

Proposed approach to responsible collaboration with external partners following advice on human rights

Executive Board, 23 April 2026

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Introduction: the route taken by the university

With the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, the human tragedy in the occupied Palestinian territories and growing international concern about serious violations of humanitarian law since autumn 2023, universities face profound questions about the boundaries of responsible institutional collaboration.

The Executive Board believes that a considered and principled response to these questions is essential. In 2024, the Board decided to mandate an ad hoc Committee for Assessing Ethical Aspects of Partnerships to develop an ethical assessment framework for sensitive collaboration. In the ensuing months, this committee conducted a thorough investigation into the manner in which the ethical review of sensitive collaboration should be undertaken. In February 2025, its advisory report was presented to the Executive Board. Central to its advice was an approach to sensitive collaboration, based on assessment against three interrelated factors: the institutional partner, the nature of the activity and the broader context. The Committee also advised establishing a permanent Ethical Aspects Chamber.

In May 2025, the Executive Board took a series of decisions: to formally establish the Committee on Human Rights and Conflict Zones; to adopt the partner-activity-context approach as the foundation for its work; and to enter into no new institutional research partnerships during the advisory process. In July 2025, this Committee issued its first advisory report in which it recommended suspending the student exchanges with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv University. The Executive Board adopted this advice in September 2025. It also decided not to commence any new exchange programmes with similar institutions within the current context.

Second advisory report of the Committee on Human Rights and Conflict Zones

The Committee on Human Rights and Conflict Zones was mandated in September 2025 to analyse the current institutional research partnerships with Israeli partners. The Executive Board received the definitive version of the Committee's report on 2 April 2026. The Committee examined 13 institutional research partnerships. It describes how, to different degrees, Israeli universities, research institutions and businesses are institutionally integrated with the current policy of the Israeli government and the activities of the military, and how institutional collaboration contributes to the economic, symbolic and network infrastructure of this system. On this basis, the Committee concludes that in nearly all of the cases examined, suspension of the current institutional collaboration is warranted, and it advises suspending 11 of the current institutional partnerships and terminating one. In a 13th project, the collaboration with an Israeli partner did not materialise.

Appreciation and approach

We are extremely grateful to the Committee for the hard work it has undertaken in this exceptionally challenging situation. We see almost daily how close the situation in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories has become for many students and staff, and the significant concerns about the determination of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law within this context. That makes it essential that a university critically examines its institutional partnerships. The report reflects a well-considered approach to an issue in which academic freedom, institutional responsibility and the exceptional severity of the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories converge.

In its considerations, the Committee distinguishes four interrelated risks for institutional collaboration within the current context: strengthening the economic and institutional infrastructure of Israeli partners; institutional recognition and legitimisation of these partners; material and immaterial support to institutions that are brought into connection with human rights violations; and the risk that Leiden staff – however unintentionally – help perpetuate a system that leads to violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. According to the Committee, these risks make it clear that minimisation or partial continuation of collaboration will not be able to prevent moral harm. Based on this reasoning, it concludes that suspending almost all of the institutional partnerships and a halt to new institutional partnerships is the only option.

Where the Committee primarily reaches a normative verdict about the admissibility of continuing this collaboration, the Executive Board also has the responsibility of translating this advice into concrete administrative decisions in a complex academic, legal and organisational reality. In our response, we are seeking an approach that sets clear boundaries when human rights and international humanitarian law are at stake, and that does justice to the responsibility of the university as a public institution, while also providing space for research, debate and international collaboration and knowledge exchange. Without wishing to detract from the moral core outlined by the Committee, additional considerations come into play that lead us to adopt a

more nuanced approach. In this approach, the first two risks are the main factors determining whether the university still wishes to connect with certain partners within the current context, while the third and fourth risks, in combination with the humanitarian and societal impact of the research, determine the way in which we look per category of activities at ongoing institutional projects. This approach is in line with the unfolding broader national and European discourse. In March 2026, the national university organisations of six countries, including the Dutch and Flemish umbrella organisations, advocated together to embed human rights as an explicit participation requirement in the future FP10 framework programme, and for a more rigorous assessment at the project or call level rather than working with generic country bans. We endorse this appeal and will actively contribute to its further development. The integrated approach to responsible collaboration that we intend to develop in Leiden aligns with this movement. We will create a cohesive framework in which human rights, knowledge security, collaboration with risk sectors and the risks inherent with defence-related research will be assessed in conjunction, and in which the considerations start at the level of the activity itself. With our present response to the second advisory report of the Committee on Human Rights and Conflict Zones, we want to act consistently in the spirit of that approach from now on.

