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## Under academic robes

Recognition of the Shalem Center as an academic institution marks another phase in the right's battle against Israel's established universities.

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The Shalem Center, which the Council for Higher Education last week recognized as an academic institution, was founded nearly 20 years ago by Yoram Hazony, a close associate of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in an effort to emulate the success of U.S. neoconservative think tanks in dominating the public discourse.

The measure comes after the upgrade last month of Ariel University Center to full university status. It marks another phase in the right's battle against Israel's established universities, which it sees as overly critical and aligned with the country's old elites. In conjunction with the upgrades of institutions associated with the right, a sharp, clear message was delivered to the higher education establishment in the form of the threatened closure of Ben-Gurion University's Department of Politics and Government.

How symbolic it is that the Hebrew part of the America-imitating institution's website is "under construction." At least we have the English version of the Shalem Center's site to rely on.

"From the moment of its birth, Israel has faced grave, even existential threats on a daily basis," reads the mission statement for Shalem College, the liberal-arts school for which the recent academic accreditation paves the way. "We at the Shalem Center believe there is another, even greater challenge ... [A] growing number of Israeli and Jewish youth do not believe in the justness or feasibility of a Jewish and democratic state. They lack a sense of national identity and cohesion, and do not see themselves as belonging to a collective enterprise."

According to the subtitle of this mission statement, "Shalem College is a historic opportunity to create visionary leaders for the Jewish state and people." This makes it clear that academics at the institution will be subordinate to higher purposes with a distinct ideological identity. Constant skepticism, a key academic principle since Medieval times, is not mentioned.

After last week's announcement Education Minister Gideon Sa'ar, who chairs the Council for Higher Education, called it "another step toward rehabilitating the humanities." In effect, the accreditation was a narrow partisan measure concealed in the robes of officialdom. It would have been better for Sa'ar and the council to find ways to increase undergraduate enrollment at Israeli universities, particularly in the humanities, than to encourage private, donor-supported institutions with a political agenda.

