

On Occupation and Academia

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The occupation is the greatest sin the State of Israel and its leaders have ever committed. With its tumors that spread all over the hills of the Jordan River's western bank, it is malignant too, bringing along oppression, dispossession, unimaginable cruelty, early apartheid, and early – but promising – buds of annexation and deportation. The occupation has been both directly and indirectly eroding everything that is good about us, as individuals and as a state, posing a real threat to Israel's academic and research life.

In the late 1970s, I happened to speak at a computer science conference held in the USA. Back then, the world was still certain that the territories that Israel had occupied in 1967 would soon be returned, and was still emphatic towards and concerned about Israel after the things we experienced later, in 1973. Being very young and probably rather naughty, and having great love for our country, I started my lecture with a colorful slide adorned with Israeli flags and huge letters that read: “Happy Birthday Israel”. Hard to believe, but it was received with wild applause, wall to wall.

That attitude changed quite rapidly. In the early 1990s, I invited Sir Tony Hoare from the University of Oxford, a seasoned and world leading computer scientist and Turing Award laureate, to come to our institute in Rehovot and deliver the annual Weizmann lecture. He declined and, being politely British, told me that he will visit Israel only after it mends its ways and terminates its rule over another nation. The number of such incidents has been increasing rapidly.

In 2014, the United States marked the 25th anniversary of the 1964 Civil Rights Act - one of the most important and enlightened declarations of the modern world. It bans all discrimination based on race, skin color, religion, gender, or nationality. That same year, I attended a ceremony in Washington, in which the National Academy of Engineering admitted new members. Addressing the ceremony, the American heads of the Academy spoke of almost nothing else! Still, my uplifting experience was quickly replaced by depression because in the Israeli academic world, one must be wary of even mentioning the Israeli Declaration of Independence, which contains parts very similar to that American act of 1964.

In my capacity as a member of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, I occasionally attend conferences of roof organizations representing numerous worldwide academies of science. Generally, these gathering are a bit tedious, conducted a little like a UN Assembly gathering: Some 120 or 130 states are represented by the presidents or vice-presidents of the relevant academies, who discuss various issues. The seating arrangement is usually alphabetic, which is why I usually sit next to Iranian or Jordanian representatives. Most participants hold the quality of Israeli science in very high regard, and some of them actually admire it (incidentally, we have signed scientific-cooperation agreements with several foreign Academies).

And yet, even at those conferences, the occupation stirs and sizzles beneath the surface. For example, several years ago, we failed to win a secret vote for a seat on a steering committee of one such pan-Academic organization. Given our academic status and past contributions to the said organization, we should have won the vote with flying colors.

I believe that anecdotal incidents such as these reflect the impact that the occupation has on the international reputation of Israeli science.

The epicenter of the occupation-academia relations is the saga of the academic institute known as the University of Ariel, which was conceived, born, and raised in sin, representing creeping, devious, and clever annexation. Some may argue that no annexation took place, since the State of Israel seized no piece of land, but this

precisely is the clever aspect: That institute has been made part of Israel by the official bodies in charge of higher education here, taking it under their wings step by step.

First, they built it somewhere in the occupied territories as the small and rather insignificant Ariel College. Then, when they sought permission to hand out academic degrees to its students, the Council for Higher Education in Israel (CHEI) justifiably argued that the institution is not on Israeli territory and thus is outside the scope of its responsibilities. In reaction, they set up a new body --following a decree by the regional military command commander, no less – and named it CHEJS – the Council for Higher Education in Judaea and Samaria. Several years later, that same affiliated higher education council granted the Ariel College a university status.

The next creeping-annexation stage happened when the Knesset passed a law placing the Ariel institution under the authority of CHEI, the *real* council. Even though CHEI never approved the academic upgrade to a University, and despite some harsh opposition, the bill passed. Soon after that, the CHEJS dissolved; of course. It played its part and was free to go.

Next came then-Education Minister Naftali Bennett and forced the Association of University Heads (VERA) to endorse the Ariel University, threatening to deny their budgets if they didn't. That was neither seduction nor some semi-harassment. That was an academic #metoo incident *par excellence*.

Since the real annexation of lands is still complicated (not to worry; they are on it), the institution was annexed without the land it stands on, by subjecting it to the relevant institutions inside Israel proper, slowly and one by one. That reminded me of a gang that used to steal cars in Israel during Kissinger's interim agreements and, wishing to smuggle them into Egypt without having to deal with complicated border crossings, they would drive them to the Sinai, bury them in the sand, and just wait for the next interim agreement to be signed and the actual border to be moved further. Then, their partners on the other side of the new borderline simply dug them out and sold them.

Speaking of Ariel, here is a personal nugget: Before the Knesset vote on the bill that subjected Ariel to the Israeli CHE, I tried to convince the Council of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities to openly oppose the move, but failed. The Council chose

to remain silent. Just to be able to look at myself in the mirror and act on my feelings, I worked hard to publish an unofficial manifesto. It did not explicitly mention the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, but it did carry 51 signatures by Academy members (more than 40% of them), but as we all know, it did not work and the bill was enacted.