Relationship between activity and partner integration

First of all, the Executive Board deems it necessary to give more weight to the third factor within the Committee's framework – the nature of the activity – in decisions about individual projects. The Committee acknowledges that the activities it investigated are considerably diverse, but focuses its conclusion principally on the combination of context and partner. In our administrative assessment, we intend to make a distinction between projects that are directly aligned with defence and security structures – where the four risks largely remain unchanged – and projects that take place within a civil or humanitarian context without demonstrable dual use risk. In such cases, a potentially relevant distinction may be taken into account between, for example, a project conducted in a civilian hospital with a humanitarian objective and an engineering project involving the development of technology with demonstrable links to defence. We want to clearly distinguish, per project, whether the specific activity itself aligns with the problematised institutional infrastructure or, on the contrary, is shielded from it. Institutional integration does not automatically mean that every project at that institution reproduces or exacerbates human rights issues.

Scientific nature and substitutability

In our administrative assessment, we also take into account the scientific nature of the individual projects. There is a potentially relevant distinction between fundamental, applied and translational research. This may have consequences for the weight accorded in the overall assessment to the partner's institutional integration. A considerable number of the projects reviewed concern fundamental or biomedical research, the results of which, in and of themselves, do not pose a detectable risk of military use or of contributing to the violation of human rights. This also raises the question of whether the Israeli partner's contribution is substantively unique and irreplaceable, or whether comparable expertise is available elsewhere. Furthermore, it is worth considering whether Leiden's participation in a project actually contributes to maintaining

standards for ethical research, transparency and Open Science, and whether the discontinuation of this involvement would weaken these safeguards.

Humanitarian and societal impact

The Committee notes that some of the projects investigated serve a humanitarian objective. In the administrative assessment, we consider it important that this aspect be further developed. Projects in the medical or biomedical arena that have the goal of fighting disease and promoting health may involve knowledge with which lives can be saved. It is important to weigh the consequences of terminating access to unique expertise and the consequences for patients and other vulnerable groups, alongside the risks associated with continuation. The same prudence is required with, for example, research projects that contribute to strengthening democratic resilience, human rights and the rule of law. This includes research into the independence of the judiciary, protecting minorities, press freedom and countering disinformation, citizen participation and democratic innovation, the role of civil society and civil society organisations, and peacekeeping. Projects that contribute to transparency, responsible governance, academic freedom and social cohesion also belong to this category, especially if they can have positive effects in the Middle East. The question of whether terminating a partnership will itself cause harm (for example, through the delay to research or the loss of data sets or treatment perspectives) deserves an explicit and visible role in the decision-making.

Reputational and integrity aspects relating to the activity itself

The Committee weighs reputational risks at the institutional level. In the administrative assessment, we also take into account the reputational risks associated with non-participation or withdrawal. For patient organisations, professional groups in the medical sector and international consortium partners, unilateral withdrawal from ongoing collaborations can raise questions about the reliability and consistency of the university as a partner. In addition, participation in a project sometimes has intrinsic value for research integrity: the presence of an international partner with a strong reputation in the field of research ethics can provide space for critical knowledge, monitoring the use of data and reporting possible irregularities. There should be explicit space for this aspect in the overall assessment.

