

Minutes of ICHTH board meeting Jan 13 2024

Meeting convened at 11:30 AM with President A. De Baets in the chair. Twelve members in attendance with regrets from M. Hughes-Warrington

Chair opened welcoming members and reminding them that the regularly scheduled meeting of Feb 19 will still occur. The present, extraordinary, meeting has been convened to consider the issue of the CISH Jerusalem meeting and ICHTH's participation in it. A memo [<https://www.ichth.net/news/23.pdf>] has been prepared by the President with input from the Executive (the memo was displayed on the screen during this meeting).

Voting will occur some time after the meeting to allow time for deliberation and for any absent members to review the recording.

Opening the floor for questions, the chair asked the past President, E. Domańska, for background on when and how the decision to go to Jerusalem was taken. ED replied that A. Liakos had been present at the meeting, but there had been lots of controversy and the decision had passed very narrowly. E. Tortarolo may have the full report on that meeting which E. Domańska will try to obtain.

B. Bevernage thanked the Executive for the memo. In his view the cons of going to Jerusalem outweigh the pros. He queried step 4 of the memo—would the general members have an opportunity to vote and how would the decision be communicated to CISH.

Chair responded we as a Board are empowered to make this decision, and that he does not plan to consult the membership at large. He clarified that this means in effect that even if CISH in its October 2024 General Assembly in Tokyo decided otherwise, ICHTH would not participate should the Board now decide not to by vote.

S. Seth expressed his view that he was puzzled by the decision in Poznan to choose Jerusalem and indicated his unwillingness to go to a Congress held in Israel.

M. Tamm restated the need for clarity on what we are voting for, and that our decision binds us and not CISH. Chair predicted that we were probably at the beginning of a cascade of decisions and that there will be as yet unforeseeable circumstances that will oblige us to reconvene on this matter between now and 2026.

B. Bevernage asked what is the value of belonging to CISH—what do we get out of it? He is in favour of boycotting the Congress. He clarified that a boycott is important because it is not the same as “cancel culture” (i.e. silencing individual academics) but rather about not participating in high-level official events—a position actually supported by progressive Israelis. He is sceptical as to how democratic the CISH decision to go to Jerusalem was but reserves judgment till he sees the report on the Poznan meeting. If the Congress were to be relocated from Israel it would be important to be open to both Israelis and Palestinian scholars who currently do not have travel freedom. Chair replied that voting against Jerusalem does not entail breaking with CISH and believes these are separate issues. We can by our input, however, potentially influence the other constituent organizations of CISH.

D. Chakrabarty reminded the meeting that the current Israeli government is in effect its own version of Cancel Culture and indicated that at one point it had resolved to deny visas for visiting critics to come to Israel. He asked if we could rank the options? Chair worried that with 4 options on the table the less clear the result could be. D. Chakrabarty indicated we might get a result that is split. A ranking exercise would provide the modal distribution. Chair confirmed that a ranking exercise would be possible. B. Bevernage indicated we should not communicate the exact vote or the options to CISH as it might weaken our voice. Chair clarified that there would be a letter drafted to CISH and circulated to CISH Bureau members but noted that all those mentioned in the memo, including CISH leaders E. Tortarolo and S. Zala, had received it. S. Seth wondered when the decision had been made to invite the president of Israel given his post Oct. 7 anti-Palestinian statement. Chair responded that the decision to invite Israel's head of state to open the Congress circulated at Poznan but was not confirmed. S. Seth indicated that the invitation to the president of Israel would give the Congress a particular legitimacy which is not politically neutral.

B. Bevernage pointed out the likelihood that those who have signed petitions such as support for the BDS [Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions] movement or other critics of Israel would be harassed at the border or denied admission. D. Chakrabarty noted that some members of the military in Israel are prepared to describe their own country as an Apartheid state. The chair invited others who had not spoken to raise their hands.

M. Tamm wondered what would happen if we voted for option 3 (for instance, Tel Aviv rather than Jerusalem) and CISH agreed—would we then be bound to go? What if then it became clear that the president of Israel would still attend--would we then change our minds and not go? This pointed to the fact that many circumstances outlined in options 2 and 3 are beyond our control and unpredictable.

E. Domańska indicated that the decision to go to Jerusalem had first been made in May 2021 during the CISH General Assembly, and as then-president of our commission she had called a vote of ICHTH in which the commission membership voted for Leipzig, not Jerusalem. Chair thanked her for that information. She further reported that the ICHTH vote was online and some people had voted by email having had problems with the website. She thought we needed to ask members of the Board at the time if they wanted their views shared with the current Board.

E. Gazi commended the Executive for the memo. She has never signed any form of boycott, but the very decision to have it in Israel and Jerusalem strikes her as bizarre and she would like to know a few more details about the logic of that decision given other issues such as safety and security. She is in favour of voting but prefers a very simple set of options to vote on. B. Bevernage agreed we should have only two options. Options 2 and 3 don't address the safety question.

A consensus emerged to vote on only two options, not four. O. Adeboye asked whether we could have a middle option in which we'd accept Israel if security concerns could be addressed. B, Bevernage pointed out that CISH is not in a position to insist on safety issues

being addressed. O. Adeboye indicated that this clause was for our own reputation so we seem more combative.

E. Domańska wondered if we should await the CISH meeting—if they decide to move the Congress then we don't need to vote. She believes they are considering this possibility. S. Seth observed that the real issue will be the letter we come up with at the end. Several people had mentioned concerns about Jerusalem well before current events, despite their relevance.

V. Tozzi is concerned that it's impossible to know whether the war is on in two years or the position of Palestinians postwar. She does not think it is viable to have a Congress in Israel at all in current circumstances.

B. Bevernage argued that we should retain only options 1 and 4 for the vote as they are the only ones of which we are in control. For the letter following it, if the vote is to reject going to Israel for the Congress, we should stick to international humanitarian law as the basis of our decision.

E. Domańska clarified that the original CISH vote had been Jerusalem 51%, Leipzig 47%, abstention 2%.

Chair proposed that we vote on two new options, either: 1) Israel, not merely Jerusalem, is acceptable as a location 2) Israel is not acceptable. It was clear from the discussion that this was an issue for the country of location, not just the disputed city of Jerusalem. An informal poll of members present (M. Tamm had left meeting) supported the chair's suggestion. After 2 days of voting the president will communicate the results, along with a draft of the letter to be sent to CISH, ideally in advance of its special January 17 meeting.

The meeting concluded at 13:05 PM with the understanding that the Secretary would post the recording later in the day and the President would follow up with the poll.

Respectfully submitted,

Daniel Woolf
Co-Secretary General