By Sacha Wigdorovits

To summarize:

- A paradoxical situation prevails at the world-famous ETH Zurich with regard to anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish activities.
- The management of Switzerland’s best educational institution is taking rigorous action against anti-Israel demonstrations and bringing unconvincing protesters to court.
- It also bans the appearance of guest speakers who do not distance themselves from the terror against the Jewish state and its population.
- The ETH management is thus adopting an uncompromising stance that is unique in the Swiss and international university landscape.
- But in the Department of Architecture at ETH Zurich, the exact opposite is being done: events are being organized to spread anti-Israeli propaganda and works with anti-Zionist (anti-Semitic) content are being supported.
- The same person is usually at the center of the action: Professor Philip Ursprung (63), Director of the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture.
- Now, following an interpellation by Zurich National Councillor Nicole Barandun (Die Mitte), the Grand Chamber of Parliament is also looking into the events at ETH Zurich.

- The question also arises as to whether Article ^{261bis} of the Swiss Criminal Code (discrimination and incitement to hatred) was violated at at least one pro-Palestinian event co-organized by ETH Zurich.

Anyone entering a meeting room on floor F of the ETH main building at Rämistrasse 101 in Zurich is suddenly confronted with a strange scene. A tightly packed group of Asian visitors stand in front of an inconspicuous locker, cell phone cameras at the ready.

Albert Einstein used to keep his clothes in this narrow locker when he taught physics at ETH. Today, the locker houses relics of its former owner in a very small space – and attracts curious visitors every day.

Einstein is a prime example of an institution that has attracted exceptional minds for more than a century. Eleven Nobel Prize winners have worked and continue to work here as professors. In a global comparison of universities, ETH ranks seventh, making it the only continental European university in the top ten.

The current management of ETH is aware of the responsibility that goes hand in hand with this past and present significance. That is why – unlike the management of the universities in Geneva and Lausanne, as well as those in Germany and the USA – it has a clear policy regarding anti-Israel and anti-Semitic demonstrations on its premises: zero tolerance.

ETH management did not hesitate when unauthorized demonstrations by pro-Palestinian activists took place in May 2024 in the wake of the Gaza war: they were immediately broken up by police and criminal charges of trespassing were filed against participants who had refused to leave ETH voluntarily. “ETH Zurich is not a platform for political activism,” said Professor Ulrich Weidmann, member of the ETH Executive Board and responsible for security, in an interview on the ETH website at the time.

Shortly beforehand, the ETH school management had already banned a planned appearance by French anti-Israel activist Léopold Lambert. The reason: he had not

clearly distanced himself from terror and violence against Israel and the Jews. Lambert had been invited by students from the Department of Architecture to give a lecture entitled “Weaponized Architecture: Settler Colonialism and the Built Environment in Palestine”.

Department of Architecture: Hatred of Israel in various forms

This brings us to the core of the problem: in the Department of Architecture at ETH, the guidelines of the school’s own management, which are designed to be politically neutral, are consistently and deliberately disregarded. With a single goal: to defame and delegitimize the Jewish state of Israel.

For ETH architecture students – or at least the activist part of them – inviting an avowed Israel-hater like Léopold Lambert has a political rather than a professional background. This is also illustrated by the so-called “Parity Talks” that have been held for the past 10 years. These periodic “training sessions” were originally about gender equality (also within the Department of Architecture). However, the war in Gaza, the “colonial state of Israel” and Zionism are now also discussed there. The title of the relevant “Parity Talks” shows where the organizers stand in this regard: “Learning Palestine – Until Liberation”. The map in the invitation post shows what is meant by “Palestine”: the state of Israel does not exist on it.

The hatred of Israel in the ETH architecture department is also promoted by the teaching staff. On 6/7 December last year, the ETH’s Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture, together with the Zurich University of the Arts ZHdK as co-organizer, held the symposium “The Great Canton: Rise & Fall of the FRG”.