Consequences for international consortia

An additional element relates to the position of international research consortia and the wider consequences of terminating ongoing projects. In many cases, these are EU-funded research programmes in which numerous international partners work together, often, incidentally, without direct collaboration between Leiden University and the Israeli consortium partner. Such projects are legally and contractually embedded in complex consortium structures and linked to clear milestones, reporting obligations and deadlines. This makes the Committee's proposed 'suspension' of ongoing collaboration slightly unrealistic and will, in practice, amount to termination. That will have consequences not only for the Israeli partner but also for the other consortium partners and the Leiden research teams and their researchers.

In addition to the financial consequences (potential repayment or contractual claims), various secondary effects must be taken into account. These include efforts already made by research

teams, expertise accumulated and research results that could be lost, and the risk of reputational damage or breach of contract in relation to European funding programmes and non-Israeli partners with whom we often have long-standing partnerships. Furthermore, terminating projects can cause great uncertainty for researchers and PhD candidates who are funded on the basis of these projects.

In certain domains, the consequences may also extend beyond the university itself. In biomedical research, projects can contribute to new insights or treatments that are relevant to patients. An attempt to stop such research activities can therefore have broader societal implications. We believe it is important to carefully consider these wider implications when making decisions about ongoing projects.

Science diplomacy

Finally, the Executive Board seeks to factor the positive value of carefully assessed academic collaboration into its deliberations. In accordance with its mandate, the Committee mainly formulated its questions as risk indicators. That is appropriate in a situation where serious violations are at issue. However, the Executive Board wonders whether, per project, Leiden University's participation could also contribute to science diplomacy and the role of the university, to protecting academic freedom in a repressive context, to keeping channels for critical academic exchange open or to introducing strict ethical and transparency standards. Where collaboration primarily serves a legitimising or normalising function, termination is the appropriate course of action; where it demonstrably contributes to the protection of rights or humanitarian objectives, a carefully managed continuation or the controlled phasing out can, under strict conditions, be justified. In the present context, the positive role of collaboration can only be given shape in exceptional cases and under strict conditions.

Decision and policy

In light of the Committee's advice, and taking into account the legal, academic and societal considerations as set out above, the Executive Board has arrived at the following proposed policy. The Executive Board takes the advice of the Committee on Human Rights and Conflict Zones as a guiding framework. The severity of the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories and the institutional integration of Israeli partners with the state and the military demand that we take action.

With regard to **new institutional collaboration** with Israeli partners, we will not enter into new partnerships, at least until the integrated approach below allows for a detailed assessment of project proposals. As soon as the new approach is operational, new project proposals will be assessed on the basis of a strict, integrated assessment of human rights risks, knowledge security, dual use or potential military applications. The guiding principle is that, in the current context, new institutional collaborations will be permissible only in exceptional cases and subject to rigorous assessment. Further specification of this 'no, unless' principle will be addressed within the integrated framework for responsible cooperation.

For **current institutional collaboration**, the Executive Board will distinguish four categories.

Problematic integration with the military and the defence industry

In one project, in which the partner is directly and structurally integrated with the Israeli military or the defence industry, the Executive Board does not deem the continuation responsible in the current form. Together with the relevant faculty, the Board will explore possible legal and contractual steps to phase out or terminate the university's institutional involvement. The obligations arising from European consortium agreements and funding rules will be taken into account. Incidentally, the individuals from Leiden who are involved have made previous attempts to stop the project. At that point, there was no room within the consortium to do so. Care for researchers and PhD candidates who are involved will be an integral part of this pathway.

Consortia with partners with a high-risk profile and limited direct contact

In these European research consortia, an Israeli partner is ethically or legally objectionable (for example, because of a location in settlements in occupied territory, because of strong integration with the defence sector or because of a problematic profile in the area of human rights), but there is no direct collaboration with Leiden University within the consortium. In this instance, the Board will, in principle, opt to complete the current contractual term and not to re-enter into commitments upon renewal or in response to new calls. This acknowledges that the risks outlined by the Committee of strengthening infrastructure and legitimisation will not be fully eliminated during the remaining term, but will be deliberately limited and time-bound to allow for the careful phasing out of contractual obligations and the position of other partners, while ensuring the greatest possible continuity for researchers and PhD candidates. This possible phasing out will be further investigated together with the relevant faculties. Where the actual relationship with the Israeli partner is minimal or is conducted through a third party, a more administrative termination may suffice, but the fundamental decision not to renew must be explicitly documented.

