

Opinion

Israel and Censorship at Harvard

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Since Vietnam, Israel has become the heartbeat of U.S. foreign policy and a litmus test of what can be debated—and even of who will be allowed to speak—on university campuses. This year, the Congress of the University and College Union—the British lecturers' union—proposed a boycott of Israeli universities and academics for what it regards as their complicity in 40 years of Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. This boycott has its counterpart in a decades-old U.S. practice of threatening, defaming, or censoring scholars who dare to criticize Israel.

Two years ago at Harvard, a social scientist who was the most widely cited in his area of study but who had, in a popular book, criticized the U.S.-Israel alliance, became the subject of insinuations that he was anti-Semitic—insinuations that were likely fatal to his candidacy. In recent years, at least three professors—Oxford's Tom Paulin, DePaul's Norman Finkelstein, and Rutgers' Robert Trivers—have been invited to speak at Harvard and then disinvited after complaints that they had spoken critically of Israel or disagreed sharply with Harvard Law School Professor Alan M. Dershowitz regarding Israel's military conduct.

In a 2006 faculty meeting, Peretz Professor of Yiddish Literature Ruth R. Wisse vocalized the underlying rationale of such censorship as few other professors have dared. Denying that anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism are separate phenomena, she declared anti-Zionism—that is, the rejection of the racially-based claim that Jewish people have a collective right to Palestine—the worst kind of anti-Semitism. For such defenders of Israel, any acknowledgment that Zionism in principle and in practice violates Palestinian rights is tantamount to an endorsement of the Holocaust.

But is it anti-Semitic to ask why the Palestinians should pay the price for the ghastly crime of the Germans? Why were the property rights of the German perpetrators sacrosanct and those of the guiltless Palestinians adjudged an acceptable casualty? In U.S. foreign policy, not all racial groups are guaranteed the same rights and protections. Otherwise, why does the U.S. rightly defend Jewish people's claims on European bank accounts, property, and compensation for labor expropriated during the 1930s and 1940s, while quashing the rights of millions of Palestinians refugees to lands, houses, and goods stolen as a condition of Israel's founding in the late 1940s? As a nation we seem unconscious of the hypocrisy. The convention that persecuted Europeans had the right to safe havens on lands stolen from non-Europeans was, by the mid-20th century, as outmoded as the Confederacy's defense of slavery in the mid-19th.

However, what follows is the most important question for the health of the academic and moral community that we share here at Harvard: How can one engage in a critical and nonetheless loving conversation about Zionism with a community as gravely traumatized as the Jewish people? The question has become particularly difficult to answer since Harvard's previous president publicly declared that petitions against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza were a form of anti-Semitism, comparable to vandalizing Jewish gravestones.

My aim here is not to preach but to insist upon my right, and others', to a conversation full of respect and free of intimidation, one that presumes no monopolies on suffering, one in which all racism and anti-Semitism—whether against Semitic Jews, Semitic Christians, Semitic Druzes or Semitic Muslims—is equally impermissible. I am troubled that Dershowitz escaped former University President Lawrence H. Summers' criticism when he endorsed Israel's torture of Palestinian prisoners. And Wisse's ghastly 1988 description of Palestinian refugees as "people who breed and bleed and advertise their misery" elicited no demand for retraction.

In my country, people tremble in the fear of losing their friends, jobs, advertising revenues, campaign contributions, and alumni donations if they question Zionism or Israeli policy—despite the billions of our tax dollars paid annually for Israel's defense and sustenance. Even the Israeli military hosts freer debates about this issue than any U.S. university does. One result: Israel has now withdrawn from Gaza, an action that

Summers slammed Harvard and MIT professors as anti-Semitic for even contemplating.

My position is difficult not just because I have colleagues and friends who disagree but because I have no Palestinian friends. For every five Jewish people I have loved, I hardly know one Arab. Indeed, I am troubled by the insouciance of the Arab and Muslim world in the face of unjust suffering by people who look like me. A region so publicly committed to its anti-racist religious tradition remains mute over the atrocities of the Arab and Islamic government of Sudan against Africans in Darfur and the south. Osama bin Laden and his cheerleaders treat as insignificant the deaths of hundreds of non-partisan Africans in the bombings of the U.S. embassies at Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.

Thus, my concerns about Zionism are motivated by neither pro-Arab nor anti-Jewish bias, but by the fear that those who dismiss all anti-Zionism as anti-Semitism—or, equally often, as Jewish self-hatred—risk creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. If Israel's defenders convince the world that all legitimately Jewish people are Zionists and that Jewish people are uniform in their opinions about Israel and its policies, then the convinced will conclude that condemning Israel or its policies requires them to hate Jewish people.

Moreover, by intimidating those who are reasonable enough to separate their criticism of Israel from the criticism of Jewish people as a whole—as we must—discourses like Summers' risk leaving the conversation to the people least able to engage tête-à-tête rather than gun-to-gun, bomb-to-bomb, and plane-to-tower. For that reason, I fear that the pronouncements of Summers—and our many colleagues who would stifle debate about Israel—are themselves “anti-Semitic in their effect, if not their intent.”

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