

Remarks at the ALLEA General Assembly

David Harel, Berlin 22.5.2024

Dear friends,

Please bear with me for a few minutes. What I have to say is related to two of the topics of the breakout session, but it is relevant to this meeting in a more general way. In addition, I am here until Friday, so anyone who wishes to sit down and talk, whether in support of what I will be saying, or against, I am available.

I would like to turn our attention to the situation in Israel and Gaza, and the war in our region.

The two basic facts are crystal-clear:

- (1) Hamas carried out the most horrifying inhumane massacre in Southern Israel on October 7.
- (2) A terrible war is being waged in the Gaza strip ever since.

Over 1200 Israelis were murdered on October 7, many suffering unthinkable atrocities in the process. As of today, 128 hostages remain in the hands of Hamas, the vast majority of which, you should know, are no longer alive. Tens of thousands of Gazans have been killed in a horrible war of revenge and retaliation launched by Israel in the aftermath of

October 7, the true magnitude and ruin of which is regrettably all but absent from our local news coverage in Israel.

But the truly devastating fact is that, for over seven months now, no clear, reasonable and achievable goals for the war have been decided upon by our government; so that no end of it is currently in sight!

No plan for withdrawing from Gaza and stopping the continuously mounting number of casualties; no workable ideas for who should take responsibility there afterwards; and no plan for the return of the dying hostages. Nothing!

One of the depressing results of this is the fact that Israel has managed to virtually eradicate the genuine and deep show of shock, empathy and friendship that the world at large exhibited towards us in the immediate aftermath of October 7, including from many of you sitting here today, several of whom I know personally. Sadly, this is fast becoming replaced by fury and rage, protests and violent riots on campuses, political isolation and many disturbing signs of painful boycotts.

The deeply troubling campus protest activities, mainly in the USA, are, of course, directly relevant to science and academia. They attract extensive, and often biased, news coverage, capturing the public's attention big time; and they are a critical part of what is triggering scientific and academic boycotts. All this results in the flames growing ever higher.

Now, what are the protesters calling for? What claims are they making, and how should Israelis respond to them?

I would like to suggest the following clear differentiation between three very different narratives, all of which can be heard on the streets and the lawns – usually very loudly too. This division is definitely over-simplified, perhaps even naively simplistic, but I think it helps make the point:

Narrative no. 1: “**Antisemitism**” – in a nutshell: the Jews must go away (to put the demand mildly).

Narrative no. 2: “**Anti-Israelism**” – the State of Israel must go away (this is put very mildly too).

Narrative no. 3: “**Anti-what-Israel-is-doing**” – Israel’s current government must go away.

As to the first two of these, I deeply believe that we must fight against Antisemitism and Anti-Israelism with all our might, something that I would hope meets with full agreement here, and indeed should garner the support of any free-minded individual.

However, as far as the *third* narrative goes – Anti-what-Israel-is-doing; that is, making our current government go away – a very large portion of Israel’s population (and, I must add, an even larger portion of Israeli *academia*) is committed to fighting for this.

I have personally been doing so, thoroughly, and along multiple avenues, for a long, long time, striving for an end to the occupation, for full equality and civil rights to all, and ultimately for an ever-lasting peace with our neighbors.

Unfortunately, despite being a computer scientist, I do not have a simple algorithm for bringing about the so-urgently-needed end to the war in

Gaza, hopefully followed by a steady improvement of the situation therein. Yet I firmly and deeply believe, with all my heart, that fighting effectively for the third of the above narratives is an absolutely crucial first step.

What has all of this got to do with our subject matter – science?

Well, in a world where politics and ideology often threaten to overshadow scientific progress, the sciences and the humanities serve as bridges over the troubled waters of disputes, disagreements, contradicting opinions and seemingly incomparable goals.

The founding of CERN in the wake of World War II was a great example of science being above political and state-based differences.

It is now the time, ladies and gentlemen, to return with new fervor to this approach, based on the premise that the pursuit of knowledge is grounded in shared universal values of academic freedom, intensive collaboration, and the freedom of thought and expression.

Academic boycotts are a direct attack on these values, impeding the ability of scientists to work together on solving global challenges, and hindering the advancement of science and culture, and the international exchange of knowledge.

Indeed, actions taken against Israeli scientists and institutions are increasing alarmingly, on a weekly basis, and have already resulted in significant disruptions. They include cancelling cooperative research projects, mutual visits and joint conferences. There is also talk about possibly barring our participation in EU research programs, such as Horizon and ERC.

Such steps will ultimately harm us all.

Thus, I would thus like to humbly, but firmly, urge you, heads of our fellow European academies – and via you also universities and research institutions in your respective countries – to unequivocally reject the use of academic boycotts as a tool to deal with geopolitical issues.

I would also like to appeal to academic institutions worldwide to stand firm against manifestations of antisemitism and anti-Israel sentiments that often masquerade as political criticism. It is essential to maintain an academic environment free of discrimination and prejudice, ensuring that all members of the academic community can contribute to scientific research and education without fear of bias or boycott.

As President of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, I plead with you to help us to continue to do what we do best – front line research in all branches of the sciences and humanities, in close collaboration with our colleagues abroad – and without threats of boycotts or calls for us to disappear hovering over our heads...

Finally, as a private citizen, I pledge – with my many friends and colleagues in Israeli academia and outside of it – to do everything in our power to bring about a long-due and crucial change in Israeli leadership, and with it an end to the horrible situation in our area, leading to lasting peace and a better future for all of humankind.

Thank you for listening, and for your support.