

Book Review - Universities Weaponized: The Case of Israel

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Review of *Towers of Ivory and Steel: How Israeli Universities Deny Palestinian Freedom*
By Maya Wind
Verso, 2024, 278 pages, 29.95 paperback

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ALL TWELVE OF Gaza’s universities now lie in ruins, destroyed within the first 100 days of Israel’s ongoing military assault. According to a United Nations report, as of April, Israel had killed thousands of students and teachers as well as 95 university professors.

These numbers are undoubtedly higher at this point. The authors of the report further stated that “it may be reasonable to ask if there is an intentional effort to comprehensively destroy the Palestinian education system, an action known a ‘*scholasticide*.’”

At the same time, on university campuses across the United States and around the world, student-led protests and encampments calling for the end of investment in and aid to Israel, as well as a free Palestine have faced repression and violence instigated by their own administrations as well as local and state police.

Maya Wind’s extraordinary book *Ivory and Steel* was published in January 2024 and written before these recent and ongoing events. As a reader, one gets a near constant sense of temporal dislocation. The book reads as written in the moment, as if to explain why and how education of Palestinians and education about Palestinian liberation struggles would come under attack.

Wind is a Jewish-Israeli citizen, now a Killam Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Canada. Her citizenship status allowed her access to Israeli state and military archives that would be unavailable to others.

One suspects that after this book’s publication, she will not be given such access in the future. The evidence she compiles for each and every claim is overwhelming and damning of the supposed “liberal” educational institutions in Israel.

Serving Settler Colonialism

Wind shows how Israel's universities have been central to the Zionist settler-colonial project from the beginning. Three institutions, beginning with the founding of Hebrew University in 1918, were designed to advance the Zionist movement's territorial aims well before the creation of the state of Israel.

Also, prior to the 1948 war, the leading Zionist militia created a Science Corps to develop the military capacity to aid in the mass expulsion of Palestinians. Each university hosted and supported this project, serving as military training grounds and storing weapons in university buildings.

Wind documents in great detail how Israeli universities continue to "sustain Israeli settler colonialism, military occupation, and apartheid..." as well as being complicit "in the ongoing violation of Palestinian rights as recognized by international law." (16) She does this both by narrating in detail particular disturbing and telling incidents, as well as by accumulating a massive amount of empirical evidence.

The book is divided into two parts, "Complicity" and "Repression." Part One outlines how the fundamental structure of academic disciplines, including archaeology, Middle East studies, and law explicitly serve Zionist ends.

Led by Hebrew University, Israeli archeology kicked into high gear in 1967 immediately following Israel's occupation of Palestinian Territory. There are now over 2600 antiquity sites in the occupied West Bank, overseen by the state and staffed by university archaeologists.

Wind documents how the development of these sites has gone hand in hand with military occupation and settler expansion. These sites are often managed by Jewish settler organizations, regularly confiscating Palestinian land in the process, sometimes even constructing parks where tourists can learn about the Jewish history of the area.

Wind cites substantial evidence that this history is the result of bad archaeology, with evidence of Muslim and Arab presence in the region destroyed or undocumented. Furthermore, she documents the large-scale theft of Palestinian owned artifacts in violation of international law.

These include most famously the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were held at the Palestine Archaeological Museum in East Jerusalem until 1967 when the Museum was seized by the Israeli military.

Israeli archaeologists continue to work on digs in the Qumran caves, where the scrolls were discovered in 1947 in what's now the occupied West Bank, appropriating, studying and displaying additional scrolls. While most international journals refuse to publish research based on illegal excavation, the Israeli academy has manufactured its own self-enclosed academic infrastructure for research and publication.

Legal "Innovation" and Orientalism

Within legal studies, Wind shows that Israel has been an "innovator" when it comes to international law. Thus she reports that Israel, in order to "sidestep available legal frameworks,...argued that it was engaged in what it defined as 'armed conflict short of war,' requiring a new conceptual framework, while also going beyond the traditional distinction between combatants and noncombatants to create a third category: "persons who appear to be noncombatants but may potentially interfere with Israeli military operations — in reference to Palestinian civilians." (35-6)

In this context, philosopher Asa Kasher worked with Major General Amos Yadlon to produce a code of ethics for the IDF legitimizing, among other things, disproportionate killing and targeted assassinations. Israeli academics have successfully promoted these ideas internationally where, like other urban police tactics, they've been picked up by the United States and others.

While Middle East Studies programs are common at major universities, Wind shows how these programs in Israel, amongst the earliest founded at Israeli universities, have been intertwined with state interests and military and surveillance practice. She reports that "this form of expertise is termed Mizrahanut (Orientalism, literally translated)," concerned with what the state calls "the other side." (44)

From the beginning, many involved in this academic study of "the other" also held positions in the security establishment. The Dayan Center, attached to Tel Aviv University, is such a place. Wind reports that it produces memos, journals, and books that "promote racialized tropes about 'jihad' and what they routinely call a 'death worship culture' in Arab and Muslim societies..."

