

Academic Freedom in Israel: Campus Watch Copycats Close in on Israeli Professors

Right hopes to silence boycott call from academics

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Right-wing groups in Israel want to create a climate of fear among left-wing scholars at Israeli universities by emulating the “witch-hunt” tactics of the US academic monitoring group Campus Watch, Israeli professors warn.

The watchdog groups IsraCampus and Israel Academia Monitor are believed to be stepping up their campaigns after the recent publication in a US newspaper of an Israeli professor’s call to boycott Israel.

Both groups have been alerting the universities’ external donors, mostly US Jews, to what they describe as “subversive” professors as a way to bring pressure to bear on university administrations to sanction faculty staff who are critical of Israeli policies.

“I have no hesitation in calling this a McCarthyite campaign,” said David Newman, a politics professor at Ben Gurion University, in Israel’s southern city of Beersheva. “What they are doing is very dangerous.”

Last month, in what appeared to be a new tactic, IsraCampus placed a full-page advertisement in an official diary issued to students at Haifa University, urging them to visit its website to see a “rogues’ gallery” of 100 Israeli scholars the group deems an “academic fifth column”.

“The goal is to transform our students into spies in the classroom to gather information and intimidate us,” a senior Israeli lecturer said. “It’s a model of ‘policing’ faculty staff that has been very successful in stifling academic freedom in the US.”

Both Israel Academia Monitor, established in 2004, and the later IsraCampus, model themselves on Campus Watch, a US organisation founded by Daniel Pipes, an academic closely identified with the US neoconservative movement.

Campus Watch has been widely accused of intimidating US scholars who have expressed views critical of US and Israeli policies in the Middle East. The organisation’s goal, according to critics, is to pressure US universities to avoid hiring left-wing lecturers or awarding them tenure.

The advertisement placed by IsraCampus, and seen by Haifa University students as they returned from their summer break, warned that a number of their professors “openly support terrorist attacks against Jews, initiate an international boycott of Israel, exploit their

status in the classroom for anti-Israeli incitement and anti-Zionist brainwashing, collaborate with known anti-Semites ... who publicly call for Israel's destruction".

Publication of the advert was supported by the head of Haifa's student union, Felix Koritney: "Students who study here need to know who their lecturers are, and if there are lecturers who oppose the state of Israel it is important to publish their names."

In a statement, Haifa University officials also defended the advertisement – after receiving a complaint from a student who called the advertisement incitement – justifying it on the grounds of "freedom of speech".

IsraCampus is associated with Steven Plaut, an economics professor at Haifa University, who was reported to have paid for the advertisement. On the group's site and on his personal blog, Mr Plaut has lambasted many Israeli left-wing academics.

IsraCampus and Israel Academia Monitor have targeted professors for criticising the occupation, joining protests against Israel's separation wall, signing petitions or attending conferences critical of Israel, defending the UN report of Judge Richard Goldstone on last winter's attack on Gaza, or calling for a boycott of Israel.

Both groups have focused their efforts on the staff at Ben Gurion and Haifa universities, two regional campuses that have attracted more outspoken dissidents.

Ilan Pappé, a former history professor at Haifa University and the author of *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, admitted he abandoned his academic career in Israel and relocated to the UK after a campaign of vilification.

But, according to Mr Newman, Ben Gurion University had become the groups' "public enemy No 1" after publication by Neve Gordon, a colleague of Mr Newman, of an article in the *Los Angeles Times* calling for a boycott of Israel.

Despite having tenure, observers say, Mr Gordon has come under increasing pressure from the university to resign his position as chair of the university's politics department over his published views.

Rivka Carmi, president of Ben Gurion University, issued a statement shortly after Mr Gordon's article was printed, condemning his opinions as "morally repugnant" and warning that he was "welcome to search for a personal and professional home elsewhere".

Dana Barnett, founder of Israel Academia Monitor, has launched a petition demanding that Mr Gordon be sacked from his position as chair, that his courses be treated as elective rather than compulsory for his students, and that he be denied travel and research funding.

Mr Newman said decisions about hiring and retaining staff at Ben Gurion were still being taken on academic grounds but that the monitoring groups were seeking to change that by calling for donor boycotts of universities seen to be harbouring anti-Zionist professors.

Yaakov Dayan, the Israeli consul in Los Angeles, sent a letter to Ben Gurion University after publication of Mr Gordon's article, warning that private benefactors "were unanimous in threatening to withhold their donations to your institution".

Although the universities are chiefly backed by government money, external donations account for about five per cent of their funding. With universities struggling with large debts, donations can be seen as leverage over the universities.

Mr Newman said the monitoring groups hoped to redirect donations to right-wing academic institutions and think tanks, such as the Shalem Centre in Jerusalem, whose founding president is the US neoconservative scholar Martin Kramer, and Ariel College, located in a West Bank settlement near Nablus.

On his website, Mr Plaut credited IsraCampus with forcing Tel Aviv University last week to investigate claims by one of its professors, Nira Hativa, that some right-wing students were afraid to speak out in class because of fears that they would be penalised by their lecturers.

Under questioning from the Haaretz newspaper, Ms Hativa admitted that her allegations were based only on "intuition and personal impressions".

Both IsraCampus and Israel Academia Monitor have been incensed by the support offered to Mr Gordon's call for a boycott of Israel by a small number of Israeli academics.

One such professor, Anat Matar, who teaches philosophy at Tel Aviv University, said the atmosphere both within the universities and more widely in Israeli society was changing rapidly and becoming increasingly "intolerant" of dissent. "We've become a little more fascistic as a society," she said.

Mr Plaut has been at the centre of a libel battle with Mr Gordon since 2002 after he called him a "Judenrat wannabe" – a reference to Jewish collaborators with the Nazis.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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