

The letter was sent to the IMO Board on May 6. Please do not share this letter on social media. However, you are welcome to forward it to your colleagues.

Mathematics and Moral Responsibility: The IMO and the Genocide in Gaza

Dear Members of the International Mathematical Olympiad (IMO) Board,
Dear Members of the IMO Ethics Committee,

Gaza had become “a graveyard for children,” [declared](#) the UN Secretary-General just one month into the genocide. One year later, the UNICEF Spokesperson [echoed](#) the same devastating truth: “Gaza has become a graveyard for thousands of children. It’s a living hell for everyone else.” Over nineteen months, Israel has killed at least [51,000 Palestinians](#) — including more than 15,600 children, 8,300 women, and 3,800 elderly people. Countless others remain beneath the rubble: nameless, uncounted, and buried without a grave.

Since October 7, 2023, the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education has [reported](#) that 14,649 students in Gaza have been killed, with at least 23,936 others injured. In the West Bank, 135 students have been killed, 830 injured, and 724 detained. Additionally, 880 teachers and administrative staff have been killed, and around 4,247 others have been injured across both Gaza and the West Bank.

In the same period, 403 school buildings in Gaza — 71.5% of the total — have been directly hit, according to the [Education Cluster](#). At least 85 have been completely destroyed, while another 73 have lost more than half of their structures. All 12 universities in Gaza have been [targeted](#) by Israeli attacks.

“Not even a grain of wheat will enter Gaza,” [said](#) Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich on April 7, 2025. Since Israel unilaterally broke the ceasefire on March 18, 2025, Gaza has been [plunged](#) into unprecedented

despair, crushed by a total military blockade that has cut off all humanitarian aid.

On March 14, 2022, less than three weeks after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, your Board acted under the Force Majeure clause of the General Regulations and [decided](#): “(i) to suspend the membership of the IMO Board of the Russian representative, (ii) to suspend the IMO membership of Russia, and (iii) to allow six students from Russia to compete remotely in IMO 2022 as private individuals (eligible for certificates, prizes, and medals) without national flags or symbols.” These decisions were confirmed by a remote [vote](#) of the IMO Jury a few days later.

You rightly based your decision on a resolution of the United Nations General Assembly concerning the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Yet in its ruling of 26 January 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) found a “real and imminent risk” that acts of genocide may be committed in Gaza ([South Africa v. Israel, §74](#)), and affirmed the plausibility of violations of the Genocide Convention. In its [advisory opinion](#) of 19 July 2024, the ICJ declared Israel’s presence in the occupied Palestinian territories illegal and called on Israel to end it within 12 months (para. 2). These rulings by the highest international court — along with numerous General Assembly [resolutions](#) on the [ongoing genocide in Gaza](#) — appear to have received far less attention from your board.

In stark contrast to your prompt and decisive actions concerning the Russian invasion of Ukraine, nineteen months into the genocide in Gaza carried out by Israel, your Board has yet to issue a single statement on this catastrophic situation — let alone suspend Israel’s IMO membership. Worse still, in July 2024, you actively moved to block a democratic debate and vote on the issue among the IMO delegations.

At a meeting of the delegations during last year’s IMO, the president of the IMO Board prevented any discussion of the situation in Gaza — let alone the possibility of suspending Israel’s IMO membership — invoking an obscure regulation: “*No one may take advantage of the IMO for political purposes.*” This sentence was added to Article 1.10 of the [current version](#)

[of the regulations](#), approved in 2024. It does not appear in the [2019 version](#), which remained accessible on your website at least until July 16, 2024, as documented by the [Web Archive](#). This addition was made by your Board precisely to suppress debate. In doing so, your Board has, in fact, taken advantage of the IMO for political purposes — specifically, to block a democratic discussion among the delegations and to shield Israel from the kinds of sanctions imposed on other countries.

We have a long-standing tradition in our community of publicly taking political stances on various issues — from the Algerian War and the Vietnam War to McCarthyism in the United States, both in its original 1950s version and its current Trumpist incarnation, as well as campaigns for the release of political prisoners in Russia, Poland, and elsewhere. The IMO's decisions — both in the case of Russia and in its move to prevent discussion on the war waged by Israel in Gaza, based on a regulation discreetly added in 2024 for that very purpose — are themselves clear examples of political positions taken at the organizational level.

Last year, Israel [prevented](#) the Palestinian team — comprising two students from Gaza and two from the West Bank — from attending the IMO in Bath, England. Your Board took no action to address this injustice — not even a public statement. In May 2024, the closure of the Rafah crossing made it impossible for the Gaza students to apply for visas; they knew from the outset that leaving Gaza was not an option. Meanwhile, their teammates from the West Bank saw their already-approved visas and passports vanish somewhere between the British Consulate in Jerusalem, the embassy in Tel Aviv, and a printer in Abu Dhabi. The IMO ethics committee launched an investigation. No findings have been released.

This year, the Palestinian team is preparing to take part in the Olympiad, scheduled for July on the Sunshine Coast in Australia. The two students from Gaza are studying in a crowded shelter, with only a phone to train online for the IMO. They learn on empty stomachs, under constant fear for their lives. They flee bombs while clinging to the fragile dream of a normal life — studying mathematics at a good university, and, this summer, representing their country at the IMO.

“Math has helped me a lot because it separated me from the horrible situations and motivated me to stop thinking about war and focus on what I love to do,” said one of them, an exceptionally gifted student.

The other qualified for the final despite being forced to flee four times in a few months — once, he recalled, with “bombs literally flying above us.”

“I left behind every tool — my laptop, calculator, math notes, and even some of the problems I invented,” he said.

We fear that Israel may shatter these students’ dream a second time.

The Israeli students also deserve our attention. Suspending Israel’s IMO membership — while still allowing these students to compete — would send a powerful message. A few Israeli teenagers are conscientious objectors who have been [imprisoned](#) for refusing military service. Your decision would offer meaningful support for their courageous and costly stand. As for the majority — those who remain indifferent, and even those who support their government’s actions — this might prompt reflection, and lead them to understand that a country committing genocide becomes a pariah.

For all these reasons, we urge your Board to apply to Israel the same measures you implemented for Russia in 2022.

We trust that you will make the decision that upholds justice, solidarity, and the values of the IMO.

[List of signatories](#) (closed on May 17, 2025)