



Israeli academics look abroad as they brace for long haul

With funding and productivity likely to dip as war takes priority, Israeli universities say preserving international links will be vital

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Israeli academics fear that the country’s research powerhouse may suffer if the war with Hamas stretches on, with scholars more reluctant to return to the country, funding streams under pressure and question marks over future international collaborations.



Source: Jack Guez/AFP/Getty Images

Leo Corry, president of the [Open University of Israel](#), told *Times Higher Education* that he and his fellow research university leaders have spent much of October ensuring the safety of colleagues and students, working out how Jewish and Arab communities might mix peacefully on campuses and trying to help frame how the war is perceived abroad.

Research has seemed trivial after the tragedies of recent weeks, but Professor Corry, who has an academic background in the history and philosophy of science, said several factors will decide how the sector fares in the months and years ahead.

Partly as a result of military service, most Israeli researchers take postdoc positions into their forties, with many going abroad. [A constitutional crisis](#) has led some to question whether to return, a decision made even weightier by the reality of war, he said. Losing them will stultify research, he warned.

Israel has led the wealthy Organisation for Economic Coopertation and Development in spending 5.5 per cent of gross domestic product on research and development up to 2020, but Professor Corry said those budgets could well be squeezed by the war. And while tight ties with the US and Europe have been a huge boon for Israeli science, fresh boycotts or sanctions could come.

So far the opposite has happened, with the European Research Council [extending deadlines](#) to keep Israeli researchers in the running, for example. Milette Shamir, vice-president international at [Tel Aviv University](#), told *THE* that offers to supply teaching from abroad to fill gaps from evacuations and 360,000 reservists being called up had been “very moving to us”.

She said a few universities in the UK and elsewhere had offered to increase funding for collaborative research programmes, allowing more joint projects to take place. “I don’t know if it’s a strategic decision of an institution, but it’s a kind of a reaction to what we’ve been seeing in a lot of campuses around the world, which is a backlash against Israel,” she said.

Shai Berlin, a neuroscientist at the Technion, said a lot of work has been abandoned because expired reagents cannot be imported and no one can come in to tend lab animals. He has been volunteering with communications and said some labs have offered engineering expertise and equipment for the war.

The ability of Israeli universities to recover will depend on the length of the conflict, said Sharon Ruthstein, a biochemist at [Bar-Ilan University](#). “I think that if the war will continue for one additional month, we will be able to close the gap, but for longer it will be difficult” because collaborators would move on if Israeli labs went quiet for too long.

For researchers themselves, work can provide some semblance of normality. “A lot of us are in mourning, almost every person knows someone personally that was either killed, abducted or wounded, especially at my university,” said Michael Meijler, a biochemist at [Ben-Gurion University of the Negev](#), half an hour’s drive from the Gaza Strip.

“Research is not at the top of our priorities right now, but it’s still ongoing,” said Professor Meijler. “Both because it helps to give many some sense of being useful, and also because of course there will be a day after the war, and our research is important from a long-term perspective,” he added.

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