

Israel Creates First 'Army-owned' University

West Bank campus plans to double in size

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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Ehud Barak, Israel's defence minister, approved last week the upgrading to university status of a college in a settlement located deep inside the West Bank, a move certain to further undermine Palestinian confidence in the peace process.

The decision, authorising the first Israeli university in Palestinian territory, is expected to entitle the college to significant extra funding, allowing it to expand its student population.

About 11,000 students, most from inside Israel, already attend the college in Ariel, studying amid a population of 18,000 settlers.

The expansion of Ariel, 20km inside the West Bank and close to Nablus, is likely to increase tensions with the US administration of Barack Obama. The White House has demanded a settlement freeze that is being only temporarily and partially honoured by Israel.

The United States and Israel have repeatedly clashed over Israeli plans to extend its separation wall east of Ariel, effectively annexing the settlement and separating the central and northern parts of the West Bank.

Peace groups have been particularly shocked that authorisation for Ariel college's upgrade came from Mr Barak, leader of the Labor Party. Members of his centre-left faction had previously blocked attempts by right-wing parties to change the college's status.

Several Israeli academics also warned that it would add fuel to existing campaigns in Europe to boycott Israeli universities, which have been accused of complicity with the occupation.

"This is all about trying to make the settlement of Ariel 'kosher'," said Yariv Oppenheimer, head of the Peace Now, an Israeli group that monitors settlement growth. "It helps to reinforce the growing consensus in Israel that Ariel should remain part of Israel permanently."

Ariel College has grown dramatically since its founding in 1982 as the West Bank campus of Bar Ilan University in Ramat Gan, close to Tel Aviv. On becoming independent in 2004, the college immediately began lobbying for university status. A year later it won the backing of Ariel Sharon, the prime minister then, who described the upgrade as of "great importance" in realising a policy of "strengthening the settlements".

Benjamin Netanyahu, the current prime minister, declared at the time that a university in Ariel would ensure the settlement "will forever remain part of the state of Israel".

The upgrade was opposed by Israel's education oversight body, the Higher Education Council, which threatened to withhold recognition of the college's degrees.

Nonetheless, in 2007 the college renamed itself the "Ariel University Centre", a change of status initially endorsed by the government of Ehud Olmert. Under pressure from education officials, however, the decision was reversed on the grounds that only Israeli military authorities in the West Bank – under Mr Barak – could authorise such a change.

Despite opposition from members of his party, the defence minister finally consented last week.

Yossi Sarid, a former chairman of the Higher Education Council, wrote in the Haaretz newspaper on Thursday: "Thanks to [Mr Barak], we will have the only university in the free world whose founders and owners are uniformed officers."

Mr Barak's approval suggested the growing power of the far right in Mr Netanyahu's government, said Anat Matar, a philosophy professor at Tel Aviv University.

Two weeks ago, Avigdor Lieberman, the foreign minister and leader of the Yisrael Beiteinu Party, threatened to block all legislative proposals from Labor unless Ariel College's upgrade was approved.

Yisrael Beiteinu has made the settlement's expansion a key plank in its platform because Ariel has a large proportion of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, Mr Lieberman's core constituency.

Alex Miller, an Ariel resident and Yisrael Beiteinu politician, issued a statement last week welcoming the decision as an "important shot of encouragement for the settlements".

Ron Nachman, the mayor of Ariel, has said he intends to turn the settlement into Israel's version of Princeton, a US town that has flourished on the back of its Ivy League university.

Mr Barak's officials said the new status of "university centre" would be a transitional measure before Ariel College became Israel's eighth fully fledged university, probably within two years.

Ariel College plans to double its intake of students over the next decade, triple the size of its campus and build a new neighbourhood for staff. About 70 per cent of the college's students are drawn from the Tel Aviv area inside Israel, as well as a small number of Israeli Arab students.

The college displays an Israeli flag in every classroom and requires all students to take at least one course on Judaism or Jewish heritage, usually overseen by settler rabbis.

Ariel, the fourth-largest settlement in the West Bank, is considered by most Israelis as one of the "settlement blocs" that will be annexed to Israel in a peace deal. Palestinians say such an annexation would effectively cut the West Bank in two.

There are widespread fears among Israeli academics that calls for a boycott of Israeli universities will intensify following the Ariel College decision. Yaron Ezrahi, a professor at Hebrew University, called the decision the "academisation of the occupation".

Amal Jamal, the head of political science at Tel Aviv University, said the upgrade would also highlight the extent to which universities inside Israel colluded with the West Bank college. "There is strong support for the college among some academics at Israeli universities, which co-operate with it in holding conferences, conducting research, supervising doctoral students and teaching," he said.

A vote by the British lecturers' union in 2005, in favour of a limited academic boycott of Israel, targeted Bar Ilan University because of its links to Ariel College. Similar boycott motions have been passed annually by the union, though later overturned.

Last November, a Norwegian university, Trondheim, became the first to vote on boycotting Israeli universities, though the motion was rejected.

Ariel College found itself at the centre of a diplomatic row last year when Spain disqualified its researchers from the finals of a competition to design a solar-powered house. Spanish officials said the institution could not participate because it was built on occupied Palestinian land.

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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