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Last Updated: January 8, 2025

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INTERVIEW | Israel

### **"The damage to the country, but also to Israeli science is growing"**

He repeatedly raises his voice against the Israeli government and its warfare in Gaza. David Harel, President of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, explains in an interview what motivates him and why this leads him into a dilemma.

Shortly before Christmas and Hanukkah, the Alliance of Science Organizations invited participants to a German-Israeli symposium in Berlin. David Harel, President of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, also took part. In conversation with Table.Briefings, he explains why it's so important to prevent academic boycotts – and why he hopes for a change in government.

### **Mr. Harel, what did the invitation to the symposium mean to you?**

I am very grateful for this kind of support from Germany. The Alliance of Science Organizations shows genuine sympathy and understanding for the difficult situation Israeli science has been in since October 7, 2023. It's worth mentioning that these aren't just lip service due to Germany's past, but that they really want to help us. This includes the major scientific institutions in Germany like the Leopoldina, the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences, the Max Planck Society and several others, with whose leaders I maintain close and friendly contact.

We also maintain very good working relationships with the German Research Ministry and the German Ambassador to Israel, Steffen Seibert, who have helped us a great deal. Elsewhere, I still have to do a lot of persuading to minimize the effects of boycott calls in the USA and some European countries.

### **"Among Israeli scientists, the proportion of government-critical voices is higher"**

What is your main argument against the boycott efforts?

I always emphasize that science knows no borders and that this must remain so. International cooperation is crucial. A good example is Ada Yonath. Like me, she conducts research at the Weizmann Institute and received the 2009 Nobel Prize in Chemistry for elucidating the structure of ribosomes. This success would not have been possible without her stays abroad, for example in Germany. People all over the world benefit from the results of her work. Those who boycott Israeli science are boycotting science as a whole and harming the cause overall as well as the motivation for scientific work.

### **What do you say to the reason for the boycott, namely the criticism of Israel's harsh approach in Gaza after Hamas's terror attack?**

I try to make it clear to my conversation partners that it's not only important to keep science borderless and free from politics, but that weakening Israeli science also affects those who raise their voices against government decisions. Among Israeli scientists, the proportion of government-critical voices is higher than in other population groups. Those who want Israel to withdraw from Gaza; who

want the government's malicious attacks on our democracy to end; who want to get rid of this government, should not boycott science.

### **"I am a patriot, but I don't hesitate to fight against my own government"**

You yourself have repeatedly criticized the Netanyahu government – not just on research policy issues, but also about the approach in Gaza and the judicial reform plans. How do you explain your position to others?

I try to make it clear that there are three narratives regarding Israel that you hear, for example, on campus, and which need to be distinguished. One is antisemitism, pure hostility towards Jews. The second narrative is anti-Zionism or anti-Israelism, which questions the existence of the State of Israel. I fight these two narratives decisively. The third narrative is directed against what Israel is doing these days – the warfare in Gaza, the hollowing out of democracy. I speak about this at rallies, write guest articles and much more. I am a patriot, but I don't hesitate to fight against my own government. This naturally puts me in a personal dilemma.

### **Can you explain that in more detail?**

I have been President of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities for more than three years. The Academy has its mandate through a law from 1961 and is independent of any government agency or authority. Its tasks include advising the government on all matters concerning science. I really try to do this to the best of my knowledge and conscience, so in this respect I am loyal to the government. On the other hand, I see what this government is doing: How it puts pressure on universities, how it vigorously tries to increase its influence in supervisory boards of scientific, educational and cultural institutions, and often even plans hostile takeovers, as with the National Library of Israel.

In many ways, this government is destroying democracy. Many people, including myself, are raising their voices against this development. That's why in the eyes of some people I am seen as disloyal when I clearly state in interviews or newspaper articles what I think about the government and its actions. That's my dilemma.

### **"University presidents should be able to be forced to dismiss critical faculty members"**

You mentioned that the government puts pressure on universities. How does this happen?

Representatives of the right wing have introduced a proposal for a law change in parliament, the Knesset. It would allow the Ministry of Education to decide in certain cases what constitutes support for terrorism and what doesn't. If a student organization, for example, calls for withdrawal from Gaza and ending the killing there, the ministry could consider this as supporting terrorism and could dissolve the organization or ask the respective university to do so.

Even worse is another amendment proposal that would force university presidents to dismiss faculty members if they express themselves in a way that the Ministry of Education considers as supporting terrorism. University presidents who refuse – regardless of whether the person has been charged or convicted in court – face budget cuts. In early December, I was invited to a hearing of the Knesset's Education Committee and warned against passing these law changes. I explicitly called on all university presidents in Israel to unequivocally declare that they will not comply if these amendments are ratified. And I appealed to Israeli President Isaac Herzog to also speak out against them.