The story of the Khan el-Ahmar Bedouin Village deserves our attention here too. Though not directly related to Israel's academic reality, the two issues are indirectly linked. It is known that liberal thinkers and artists often rise against wrongs that befall minorities and underprivileged populations. In the Khan el-Ahmar case, many academics and artists decided to drop their scientific, artistic, or literary projects and help. Some of them actually used to visit the place time and again to support the local Bedouins and staged protests against the wrongs of planned demolition and deportation. The government were presented with a letter on the issue, endorsed by 25 Israel Prize laureates (which was attached to a petition filed with the High Court of Justice (HCJ)), and some of us even spent hours attending the lengthy HCJ deliberations, in order to demand justice for the Jahalin Tribe members, doing anything we could to abolish the decree.

For example, Prof David Shulman of the Hebrew University is one of the greatest researchers of Indian culture of our time (and a real saint). Would his time not be better spent on researching, writing, or teaching instead of spending his days and nights with the Khan el-Ahmar Bedouins and opposing the upcoming deportation? This is but a small, albeit typical example of the ways the occupation impacts the academia.

I do not know how this damned occupation will end, but I believe we must take two necessary paths of action, and hope that would somehow be enough.

One path we need to take is creating external pressure. Several years ago, Ilana Hammerman and I published an op-ed article in the Guardian, calling for such pressure to be applied (the article is very easy to find). We wrote there explicitly that we are not calling for staging a comprehensive, BDS-style boycott against Israel as a state, but rather, urged foreign states, organizations, and individuals to apply cautious and measured pressure against related Israeli Government's policies. We argued that the

occupation is no longer a mere Israeli matter, but is also under the responsibility of the international community and its institutions that have laws and agreements that may be relevant to the occupation, but have never been enforced.

Domestically, people criticized us for taking our dirty laundry outside. Some even warned that Ilana and I might be sent to prison for that article. Oh well. So be it. This does not really scare me. And the laundry? Yes, it is dirty. It is actually filthy. Seems like we need an imported washing machine for it.

Unfortunately, academic pressure will not do much good on its own. Bringing Lionel Messi to Israel is much easier than making Sir Tony Hoare come here. How much power do professors and thinkers have against the occupation, when compared with the Eurovision Song Contest or the Giro d'Italia bicycle race, for example? If a decision were made not to hold the Eurovision in Israel – not just to reject the suggestion that it be held in Jerusalem – *that* might have had some impact. If only the friendly football game between the Israeli and Argentine national teams was not the only thing cancelled, and if occupying Israel were to be thrown out of international sports forums, things could have started moving a little. After all, no one cares if there one less scientist on a research fund commission, and I am not even certain that comprehensibly excluding Israel from receiving European research funds would seriously affect the Netanyahu government.

The second path of action that must be taken to end occupation is the formation of a broad, Jewish-Arab political front – not a Jewish movement with a few token Arabs to ease our consciences or an Arab movement with a few symbolic Jews, but a broad-based, egalitarian, and democratic political group that fully represents the Israeli citizens. Such a movement will have to make ending the occupation its top priority, while promoting absolute equality all over the land. Such an initiative could motivate *everyone* – Jews and Arabs – to move in large numbers. For the past few years, I've been collaborating with several dear people in an attempt to form such a front – not a political party just yet, but a movement, a front.

This is a good time to remember a great scientist, who cared hugely about equality and basic decency between humans. In 1933, Albert Einstein decided to renounce his

German citizenship and stayed in the USA. He then wrote these famous words: "*As long as I have any choice in the matter, I shall live only in a country where civil liberty, tolerance and equality of all citizens before the law prevail.*" Please note that he said that before Nazi Germany started occupying Europe! Einstein was actually referring to the situation in his country before the occupation. It is as if some notable scholar should choose to leave Israel – not even because of the occupation, but in protest of the discrimination and inequality that exist within the Green Line boundaries. Yeshayahu Leibowitz could have been a fine candidate for that.

When the occupation ends, we will no longer need an ethical code for professors. There will be no more BDS, no one's words or actions will have to be scrutinized, and no one will care if a citizen or a visitor signs some petition. When the occupation ends, they will no longer have to demolish and evacuate a Bedouin residential compound just to build a new neighborhood for settlers. Scientists and thinkers will be able to do what they need to do, undisturbed. When the occupation ends, ladies and gentlemen, there will be no Ariel University at all, or peace accords will state that, one way or another, Ariel is a legal part of the State of Israel, thus eliminating the problem.

On the positive side, when the occupation ends, there will be plenty of money for good things. Funds for research and science will flourish; votes in conferences attended by university heads will be about their subject matters; and I will be able to wish the State of Israel happy birthday anywhere, proudly, and without hesitation. Israel will be a country residing within its modest and agreed-upon borders; a country where equality for all citizens will be a top priority and, mainly, a state championing respect for, and peace with its neighbors.

Inshallah, this will happen soon, with the help of the real dweller of the Heavens.

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