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Israeli academics reject university status for settlement college

By **Or Kashti**

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Two hundred fifty Israeli faculty members sent an open letter to the Council of Higher Education Tuesday, calling on it not to recognize the Ariel college as either a "university center" or a university.

Defense Minister Ehud Barak announced last month that he would recognize a five-year-old government decision to upgrade the college formally to a "university center," as a step toward recognition as a full-fledged university.

The signatories wrote that they hope the council instructs "universities in Israel not to work with the college in Ariel as they do between themselves."

Last week, council Planning and Budget Committee chairman Manuel Trajtenberg said, "There will be no developments on the matter [of Ariel college] without the committee agreeing to it."

"It's inconceivable for another research university to arise in Israel within the next 20 years," he added.

Trajtenberg's comments were the first reference to Barak's announcement by a senior council official.

In their letter, the academics wrote that while the Council for Higher Education in Judea and Samaria (the body's West Bank branch) may grant the college whatever status it likes, "the Council in Jerusalem must declare that it is not party to such recognition. It was a mistake from the start to allow the creation of a college outside the borders of the State of Israel and to give it Council for Higher Education recognition, but insult must not be added to injury."

The authors added that the college is influenced "by a distinct ideological flavor, and the Council must ensure that the institutions under its authority do not have any ideological or political character."

Distancing itself from Barak's announcement, they wrote, "would aid us in thwarting attempts to impose an academic boycott on Israel's universities. The Council's clear opposition to recognizing the college in Ariel as a university would show that Israel's academic establishment is not participating in [Israel's]



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tightening hold on the West Bank."

Faculty members at Tel Aviv University's Department of History, including noted historian Miri Eliav-Feldon, initiated the letter. Signatories included Israel Prize recipients Simon Sandbank of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Myriam Yardeni of Haifa University, Benjamin Isaac of Tel Aviv University and other prominent academics.

At last week's council meeting, Trajtenberg said Ariel College's recognition as "Ariel University Center of Samaria" has "no significance" and was merely a "declaration."

"I have doubts as to whether there is indeed a need for the seven research universities Israel has today," Trajtenberg added. "When we examine the level of the various faculties, we have barely five universities at a suitable level."

The executive committee chairman of Ariel University Center, Yigal Cohen-Orgad, said in response to the letter, "I'm pleased that the scientific community in Israel and abroad is not waiting for instructions from the peripheral group of anti-Zionists who stand behind the letter."

"Unfortunately, there were attempts to impose an academic boycott on Israel before the Ariel University Center existed, and there will be attempts in the future."

Responding to Trajtenberg's remarks, Cohen-Orgad said, "Our every move is made out of respect for the authority of the Council for Higher Education. As for the prediction of Prof. Trajtenberg, it is premature."

The Council for Higher Education said, "We do not respond to comments made in the council's internal forums. It is clear to all that authority for naming the institution in Ariel is not in the council's hands."

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