In the Service of Oppression and Militarism: the Complicity of Israeli Universities in the Structures of Domination and State Violence

Paper Presented at the World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies
Barcelona, Spain, July 19-24, 2010

Lisa Taraki
Associate Professor of Sociology
Birzeit University, Palestine

The social and political history of the Israeli academy has yet to be written in a systematic fashion. Once it is, it is certain to reveal the deep embeddedness of Israeli academic institutions in the Zionist colonial enterprise, beginning with the establishment of the Hebrew University in 1925 as an important institution of pre-state settler society. Today, Israel's universities and other academic centers are key components of Israel's cultural—and increasingly, economic—capital. With mounting censure of Israel and the rapid growth of the international movement to boycott it, efforts to highlight the scientific and cultural achievements of Israel have taken on added significance. Israel portrays itself as a world leader in knowledge production, and increasingly, of hi-tech expertise and products, particularly weapons.

The emphasis on scientific innovation and advances in technological know-how is part of the decades-long quest for legitimacy and acceptance by the world; it is meant to secure a place for Israel in the ranks of the enlightened western academy. Israeli universities are therefore depicted as autonomous spaces encouraging freedom of expression, diversity of opinion, and democratic values. However, it is clear that in very critical ways, and declarations by defenders notwithstanding, Israeli universities are neither autonomous nor protected spaces for the expression of critical or dissident thought or for real democratic debate about the role of the university in the polity and its relation to dominant state institutions.

I hope to show in this very short time allowed me, that Israeli academic institutions are first, firmly planted in the military-intelligence-industrial establishment, and second, fall squarely within the national consensus and are by no means centers of critical thinking about basic issues having to do with the "national interest" and national priorities as defined by hegemonic institutions. By this I mean that the universities, embodied in their administrations, departmental governing bodies, senates, unions, staff associations, student governments, tenure and promotion committees—in short the main representative and decision-making forums and bodies—are part and parcel of the prevailing orthodoxy that accepts and treats the political regime in all its aspects—the military, the intelligence agencies, the government--as a benign feature of the social-political landscape. They also do not question in any fundamental way the role of their institutions in upholding the oppression of the Palestinian people through myriad military, bureaucratic, and legal

measures and policies. The regime and its organs—security and intelligence agencies, and the fighting army in particular--are accommodated, legitimized, and their presence as well as their unquestionable authority normalized.

The ease with which academics have weaved in and out of the military, the government--even the military government--and the academy appears quite banal in a society with a persistently high level of military mobilization and a steady regimen of violence, repression, and discrimination carried out against the Palestinian people.

I would like to begin with the relationship of Israeli universities with Palestinians living under Israeli rule. Israel's "Arab problem," as reflected in both mainstream and academic discourse has, since before the Nakba in 1948, involved the imperative of how to understand "the Arabs," whether referring to Palestinian citizens of Israel or those under colonial rule in the West Bank and Gaza after 1967, in order to control and contain them.

Thus I will begin with a field relevant to our common professional concerns, the field of Middle Eastern studies, which in Israel has long embodied a dynamic partnership among colonial administrators, army officers, intelligence operatives, and academics.

While I will be mentioning names of some Israeli academics here, it should be understood that it is not individual culpability that is significant, but rather the active complicity or silence of institutions that not only did not find anything objectionable in the extra-academic activities of their faculty, but also promoted and appointed them to important posts. That is, the support for and tolerance—indeed, encouragement--of the interchangeability of the roles of scholars and those in charge of controlling the Palestinian population.

I will take three examples from Israeli social sciences and humanities to illustrate this. The first example is that of Major-General Yehoshofat Harkabi, an Arabist "spy and advisor," in the words of the New York Times.[1] He was the chief of Israeli military intelligence from 1955 to 1959. His professional biography is revealing: Harkabi joined the Hebrew University in 1968. He became professor and head of the Department of International Relations and Director of the Leonard Davis Institute of International Relations several years later. In 1975 he was seconded to serve as Assistant for Strategic Policy to the Minister of Defence and in 1977, after the Likud's rise to power, he became Intelligence Adviser to the Prime Minister, Menahem Begin. He retired from the Hebrew University in 1989 but continued to teach in the National Defence College. In 1993 Harkabi was awarded the Israel Prize in Political Science.[2]

