

May 3, 2024

To the participants in the University of Virginia “Liberation Zone” for Gaza:

We are writing to acknowledge the document you shared with us early this morning outlining the interests of your group. Given the rotating schedule of student participation in your demonstration, we thought it would be most productive to respond in writing, with the hope of scheduling a time to discuss your goals in greater detail with the appropriate representatives from your group. Over the course of this academic year, University leaders have engaged with students across a wide range of perspectives and formats, including through discussions, academic programming, religious and cultural events, demonstrations, and rallies. We would welcome the opportunity for further conversation.

Regarding your first two points around disclosure and divestment, the University’s Board of Visitors has vested the University Investment Management Company (UVIMCO) with the authority to make decisions about how the University endowment and other long-term funds are invested, and UVIMCO has a process in place for considering requests like the ones you’ve articulated. In 2021, UVIMCO established an Advisory Committee on Investor Responsibility (ACIR) to gather information and offer advice to UVIMCO management and ultimately to the UVIMCO Board on how the organization can fulfill its responsibility to generate strong returns while incorporating important environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors into its investment decisions. The ACIR regularly consults with students, faculty, alumni, and other UVA stakeholders. Following the student referendum in February, members of the ACIR met with students who are interested in the issues you have highlighted. The ACIR would welcome the opportunity to hear more about your questions and concerns. We would be happy to arrange this for you.

Your request for permanent withdrawal from academic relations with Israeli institutions is not one we can support, for a number of reasons, including that academic freedom is central to the life of our University. To terminate study abroad-programs, fellowships, research collaborations, and other collaborations with Israeli academic institutions would compromise our commitment to academic freedom and our obligation to enabling the free exchange of ideas on our Grounds, both of which are bedrock values of the University.

We agree with your final request regarding allowing students, faculty, and staff to express their support for Palestine without the risk of administrative discipline, provided of course that such expressive activity occurs within the limits of the laws and policies we have in place. The University is required by the Constitution and our own values to uphold the rights of free speech and free expression. We do, however, enforce reasonable restrictions on the time, place, and manner of expressive activities, so as to assure the safety of our community and to avoid disruption to University life or the rights of others. We appreciate your cooperation with our requests to follow University policies, which has enabled us to ensure that your protest can proceed safely and that your voices are heard.

In addition to responding to the requests you've articulated, we'd also like to share that the University's Task Force on Religious Diversity and Belonging, created in December with the goal of ensuring the University is welcoming to individuals across the full spectrum of religions and cultures, is preparing to share an update with the University community. Members of this task force have worked tirelessly over the course of the last several months, examining data, engaging broadly with members of our community, and considering the ways in which we can ensure that the University of Virginia is welcoming to students, faculty, and staff from the full spectrum of religious and cultural backgrounds, and that we provide constructive opportunities to engage across differences. Their update, which we will share with the community in the coming days, will contain meaningful commitments to this work.

On a final note, we recognize that this is an incredibly difficult moment for our world. We are seeing disturbing images of arrests and bitter division on campuses across the country. The staggering loss of innocent lives as a result of the conflict in the Middle East is heartbreaking. We know that many of our own students and their families have been affected by the violence in Israel and in Gaza, and we share your concern for the suffering of Palestinians in this conflict. Throughout these times, members of our community have shown a willingness to engage, to debate, and to respect and care for one another and the University we call home, and we hope that you will be willing to participate in further discussion on the issues you've highlighted so that we can better understand one another.

Sincerely,

Kenyon Bonner, Vice President and Chief Student Affairs Officer

Brie Gertler, Vice Provost for Academic Affairs