is typically met with this level of institutional attention. Additionally, the singling out of a student by name and ongoing monitoring imply that their political views, rather than their conduct, were the reason for scrutiny. This suggests the student was treated as a potential threat rather than a participant in legitimate civic discourse, sending a chilling message to others. Knowing that one's name has been discussed in meetings of authority figures, without transparency or recourse, is inherently intimidating. Such treatment is likely to deter not only the individual but also others in their community from future participation in similar forms of advocacy. This type of scrutiny becomes excessive when it surpasses what would be standard for similar forms of political speech, is unaccompanied by transparent processes, and targets individuals based on viewpoint rather than behaviour.

Deligitimisation of the Palestinian cause

Multiple responses reflect a delegitimisation of the Palestinian cause. Many of these actions separate “activism” from “academic discourse”, implying that speaking about Palestine is biased, irrational, or emotionally charged rather than intellectual or scholarly. They create an implicit rule that Palestine is off-limits, or that referencing it is a breach of academic norms. In one response, a teacher interrupted a student discussing imperialism and Palestine, stating that activism is not allowed in class, only academic discussions. **The student was told their comments made the room uncomfortable.** In another response, a teacher stated that criticism of Israel was not acceptable, despite student consensus that criticism of states is a democratic right. In a different response, **a supervisor cautioned a staff member that raising Gaza concerns could harm their career.** An additional response of Pro-Palestinian expression being framed as inappropriate in academic settings was reflected when a student was academically penalised for missing fieldwork to attend a protest, despite syllabus allowances for substitutions. A Palestinian flag at a lunch gathering was labelled “political propaganda” and said to risk making students or staff uncomfortable. Another response shared how both a student and lecturer were told not to wear keffiyehs, as it may make others “uncomfortable”. In experiences where many survey responses reflect Palestinian visibility as unsafe or as a threat, such as the claim that pro-Palestinian symbols or speech make others “uncomfortable”, reframes the presence of Palestinian solidarity as illegitimate rather than a call for justice. This reproduces a form of epistemic violence: making the Palestinian experience and resistance unintelligible or out of place in the university. This turns Palestinian political expression into a security issue rather than a human rights concern, which makes it easier to justify surveillance, repression, or avoidance. **We see several incidents where the suppression is justified through vague rationales like “security,” “relevance,” or “neutrality,” none of which are consistently applied.** It delegitimises the cause by tying advocacy for Palestine to professional risk; students and staff are warned not only that their cause is controversial, but that they will suffer for associating with it. It isolates Palestinian activism as uniquely risky or improper.

Bureaucratic ping-pong

Swedish universities are masters at the art of redirection and arbitrary application of rules. We see that after event cancellations, students and staff have been left with a notification of a policy they had never heard of before, or being directed to a subgroup of a department unit that is unavailable for contacting. One respondent writes: “We were told our event couldn’t happen because of a scheduling conflict that was never explained”. Another reports “We booked the room months ahead, but were moved to a smaller one last-minute”. **It is clear to us that Swedish universities use administrative barriers to obstruct and silence Palestinian solidarity at Swedish universities.** A student group organising solidarity lunches for Palestine experienced repeated interference with their efforts to promote the events through posters on public university bulletin boards. Despite following formal procedures, such as adding an organisation logo, acquiring date stamps from the service centre, and ensuring posters were placed only in designated areas, their posters were removed multiple times over the duration of a month. Faculty staff repeatedly questioned the legitimacy of the posters and the associated events, sometimes demanding permissions not required by official policy. It is important to note the arbitrary nature of when these rules and bureaucratic procedures are applied. Respondents state that: “Only our flyers were removed from bulletin boards, even though others violated the same policy and we were required to submit our speaker’s bio and security plan weeks in advance, unlike other orgs”. We think that it is important to state that a pattern is emerging, indicating that students and staff are not bureaucratically illiterate, but rather stuck in a game of bureaucratic ping-pong aimed at silencing dissenting voices.

Racism

Several of the incidents reported show how racism still prevails within Swedish universities. For example, a visibly Muslim student wearing a hijab was deliberately targeted by a student and staff, in what felt like an attempt to provoke a reaction, a tactic to delegitimise her presence. This is a clear example of Islamophobic harassment, especially within the broader climate of hostility surrounding pro-Palestinian expression. **The university's cooperation with the police further exacerbates the repression: we have reports of international students risking criminalisation and, by extension, losing their path to citizenship, simply for attending official events on Palestine.** If students or staff from racialised, immigrant, or international backgrounds face more severe consequences (like visa revocation threats, academic penalties affecting immigration standing, or involvement of immigration authorities) compared to their citizen or white peers for similar political actions, this reflects systemic racism in the Swedish higher education system. The use of immigration status as leverage to discipline political dissent is part of a racialised mechanism of control. It functions as a form of racialised state violence, where political activity becomes risky because of one's race and immigration status. We also note the increasingly common conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism within the logic of legitimising the extermination of Palestinian solidarity at Swedish campuses. When Palestinian, Arab, Muslim, or other racialised individuals express criticism of Israeli policies or settler colonialism and are labelled as antisemitic without engaging with the substance of their critique, this functions as a form of racialised silencing. It denies these groups their political voice and delegitimises their lived experiences of oppression. **Further, policies or norms that designate legitimate critique of a state as inherently antisemitic dangerously conflate state actions as belonging to an ethno-religious group.** This is both intellectually and historically dishonest, silencing and erasing both the Jewish and the Palestinians' historical and present struggle against imperialist, colonial, and white supremacist power.