### **"The operation in Gaza could have been ended within two months"**

This isn't the first time you've exposed yourself as a critic. In January 2024, for example, you signed an open letter accusing the judicial authorities of ignoring the comprehensive and blatant incitement to genocide and ethnic cleansing in the Gaza Strip by influential public figures.

I continue to believe the continued warfare is wrong. The operation in Gaza could have been ended within two months. After Hamas's terror attack, they should have carried out a massive counterattack, but then swallowed their pride and negotiated for the release of the hostages.

Don't these statements get you into trouble?

That's possible and sometimes the potential consequences worry me. At the hearing in the Education Committee, I practically called on university presidents to engage in civil disobedience. But I must speak out. I cannot reconcile it with my conscience otherwise.

Does your position as president of the Israeli Science Academy protect you?

Well, the Education Minister can't simply fire me, probably not even the State President. As Academy President, I probably enjoy a certain degree of respect, and I don't seem to have been directly targeted - at least not yet. The government also knows that many students and academics participate in the Saturday evening demonstrations against the government. They would likely cause unrest if the police decided to investigate me or take me into custody.

### **"The war affects us in many ways"**

What about other leading scientists in Israel. Are they less outspoken?

There are many academics who criticize the government and also write their opinions and speak at rallies. Most university administrations are restrained, however, with few exceptions like Ariel Porat from Tel Aviv University. He is like me and fearlessly raises his voice for what he believes in. I can understand the reticence of university presidents. They have to balance many interests. On one side are thousands of students who are often critical and vocal and organize protests. On the other side are supervisory boards and funders who are often politically aligned with the right wing, which means their budgets are threatened, just as with the mentioned law changes.

How else is the Gaza war affecting universities and research institutes?

The war affects us in many ways. Financially due to increased military spending, but also because the government is spending an incredible amount of money to keep the ultra-religious population segments in the coalition. There have already been significant cuts to science budgets. And for 2025, the Ministry of Education is planning massive cuts at universities.

Additionally, many scientists are being mobilized for reserve duty in the army, often for months at a time. At universities, the quota is 30 percent, many of them are called up for reserve duty lasting more than three months.

### **"We are seeing a very worrying brain drain"**

How is academic freedom in Israel?

Academic freedom is acutely endangered. If the government pushes through the mentioned law changes, people will be afraid to speak out. Regarding research topics, academic freedom in Israel has not yet been visibly restricted.

Is Israeli science already isolated due to the boycott calls?

This is increasingly the case. There are fewer invitations to international conferences, joint research projects have become more difficult, and there are impacts on peer review processes for funding applications. Many boycotts take place on a personal level, often bilateral cooperation is ended. But there are also boycotts at the institutional level, where universities ask their faculty members to cease or at least reconsider scientific collaboration with Israeli scientists. Fortunately, devastating measures like Israel's exclusion from the EU's Horizon programs have not yet occurred.

Nevertheless, we are seeing a very worrying brain drain. Many young scientists who have the opportunity to get a position in the USA or Europe after their doctorate take these opportunities. Two talented young researchers from my group at the Weizmann Institute did exactly that a few months ago and left Israel with their families forever. They said goodbye with tears in their eyes. They explained that they couldn't think of raising their children in a country like ours.

**"I think it's conceivable that Germany sometimes overdoes its pro-Israeli stance"**

What gives you hope in these times?

The situation must improve quickly, because the damage to the country, but also to Israeli science, education and culture is growing. And I really see no other solution than a change of government. One of the things that gives me hope: We have very good scientists in Israel. I count on them – and on Israeli civil society, which has proven to be very strong and active in recent months. We don't yet have a personality like Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther King among us. But there are quite a few promising, positively minded young people who could take on leadership roles.

In Germany, there is a debate about the fight against antisemitism. In November, the Bundestag passed a corresponding resolution based on the IHRA definition. There was criticism beforehand, especially from academia and culture. The commitment to the IHRA definition was considered problematic because it doesn't clearly enough distinguish criticism of Israel from antisemitism. Do you understand these concerns?

I'm not familiar with this debate in detail. But I can understand the concerns. Criticism of what Israel does should not be mixed up with antisemitism or anti-Israelism. I think it's conceivable that Germany sometimes overdoes its pro-Israeli stance. The basic assumption often seems to be that Israel can do no wrong. That's not correct. We are currently experiencing that Israel can do a lot wrong. Even Germans may – and should – criticize Israeli politics.