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The Politics of Israel Studies

The surging number of programs at American colleges has led to a debate over just how the subject should be taught

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Tucson

In recent years, few countries have caused as much controversy on college campuses as Israel. Since the second Palestinian uprising began, in 2000, petitions calling on universities to divest their holdings from the Jewish state and to boycott its scholars have circulated throughout the academy.

In 2002 Concordia University, in Montreal, banned all activities related to the Middle East after violent demonstrations led to the cancellation of a speech by Benjamin Netanyahu, a former prime minister of Israel. In 2004 security at commencement exercises at the University of California at Irvine was tightened in a dispute over the meaning of green stoles worn atop graduation robes by some Muslim students, who called the garments an expression of faith; Jewish students called them a sign of solidarity with Hamas, a Palestinian militant group.

The issue exploded at Columbia University last fall, after a student documentary accused professors in the Middle East studies department of intimidating pro-Israel students. Although the university found no evidence that faculty members had made anti-Semitic statements, the allegations sparked headlines in New York newspapers and prompted a member of Congress to call on the university to fire an assistant professor.

The concern that professors of Middle East studies, and not just those at Columbia, are teaching about Israel only in terms of the bitter Israeli-Palestinian conflict has prompted American Jewish philanthropists to dig deep into their wallets. In recent years they have sought to counter what they see as a pro-Palestinian propagandist view of Israel by endowing chairs, centers, and programs in Israel studies. Unlike Jewish studies, which focuses mainly on religious aspects of Jewish life, Israel studies teaches students about the country's economy, society, history, and culture, without focusing solely on the conflict.

"Imagine if in America there were only people who studied Russia in terms of the cold war, or France and Germany only in terms of their conflict with each other," says S. Ilan Troen, a professor at Brandeis University who holds the Stoll Family Chair in Israel studies. That "would be a gross distortion of what those societies are really about."

But it is the perception of the Arab-Israeli conflict on college campuses that led to the creation of Mr. Troen's chair at Brandeis, one of about a dozen universities in the United States where Israel studies is part of a center's or a faculty member's official title. Since 1997 such chairs and centers have been created at institutions including Emory University, American University, and the University of Denver. Although these professors readily acknowledge that politics has made their positions possible, they contend that they engage in objective scholarship, not pro-Israel advocacy.

While allegations have been raised that anti-Israel bias pervades Middle East studies, the emergence of Israel studies raises serious questions about whether pro-Israel donors and scholars can resist waging a tit-for-tat battle with pro-Palestinian scholars. What's more, say some professors in Middle East studies, Israel already gets more than its share of scholarly attention.

A Heated Discussion

Last month about 150 members of the Association for Israel Studies met here in Tucson for their annual conference. Although it was created in 1985 by scholars fed up with bias against Israel in the Middle East Studies Association, the group has no political litmus test for membership.

Few members have "Israel studies" in their formal titles, since such centers and chairs are relatively new. But professors in the association have been teaching aspects of Israel for years, and during a conference session titled "Teaching About Israel in the U.S.," they reveal how strongly they disagree about how to do it.

Standing before an audience of his colleagues in a hotel conference room, Ian S. Lustick says he has confirmed the perception that courses on Israel often focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Of the 34 syllabi he found on the Internet, Mr. Lustick, a professor of political science at the University of Pennsylvania, found that 23 of them focused on the conflict.

In his talk, he explains how previous scholarship on Israel dealt with the success or failure of Zionism. In current scholarship, he argues, "Israel is now seen more as a function of the conflict than as the result of the Zionist blueprint." During his talk he refrains from commenting on whether that shift is good or bad. Later, during a question-and-answer session, he says that if there were "250 million Native Americans surrounding this country, with many of them in this country, I guarantee you 80 percent of the courses taught in this country would be about the conflict." Consequently, he says, focusing on the conflict in courses about Israel is the right thing to do.

