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The Israeli academic elite's complicity in oppression

By Ofer Neiman

Israel's academic elite is mobilised on behalf of the national project, and is well compensated by the regime. When its members shout things such as "fascism", it's appropriate that this criticism be directed at itself as well.

Professor Nati Linial, from the computer science department of Hebrew University, recently received the prestigious Rothschild Prize. In his award ceremony [speech](#) at the Knesset, Linial chose to speak about fascism, rather than scientific topics. The choice to engage with political reality is commendable, but the speaker's disregard of more fundamental political topics is worthy of a critical review.

Fascism – incitement on the street and via social media, and acts of physical violence against (Jewish) peace activists and the hunting down of Palestinians on the streets – threatens the wellbeing of many good people. It is most appropriate to speak of this in the Knesset. It is doubtful, however, that fascism is the fundamental driving force behind processes of evil in Israel. The State of Israel relies on a central, government-controlled military force to attain its political goals. For nearly seventy years, these goals have been determined on the basis of [fundamentally racist positions](#), which differentiate amongst people based on their ethnicity or religion. The Israeli leadership throughout the generations has not been averse to the use of military force and the conduct of war crimes. Its seemingly dovish component has also been a partner in all of this. For example, Israel's most severe [human rights violations in the 1948 Nakba](#), the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people, were conducted by members of the secular and (ostensibly) socialist elite, and some of these crimes have only been exposed [recently](#). Today's members of this elite also support the expansive military oppression of the Palestinians, and some have even [flanked Likud from the right](#).

Israel's academic elite is also mobilised on behalf of the national project, and is well compensated by the regime – with prestige, grants and prizes. [Senior researchers](#) from universities in Israel, including the Hebrew University, were involved in establishing military facilities of strategic importance to the regime. Universities in Israel are engaged in [developing weapons](#) of significant military and economic importance. These weapons are tested in "laboratory conditions", for example on residents living in the huge corral that is the Gaza Strip, and are sold to [other countries](#). The Israeli universities' preoccupation with weapons is out in the open. The Technion, for example, has no qualms about offering a [program of studies in the field of "security exports"](#).

During Israel's operation Protective Edge, the attack on Gaza in the summer of 2014, The Hebrew and Tel Aviv universities were mobilised on its behalf. The Hebrew University organised the "[\[collection of\] products for soldiers on the](#)

[front line, in accordance with demands of the military units](#)", and Tel Aviv University declared that it "[embraces the security forces](#)". Tel Aviv University is home to the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), several of whose researchers have [dubious](#) military track records. The INSS produces position papers with military recommendations for the Israeli government, such as the "[Dahiya doctrine](#)" advocating the disproportionate destruction of entire areas.

Many leading researchers in mathematics and sciences serve in senior positions in Israeli military intelligence and technology units. Several of them were trained in the [Talpiot program](#) of the Hebrew University and Israeli army. Some have won prizes for their contributions to this system. These elite units are partners in developing innovative weapons. They are further partners in the extraction of information that serves to [destroy the lives](#) of the victims of Israeli oppression. The Israeli high tech industry has grown, to a large extent, from within these units.

During a previous debate regarding the potential opening of the Hebrew University's [special academic track for Shabak \(aka Shin Bet\) staff](#), Professor Linial declared he would not necessarily object to the existence of these studies, although no compromises on the academic level should be made. One can suggest additional reasons for opposition to such a course of studies: The Shabak is a violent mechanism for the collective imposition of the military occupation on millions of human beings. It is also a means of oppressing Palestinian citizens of Israel. The Shabak is tainted by acts such as the [denial of medical care](#) and [torture](#), as well as [extra-judicial assassinations](#). Collaboration between an Israeli university and the Shabak provides a public and moral stamp of approval of this murky mechanism.

Previous Israeli governments, which Professor Linial praises in his speech for their support in promoting education for universal values, had committed (as noted) criminal acts no less severe than the current government. Author David Grossman, an "exemplary figure" mentioned in Professor Linial's speech, [has justified](#) Binyamin Netanyahu's warmongering vis-a-vis Iran. Grossman, similar to other pillars of the liberal, anti-fascist Israeli tribe, has supported Israel's wars of choice against Gaza and Lebanon in the past decade. During these attacks, and from their first moments, Israel flagrantly killed innocents, including children, in numbers which dwarf the numbers of victims of rogue Israeli soldiers ("bad apples") or fascist Israeli thugs on the streets.

Fascism may indeed sprout everywhere. However, the reasons for its rise are diverse. Fascism in Germany grew from frustration over WWI and the 1929 economic crisis, but not directly from the regime preceding it. The (weak) Weimar Republic, whose foreign minister and other senior figures were Jewish, had adopted a constitution which did not discriminate according to race and religion. Germany was not defined then as a "Christian and democratic state", or as a "White and democratic state". In contrast, when a regime is strong and racist, when it openly discriminates based on its most fundamental laws determining the state's character, the emergence of more violent elements within such a regime is expected. Such is the situation in Israel, and this had been [predicted](#) years ago by the political philosopher Hannah Arendt.

It is convenient to portray fascism as an aberration from the Israeli State's values. Such a reading of reality disregards a fundamental fact: Israel has an apartheid regime anchored in explicit differentiation between Jews and the Arab "demographic threat". [This apartheid is supported by an absolute majority of the political system, including what is dubbed the "peace camp"](#). When existing state discrimination and violence do not provide 'personal security', the public demands, and leaders implement, the augmentation of these policies, in the name of the explicit and fundamental ethnocentric values of the state. Israel is an apartheid state much more than a fascist one. In constitutional terms, there is a chasm between Israel and Western states. In Israel, as opposed to these states, fascism grows from state-sponsored apartheid.

In his book [Intellectuals, Truth and Power](#), Professor Shlomo Sand mentions numerous cases in which intellectuals partnered with systems of oppression, even while assuming themselves to be ambassadors of freedom, equality and peace. A convenient and selective reading of reality had allowed them to adopt a "one foot here, one foot there" approach. Professor Linial and his friends in the academic ivory tower, many of whom are good and honest people, have contributed, at least structurally, to the apartheid system in Israel. They have enjoyed its fruits, and done almost nothing to challenge its foundations. Time will tell if they can direct criticism toward themselves as well.

(The author studied mathematics and computer science at the Hebrew University.)

Hebrew version:

<http://www.haokets.org/2016/04/20/%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%AA%D7%A4%D7%95%D7%AA%D7%94-%D7%A9%D7%9C-%D7%94%D7%90%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%98%D7%94-%D7%94%D7%90%D7%A7%D7%93%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%AA-%D7%91%D7%93%D7%99%D7%9B%D7%95%D7%99/>

Arabic version:

<http://www.haokets.org/ar/2016/04/21/%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%85%D8%B9/>