

Policing thought on Palestine

After the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 academic freedom in the United States is facing its most serious threats since the McCarthy era. A new publication argues that freedom to pursue critical thinking about the Middle East, most particularly Palestine, is under sustained attack.

The storm of controversy sweeping American campuses is not a result of internal activism or clashes. The escalating tensions are a product of professionally organised external interventions by well-funded special interest groups intimately tied to the coalition of forces in the Bush Administration – militaristic nationalists, Israeli lobbyists, the evangelical Protestant Zionist electoral base of the Republican Party and the military industries that promote the US-Israeli alliance as a business asset. They attempt to depict ‘Islamic terrorism’ as the primary evil and source of fear and propose phrases like ‘war on terrorism’, ‘clash of civilisations’ and ‘axis of evil’ as serious explanations for what is happening in the contemporary Middle East.

Universities and colleges have been a particular target of policing what may be thought and said about the Middle East because they are among the few institutions where intelligent political discourse remains possible in the United States. The Middle East Studies Association of North

America has been subjected to a barrage of intemperate attacks by neo-conservative pundits determined to shield Israel from criticism and to prevent faculty, staff and students from suggesting that universities should disinvest from companies supporting the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Students and faculty connected academically or culturally to Muslim and/or Middle Eastern countries are being identified as suspect both in their loyalties to the United States and in their ethical commitments to the pursuit of knowledge. Racist profiling and scapegoating are common in websites that compile lists of ‘un-American’ professors critical of US foreign policy in the Middle East. Charges of anti-Semitism are routinely levelled against critics of Israel. Jewish scholars critical of Israeli policies towards Palestinians are ludicrously described as ‘self-hating Jews’. These notions are being propagated by circles close to the government of the most powerful country in human history in concert with unprecedented assertions

of a right to make and unmake regimes throughout the world, especially in the Middle East.

Powerful lobbies seek to de-fund Middle East centres and establish think-tanks that will provide for the press and government a ready stable of ‘experts’ who can shape knowledge about the Middle East. Most of those who have attacked Middle East scholars spend their days in think-tanks where they are paid to hobnob with foreign policy makers and mass-media opinion makers. They write op-eds and policy think pieces and for the most part do not engage in the primary recognised activities of scholars: teaching and research.

The determination of many Jewish organisations to delimit the boundaries of permissible discussion of the Middle East at colleges and universities is motivated in large part by a desire to keep young American Jews in the ‘pro-Israel’ camp as they define it. They seek to convince legislators that there is a wave of anti-Semitism on American campuses. Paradoxically, by failing to make a clear distinction between anti-Semitism, which should always and everywhere be opposed, and anti-Zionism, which is a legitimate political opinion, organisations such as the B’nai B’rith Anti-Defamation League have exposed American Jews to attack because they were identified with Israel.

The virulently anti-intellectual nature of the 9/11 attacks is mirrored in the war launched in response. Campaigns of surveillance, intimidation and control, if unchecked, will not remain confined primarily to scholars who study the Middle East.

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Roger Waters,
founding
member of
Pink Floyd,
graffitis
the Wall.



War on Want