Kenneth W. Stein takes strong exception. A fellow panelist at the meeting, he begins a tirade against what he agrees is the prevailing pedagogical approach to Israel in this country. "The teaching of Israel's history has been hijacked," says Mr. Stein, a professor of contemporary Middle Eastern history, political science, and Israeli studies at Emory University. "We've been captivated by this conflict. It's what pushes our teaching."

When was the last time someone read a biography of David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, in a course about Israel? Mr. Stein asks, his voice rising. "What vocabulary do we use in instructing our students? 'Colonial,' 'racist,' 'apartheid,' 'Nazi-like.'" Mr. Stein says he never heard such words as a graduate student in Middle Eastern studies at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in the late 1960s. Today, he contends, they come up in the classroom repeatedly.

Mr. Stein says he is arguing for balance. "We'd do a better job if we teach students how to think, not what to think," he says.

After he takes his seat, hands shoot up from the audience. The room is tense. One man says he would have liked to see the whole conference devoted to this subject. Another defends his university's decision to offer courses on the conflict; the topic is popular with students, he says. Another asks if Mr. Stein is telling them to teach the history of Zionism rather than current affairs, and then accuses him of being an ideologue.

"My argument is not that we not teach politics -- controversial aspects of Arab-Israeli relations," says Mr. Stein, on the defensive for much of the panel. Teaching the history of the country from 1860 to 1948 is just as important as teaching it from 1945 to the present, he says. "We need to ... put Israel not in a separate place in teaching, but into the context of Jewish history. It's part of the Jewish experience."

Then someone in the audience interrupts him, shouting, "It's also part of the Middle East!"

Putting Up the Money

American Jewish donors who are endowing the new chairs in Israel studies probably would not have been pleased with the focus of the discussion. The strong support for teaching Israel in terms of the conflict is exactly what they're fighting against.

"There is bias in numerous Middle East-studies departments, no two ways about it," says Richard S. Ziman, a trustee of the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation. Last month the foundation pledged \$1-million to endow a chair in the new Israel-studies program at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Israel, says Mr. Ziman, is not adequately taught at most American or Western European universities. "Most of the things that are taught are current political affairs," he says. "It doesn't go deeper than that."

At New York University, the Marilyn and Henry Taub Foundation gave \$4-million three years ago to endow a chair and a center for Israel studies. Ronald W. Zweig, a former chairman of the Jewish-history department at Tel Aviv University, just finished his first academic year in the chair. He taught undergraduate courses on the history of Zionism and Israel and on Israel and American Jewry, as well as two graduate courses on the struggle for Israel's statehood. This fall he will also supervise two doctoral fellows in Israel studies.

An Israeli citizen, Mr. Zweig says that his own politics have nothing to do with his courses, and that he does not function as a classroom spokesman for the Israeli government. "I don't consider presenting the Israeli perspective as part of my job," he says.

Still, donors who are endowing these chairs have a strong interest in Israel. Mr. Taub is a past chairman of the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, and Fred S. Lafer, the Taub foundation's president, is a former member of the executive committee of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Both men have degrees from NYU, and Mr. Taub sits on the university's Board of Trustees, so it was natural for the foundation to make the donation, Mr. Lafer says. Both men are also Jewish. "Israel is a player in the world," says Mr. Lafer. "We think it has a history worth learning about."

That history, Jewish philanthropists contend, will not serve as just a counterweight to how Israel is taught in Middle East-studies programs. "We are not saying there should be people, quote, 'on the other side' who go beyond the bounds of academic standards and are merely partisans in the classroom," says Michael C. Kotzin, executive vice president of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago. It will contribute \$300,000 to a new postdoctoral-fellowship program on modern Israel at Northwestern University, which will bring visiting Israeli scholars to campus, possibly as early as next fall.

Donors view Israel studies as an academic discipline, says Mr. Kotzin. "Yes, we do have political concerns about the subject matter," he says. But "we're not using the word 'balance.' It would be an alternative to what certain people are doing. But for us the value transcends its simply being an alternative."

Special Attention?

