

One Hand Clapping: Applauding Tolerance and Pluralism in Israeli Academia

By Sharif Hamadeh*

International support for Israel turns on the uncritical acceptance of the Jewish state as bravely fulfilling the obligations of a Western-style democracy in an otherwise hostile region. In reality, this is simply a PR-friendly re-branding of an old Herzlian notion. In *The Jewish State*, Theodor Herzl, the premier Zionist ideologue, envisioned that the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine would form, “part of a wall of defense for Europe in Asia, an outpost of civilization against barbarism.”

Now, however, as the walls and outposts of the Zionist enterprise are becoming ever more conspicuous, so too are the contradictions inherent in the 57-year-old experiment of establishing a state that is both “Jewish” and “democratic” in pluralistic Palestine. The recent, albeit short-lived, decision of Britain’s Association of University Teachers (AUT) to impose an academic boycott on Bar-Ilan and Haifa Universities attests to the growing realization abroad that Israel’s policies adversely affect Palestinians on both sides of the Green Line.

The AUT’s decision, which was taken on 22 April 2005, and then, following enormous pressure, revoked at a special council meeting on 26 May 2005, was made in response to the call from the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI). PACBI called for the implementation of a boycott in protest against the Israeli academy’s contribution to the maintenance of the state’s policies toward Palestinians; most notably, the continuing “military occupation and colonization of the West Bank and Gaza,” and “the entrenched system of racial discrimination and segregation against the Palestinian citizens of Israel.”

In the ultimately successful counter-campaign waged in the English language press against the boycott, most arguments focused on the affront to the principles of academic freedom that such a boycott was said to constitute. Beyond these arguments, however, a more subtle defense-strategy emerged. Of the two claims made by PACBI cited above, it is the second that provoked the sharpest rebuttals from Israel’s domestic intelligentsia and its loyal supporters abroad. The occupation is only denied by a few right-wingers, but it is the liberals in Israel who take exception to accusations of domestic state-sponsored ethnic discrimination and segregation. Moreover, the notion that Israeli academia could be tainted with such illiberal practices is anathema to Israel’s self-promotion as a mature democracy.

In the pages of *The Guardian*, the hip Israeli author Etgar Keret protested that Israeli institutions of higher learning were, “one of the few remaining bastions of the liberal left.” Israel’s Council of Higher Education (CHE) issued a statement stressing that the Arab population in Israel, “has full access to all institutes of higher learning.” In *The Wall Street Journal*, Fania Oz-Salzberger, a senior lecturer at Haifa University, described her university as, “a model Jewish-Arab institution,” whilst Prof. Mina Teicher of Bar-Ilan insisted, “[T]here is no discrimination in the Israeli universities whatsoever,” in an online

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Q & A session hosted by the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*. In short, a beautiful picture was painted of Israeli universities as, "havens of political and racial tolerance," as a *Times* editorial lavishly described them.

This picture is, of course, a distortion. Notable by their absence in these avowals of the political, "racial" and religious tolerance said to reign in the campuses of Israeli universities were the voices with the greatest credibility: those of Palestinian students and scholars themselves. The result is the commentary equivalent of one hand clapping.

There are good reasons why Palestinians at Israeli universities have not been heard applauding the tolerance and liberalism of these institutions. For a start, there aren't many of them. Although Palestinian citizens of Israel comprise approximately 20% of the population in Israel, according to official data, "non-Jews" comprise 9.5 percent of undergraduates, 4.8 percent of students in Masters' programs, and 3.2 percent of students in doctoral degree programs. Moreover, as the civic-equality group Sikkuy has acknowledged, a "non-Jewish" applicant is three times more likely to be rejected from university than a Jewish candidate. As for the number of Palestinian academic staff in Israeli universities, at the last count, that figure was found to be a paltry one percent.

More disturbing still is the reluctance to improve accessibility for aspiring Arab students. When, in 2003, the psychometric examination requirement known to be the principal barrier to entry for Palestinians was dropped, Palestinian university applicants benefited in significant numbers. In direct consequence, the decision was overturned and the requirement reinstated.

But the discrimination against Palestinians in Israel's higher education system does not end there, as the experience of Arab students at Haifa University exemplifies. Two weeks ago, the university administration attended a court hearing in which it defended its decision to refuse to place a Christmas tree in the university's Main Building during the Christmas period, despite repeated requests from the Arab Students' Committee, and despite the fact that a Jewish menorah is placed there during the celebration of Hannukah. The administration preferred to ghettoize Christmas in another building, far from the center of campus.

In the same week, the University Rector, Prof. Yossi Ben-Artzi, attended a conference hosted at the university titled, "Israel's Demographic Problem and Policy," discussing the pet-subject of racists everywhere: the demographic "threat" posed to a state by a particular ethnic group. In Israel's case, this means the Palestinians.

In addition, the proliferation of indictments filed against successive leaders of the Arab Students' Committee testifies to the harassment that Palestinian students expressing dissenting views on campus can expect to attract from the university's administration.

All of this occurs at an institution described by its President, Aaron Ben Ze'ev, to an *Independent* journalist as, "the most pluralistic and most tolerant university in Israel."

Which brings us to our last point. For the past five years, the CHE has ostensibly been considering the establishment of a new, Arab, institute of higher education in the Galilee, where a clear majority of the population is Palestinian. But, since Likud MK Limor Livnat assumed the post of Education Minister, the plan has been shelved. In response to renewed calls from the Arab community for its implementation, MK Livnat explained that

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the plan had been rejected because the concept of an Arab university is “racist.” Instead, a decision was made by the cabinet to recommend the transformation of several Galilee colleges and the College of Judea and Samaria, situated in the illegal Jewish settlement of Ariel in the occupied West Bank, into two new Israeli universities.

Like its counterparts across the Green Line, the College of Judea and Samaria boasts of its commitment to pluralism and ethnic tolerance. On its English website the college proudly advertises that its students represent, “the full spectrum of Israeli society: secular and observant, new immigrant and veteran Israeli, Jew and Arab.”

After all, in an outpost of civilization, discrimination is considered an affront to academic freedom.