Two other outstanding examples are Menahem Milson and Shlomo Gazit, whose names will also be well known at this Congress. Milson began his career as a professor of Arabic literature at the Hebrew University in the early 1960s. Between 1976 and 1978, then-Minister of Defense Shimon Peres appointed Milson as an adviser on Arab affairs to the Israeli military. Later, he was drafted by Ariel Sharon to head the Israeli "civil administration" from 1981-82. In this capacity, he presided over the campaign to crush

the Palestinian national movement, famously dismissing several Palestinian mayors and closing down Palestinian universities as punishment for student resistance to the occupation. He also formed the notorious village leagues, composed of local Palestinian collaborators installed in order to mediate colonial rule. However, that experiment in colonial administration failed and was unable to stem the tide of support for the PLO within the West Bank and Gaza. Milson was also the architect of infamous Military Order 845, which imposed sweeping controls over Palestinian institutions of higher education. After the end of his brief stint at the civil administration, Milson moved back seamlessly into academic life, becoming head of the Department of Arabic Language and Literature, then Director of the Institute of Asian and African Studies, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, and finally, Provost of the Rothberg International School at the university. Milson is now chair of the board of advisors at MEMRI, the right-wing Middle East media monitoring organization headed by none other than Colonel Yigal Carmon, who succeeded him as civil administration head in 1982.

Another example is Shlomo Gazit, a major general in the army with a long career in several of its agencies. He served as the head of a department in army intelligence, followed by appointment as the first coordinator of government operations in the occupied territories (1967-1974) and Head of Military Intelligence (1974-1979). Gazit was promoted to head of the Military Intelligence Directorate, a position he held from 1974 to 1978. Upon his retirement from the army, Gazit served as President of Ben Gurion University for eight years. He later joined the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University.

My point in presenting the careers of these three individuals is not to single out the individuals, but to show how the Israeli university leadership did not and does not find anything morally amiss in appointing to top posts individuals known to have supervised and designed repressive measures and persistently committed violations of international humanitarian law against Palestinians in their other careers as military and intelligence functionaries. And this is precisely the point; the two seemingly different career paths are not perceived as distinct within the prevailing academic culture at Israeli universities.

More generally, Israeli academic Gil Eyal has argued that "the relations between Middle Eastern studies and military intelligence are made possible by the construction of a liminal institutional setting, between academia and officialdom, and on the basis of a common form of expertise shared by both academics and intelligence officers."[3]

It might be claimed that the unabashed colonial mindset of a Menahem Milson, who said once that "[t]o serve an Arab population responsibly, one needs to know language and civilization. That is why so many professors have been called to do this"[4] is a thing of the past. But this is not just an unfortunate and sordid episode in the history of the Israeli academy. In fact, the collaboration of the academy with the military and intelligence services moved to a new phase with the establishment of strategic studies institutions in the 1990's in the form of think tanks and security studies departments and institutes, many of which are located at or affiliated with universities. A quick review of the names

of the founders, directors, or staff of these institutes shows that they have had careers with the Israeli military and intelligence establishment.

I only have time to mention one of these institutions, the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), an external institute of Tel Aviv University. The institute was launched in October 2006, incorporating the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University that was founded in 1977 at the initiative of Tel Aviv University by Major General (res.) Aharon Yariv, former head of Military Intelligence, government minister, and member of Knesset. The institute describes itself as "non-partisan, independent, and autonomous. As an external institute of Tel Aviv University, it maintains a strong association with the academic environment. In addition, it has a strong association with the political and military establishment."[5]

It is no surprise, therefore, to find that top retired army officers-turned-military-analysts at the INSS were instrumental in developing the doctrine of "disproportionate force" and the targeting of civilian infrastructure in 2008, based on the lessons of the war on Lebanon, and later applied to deadly use in the assault on Gaza. Needless to say, this doctrine is a gross violation of international humanitarian law.[6]

I will move to another, more public and highly visible form of partnership between the military and the university, which is the integration of army personnel and institutions within the universities. I would like to refer you to two excellent reports for further details, one published by the Alternative Information Center in Jerusalem,[7] and the other prepared by the SOAS Palestine Society.[8]

An example of the proud partnership of the academy and the military is found on the website of the National Security Studies Center at Haifa University:

> For over a decade, the University of Haifa has maintained a special program of graduate studies in national security and strategic studies. This interdisciplinary program, based in the Department of Political Science, has by now trained hundreds of senior officers in the Israeli Defense Forces in modern social science and the various branches of strategic thinking. This program has created a warm and active relationship between the University, on the one hand, and the command of the IDF on the other. The Center builds on this relationship, and institutionalizes the links between the two, performing research tasks that are critical to planning the future needs of security in Israel."[9]

Tel Aviv University is no less hesitant to advertise its close partnership with the defense establishment. A recent issue of the *Tel Aviv University Review* says it all:

> In the rough and tumble reality of the Middle East, Tel Aviv University is at the front line of the critical work to maintain Israel's military and technological edge. While much of that