Some professors question whether the rise of Israel studies reflects only a scholarly quest.

Proponents of the new chairs "would like ... the academic study of Israel to be commensurate with the attention, special attention, that Israel receives in the United States, particularly in U.S. foreign policy," says Ali Banuazizi, a professor of psychology at Boston College and president of the Middle East Studies Association.

Israel probably has not received sufficient attention as an independent country within his own association, he acknowledges.

Members of the Association for Israel Studies have accused the Middle East-studies group of rejecting papers that did not present Israel as a colonialist, imperialist power. Mr. Banuazizi, however, says he is not aware of any papers or panels that have been rejected for that reason. "We haven't exercised that kind of censorship," he says. "I hope we never will. Israel is a party to a conflict. Of course you'd expect Israel to be mentioned."

Israel is not, however, taught predominantly in terms of the conflict, asserts Rashid Khalidi, director of Columbia's Middle East Institute: "Anyone who says that obviously has their head in the sand," expressing "partisan views by people who are ignorant. The number of courses on Israel, not the conflict, per capita in terms of Israel's size, is enormous." That base of support, he says, is something "people in Turkish studies, in Iranian studies, would kill for. Over 100 kids are studying Hebrew here. That's certainly a lot."

Because the study of Israel in the United States has become "a study of our story versus your story," says Emory's Mr. Stein, he has reservations about the growth in the number of Israel-studies chairs, even though he holds one himself. Universities should avoid hiring polemicists and look for people who will teach the story of how Israel came into being and how Israeli society has handled immigration, he says. There are "lessons to be learned from Israel's experience that have application elsewhere that have nothing to do with the struggle."

It is true that modern Israel has not been given a due place on university campuses, Mr. Stein says, but "it's not correct to say the only reason why it hasn't is because Middle East-studies centers have decided it's not important."

In the 1960s, black studies, women's studies, and Jewish studies began to emerge. American Jewish donors who gave money to Jewish-studies programs, however, wanted them to focus on the Holocaust, not Israel, says Mr. Stein. They were themselves Holocaust survivors or had relatives who did not survive. "They wanted their names remembered," he says.

Today American Jewish donors have a different agenda, he argues: They are not endowing chairs to study what modern Israel did to change Jewish identity, he says. They are asking if Israel studies can be "used as a platform to promote Israeli identity on campus, ... to shape a different view of the conflict."

Martin S. Kramer says the answer to that question is no. Israel studies "creates a ghetto," says the author of *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*. It "essentially absolves existing departments and programs from having to include Israel studies" and "deal with Israel in a way that's pragmatic and fair."

For years Mr. Kramer, a senior associate at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University, has argued that scholars of the Middle East are biased against Israel. "I don't think you can bury these programs and chairs in a bunker deep enough to protect them from what goes on in Middle East studies," he says.

He points to the new Israel-studies chair being established at Columbia as an example. There, just looking for someone to hold the chair has revealed the political fault lines that plague the field. Four Columbia trustees, all of them Jewish, have pledged more than \$3-million for the position. Lee C. Bollinger, Columbia's president, suggested the idea two years ago, says Mark E. Kingdon, one of the contributors. The president, Mr. Kingdon says, felt that while the university offered excellent courses in Jewish studies, it did not adequately cover modern Israel.

While the decision to create the chair came well before the controversy over Middle East studies at

Columbia, the appointment of the search committee has created a minor controversy of its own. The six-member committee includes two scholars known for their pro-Palestinian views: Mr. Khalidi and Lila Abu-Lughod, a professor of anthropology, who signed the petition seeking Columbia's divestiture from Israel.

Mr. Kramer and others contend that with anti-Israel academics on the committee, the search will not be fair.

The panel's chairman says that's absurd. "Both Professor Khalidi and Professor Lughod will act totally professionally, whatever their political statements outside the classroom," says Michael Stanislawski, a professor of Jewish history. "Like the other members of the committee, they have political opinions. We're not going to base our academic decisions on anyone's political opinions."

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