

# International Community Defends Israeli Scientific Cooperation



Science has always prided itself on being an objective inquiry into the workings of nature, one which transcends national differences and boundaries. Thus, the scholars of Israel's scientific community were first surprised, then hurt, then outraged to find themselves the targets of a politically motivated boycott. Fortunately, they were not alone, and most of their international colleagues rose to defend academic freedom and dialogue and its independence from partisan politics. Still, there is a lingering sense of alarm and lost innocence - even science is not secure.

The ruckus began on April 06, 2002, when the *London Guardian* published a manifesto masterminded by two members of Britain's Open University which called on European research institutions to ostracize Israeli scientists "until Israel opens serious peace negotiations with the Palestinians, along the lines proposed...by the Saudis and the Arab League." It was eventually signed by 270 European scientists (including nine Israelis). Prof. Joshua Jortner, former President of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, sent an immediate response to the editor of *The Guardian* decrying "the blatant sacrifice of the basic tenets of scientific ethics to serve a political agenda." Noting how joint Israel-Arab scientific cooperation has contributed to understanding and peace, he called on scientists to encourage, rather than discourage, such activity.

Prof. Jortner as the Israel Academy's representative to the International Rights Network of Academies and Scholarly Societies, also responded to a report distributed by the Network which parroted one-sided Palestinian accounts of the current situation. He also wondered about the lack of mention of the innocent Israelis killed when Palestinian terrorists blew up a coffee shop 100 meters from the offices of the Israel Academy. In response, on April 28, 2002, the Network's Executive Committee issued a statement noting that that report had not been properly cleared and that "moratoria on scientific exchanges based on nationality...thwart the Network's goal and should be opposed."

Current Israel Academy President Prof. Jacob Ziv also sent a strong letter of protest to the All European Academies (ALLEA) organization, regarding a one-sided anti-Israel initiative instigated by three members of the Norwegian Academy of Sciences. Citing the need to maintain impartiality and avoid "snapshot portrayals," he also called for greater moral clarity. "Let there be no mistake," he explained, "What leads a woman to...pretend she is pregnant and blow herself up at a crowded bus stop is [the result of a deliberate]...ongoing repressive climate of indoctrination to absolute hatred and...the long-term cynical exploitation of a tragic situation, instead of the honest pursuit of solutions." The latter is the responsibility of all scientists and men of good faith.

The world scientific community apparently agreed. Over 10,000 academics, from the US to France to Russia have already signed a counter-petition defending academic freedom and its potential contribution to international understanding. Similarly, in a letter of April 25, 2002, Philippe Busquin, Commissioner for Research of the European Union (EU), noted that President Romano Prodi has already stated that the European Commission "is not in favor of a policy of sanctions against the parties to the conflict but rather advocates a continuous dialogue with them" and that the Council of Ministers had taken the same position. Busquin concluded that the EU's many joint European-Israeli-Palestinian research initiatives are "certainly more effective than many well-intentioned words without any concrete impact."

The scientific community's reaction culminated in a May 2, 2002 editorial in *Nature*, which pointedly noted that the concept of a research boycott restricts channels that are better kept open. It also labeled the current attempted boycott as partisan, rhetorically asking, "Should we also boycott Palestinian researchers because the Palestinian Authority has not done enough to prevent suicide bombers?" The May 16, 2002 *Nature* published two more editorials in a similar vein. One noted that the contribution of a political scientific cooperation "to the political peace process should not be underestimated," while the other saw "signs that the current crisis" will galvanize international interest in promoting such collaboration. Both call on national academies to become more involved in this effort.

Thus, what started as a politically motivated anti-Israel attack has actually helped sensitize the international community to the important contribution regional scientific cooperation can make to mitigating conflict and to rapidly normalizing relations once there is peace.