> research remains classified, several facts illuminate the role of the university. MAFAT, a Hebrew acronym meaning the R&D Directorate of the Israel Ministry of Defense, is currently funding 55 projects at TAU... Seven highly-coveted Israel National Security Prizes have been awarded in recent years to members of TAU's Blavatnik School of Computer Science – more than any other institution in the country.[10]

One aspect of the close cooperation with the military is what has been called the academic reserve program established by the Ministry of Defense and the army, academically administered by universities and supervised by the Defense Ministry's Directorate for Research and Development (*Maf'at* in Hebrew). The competencies targeted by these programs are in high-tech fields needed by industry and the army. About 1000 cadets are recruited by the Israeli army annually to the academic reserve; students are allowed to postpone their mandatory military service, with the proviso that after graduation they will serve in the military as officers, their service prolonged by 3-5 years.[11]

One of the programs under this scheme is the elite Talpiot program at the Hebrew University, where students excelling in the sciences, physics and mathematics are recruited for a 3-year funded program of study, after which they commit themselves to work for six years with the army's research and development programs. While at the university, the students study in uniform and live at a military base on campus, undergoing military training alongside their academic program. Another well-known program is the Psagot scheme at Tel Aviv University and the Technion. Students in all of the academic reserve programs are screened by the military before admission.[12]

Another example is the military medical school that was established at the Hebrew University in 2009 after a successful bid. It is described by the university as a "unique program [that] will enrich the mutual relationships between the IDF, Ministry of Defense, and The Hebrew University in Israel as well as with International Security Academic Institutions." Similar to the Talpiot program, it entails postponement of military service and financial assistance.[13]

In relation to this unique medical school, one only wonders what type of medical ethics are taught there; are students warned against participating in the torture and mistreatment of Palestinian prisoners, or sick Palestinians finding themselves at checkpoints and other Israeli barriers and borders? The Israeli medical establishment has long remained silent in the face of well-documented charges concerning the role of medical personnel in torture and mistreatment of Palestinian prisoners and ill people, despite a vigorous international campaign to hold it accountable to medical ethics if not human rights principles.[14]

On a related note, only a few weeks ago, Haifa University proudly announced its successful bid for an army tender to continue training students at the army's College for National Security for MA studies. The announcement was made in a routine press

release by the Rector: “Haifa University is proud to continue being the academic home for the security forces and to teach the IDF leadership a large number of different and diverse perspectives. This is the sole way to be better people and better commanders.” It goes on to say that the "Winning bid was made possible thanks to close cooperation between the School of Political Studies, Office of the President of the University, Office of the Rector and the Faculty of Social Sciences."[15]

I should add that major Israeli universities, as with other research universities around the world, are increasingly dependent on industry for support for research activities. In the case of Israel, cuts in government spending and changes in university governance have encouraged more cooperation with arms manufacturers in high-tech fields. This partnership in reality puts the orientalist advisors to colonial authorities in a somewhat more favorable light, since their work was more or less transparent, less shrouded in secrecy, and perhaps with less lethal consequences for Palestinian and Arab lives. The major institutions working with the arms industry are Tel Aviv University, the Technion in Haifa, the Weizman Institute in Rehovot, the Hebrew University, and Ben Gurion University.

Just as an example, it was announced in 2008 that Elbit Systems, a major Israeli arms developer, had signed a joint research agreement in vision systems with the Technion. Elbit was to award grants to selected Technion researchers using Elbit Systems' advanced Eye Tracking laboratory. The promotional material indicates that the scheme is “expected to contribute to the improvement of data fusion capabilities in determining targeted objects' outlines, efficient automatic calibration in case of overlapping cameras' fields of vision, picture reconstruction and more.” Elbit is described as “a world leader in vision systems, offering its cutting edge technology in diverse fields, such as advanced helmet mounted systems for combat aircraft, providing pilots with critical flight and mission information which is projected on-line into the pilots' helmets, without the need to turn or lower their gaze…”[16]

It should be noted that in the past two years, the international campaign for divestment from Elbit Systems has achieved some successes in Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Germany. Elbit provides electronic detection devices used in the Israeli Separation Wall in the West Bank, and has also supplied UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles) to the Israeli army for use in combat in the West Bank and Gaza.[17]

Finally, I would like to touch very briefly on the autonomy of the university. While Israeli academics’ associations have been active in recent years protesting the commodification of knowledge and proposed and actual reforms in university governance that would compromise the universities’ autonomy, there has been no equivalent protest against the deep involvement of the academy in the military and related institutions, particularly after the lethal assault on the Gaza Strip in the winter of 20089-2009. This war on the civilian population and infrastructure of Gaza has been condemned widely; the UN Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict found Israel guilty of war crimes and possible crimes against humanity, as did major international human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

It is instructive to note that while North American academics are up in arms about the collaboration of academics with the army under the Pentagon's Human Terrain Teams and the Minerva Research Initiative, we find no similar protest from the professional associations of physicists, geographers, mathematicians, political scientists and others in Israel about the moral and professional implications of collaboration with the army, not to mention the danger to the autonomy of the university inherent in such a close partnership with the military.