Wind cites many instances, e.g. Bar-Ilan University Middle East Studies professor and former military Lieutenant Colonel Mordechai Keidar speaking "on Israeli radio to argue that deterrence of a Palestinian insurgent can only be achieved if 'his sister or mother will be raped'." (48)

The teaching of Arabic as a "foreign language" is similarly militarized, offering courses tailored for the military. According to Wind, With only three per cent of Jewish-Israelis speaking Arabic (50), the language and its study in university settings is functionally a tool of the security state.

Built on Ruins

Wind convincingly shows that Israeli universities "were designed as regionally strategic outposts for the Israeli state's territorial and demographic project." (59) Hebrew University's West Jerusalem campus for example was built on the ruins of a Palestinian village destroyed in 1948, though the institution's official narrative indicates that it was built on a "rocky deserted hilltop." (63)

The university received state funding to employ professional librarians, who trailed soldiers to collect books from Palestinian libraries and private homes, amassing 30,000 books during the war. Another 40,000 were collected in the early 1950s, though more than 26,000 were destroyed, judged "'inappropriate' for containing 'material against the state.'" (64)

Adding insult to injury, Wind reports, some books were sold back to Palestinian schools. Many Palestinian families have since sought to retrieve their books, though their names have been intentionally erased and their efforts have been futile.

With Israel's 1967 occupation of East Jerusalem, Hebrew University's Mt. Scopus campus located there was rapidly expanded on a monumental scale with a tall tower dominating the skyline to symbolize, in the words of its lead architect, "I am here, and you cannot remove me." (66) Palestinian properties in the area continue to be seized, homes demolished, and residents policed.

Wind reports similarly on other Israeli universities. The University of Haifa, with its own 31-story tower soaring over the city, was established in the only area of Israel where Palestinians constitute a majority, specifically to advance "Judaization" of the region. Jewish only settlements have since expanded in the area, while Palestinian construction has been limited.

Wind describes similar situations elsewhere in Israel and at Ariel University in the occupied West

Bank, where students are also given academic credit to serve as guards for illegal settlements. (83)

Israeli universities offer over 50 programs of study designed jointly with the military and security apparatus. Wind shows that propaganda or what is in Israel called *hasbara*, holds a comfortable place at these institutions. The University of Haifa houses the Comper Interdisciplinary Center for the Study of anti-Semitism and Racism, which provides academic credit and scholarships for research in combating BDS and the academic boycott of Israel.

Scientific and Technological research at Israeli institutions, Wind shows, are close to fully incorporated into the military and intelligence establishment. Hebrew University runs two degree programs that largely feed the Israeli Intelligence Corps, especially Unit 8200 which heavily surveils the Palestinian population and is “responsible for amassing all intelligence transmission, including phone calls, text messages, and emails.”

This information (financial problems, sexual orientation, medical treatment needed by a loved one, etc.) is used to strongarm Palestinians into collaboration with the military. As one Israeli soldier-whistleblower reported, “If you need urgent medical treatment in Israel, the West Bank or abroad — we were looking for you. The state of Israel will let you die before it will let you go for medical treatment without giving information about your wanted cousin.” (104)

Repression and Revelation

Part Two, “Repression”, begins with a substantial analysis of policing and censorship of research and teaching at Israeli universities, practices that have always been in place but intensified in recent times.

Wind reports that with the declassification of many government documents in 1978, several researchers dubbed the “new historians” including internationally known scholar Ilan Pappé challenged the official history regarding the founding of the state of Israel.

Wind describes how this work was met with extreme hostility both inside and outside the academy, leading to these documents being reclassified. In case after case, critical academics have either left the Israeli academy or in some cases decided to toe the line.

Pappé himself left for the University of Exeter in 2006. [Pappé’s own account of the growth of repression and reaction at the University of Haifa is presented in his 2010 book *Out of the Frame. The Struggle for Academic Freedom in Israel* - ed.]

The timeliness of Wind’s book again shows itself insofar as we can note the continuity of intimidation of those who try to speak the truth about Israel, shown by Ilan Pappé’s detention and interrogation by U.S. federal agents this May upon flying into Detroit.

As Wind reports, “The list of untouchable subjects in Israeli universities has only expanded with rising far-right influence and political power over the past two decades. Most recently, almost any critique of the military or of Israeli soldiers has become taboo on Israeli campuses.” (118)

In 2018 much of this was codified in an academic code of ethics to which philosopher Asa Kasher (author of the IDF code of ethics) contributed. Essentially, “politics” is banned from the classroom. Here “political” means anything that might be construed as at odds with the official state Zionist narrative.

