

REFLECTIONS

Israeli academia during the genocide: supporting the state through words and silences

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Abstract

In the one year that I spent in Israel as a student of public health from October 2023 to September 2024, I was stunned and disappointed by the ignorance and inaction of the academic institutions towards a state-sponsored genocide as the violence in Gaza escalated incredibly. Based on personal experiences and published information, this reflection attempts to show the Israeli academia's failure to provide an objective critique of the state's action while contributing to the suppression of dissenting voices, thereby failing to uphold ethical responsibilities.

Keywords: genocide, Zionism, nationalism, public health

"Moral agency is central to the definition of the crime of genocide, defined as any act committed with *the intent to destroy a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, in whole or in part.*" (United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 1948) [1]

The Israel-Hamas "conflict" that has undergone serious escalation in the year that followed the events of October 7, 2023 has invited scores of opinions, analyses, criticisms and justifications of the actions of both sides from all over the world. All this has contributed minimally to any substantial remedial actions but significantly to a profound academic noise, which speaks of conflicting ideas. The experts in middle-eastern geopolitics have been clashing with historians and together, they have ignored the public health experts. The tinge of naivety that I was entitled to as a student in one of the prominent universities of the world made me expect that when confronted with undeniable facts, national and international debates would refocus on the truth, paving the way for informed efforts towards peace — led by conscientious academics. However, as the reality of a state-sponsored genocide by Israel became increasingly evident, the academic noise in Israel became louder to counter protest and echo the actions of the state. Simultaneously, the silence of public health academia in Israel became increasingly painful as the visuals of hospitals in Gaza being bombed flew across social media platforms [2]. As the space in academia to discuss the common good shrank with a loud hush, "peace" went out of the discussion and "nationalism" became the only touchstone for all arguments. This account tries to summarise my personal observations, experiences and published media reports about the general attitude of academia in support of the actions of the state and treatment of those who opposed it.

Academic institutions' support to the state

Soon after the events of October 7, Israeli universities actively sought to gather international support for the country during its military operations in Gaza. The president of Tel Aviv University (TAU) issued a statement highlighting the institution's commitment to national efforts [3]. He criticised those advocating for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions and expressed disapproval of certain international academic leaders who had not acted against the global Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaigns, for solidarity with the Palestinian people. As part of these efforts, TAU incorporated "media outreach" into its initiatives, appointing students to engage on social media platforms to counter what they considered misinformation and challenge narratives perceived as hostile to Israel [2]. Within days, TAU's international students launched a social media initiative to show solidarity, pledging to share "accurate," fact-based information and framing Israel's actions as part of a broader struggle between humanity and terrorism, good and evil [3]. It is interesting to note that there was no noticeable resistance from the students against the war, although selective protests demanding intensified efforts to bring the Israeli hostages back home had substantial participation by students. Moreover, influential, renowned professors like Uzy Raby, who teaches history at TAU, openly advocated the starvation of civilians in Gaza who were not evacuating after the Israeli military's order [4]. Professors Harel Chorev and Eyal Zisser from the same university have frequently supported far-right politicians like Itamar Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich when they came up with plans for the "total occupation of Gaza" [4]. The labelling of Palestinians as "death-worshippers" and "murderers" is also evident in writings of professors like Avi Barelli, who teaches the history of Zionism^a at Ben-Gurion University [4].

The University of Haifa had also mounted strong support for Israeli military efforts in Gaza. The university established a campaign aimed at shaping international perceptions, arguing that criticisms of Israel's actions in Gaza are unjust and suggesting that advocates for Palestinian rights are often misinformed or sympathetic to terrorism [3]. As part of this initiative, the university released a series of multilingual videos that also reached us via WhatsApp featuring students and faculty members reiterating key Israeli government narratives, such as portraying pro-Palestinian slogans like "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free"

as calls for the extermination of Jewish people and antisemitic [3].

All the academic support that was lent to the Israeli government made for a dehumanised, discriminatory perspective against the Palestinians. This was also evident in the informal interactions with Israeli medical students which revealed a great lack of sensitivity for loss of civilian lives and destruction of health services in particular. Some of the notable expressions about the people of Gaza as were noted by me in personal interactions are:

“Those animals are in no way innocent.”

“They should have thought of consequences before supporting and sheltering Hamas.”

“Healthcare is for humans, not for terrorists.”

“They should all have evacuated long ago; that’s not their piece of land.”

“The world will always hate Jews no matter what we do, so we will just do whatever it takes to kick them (the Palestinians) out.”

However, though these interactions were limited, and their findings should not be generalised, they definitely show an absence of objectivity with strong support to the state’s propaganda.

Silence, silencing and selective outrage

Apart from blatantly supporting the government’s actions, many Israeli academicians also called out the government boldly on its failure to protect its people and mounted efforts to safeguard the health of hostages taken by Hamas. The initial outrages also included slamming the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) for not doing anything significant for the hostages in captivity and wilfully ignoring them [5]. It was common to hear this being re-iterated in lecture halls and seminars where the families of the Israeli hostages also occasionally raised their voices. However, there were absolutely no public statements on the destruction of health services in Gaza and killing of health workers by the Israeli army. There was a general attitude of labelling the destruction of health services and loss of civilian lives as “unfortunate consequences of a war” and “unavoidable collateral damage” in the academic conversations held inside and outside the lecture halls, which conformed with what the Israeli government was saying. In the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (HUJI) where I was a student of public health, there were professors who understood fairly well the consequences of a disrupted health system in Gaza, especially on vaccination and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities but none of them could ever express their views in public, given the hostility they might need to face for their views. A prominent example was the case of Professor Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian at the HUJI. A scholar who works on trauma, state

