

Witch-Hunt Begins in Israeli Schools and Colleges

Minister to punish boycott supporters

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

Global Research, July 12, 2010

12 July 2010

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Nazareth — Hundreds of Israeli college professors have signed a petition accusing the education minister of endangering academic freedoms after he threatened to “punish” any lecturer or institution that supports a boycott of Israel.

The backlash against Gideon Saar, a member of the prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Likud party, comes after a series of moves suggesting he is trying to stamp a more stridently right-wing agenda on the Israeli education system.

The education minister has outraged the 540 professors who signed the petition by his open backing of a nationalist youth movement, Im Tirtzu, which demands that teachers be required to prove their commitment to right-wing Zionism.

Two of Mr Saar’s predecessors, Yossi Sarid and Yuli Tamir, are among those who signed the petition, which calls on the minister to “come to your senses ... before it’s too late to save higher education in Israel”.

Mr Saar’s campaign to “re-Zionise” the education system, including introducing a new right-wing Jewish studies syllabus and bringing soldiers into classrooms, has heightened concerns that he is stoking an atmosphere increasingly hostile to left-wing academics and human-rights activists.

Neve Gordon, a politics professor at Ben Gurion University in Beersheva who called for an academic boycott of Israel last year, has reported receiving death threats, as has a school teacher who refused to participate in Mr Saar’s flagship programme to encourage high-school recruitment to the Israeli military.

Daniel Gutwein, a professor of Jewish history at Haifa University, said: “A serious red flag is raised when the education minister joins in the de-legitimisation of the academic establishment. This is a method to castrate and abolish Israeli academia.”

Mr Saar’s sympathies for Im Tirtzu were first revealed earlier this year when he addressed one of its conferences, telling delegates the organisation would be “blessed” for its “hugely vital” work.

The youth movement emerged in 2006 among students demanding that the government rather than ordinary soldiers be held to account for what was seen as Israel’s failure to crush Hizbollah during that year’s attack on Lebanon. It has rapidly evolved into a potent right-wing pressure group.

Its biggest success to date has been a campaign last year against Israeli human rights groups that assisted a United Nations inquiry led by Judge Richard Goldstone in investigating war crimes committed during Israel's assault on Gaza in 2008. The human rights organisations are now facing possible government legislation to restrict their activities.

Im Tirtzu's latest campaign, against what it calls "the reign of left-wing terror" in the education system, was backed by Mr Saar during a parliamentary debate last month. He told MPs he took very seriously a report by the movement claiming that anti-Zionist professors have taken over university politics departments and are silencing right-wing colleagues and students.

Mr Saar also warned that calls for boycotts against Israel were "impossible to accept" and that he was talking to higher education officials about taking "action" this summer, hinting that he would cut funds for the professors involved and their institutions.

Yossi Ben Artzi, the rector of Haifa University and the most senior university official to criticise Mr Saar, warned him against "monitoring and denouncing" academics. He added that the Im Tirtzu report "smells of McCarthyism".

The universities are already disturbed by a bill submitted by 25 MPs last month that would make it a criminal offence for Israelis to "initiate, encourage, or aid" a boycott against Israel and require them to pay compensation to those harmed by it.

The bill is likely to be treated sympathetically by the government, which is worried about the growing momentum of boycott drives both internationally and in the occupied West Bank. Mr Netanyahu has called the emergence of a boycott movement inside Israel a "national scandal".

Prof Gordon, who wrote a commentary in the Los Angeles Times a year ago supporting a boycott, said Im Tirtzu had contributed to a growing "atmosphere of violence" in the country and on campuses.

Hundreds of students at his university have staged demonstrations demanding his dismissal. He was also recently sent a letter from someone signing himself "Im Tirtzu" calling the professor a "traitor" and warning: "I will reach Ben Gurion [University] to kill you."

Prof Gordon said: "I have tenure and Im Tirtzu cannot easily get me fired. But they are trying to become the 'guards at the gate' to make sure other academics do not follow in my path."

Only three Israeli academics have so far openly endorsed a boycott, he added, with many others fearful that they will be punished if they do so. But Im Tirtzu and its supporters were using the issue as a pretext for cracking down on academics critical of rightwing policy. He called Israel an increasingly "proto-fascist" state.

Prof Gordon cited the recent case of Assaf Oren, a statistics lecturer and peace activist who had been told he was the leading candidate for a post in Ben Gurion's industrial engineering department until right-wing groups launched a campaign against him.

In a further sign of what Prof Gordon and others have labelled a McCarthyite climate, MPs in

the parliamentary education committee — which has come to closely reflect Mr Saar’s views — summoned for questioning two head teachers of prestigious schools after they criticised official policies.

One, Ram Cohen, has condemned Israel’s occupation of the Palestinians, while the other, Zeev Dagani, has spoken against the programme to send army officers into classrooms to encourage pupils to enlist.

Mr Dagani was the only head teacher in the 270 selected schools to reject the programme, saying he opposed “the blurring of boundaries when officers come and teach the teachers how to educate”. He subsequently received a flood of death threats.

The education ministry has announced a new core curriculum subject of Jewish studies in schools that concentrates on nationalist and religious themes and is likely to be taught by private rightwing and settler organisations.

Avi Sagi, a philosopher at Bar Ilan University in Tel Aviv, warned in the liberal Haaretz newspaper that the syllabus offered “an opening for dangerous indoctrination”.

A modern history curriculum published this month has been similarly criticised for leaving out study of the Oslo peace process and Palestinian politics.

Also in the sights of education officials are hundreds of Arab nursery schools, many of them established by the Islamic Movement. Zevulun Orlev, head of the education committee, has accused the schools of “poisoning the minds” of Arab children in Israel.

Mr Saar appointed a special committee last month to inspect the schools and shut them down if they were found to be teaching “anti-Israel” material.

Arab MPs have called the claims “ridiculous”, pointing out that the schools were set up after the education ministry failed to build nursery schools in Arab communities.

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.

A version of this article originally appeared in The National (www.thenational.ae), published in Abu Dhabi.

The original source of this article is Global Research
Copyright © [Jonathan Cook](http://www.jkcook.net), Global Research, 2010

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: **Jonathan Cook**

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca
www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca