

Introducing Israel Studies in U.S. Universities

Interview with Mitchell Bard

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- The first two centers for Israel Studies were established in 1998. Their initiators were driven by the concept that it was important to teach American students about modern Israel. Israel Studies remained largely neglected, however, until 2004. Since then it has rapidly grown.
- The anti-Israeli activism on college campuses during the Second Intifada created the incentive among the American Jewish philanthropic community to promote education and scholarship on Israel at universities. The less visible problems in academic teaching were, however, more serious and endemic. There was also an absence of information as courses about Israel were lacking.
- There are at present nine Israel Studies centers throughout the United States. By the end of 2008 about 15 chairs in Israel Studies will have been endowed. The program for visiting professors from Israel started in 2004-2005 and, in the current academic year, has 27 such scholars teaching on 26 campuses.
- The creation of senior positions for Israel Studies scholars means that people need to be trained from the bottom in order to fill these positions in the future. These scholars will generate scholarly output, curricula, and books, and will distribute these materials through the educational system. As the scholars become resources in many ways, Israel will gradually be seen in a much more informed light. This, in turn, will positively affect American-Israeli relations.

"The creation of senior positions for Israel Studies' scholars means that Israel Studies is a rather new phenomenon. The first two centers for Israel Studies were established in 1998, within a few months of each other. Their initiators were driven by the concept that it was important to teach American students about modern Israel. Israel Studies, however, became significant only in the academic year 2004-2005."

Dr. Mitchell G. Bard is executive director of the nonprofit American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise (AICE) and a foreign policy analyst who lectures frequently on American Middle East policy. He is the author of 18 books, the most recent of which is *Will Israel Survive?*

"An Association of Israel Studies was already created in 1985. It was a professional organization without any specific mission to expand beyond Israel. Several of its key members were among the most outspoken critics of Israel, including post-Zionist revisionist historians. This association is now becoming increasingly mainstream as less politicized scholars have assumed an active role in it."

The First Centers

"Kenneth Stein started one of the first two Israel Studies centers at Emory University in Atlanta and is still its director. He brings in professors and sometimes postdoctoral students. As Stein is a historian by training, most of this center's focus is on modern Israel in the historical context.

"The economist Howard Wachtel created another Israel Studies center-also in 1998-at American University in Washington, DC. He considered that the modern nation of Israel should be studied in the same way as any other country. That meant it should be seen in all of its perspectives including history, politics, economics, geography, art, and culture. Wachtel set up an interdisciplinary program with 20 professors from different departments who could contribute to the teaching of Israel-related courses. American University has been handicapped because there is no fulltime professor of Israel Studies who can drive a research agenda; however, a recently endowed chair is expected to resolve this problem.

"Outside these two centers there were few activities until 2004-2005. The Second Intifada created the incentive among the American Jewish philanthropic community to promote education and scholarship on Israel. At the time there was much anti-Israeli activism on some college campuses. Public attention was mainly focused on student activities including 'mock checkpoints' and 'apartheid walls.'

"This created the impression that campuses were aflame and the anti-Semitic fire had to be extinguished. Outsiders didn't realize that most of these activities occurred at universities that had been anti-Israeli for decades. I studied at Berkeley during the First [Lebanon](#) War and saw expressions of anti-Israelism like the ones twenty years later." [1]

Promoting Arab and Islamic Studies

"Arab leaders saw the importance of academic teaching in the United States about their countries and religion long ago. The first program in Islamic Studies in 1969 was funded by King Faisal of [Saudi Arabia](#), Kuwait, and Aramco-the Saudi Arabian oil company-at a small college, which no longer exists. Arab leaders have understood that one way to try and influence American policy and the image of Islam and Arabs was via the universities. Governments such as Saudi Arabia-as well as its king-the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait are directly funding chairs and centers around the United States. They have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in Arab and Islamic Studies.

"These investments over the past forty years have the explicit aim of influencing American opinion. University teachers present Arab views on Middle East history and their-usually sanitized-version of Islam. The Arab donors understood that they could not beat the so-called 'Israeli lobby' on the merits of arguments or in the political arena in Congress. So they had to create influences in other ways.

"These investments in Arab and Islamic Studies went over very easily. If one offers-as the Saudis did to Georgetown and Harvard-\$20 million, not many university presidents will turn this down. Arab donors know that whoever is hired to teach Arab or Islamic Studies will have a sympathetic orientation. They are not worried that, for instance, Georgetown is going to hire an Israeli authority to teach on Islam. The Georgetown investment was to establish a Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding. I frequently point out to potential donors to Georgetown that they might want to ask why it's not the Center for Muslim, Christian, and Jewish Understanding.

"Many academic Arab Studies programs are very propagandistic and the Arab world is presented through rose-colored glasses. One of the best-known scholars, John Esposito of Georgetown whose institute received large contributions from the Saudis, said before 9/11 that, 'Bin Laden is the best thing to come along, if you are an intelligence officer, if you are an authoritarian regime, or if you want to paint Islamist activism as a threat. There's a danger in making Bin Laden the poster boy of global terrorism.' [2]

Thereafter he suggested that radical Islam is not the problem people have made it out to be. This is an example of the apologetics that are quite common in Arab-sponsored teaching."

Endemic Problems in Academic Teaching

"When discussing this subject with philanthropists throughout the American Jewish community, I always stressed that the most serious and endemic problems on campus were in academic teaching. There was an absence of information as courses about Israel were lacking. A study by the Israel on Campus Coalition showed that 53 percent of the universities, including all the top one hundred, had zero courses on Israel, while another 24 percent had one course. This meant that one could not study Israel at most of America's elite universities.

"The second problem was that many things taught by academic teachers about Israel in the classroom were negative. They were often straightforwardly anti-Israeli and sometimes plainly anti-Semitic. To prove this we had only anecdotic evidence. It was difficult to explain the problem to philanthropists because it didn't get publicity.

"One way among many in which academic teachers promote anti-Israeli attitudes is that they will teach Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer's *The Israel Lobby*.^[3] They will often do so without presenting an opposite viewpoint. This is difficult anyway since it would require balancing distorted material with facts. The pro-Israeli battle thus has to be fought in the classrooms, where future leaders of America are getting their information. Some of these students will become members of Congress, others will be decision-makers elsewhere or journalists. In most universities they are learning from anti-Israeli books.

"It would be a good project for somebody to go through syllabi of a number of courses, now that they are online. This will be a major task as there are so many. It is difficult to complain about biased syllabi, because it is an area that is the preserve of an academic teacher's freedom.

"Until now we have found out about the impact of anti-Israeli professors through student complaints. For instance, one of my former interns told me that she had been taking a course on Zionism at the University of Florida. There were no Zionists in the syllabus, no Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau, or Moses Hess. There were, however, anti-Zionists like Maxime Rodinson.

"At one of our conferences it was remarked that one of the better-known professors and former members of the National Security Council, William Quandt, was teaching a course at the University of Virginia with three textbooks. One was Walt and Mearsheimer, another was from Rashid Khalidi, and the third was Jimmy Carter's."

High Schools

"High schools are, as far as anti-Israeli teaching is concerned, even worse than universities. This problem has grown since the Arab terrorist attacks of 9/11. They prompted a desire to better understand the Muslim world. The people who are producing the information about it in textbooks are largely funded by the Saudis. They are presenting a version of Islamic history that is often very selective, to put it mildly. We have tried during the last couple of years to produce texts on the history of Israel and found it surprisingly difficult to get them into public schools.

"Fifteen years ago I published a study on eighteen of the history textbooks most widely used in American high schools, *Rewriting History in Textbooks*. They were full of factual errors, oversimplification, omission, and distortion, always to the detriment of Jews and Israel. This inevitably leads to the conclusion that the authors are prejudiced.

"Among the more common errors are wrong dates and blaming Israel for wars that resulted from Arab provocation. A textbook might have a whole chapter on World War II, and mention by the way that six million Jews died. Others were suggesting that Israel was the obstacle to peace. Or they might say that war broke out in 1973 and the Israelis conquered Arab territory, failing to mention that [Syria](#) and Egypt launched a surprise attack on Yom Kippur. Some books omitted that [Iraq](#) fired Scud missiles at Israel during the 1991 Gulf War. There was only one book that did not require major revisions. A recent analysis by Gary Tobin and Dennis Ybarra confirms these findings.^[4]

"Also when any major textbook publisher comes out with a textbook, some people associated with radical Islamic groups are consultants. Several totally unacceptable textbooks have come out. One of these contains course simulations where the students are asked to dress up and behave like Muslims and pretend that they are going through certain customs and holidays. That could never be done in a public school for Christianity or Judaism. In the American Muslim community, the Saudi Wahabi perspective is being widely disseminated in the school system as they are involved in the production of course materials."

The Summer Institute for Israel Studies

"In view of the distortions in the teaching of Israel, in 2004 the American Jewish Committee together with a group of philanthropists created the Summer Institute for Israel Studies at Brandeis University. Prominent Israeli scholars gave courses on various aspects of the country to U.S. academic teachers who

came from fields such as Jewish Studies. At the end of this workshop these academics could go back to their universities and offer courses on Israel.

"To date about a hundred professors have studied in the Summer Institute. They teach courses on Israel on campuses across the country. These academics also act as resources to bring in programming and other scholars to speak about Israel. This has been an important development as even in the best of circumstances there will not be an Israel scholar on every campus. The academics who have been trained at the Summer Institute can make a difference on their campuses.

"In 2007 Brandeis University received funding of about \$30 million to create a full-fledged center for Israel Studies. It is headed by Ilan Troen from Ben-Gurion University. He understands how to structure the field and will have the best-funded Israel Studies center in the United States. This will enable him to build a major program. Each academic institution, however, will define the field to some degree on its own.

"There are now nine Israel Studies centers throughout the United States. Most, however, have so far been one-person operations. At New York University (NYU), for instance, Ronald Zweig from Tel Aviv University has been teaching Israel Studies for some years.

"The University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA) and the University of Maryland have established Israel Studies centers in the last two years, but have been unable to fill endowed chairs. Yeshiva University (YU) has also created a center but-because of its specific nature-sees the subject more as 'Land of Israel' studies. Teaching at this center also covers the biblical period. Other centers are at Columbia University, the University of Denver, University of Maryland, American University, and Emory University.

"A landmark event occurred in 2006 when American University created a 'minor' in Israel Studies. This established Israel Studies as a separate academic field, yet only as a secondary topic. There are now discussions at some universities on offering a 'major' in the field.

"By the end of 2008 about fifteen chairs in Israel Studies will have been endowed. These are expensive projects, costing depending on the university-from \$1 to \$5 million. The number of philanthropists who have such funds available is significant, yet only a few are interested in this field.

"Finding academic teachers who have the stature to fill an endowed chair will remain difficult. In the U.S. university system, such positions typically have to be occupied by senior scholars with long reputations in the academic community. They are expected to bring much prestige to the campus and to be fundraisers. As one cannot raid the Israeli university system for its best scholars, it is very difficult to find sufficient people in the United States and Israel who are qualified for these positions and willing to fill them. Some universities such as Michigan State and the University of Wisconsin have therefore decided to give these chairs to promising young scholars who will have to build up the program."

Whom Will Universities Hire?

"Another major problem with establishing chairs in Israel Studies is that one cannot dictate to an American university whom to hire. After the philanthropist makes the funds available, the university does with them as it sees fit. One cannot always trust universities to name to the position a person who will use the money in the way it was intended.

"Sometimes an academic is appointed who can best be defined as a Trojan horse. One traumatic experience occurred when the philanthropists Sanford and Helen Diller gave a \$5-million endowment for a chair to be filled by a visiting Israeli professor at Berkeley. The university put the most anti-Israeli faculty members on the search committee. They chose the most anti-Israeli academic they could find for the position.

"At Columbia University a number of Jewish trustees who love their university were upset about the negative publicity it received. They donated several million dollars to establish a chair in Israel Studies. The university's Middle East Department had a particularly bad reputation because of academic teachers who conducted anti-Israeli activities in and outside the classroom. Columbia then manned the research

committee with Rashid Khalidi and another professor who had signed a petition to divest from Israel. It wasn't surprising that the person chosen for the position was not one whom the Jewish philanthropic community would have liked to see there."

Educating Philanthropists

"Part of the process of educating philanthropists is to try and inform them about how universities work. That includes telling them about the dangers of hiring Trojan-horse academics. This will make them more careful in their negotiations with universities and in their agreements on their donations to them. Sometimes they can introduce safeguards. There is, however, a limit to how much one can achieve. One has to find better methods to structure gifts to a university that will reduce as much as possible the risk of it taking the money and misusing it.

"Unlike the Arab-sponsored programs, AICE is careful not to try to turn teaching positions into public-diplomacy efforts for Israel, even though several pro-Israeli philanthropists would be happy with that. No Israeli professor would be willing to do so. They all say that they are scholars who do research on the basis of evidence and facts, and not spokesmen for the Israeli government. This position is not only legitimate but also desirable, as it shows that our program has scholars with impeccable credentials. My approach is that one should present the facts about Israel, warts and all. One should not hide Israel's evident flaws. Once one discusses the context Israel always looks good.

"Another thing our organization does not do is to counter or silence anybody on campus, or prevent anti-Israeli academics from getting tenure. If we did this we would get into free-speech debates. One almost inevitably loses them, because your adversaries will present you as if you are trying to squelch free speech and thus make you look bad. Nor do we aim to place visiting professors at the most anti-Israeli campuses in the country. Our approach is that irrespective of what anybody else is saying on the campus, we will present an alternative view by bringing the best scholars we can find to teach about Israel.

"AICE works closely with other organizations. The Israel on Campus Coalition, for example, has sponsored speaking tours over the last two years for AICE's visiting scholars to lecture on other campuses. We have tried to encourage federations and donors in local communities to help universities match AICE's contribution for visiting scholars and to invest in longer-term positions. We have encouraged our scholars to reach out to Hillels and Hillel professionals to make use of these academics' abilities.

"AICE also started a pilot project through Hillels at George Washington and American universities to bring Birthright Israel alumni together with our scholars at those schools for informal coffeehouse meetings to try and keep the students excited about Israel, encouraging them to learn more and to return for a longer stay. We have also attempted to educate the broader community about the need for Israel Studies."

Chairs and Visiting Professors

"There are about 3,000 universities in the United States and we cannot have so many chairs in Israel Studies. Several philanthropists want to establish them at their own alma maters. One example is a chair being created at the University of Nebraska in Omaha. Some Jewish investors there made a fortune by coinvesting with Warren Buffet in his early days. This will certainly benefit students in the Midwest, but strategically speaking we would prefer that the limited resources for chairs in Israel Studies be directed to the most influential campuses where scholars can have the strongest impact.

"In the framework of developing Israel Studies, AICE has also created a program of visiting Israeli professors. At many schools where no Israel Studies chair will be endowed, one can still bring a visiting professor for a year. This can help transform a campus. It frequently occurs that students, for instance, take a course in geography or anthropology where a professor will say things like 'Israel is an apartheid state.' Students often have, besides what they see on CNN, no other access to information about Israel.

"Students feel empowered knowing that there is an Israeli resource on their campus. They can go to this scholar and ask whether what they heard in class is true. One example will illustrate this. After the Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006, the Middle East Department at the University of Arizona organized a forum on the war. The four Middle East Studies professors were supporters of [Hizballah](#). In any other year the students in the audience would have heard only that viewpoint. However, Prof. Shlomo Aronson from Israel was then a visiting professor at the university, and he provided a very effective alternative perspective.

"This visiting-professors program was launched in the academic year 2005-2006 with very limited funding. In that year we had two professors, the next year we had eight, and in 2008-2009 we have 27. This growth, plus the fact that elite universities such as Harvard, Stanford, Brown, and many others ask to have these professors, shows that they recognize that we bring top academics in their field.

"For next year we already have funding for 25 positions and I hope that this will increase further. Yet once again one cannot make this program too large without draining Israeli universities. Our main philanthropist, for example, has said that to avoid such a problem we will only support professors staying in the United States for up to two years."

Trying to Make a Significant Impact

"AICE tries to focus on the universities where one can make a sizable impact. This means the top hundred schools, particularly those with a fairly large Jewish population. However, we do make exceptions. For instance, we have a visiting professor at Notre Dame University in Indiana, an important Catholic college.

"When we started we didn't know whether this approach would work. I wondered how we could convince universities to hire Israeli professors. But once universities see the value of having an Israeli scholar, they want more of them. Now universities increasingly ask us whether we can help them bring a scholar to their campus.

"The visiting professors who return to Israel are also usually very positive about how rewarding the year was, despite the fact that we have very onerous requirements. Most professors who go on sabbatical abroad want to teach as little as possible, as they intend to do their research or, sometimes, write a book. We require them to teach four courses, which is a heavy load for a visitor, but we have to do this because there are so few courses on Israel. Yet they are willing to comply because they understand the problems of how Israel is portrayed on American campuses. These scholars want to make a contribution and usually return feeling that they have done so.

"Another major aim is to build a future pool of Israel scholars. If the number of chairs increases, there must be scholars to occupy them. Students will only enter this field and obtain a PhD in it once they know that there are positions to be filled. At present this is not possible in Middle East Studies departments because they have become dominated by the worldview of the late Edward Said.

"We also help Israelis get postdoctoral fellowships in the United States. If they come to this country and spend a year teaching, researching, and publishing, they can return to Israel with a much more marketable résumé. AICE is also trying to fund conferences and publications. In essence, we try as much as possible to help people develop the Israel Studies program."

What Are Israel Studies?

