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Israel decides to recognize West Bank college as accredited university

Israel's Attorney General rules that there are no obstacles to recognizing Ariel University Center as a full university, after debate of more than five years; Israeli and international officials have urged Israel to reconsider the upgrade of the college in the settlement of Ariel.

By Talila Neshet | Dec.24, 2012 | 6:52 PM | 14

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Israel's attorney general, Yehuda Weinstein, ruled Monday that there was no reason to prevent the Ariel University Center, an Israeli institution in the West Bank, from being recognized as an accredited university.

In the wake of that decision, Defense Minister Ehud Barak ordered GOC Central Command Nitzan Alon to approve the recommendations made by the Council for Higher Education in Judea and Samaria.

This approval was the final step necessary for accrediting the university center, making it the first Israeli institution of higher learning in the West Bank to receive such a title. Weinstein's decision on the matter comes after years of debate.

The institution, which used to be called the College of Judea and Samaria, declared itself a university in 2007, changing its name then to Ariel University Center of Samaria. Despite changing its name, it was not able to gain immediate accreditation.

Deputy Attorney General on Legislation Orit Koren released a legal opinion on Monday making clear that there were no obstacles preventing the military commander in the territories from reaching a decision to approve the upgrade of the Ariel college to a full university, "as decided and authorized by the Judea and Samaria Council for Higher Education."

The government requested Weinstein's opinion on the legality of continuing the process of approving the accreditation of the institution, which already bears the name "university center" despite having lacked legitimate approval for such a name.

The Judea and Samaria Council for Higher Education, which operates in the territories in conjunction with the Council for Higher Education in Israel proper, had already ruled that the University Center should be recognized as a university.

Judea and Samaria Regional Council regulations authorize the head of the IDF's Central Command to function as the government in the area, parallel to the authority of government, on decisions of the Israeli council for higher education.

The Judea and Samaria Higher Education Council had previously turned down a planning and budgeting committee opinion opposing the academic center's upgrade in status due to the anticipated effect the change could have on all Israeli institutions of higher learning.

"In keeping with the criteria of the attorney general, the military commander [in the territories] should consider these and other relevant aspects of processes that have taken place and the budgetary consequences, additionally giving significant weight to the position of the government of Israel, as expressed in the political decisions it has taken in 2005 and in the last year, as to the national importance in the creation of a university in Ariel and the strengthening of higher education in the area," an announcement on the decision stipulated Monday.

The Israeli cabinet approved the upgrade of Ariel to university status in September, a decision which sparked controversy among other academic institutions. One Israeli university official said that Ariel was a political college, and that the "absurd" idea to promote it stems from the fact that it has political patronage.

Britain took a stance on the matter as well, and urged Israel to reconsider its approval of Ariel college as an accredited university. U.K. Foreign Secretary William Hague severely condemned the move, hinting at the possible repercussions the resolution may have on academic ties between Britain and Israel.