Workplace intimidation

Academic staff who are engaging with Palestine and/or openly show support for Palestinian movements on campus are reporting both formal and informal reprimands coming from their superiors. In cases of formal reprimand, there seems to be no clear consensus at any level of the university on the actual mandate of sub-organs or the scope of critical research. For example, one respondent was demanded to retract their department's statement in solidarity with student protests and against the ongoing scholasticide in Gaza by representatives from human resources, the Dean and the university management. Another respondent was asked by the head of their department to cancel an extra-curricular film screening on a topic that is directly related to their teaching and research. Quite often, however, the intimidation is happening outside of formal communication channels. **Academic staff are reporting office visits, personal emails, and dubious redirection from department heads and managers when openly engaging with Palestine in Swedish universities.** One respondent experienced, after having questioned the silence on Gaza in their workplace, a phone call from their superior, where they were told that such questions can affect their career. These incidents reflect workplace intimidation and raise questions about the independence of research and teaching and workplace safety within the Swedish University.

Palestinian erasure

Several incidents describe the discursive and material erasure of Palestine at Swedish universities. This erasure happens in the blatant form of concrete cancellation and removal of anything Palestinian from the university campuses. We see reports on academically organised events and seminars on Palestine being cancelled by faculty management and department heads. Students and staff are also asked to remove flags and keffiyehs before entering university buildings or a lecture hall. In one incident, a respondent notes that flyers were allowed to stay up, but Palestine needed to be removed: “We were told not to use certain phrases on our flyers, like ‘Free Palestine’”. We have also received reports on university management deleting emails from academic staff's inboxes. The emails came from students asking for staff support after having been violently handled by the police at an official meeting with university management. When these incidents are taken further, we note that a more subtle form of erasure occurs, where official communication refuses to utilise the word Palestine within their communication. One respondent wrote: “The head of the department didn’t disclose the exact reason for cancelling the event and just told us that the Vice-chancellor and the Dean of the faculty *** are involved in the decision”. This is not an isolated happening, but rather a repeated strategy of communication across Swedish universities. Thus, students and staff are left with an ambiguous reasoning for why their freedom of expression has been restricted, where Palestine lingers in the air as a contagious word, which results in abandoning all normal praxis within academia.

Social condemnation

Social condemnation has become a quiet yet powerful force shaping how Palestine solidarity is experienced on Swedish campuses. The normalization of censorship in academic spaces, often internalized through self-censorship, reflects a fear of sparking controversy rather than a lack of conviction. **Many students and staff encounter peer discomfort when bringing up Palestine, leading to a culture where empathetic expression is subtly delegitimised, compassion itself framed as politically inappropriate.** This silencing extends beyond peer interactions, as some professors invoke “academic neutrality” to shut down discussions, reinforcing the notion that solidarity is out of place in scholarly environments. Teachers and administrators explicitly prohibit activism or discussion of Palestine, even in contexts where similar political discourse would be accepted (e.g., criticising other states). **Events, posters, and emails about Gaza are censored or removed under vague claims of “security,” “neutrality,” or discomfort.** Symbols like keffiyehs or flags are labelled “political propaganda” or seen as making others uncomfortable. This suggests that advocating for Palestinian rights is not just controversial, it’s socially unacceptable. The message is: you’re out of line! Several respondents were accused of antisemitism without basis for simply proposing or attending discussions about Israel/Palestine, told that criticising the state of Israel is equated with hate speech, and warned that expressing concern over Gaza could hurt their careers or be seen as unprofessional. As a result, students and staff who raise these concerns are not only dismissed but also emotionally isolated, navigating an institutional climate that discourages ethical engagement and political awareness.

Police interference

Across the Swedish campuses, there are reports of surveillance and disciplinary measures in response to pro-Palestinian expression. Instances of police interference can be defined as when law enforcement is used to surveil, intimidate, remove, or physically assault individuals engaging in peaceful political expression. Police are a common presence at protests and other political gatherings within the university, often escalating in tactics to repress Palestinian solidarity. **During one protest, students were prevented from entering university buildings and then physically barricaded by police on a staircase near campus. Surrounded on both sides, the respondent found the experience suffocating and degrading.** The involvement of police leads to criminalisation and potential violence against students and staff. In one incident, a respondent's partner, not involved in the protest, was violently shoved, suffered repeated head trauma, and medical attention was needed. In another incident, a student was dragged across the ground after having participated in a peaceful protest. **We also see that the involvement of the Police on our campuses is not limited to protest activity. There were several other instances where respondents involved in Palestinian solidarity experienced being criminalised unfairly.** One respondent recalled a time when police approached six individuals displaying a Palestinian flag and flyers. They were interrupted, the police claiming they were conducting an unauthorised public gathering, asked for identification of the individuals, and told them to stop expressing their opinions on campus. In another instance, at a Q&A event on Palestine, one respondent recounted how campus security and police were called and attempted to arrest one attendee. The involvement with Palestine solidarity actions has later hindered the path towards citizenship for this individual. These experiences of police interference paint a picture of university campuses, not only becoming incapable of an open debate, but where policing, criminalisation and violence are real potential repercussions for students and staff who express solidarity with the Palestinian people and speak up against the ongoing genocide.

REPORT YOUR INCIDENTS HERE

[HTTPS://TALLY.SO/R/WKYNLJ](https://tally.so/r/WKYNLJ)



The preliminary findings has made it apparent that we need to systematically collect stories of censorship, harassment and discipline that have occurred in Swedish higher education institutions since October 2023. In the process of putting together this report, the survey has been reassessed and updated to better facilitate such a task in the future. We hope you share your stories of dissent and resistance with us.

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