

We Are Not Our Government \ Itai Ater and Yossi Spiegel

Israel was viciously attacked on October 7, 2023 and had no choice but defend itself. More than 600 days later, the war continues with no end in sight. The son of David, king in Jerusalem, wrote almost 2,500 years ago, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven... a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up... a time for war, and a time for peace.” It is obvious to any honest observer that the time to heal, build up, and make peace is long overdue. The war no longer contributes to Israel’s security, it puts the lives of the Israeli hostages in danger, creates a humanitarian crisis in Gaza, and will forever be a stain on Israel’s history. The Israeli government, however seems intent to prolong the war and refuses even to discuss plans for the day after. Netanyahu stated recently that “the war has an ultimate goal and that is victory over our enemies.” Problem is, after 600 days of war, nobody can tell what “victory” means, how can we ever tell whether victory has been achieved, and how long the government plans to continue to pursue victory.

Opinion polls consistently show that around 70% of the Israeli public support an end to the war and a deal to release the hostages. Among them are many retired army generals and heads of the secret service and the mossad who argue that the ongoing war serves no useful purpose and does not contribute to Israel’s security. We recall the words of Hillel the Elder, who stated more than 2,000 years ago that “that which is hateful to you, do not do unto your fellow” and Maimonides who wrote in the 10th century: “there is no greater *mitzvah* than redeeming captives.”

Shortly after the new government took office at the end of 2022, it announced plans to “reform” the judiciary. It quickly became obvious that these are not “reforms,” but rather an anti democratic “coup d’etat” intended to gain control over the state’s public institutions, including the judiciary, the media, the police, the public administration, and the labor unions. Similarly to other countries that took a similar path, such as Poland or Hungary, academia is one of the government’s main targets. The minister of education repeatedly tried to gain control over academia and silence criticism of the government’s actions. A case in point is two proposed bills that will undermine academia if enacted: a law that would enable the dismissal of faculty members who speak against Israel or tacitly support or condone terrorism, and a law that would allow higher education institutions to establish separate academic tracks for men and women.

Since the beginning of 2023, the Israeli academia has actively opposed the government’s anti-democratic initiatives and plays a key role in the massive Israeli protest movement. A grassroots protest organization, called Academics for Israeli Democracy (AIDS), was formed with representatives from all universities and many colleges throughout Israel. AIDS regularly organizes and leads large pro-democracy rallies, in and outside campuses, members of AIDS circle petitions, write op-eds, give public speeches, and write and initiate pro-democracy university senates’ decisions. Faculty members, including Israeli Nobel laureates, members of the Israeli academy of science, and nearly all former university presidents, filed petitions with the High Court of Justice against anti-democratic government decisions. Professional forums of legal scholars, academic economists, and political scientists were formed to write position papers, issue public statements in response to government initiatives and explain the

consequences of democratic backsliding. Overall, the academic community plays a critical role in the massive Israeli protest movement.

After more than 9 months of intense struggle to defend democracy, came the October 7th massacre. More than 1200 Israelis were barbarically murdered and 251 were taken as hostages and held in Gaza. To our dismay, almost immediately afterwards, anti-Israeli rallies were held on university campuses in the U.S. and in Europe and many were even cheering up for Hamas. But now, after 600 days of endless war with astonishingly high and quickly rising death toll, horrifying pictures from Gaza on public media, and a real concern for a massive humanitarian crisis, there is a growing anti-Israeli sentiment even among Israel's closest friends. Recently, there are increasing calls to boycott Israeli academia and suspend the research cooperation agreement between the EU and Israel.

While the anger may be understandable, it is all too easy to take the moral high ground and call for severing ties with Israel. Yet those who do, ignore the fact that the vast majority of Israeli academics strongly support the end of the war, the release of the hostages, and oppose the government's anti-democratic "coup d'état." The Israeli government and its supporters care little about academia and research. In some ways, they may even take pleasure in seeing Israeli academia struggle. A boycott on Israeli academia will only weaken the opposition to the Israeli government and will help silence an important voice for liberal and pro-peace ideals. We find ourselves between the rock and the hard place: we are accused for the actions of our government which we strongly oppose and actively protest against. To help us oppose our government, we need help and support from our colleagues abroad. Recent events in the US further demonstrate that the attack on academia is not limited to Israel but rather is a worldwide phenomenon. To protect the values of academic freedom, intensive collaboration, and the freedom of thought and expression, we should show solidarity and help each other in these difficult times.

We wish to end with words written by the Israeli songwriter, Yaakov Rotblit:

Between the sea and the river...

Waiting for a president or emperor to come

A messiah, a prophet, a warrior or an alien

Who knows how to solve the unsolvable

To bring hope again, to show that it's possible

To live in peace between the sea and the river

To bring peace between the sea and the river, we need to develop a strong and liberal society in Israel. Strong academic institutions have an important role to play in the process. Do not abandon us in this difficult moment. We need "help from our friends" so we can replace the government and find a way "to solve the unsolvable."

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