Medical and humanitarian research with a high-risk institutional profile

A third category relates to medical research with a clear humanitarian purpose, in which the Israeli research institution is institutionally integrated with the government and the defence industry, but in which the specific research itself has no dual use or military dimension. The Executive Board recognises the tension here: the partner's institutional integration is real and problematic, but the societal value of the research is equally real. In some instances, relationships have been built up over the years around knowledge, data or expertise that is not easily acquired elsewhere, and the abrupt cessation of the collaboration can have immediate implications for the continuation of research that benefits patients or other vulnerable groups. In such cases, the Executive Board will weigh the risks outlined by the Committee of strengthening infrastructure, legitimisation and support against the risks for patients and other vulnerable groups. The guiding principle for this category is controlled phasing out: ongoing collaborations will not be extended, new institutional partnerships with these partners will not be commenced, and ongoing obligations will be carefully brought to completion. The Board will

investigate this together with the relevant faculties. During implementation, explicit safeguards will be in place to ensure continuity for the PhD candidates, postdoctoral researchers, physician-scientists, patients and study participants involved in ongoing studies. In certain cases, it can be defensible to continue ongoing collaboration under strict conditions. Such an exception may apply if the research serves a demonstrable humanitarian goal, if cessation would cause disproportionate harm, if there is no dual use risk and if an independent assessment by the authorised committee leads to a positive decision. The integrated approach that we will develop in the coming months will offer the framework within which this assessment takes place.

Projects with limited Israeli participation or in which the Israeli participation has failed to materialise

For projects in which Israeli participation has never actually materialised, in which participation is through a European network with no direct bilateral collaboration, or in which the scope of the collaboration is so limited that the Israeli partner's institutional support is negligible, the Board will choose a pragmatic completion. These projects will be brought to an administrative close or will expire without extension, without requiring a substantial change process. The fundamental decision not to extend will also be explicitly stated here.

Timeline and decisions

The advice and the response will be discussed in the regular cycle with the University Council and the Board of Governors. Based on this, the Executive Board will make decisions on the projects in question and publish these decisions. Parallel to this, the university will evaluate the three existing committees on human rights/conflict zones, knowledge security and collaboration with the fossil fuel industry and will work towards an integrated process for responsible collaboration. The aim of this evaluation is to ensure future decisions are swifter, more consistent and more transparent.

Plurality and connection in the academic community

Finally, we would like to emphasise that this issue also leads to divergent and sometimes diametrically opposed opinions within the university community. The tension between institutional responsibility for human rights, on the one hand, and the value of academic freedom and international cooperation on the other, is not easy to resolve. That this is openly addressed and discussed within our community is a characteristic of a university that takes its role seriously. A university is by nature a place where fundamental differences of opinion can be expressed and explored. An essential aspect of this is the willingness to keep talking.

We may fundamentally disagree with one another, but respectful debate that offers space to listen, argue and view others as our intellectual equals is at the heart of an academic community. We will not accept members of our community being attacked or excluded from full participation in university life because of their opinions, ideology, nationality or ethnicity. Connection also remains essential with academics and staff in Israel and in the occupied Palestinian

territories who are committed to human rights, dialogue and just peace. For many of them, international academic contacts are an important source of support and intellectual exchange. Institutional decisions about collaboration should therefore never be blamed on individual colleagues who, through their academic work, actually contribute to critical reflection, dialogue and societal change.

Support, recovery and reconstruction

The Executive Board will also explore how the university can contribute to supporting academics and institutions that have been affected: for example, through emergency grants or participating in reconstruction programmes for academic infrastructure, with, in the current context, a particular focus on Gaza and the occupied Palestinian territories. The Board aims to take these steps in close collaboration with faculties, representative bodies and our partners in Leiden and beyond. Solidarity with our colleagues in that region is our guiding principle.