The ultra-Zionist group Im Tirtzu has large student membership on all of Israel's campuses and helps to monitor and police the academic community. Hebrew University even offers student credit for participation in the group. (129)

Barriers to Education

Palestinian students have many obstacles placed before them. Since its inception, the education of Palestinians has been a problem for the Israeli state. Wind documents how discussions occurred regularly among state and education officials over whether "properly" educating Palestinians might be a way to control them versus the danger of producing educated radicals.

In any case admission of Palestinian students has been historically limited. Telling is a proposal made by Shmuel Toledano, then the prime minister's advisor on Arab affairs, at a 1968 conference where he advocated for education of Palestinians, especially women, on the basis that it would lower the Palestinian birth rate, "the demographic issue" being the one that should be prioritized. (149)

Those Palestinian students that do make it to university are heavily policed on campuses that are fully Jewish in their identities. Student organizations are routinely banned, students suspended, and events sponsored by Palestinian students canceled and labeled "security threats."

When students at Ben Gurion University wished to hold a protest over the killing of Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu-Akleh in the West Bank, the administration initially gave permission to hold it in a closed classroom. (160) One can't help be reminded here of the recent testimony before Congress of Columbia University president Minouche Shafik, -demonstrating the "balanced" view that student demonstrators at Columbia who wanted to chant "From the river to the sea...." should do it somewhere people don't have to hear them.

Higher education in the occupied territories has faced its own sequence of restrictions and attacks. Before 1967, students in these areas traveled to universities across the Middle East, to the Soviet Union, the United States, and elsewhere. Because such travel was restricted with the military occupation, Palestinians had to form their own system of higher education.

Wind documents in case after case how, from the moment of the founding of Palestinian universities, each institution was perceived as a potential site of Palestinian resistance and hence monitored, attacked and bombed.

Today's destruction of universities in Gaza is a continuation of ongoing practice. Wind writes:

"In offensives on the Gaza Strip, the Israeli military has repeatedly targeted Palestinian university and colleges in aerial and land strikes, killing and injuring students, faculty, and staff. The strikes continually destroy campus infrastructure, which is rebuilt and then again devastated." (176)

Again, the author provides so many examples occurring over such a long period of time, that she more than justifies her statement: "With Palestinian education regarded as a threat to Israeli rule, Palestinian universities are defined as military targets." (178)

Palestinian student groups are regularly labeled terrorist organizations and student leaders arrested. Again, Wind details many instances. In December 2019, Birzeit University student council president Shatha Hassan was arrested in the middle of the night and held for five months without charges being brought.

In another case, in January 2022, a military raid on a student council meeting led to the arrest of five people and the wounding of one with live ammunition. (187) The list goes on. But as Wind emphasizes, so does the brave struggle of Palestinian students even in the face of violence, detention and torture.

The author concludes that a reckoning with the role Israeli universities have played in Palestinian oppression is “overdue.” After Israel’s brutal and genocidal attack on Gaza, one hopes that international pressure will mount to force this reckoning.

Broadening the Perspective

While Wind fully accomplishes her task of showing “How Israeli Universities deny Palestinian Freedom,” the completed text also reaches beyond itself. In her brief epilogue and in an Afterword by Robin D. G. Kelley, the analysis is extended and universalized.

Going beyond Israel, Wind reports that across three continents Anglo settler states developed institutions of higher learning through appropriation of 15 million acres of Indigenous lands:

“These settler states used the lands to either build or finance their institutions of higher education, which became known as land-grant universities, termed ‘land grab universities’ by Indigenous peoples.” (194)

In the United States today, of course, even small movements internal to the university seeking to confront this legacy would fuel current rightwing attacks on education. Kelly’s Afterword engages with these recent attacks, both more broadly and specifically with regard to the Palestinian question.

Wind writes that Israeli faculty have largely, when they are not active defenders of state policies, chosen to remain silent about these policies, Kelly makes the same claim regarding liberals in the United States. He writes, “Liberal silence, not just the Zionist lobby” explains how states have passed laws demonizing BDS and criticism of Israel as antisemitic.

Kelly emphasizes that part of the lesson we can draw from Wind’s book is that colleges and universities everywhere are crucial sites of power and struggle. States and ruling classes are fully aware of this. At the moment, students are recognizing their power and attempting to make enough noise to disrupt liberal silence. One can only hope that the current protests on campuses will continue and extend to further political engagements and radicalizations.

Michael Principe

P.S.

• *Against the Current.* :

<https://againstthecurrent.org/universities-weaponized-the-case-of-israel/>

• This review will appear in the September/October issue of *Against the Current*.

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