When asked where Israel Studies fit in a university curriculum, Bard answers: "There is much debate in the scholarly community on whether Israel Studies should be part of Jewish Studies as it is in some universities. Often scholars of Jewish Studies make the case that it is impossible to study Israel without studying Hebrew and Hebrew literature, Judaism and Jewish history. Yet the study of Israel also involves

the study of non-Jewish minorities in Israel as well as their art and culture. Nobody would consider putting the study of a country where most of the population is Catholic, in Catholic Studies.

"There are many places where Jewish Studies focus on Jewish history predating modern Israel, American Jewish identity, the Holocaust, and so on. On the other hand, the debate has also led to turf wars in some universities. One sees the Jewish Studies Department's scholars sabotaging Israel Studies because they want to control it, or its money.

"There are also places where the debate concerns whether Israel should be part of Middle East Studies. Here the argument is that a separate program in Israel Studies ghettoizes the country and makes it seem alien to the Middle East. The problem, though, is that the Saidian-ideology control of the Middle East Studies departments means these are dominated by people who claim one cannot understand the Arab world and other Muslim societies unless one is an Arab or a Muslim. These departments, with a few exceptions, are rabidly anti-Israeli and cannot be trusted to give a fair view. One can only hope that eventually there will be some positive change. The Saidian approach is very anti-academic. Applied elsewhere it would mean, for instance, that one cannot teach Russian Studies unless one is Russian.

"As for cross-fertilization between Middle East Studies and Israel Studies, there is some. A couple of graduate students whom we're funding have advisers who are working with people in Middle East Studies, including even Rashid Khalidi and some others. They wouldn't necessarily be my first choice of people to discuss issues with, but a certain cross-fertilization is occurring. In some places such as Brandeis, the situation is completely different. They have a good Middle East program led by Shai Feldman, with much cross-fertilization with Israel Studies.

"An important issue is how Israel is viewed in society at large. The main perception in the United States is through the prism of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The impression is given that Israel is a country that doesn't do anything but fight with Palestinians and operate checkpoints that humiliate them. Few people are aware that the country has great art, literature, music, dance, and so on. Howard Wachtel understood this already in his early center. He wanted to present Israel as a multifaceted modern country."

Measuring Success

When asked how success is measured, Bard answers: "Brandeis University has done an evaluation of the first three years of the AICE visiting-scholars program. Factors considered are, for instance, how many courses are taught and how many students are in the classes.

"From a situation where 53 percent of the universities had no courses to one where this year we brought 27 professors, each teaching four courses, the amount of courses available has increased exponentially. One can furthermore look at how many articles were published, the number of lectures given, and quotes in the media.

"Other measures are qualitative and anecdotal. One can see how students are reacting, reporting, and evaluating. Also, if one reads the reports from the universities about the visiting professors and the difference they make on the campus, one realizes the tremendous potential impact of an Israeli professor. The fact that many universities-ten in 2008-2009-ask to keep their scholars for a second year is also evidence of the program's success."

Conclusion

Bard concludes: "What we want to accomplish is very expensive. Creating a center for Israel Studies requires from \$10-30 million. Endowing chairs necessitates from \$1-5 million. A visiting professor costs about \$50,000, as the universities provide matching funds. The fact that a university is willing to do that shows that it desires to have the scholars we propose, as they are people of academic standing who deserve to be on their roster.

"We should see this project as one with a time horizon of up to twenty years. One part of our larger agenda is the hope that when we put a successful visiting professor on a campus, that university will say they want such persons all the time, or even seek an endowment. It has already worked at some universities such as UCLA, Washington University, American University, the University of Arizona, and San Francisco State, which now have or are trying to create a longer-term position.

"Senior positions are being created and people have to be trained from the bottom to fill them in the future. They will then generate scholarly output, curricula, and books. They will distribute these materials through the educational system. These people will be asked to advise policymakers and perhaps become decision-makers themselves. The media will also use them as resources.

"At that point Israel will start to be seen in an entirely different, much more informed light. It will be much more favorably perceived and this, in turn, will positively affect American-Israeli relations."

Interview by Manfred Gerstenfeld

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Notes

[1] See also Beata Shneyer, "Anti-Israelism and Pro-Israel Campus Activism, A Case Study: University of California, Berkeley," *Post-Holocaust and Anti-Semitism Web Publications*, 7, 5 June 2008, www.jcpa.org/JCPA/Templates/showpage.asp?DBID=1&LNGID=1&TMID=10000&FID=610.

[2] John L. Esposito, "The Future of Islam," *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2001): 19-33.

[3] John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israeli Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007).

[4] Gary A. Tobin and Dennis R. Ybarra, *The Trouble with Textbooks: Distorting History and Religion* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).

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