

South African academic conference disinvites Israelis after boycott pressure

Citing nation-state law and 'incremental genocide' in Gaza, activists call on organizers of reconciliation conference to disinvite Israeli professors ■ 'Academia is being trampled by politics,' Israeli prof. responds

Shira Kadari-Ovadia | Nov. 27, 2018 | 4:49 PM | 3

Pressure from supporters of a boycott against Israel has led organizers of an academic conference in South Africa to disinvite Israeli participants.

Entitled “Recognition, Reparation, Reconciliation: The Light and Shadow of Historical Trauma,” the conference is set to take place next week at Stellenbosch University.

In a letter calling on the organizers to disinvite the Israelis, activists cited the nation-state law and “many other egregious violations of basic human rights for Palestinian citizens of Israel,” the “draconian laws of Israel's military administration” in the West Bank, and – quoting academic Ilan Pappé – “incremental genocide” in Gaza.” The signatories included the South African Jews for a Free Palestine organization.

Seven academics from three Israeli universities – the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv University and Ben-Gurion University of the Negev – were supposed to attend.

>> The anti-apartheid crusader who turned Palestinian ruins into Jewish tourist sites ■ Analysis: Carnage in Gaza threatens to revive analogies between Israel and apartheid South Africa

One panel discussion was to be moderated by Prof. Shifra Sagy of Ben-Gurion University's conflict resolution center and four of her doctoral students, under the heading, “Is it possible to identify with the narrative of the enemy?” Another panel that was canceled was to include Prof. Sagy; Prof. Arie Nadler, a Tel Aviv University social psychologist; and Prof. Mohammed Dajani Daoudi, a political scientist from a Palestinian institution, Al-Quds University. A lecture by Prof. Raya Morag of the Hebrew University's communications department was not canceled, but after organizers added

after her name on the conference program the words “speaking in her own capacity,” Morag canceled her attendance.

Sagy said this was the first time she had encountered such a blatant academic boycott.

“I am invited to many conferences in places where people aren’t necessarily fans of Israel,” the professor said. “I never hide my identity. On the contrary, most of my lectures open with a declaration that I come from a place of conflict, and I explain how this fact influences my research. To date I have never encountered such behavior. The feeling is that academia is being trampled by politics.”

In addition to having her lectures canceled, Sagy said she was told by a researcher whom she was to meet at Stellenbosch that their meeting was also canceled because of the boycott call.

“Beyond the basic ignorance and misunderstanding of the situation in Israel, I can only condemn the call to boycott Israeli academia,” said Ben-Gurion University rector Prof. Chaim Hames. “This is a dangerous capitulation by the conference organizers and a blow to the central values of academia – open and respectful discourse, listening even when you don’t agree with what is said, and openness to examining every issue from different angles.

“I understand that the not-so-distant history of South Africa makes it more sensitive to what’s perceived as undermining the rights of the weak,” added Hames, “but unlike the universities that cooperated with the apartheid regime, Israeli academia represents a broad variety of views and parts of it work openly, using democratic tools, against the harm caused to Palestinians, against the policies of the current government, and in favor of a diplomatic resolution to the conflict.”