It is not clear how this topic relates to the “history and theory of architecture”, which is the subject of research at the ETH Institute that co-organized the event. However, the event was not about architecture at all. This is made clear by the conference report in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung. Under the title “Left-wing conspiracy theories, scientifically disguised”, the NZZ wrote on December 8, 2025: “The ETH and the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) announced a scientific symposium on Germany. In fact, it was a friendly meeting of pro-Palestinian activists.”

The fact that “pro-Palestinian activists” are welcome in the Department of Architecture at ETH is also illustrated by the symposium “Unarchiving Architecture”, which took place on February 19 and 20, 2026. Faiq Mari was one of the guest speakers at this event. The Palestinian currently teaches and researches at Birzeit University in Ramallah. Prior to this, he studied architecture at the ETH for many years and eventually obtained his doctorate.

Mari’s research project for an online database called “Maktabat Sabil” was a talking point. This initially ran on a domain belonging to the Department of Architecture at ETH. Following internal and public pressure, “Maktabat Sabil” was then removed from there and moved to an external URL. For good reason: the database launched by Faiq Mari was not a scientific architecture project, but an activist tool for the Palestinian struggle against Israel, with close ties to the terrorist organization Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

This can be seen from the first click on the “Maktabat Sabil” website. The following articles await the user on this online database developed at the ETH: “Gaza – a history of resistance”, “Gaza: a history of colonization”, “Testaments of martyrs”. And, prominently placed: the link to “Al Hadaf” magazine, where countless articles promote the terrorist organization PFLP. Only one topic is missing from the website developed by the Department of Architecture at ETH: architecture.

The fact that Faiq Mari is less concerned with academic research and more with political activism for the Palestinian struggle against Israel is also demonstrated by his dissertation, which he wrote at ETH. Its title is “Masha’ of the Periphery: Collective Labor and Property in Palestinian Liberation Struggle”. Undoubtedly a typical architectural theme.

It is therefore not surprising that Mari eloquently thanks the Palestine Committee Zurich in his doctoral thesis for helping him “to feel at home”. This probably refers to a kindred spirit. The anti-Zionist struggle committee denies Israel’s right to exist (“from the river to the sea”) and accused the Israeli army of genocide in Gaza. Just as Mari does in his (architectural) dissertation, in which he writes of “ongoing Zionist genocidal aggression” and describes the protective fence or wall erected by Israel against Palestinian terrorists as an “apartheid wall”.

In the spotlight: Professor Philip Ursprung

In response to questions from FokusIsrael.ch about the various politically problematic passages in Faiq Mari's dissertation, Professor Philip Ursprung replied that the passage "continued Zionist genocidal aggression" referred "explicitly to the lawsuits filed by South Africa, Nicaragua, Spain and other states (against Israel, ed.) at the International Court of Justice." Apart from the fact that these lawsuits were purely political and legally groundless, this also raises the question: what does this have to do with architecture?

Professor Ursprung is head of the ETH Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture and one of Faiq Mari's doctoral supervisors. He also defends his former protégé with regard to the term "Apartheid Wall". This is a common formulation in Palestine Studies, says Ursprung. "Personally, I wouldn't use the term "apartheid wall" or the term "security wall" because both terms are ideological. I would refer to the barrier, which violates international law, as a 'separation barrier'." However, it is "at the discretion and responsibility of the researchers to use these terms."

According to Ursprung, the same applies to Mari's assertion elsewhere that Israel is a "colonial state". This is also a "common definition" in Palestine Studies, the ETH professor defends his former doctoral student. He does not use it himself because it is ideological and reduces the historical complexity. But, Ursprung repeats, "it is at the discretion and responsibility of the researchers to use it."

Professor Ursprung was also responsible at ETH for organizing the inglorious event "Der Grosse Kanton: Aufstieg und Fall der BRD". He firmly rejects the accusation made by the NZZ that this was a "friendship meeting of pro-Palestinian activists". Likewise the accusation that he rejects dissertations with a clear anti-Israeli thrust for political reasons.

"This is an insinuation," replies Ursprung. "As a professor and head of the institute (responsible for the history and theory of architecture, ed.), I consider it my responsibility to facilitate research such as that of Faiq Mari on the agricultural structure in the West Bank and a conference such as "The Great Canton: The Rise & Fall of the FRG"."

Research can and should also be controversial, explains architecture professor Ursprung, and he also wants to contribute to a gain in knowledge and a dialog, "even if a dissertation or event does not correspond to my personal position on all

points.” As an institution, ETH Zurich enables and protects freedom of research. “I feel committed to freedom of research.”

The ETH Executive Board is also hiding behind the killer argument of “freedom of research” and the personal freedom enjoyed by its professors. When asked about the event “The Great Canton: Rise & Fall of the FRG”, which was co-organized by the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture, its media office stated: “In the case of symposia, the responsibility for the content lies with the organizing professors (in this case: Philip Ursprung, editor). We assume that the scientific principles will be adhered to.” Lenin would have replied to the ETH Executive Board: “Trust is good, control is better.”

ETH Zurich and its media office also “explicitly” defend themselves against the accusation that their Department of Architecture supports anti-Semitic tendencies. “This unsubstantiated allegation does not correspond to the reality of life in the Department of Architecture.”

This statement is incomprehensible in view of the facts. The Parity Talks, in which Israel’s right to exist is denied, the invitations to terrorist-affiliated guest speakers such as Léopold Lambert and Faiq Mari, the events such as “The Great Canton: Rise & Fall of the FRG” and the social media posts by members of the Architecture Department all show that an anti-Zionist attitude is indeed “lived” in the Architecture Department at ETH. And the fact that the term “anti-Zionist” is synonymous with “anti-Semitic” in today’s political debate is something that the ETH school management should also be aware of.

Interpellation submitted to the National Council

The ETH Executive Board is not doing itself any favors by refusing to face reality with regard to the events in the Department of Architecture. The behavior of well-known exponents of this department has made negative headlines internationally and has also damaged ETH’s reputation in academic circles. In addition, the Executive Board must now take a stand in the National Council. Nicole Barandun (Die Mitte, Zurich) has just submitted an interpellation to the Federal Council asking for information on how much the production of “Der Grosse Kanton: Aufstieg & Fall der BRD” cost the ETH.

This question should not be a headache for those responsible at ETH: According to

the school management, ETH did not pay anything towards the organization of the event, but merely provided a lecture hall free of charge.

However, another point in Nicole Barandun's interpellation is unpleasant for the management of the ETH and in particular for the co-organizers of "Der Grosse Kanton: Aufstieg & Fall der BRD". The Zurich National Councillor points out that a statement by Israeli architect Eyal Weizman (a well-known anti-Israel activist in specialist circles, editor's note) relativizing the Holocaust was subsequently edited out of the video recording, which is available on YouTube. And, writes Barandun further: "According to the IHRA's working definition (of anti-Semitism, ed.), which is recognized by Switzerland, the denial, trivialization or relativization of the Shoah is considered a form of anti-Semitism."

Has Article ^{261bis} StGB been violated?

Nicole Barandun's findings are significant for the following reason. Publicly denying, trivializing or relativizing the Shoah violates Article ^{261bis} of the Swiss Criminal Code (discrimination and incitement to hatred). Not only the person who made the statement in question is punished. Those who helped to make this possible by organizing it are also punished. In the case of "Der Grosse Kanton: Aufstieg & Fall der BRD", this would be those responsible at the ETH Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture and the Zurich University of the Arts ZHdK.

Sacha Wigdorovits is President of the Fokus Israel und Nahost association, which runs the website fokusisrael.ch. He studied history, German and social psychology at the University of Zurich and has worked as a US correspondent for the SonntagsZeitung, was editor-in-chief of BLICK and co-founder of the commuter newspaper 20minuten.