crimes, genocide and gender violence, was arrested in April 2024 for criticising Zionism and speaking up against the genocidal campaign by Israel in Gaza [3,6]. Long before her arrest, she was being attacked by the public media and government authorities for “inciting violence against the state of Israel!” A letter issued to her by HUJI’s leadership in late October 2023, expressed their “shock, disgust, and deep disappointment” regarding her decision to endorse a petition advocating for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and a political resolution to the broader Israeli Palestinian conflict, aiming to end the occupation and apartheid [3,6]. The letter conveyed that the president and rector were “embarrassed to count her among the university staff” and suggested that she reconsider her position at the institution. This letter was publicly circulated, intensifying the campaign against her. However, when the BDS campaigns against Israeli academic institutions across the prominent global universities became intense, an e-mail was circulated in the HUJI mail system which described HUJI as an institution committed to protect the “right to freedom of speech” and said that despite not endorsing Professor Shalhoub’s views, the university acknowledged the need to safeguard her views. This was an impact of many professors from HUJI and outside coming out in her support calling her arrest a “political act” [6]. However, this was not followed by her reinstatement in the University.

Another case is that of Professor Regev Nathanson who teaches communications at Sapir College in the town of Sderot. He was among the few Israeli academicians who signed a petition that appealed to the United States to stop arming the Israeli army and described Israel’s action as a “plausible genocide” [7]. He faced a massive backlash from the student community of Sapir College in February 2024 demanding that he be fired. However, unlike Professor Shalhoub, Nathanson wasn’t fired but the college authorities condemned the petition and forced him to go on unpaid leave [7].

Eventually, the impact of the BDS movements on public health academia became apparent when many academics slowly started to come up with more balanced statements over “protecting health during crisis”. An argument supporting ceasefire was by professors of the Braun School of Public Health and Community Medicine of HUJI advocating for polio immunisation in Gaza as traces of polio virus (VDPV-2) were detected in Gaza’s water streams. They stated that efforts to contain the spread of the virus should be a priority and a ground for ceasefire [8,9]. This argument was also presented in the annual conference of the Israeli Academy of Public Health Physicians in August 2024 organised in HUJI but aimed to safeguard the Israeli population from a potential outbreak, and was not against the hazardous health impact of the government’s actions, not to safeguard civilians and protect health services in Gaza collapsing due to regular bombings.

Reflections

Academic institutions are expected to be liberal, inclusive and safe spaces for diverse ideas and opinions. Another great expectation is to provide evidence-based, intellectual and humanitarian feedback to the state to keep its potential abuse of power in check. The intense year of conflict in Israel and Gaza eventually turned into an undeniably state-sponsored genocide and yet the academic community in Israel, including majority of public health academia, decided to ignore it and bowed down to hyper-nationalistic sentiments without examining them.

The ten stages of genocide described by Gregory Stanton essentially indicate the role of human-choice and bystander-indifference in genocides [10]. Israeli academia seemed to reflect both. Academics in public health were expected to act as neutral mediators, fostering discussions rooted in ethics and a commitment to human welfare amidst one of the greatest humanitarian crises of the 21st century. Their role demanded advocating for humanitarian solutions, highlighting the health crises in Gaza, prioritising the protection of civilian lives and examining their state's action under the lens of war-crimes. However, many prominent academics ignored their responsibilities and aligned with state propaganda, endorsing discriminatory narratives, and failing to criticise the destruction of Gaza's health system and the deliberate targeting of health workers. This silence from public health academia betrayed the foundational principle of advocating for marginalised populations and addressing health inequities while also ignoring the principle of respect for life and dignity that is central to public health ethics. Rather than promoting peace and fostering evidence-based solutions, many academics contributed to polarisation and a dehumanised discourse, abandoning their responsibility to use knowledge as a bridge for dialogue and make efforts toward reconciliation. Belonging to a country of people who suffered a brutal genocide under the Nazi rule in the 1940s, academia failed terribly to identify a brewing genocidal sentiment in their own community and subsequently, failed to prevent it.

As an international student in Israel during an extraordinary year, I was often compelled to choose between two things: feeling gratitude towards the country that was giving me the best resources to study public health and opportunity to engage with some of the best professors in the world and be quiet; or have a shot at discussing a tragedy that was happening a few miles from my residence in the university campus at the risk of annoying some influential figures with no immunity of my own. While both could have happened in a "truly free" educational campus where conflicting ideas were safeguarded, I was often left suffocating in my own thoughts and feelings as the crises in Gaza became unbearable. It often made me think that perhaps even the best educational curriculum can be limited to a glorification of skills and technology and be so devoid of humanitarian values that its institutional guardians are useless when they

are expected to stand up for truth and justice. It should also be noted that academia in Israel did not contribute to a speedy return of its own citizens from Hamas's captivity either and often kept blaming the same international laws their own state was twisting to inflict a genocide.

The one learning out of many that I take from this experience is: the best intellect and education can serve violence, if not rooted in empathy and equipped with the ability to critically examine its own actions in peaceful times.

***Note:** Zionism is an ethnic nationalist movement that emerged in Europe in the late 19th century which aimed to establish a national home for the Jewish people, which was achieved by the colonisation of Palestine, a region roughly corresponding to the Land of Israel in Judaism, with central importance in Jewish history. Contrary to a common notion, Zionism, Semitism and Judaism are not synonymous.

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