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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Why the University of Haifa Wants to Get Rid of Me

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On May 5, 2002, I was summoned to stand trial in my university, University of Haifa, where I am a lecturer at the department of International Relations. The prosecution, represented by the university's Dean of Humanities, demanded my expulsion from the campus due to the position I had taken in the past on the controversial case of Teddy Katz. Katz was an M.A. student at the University who in 1999 received the highest possible grade for a dissertation that, among other things, exposed an unknown massacre in the 1948 war in the village of Tantura; quite probably it was one of the worst atrocities committed by the Israeli army at that war. He was sued by the veterans who belonged to the unit whose troops perpetrated the massacre, but the trial never took off.

Katz at first apologized for fabricating the event, due to unbearable pressure exerted on him by family and public alike, but soon retracted that apology and asked for the trial to be resumed, but was refused. As a result his thesis was examined by a special inquiry commission in the university that found several misquotes in the thesis -- six quotes out of hundreds were flawed -- a quite small percentage and normal in the works of even established historians. None of the misquotes affected the final conclusion or his findings about the massacre in Tantura. On the basis of this commission's report, Katz was disqualified in November 2001.

All this time I had challenged the university's conduct, while also conducting my own research on what had happened in Tantura. I accused the university of moral cowardice and attributed political motives to its conduct in the affair. At the same time, after going over all the relevant material, I published my unequivocal conclusion that a massacre of around 250 innocent Palestinians took place in May 1948 in Tantura (a village that was at the time already part of the Jewish state, and hence all the victims were citizens of the new state).

As a result of voicing these opinions throughout the affair (December 2000 to November 2001), I became the target of a boycott campaign initiated by the Department of Erez Israel studies in my university, an ideological academic outfit established to provide scholarly scaffolding to the Zionist narrative. The prosecutor in my case comes from this department.

Those who see themselves as the guardians of the national historical version could not allow a thesis like that of Katz or my own conclusions to be accepted as legitimate products of academic research. The Tantura affair exposed the brutal nature of the 1948 ethnic cleansing and by that gave credence to the Palestinian demands of restitution and repatriation. The exposure of such atrocities in Israeli academia turns them into undisputed facts in the eyes of the world, and who knows, even may plant doubts in the minds of Israelis. The history of 1948, especially the ethnic cleansing that took place there, are directly connected to the peace process today and to the shape of the future solution.

But the Katz affair ended half a year ago and this raises the question of timing. The timing has to do with specific issues relevant to my own work as it is generated by the more general atmosphere in Israel today.

I think there are three reasons for the timing. One is my signing of a petition a few weeks ago endorsing the decision of European academics to boycott Israeli academic institutes. This has led the university authorities to think that the atmosphere is right for settling older accounts with me. The second is a pending article of mine in Hebrew on the affair, in a highly reputed academic journal. In this article I repeat my critique of the university's conduct. The third is my proposal to give a course on the Nakbah in the university in the next academic year beginning in October 2002, the first such course ever to be given in an Israeli university. It should be understood that the very idea that the Palestinians are a legitimate subject matter is quite new to Israeli academia and was introduced only in the 1980s. But it was done then not out of empathy for the Palestinian plight, but rather as part of an intelligence attempt to know 'thy enemy.' I am talking about a course, that due to my views and known positions on history, would identify with the Palestinian narrative of the Nakbah and would discuss openly the present implications for a future solution. In my university this is heresy.

But the timing is also connected to the general atmosphere that is best described as a conscious Jewish Israeli desertion of the democratic game, or shall we say pretense, by government and society alike.

This new mood is manifested in two ways. One is the silencing of any criticism, even the mildest, as was the case with Israel's national singer, Yaffa Yarkoni, who dared to question the Jenin operation, and now is ostracized everywhere. In such a national mood, lecturers who supported those refusing to serve in the occupied territories are being prosecuted, so far with little success, by the minister of education. The public pressure has led few critical Israeli scholars to retract their previous support for peace and democracy. And no wonder, as the time seems now ripe for settling old accounts with

'new historians,' it is less comfortable to be one. For some it was too much. My colleague Benny Morris succumbed and under pressure publicly justified the 1948 ethnic cleansing he helped to reveal and warned that he would support it again if the present crisis continues (his confession is now distributed by the Israeli embassies around the world).

The second manifestation of the new situation is the clever manipulation of the political elite of the new consensual mood to drive into the center of the public stage discourses and ideologies that used to be regarded as belonging to the extreme right, the most notable of which is the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians wherever they are inside Israel or in the occupied territories. Surprisingly, the media and the academy willingly cooperated with this. As Daniel Dor has shown us in his *Press Under Influence*, the local media distorted the reality ever since the outbreak of the Intifada and reported it in a way that would serve the government and would not allow any alternative thinking.

The erosion of free thought and speech can lead to one conclusion only. There is a need for strong economic and cultural pressure on Israel, not only in order to stop its destructive policies against Palestinians, but also in order to prevent the region as a whole from deteriorating into a war that would ruin the lives of everyone, Jews and Arabs, in Israel, Palestine and beyond.