Finally, it should be said that in Israel, there are no dis-incentives for the involvement of academics in the machinery of oppression and state violence. Promotion and tenure committees, departmental councils, faculty senates, and associations of academics have remained eerily silent about this. The rare exceptions prove the rule, as in the case of the ineffective protests that accompanied the appointment of Colonel Pnina Sharvit-Baruch in the law faculty at Tel Aviv University. The protesters claimed that her interpretation of the law during Israel's Gaza assault allowed the army to act in ways that constitute potential war crimes.[18] The appointment has gone ahead.

Why the Israeli academy? Why Israel? The state of Israel is unique in today's world. After the end of 19th century settler-colonialist regimes, and after the demise of apartheid in South Africa, other incarnations of settler colonialism and apartheid continue to thrive in Israel. Simply, Israel is an anachronism in today's world. And the Israeli academy is part and parcel of this system, and very much at home in it. As a professor at Tel Aviv University observed, "I've been in the US and Europe, and there is a disconnect between the workshops and the army; they hate the army! [with us], I think that we succeeded by virtue of the fact that we help one another so much.[19]

Given the long history of complicity and collaboration with the army and other repressive institutions that has characterized the Israeli academy, indignant cries protesting the assault on "academic freedom" through the academic boycott of Israel ring very hollow indeed. The Israeli academy's decades-old collusion in violations of international law, grave violations of international humanitarian law, and outright war crimes has triggered calls around the world, including in Spain, for boycotting it as an effective measure, within the context of the international BDS movement, to help bring about justice and freedom for the Palestinian people.

---

[1] http://www.nytimes.com/1994/08/27/obituaries/yehoshafat-harkabi-israeli-spy-and-adviser-is-dead-at-72.html

[2] http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-professor-yehoshafat-harkabi-1448686.html

[3] Gil Eyal, "Dangerous liaisons between military intelligence and Middle Eastern studies in Israel," *Theory and Society* 31: 653-693, 2002, p. 653.

[4] http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/2038/ex-west-bank-mayor-in-berkeley-visit-says-jews-must-study-arab-culture/

[5] http://www.inss.org.il/about.php?cat=55&in=0

[6] SOAS Palestine Society, "Urgent Briefing Paper: Tel Aviv University-a Leading Israeli Military Research Centre." February 2009. http://www.electronicintifada.net/downloads/pdf/090708-soas-palestine-society.pdf

[7] Alternative Information Center, "The Economy of the Occupation: Academic Boycott of Israel," October 2009. http://www.alternativenews.org/images/stories/downloads/Economy_of_the_occupation_23-24.pdf

[8] SOAS Palestine Society, op cit.

[9] http://nssc.haifa.ac.il/profile.htm

[10] www.tau.ac.il/news/eng/ENGWin08-9.pdf

[11] Deganit Paikowsky and Isaac Ben Israel, "Science and Technology for National Development: the Case of Israel's Space Program," *Acta Astronautica*, vol. 64, issues 9-10 (November-December 2009). Doi:10.1016/j.actaastro.2009.03.073

[12] See Josef Federman, "Military units provide training ground for Israeli tech leaders," *USA Today*, February 4, 2004 http://www.usatoday.com/tech/world/2004-02-04-israeli-military-tech_x.htm); Christopher Rhoads, "How an Elite Military School Feeds Israel's Tech Industry," *Wall Street Journal*, July 6, 2007. http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB118368825920758806.html

[13] http://medicine.huji.ac.il/DCPage.aspx?PID=128

[14] See www.bricup.org.uk/documents/medical/BlacharWMA.pdf and http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=464&key=health

[15] http://wordpress.haifa.ac.il/?p=2642 (Hebrew). Reported in "Haifa University 'Proud to Be Academic Home of (Israeli) Security Forces'" AIC, June 15, 2010. http://www.alternativenews.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2677:haifa-university-proud-to-be-academic-home-of-israeli-security-forces&catid=119:english&Itemid=878

[16] http://www.pressreleasepoint.com/elbit-systems-and-israel-institute-technology-technion-establish-new-vision-systems-research-centre

[17] http://whoprofits.org/Company%20Info.php?id=554

[18] http://www.haaretz.com/news/lecturers-say-idf-officer-who-justified-gaza-strikes-should-not-teach-law-1.268892

[19] Quoted in SOAS Palestine Society, op cit.