

THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT: HOW TO TEACH ALL SIDES WITHOUT TAKING SIDES

The feelings stirred up the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis are so volatile that it is difficult to examine it without taking sides even within the halls of the academy. But in the classroom, the terrible toll exacted by this hundred years' war should command intellectual analysis not political advocacy. Politicians posture and champion causes, teachers develop perspectives, generate critical and thoughtful scrutiny, open up conversation, and produce some understanding of the reasons for the persistence of this conflict. Properly practiced, the academic study of this conflict rights no wrongs, provides no political or social therapy and configures no moral compass for what to do outside of the classroom. The classroom is no battleground and the lectern no soapbox. The responsibility of an engaged intellectual is to bring clarity and substance to the issues probed. For that reason, I routinely begin my course on this topic by asking students about the appropriateness of its title: The Arab-Israeli Conflict. I do so to invite criticism, to suggest that my perspective is not sovereign and to say, plainly, that the arguments I may put before them need not be taken for granted.

In designing my syllabus, my task as instructor is to help students develop their analytical and critical abilities as well as to make available to them the body of knowledge necessary for making their own informed judgments long after the final examination has been graded. Over the years, I have experimented with various approaches to achieve these aims—my syllabus never remains the same from year to year, and the changes I introduce invariably generate the need for even further change.

The initial readings, including excerpts from books or articles by Edward Said, Fawaz Turki, Hillel Halkin, Amos Oz, and Aaron Soloveitchik¹, encourage students to confront the fact that this conflict is not only about a piece of real estate: it is also about different and competing conceptions of national identity. And on that topic, Zionists and Palestinians disagree as much within their own communities as across the national divide.

The Said piece enables students to see what might be called the invisible paradigms of the argument in favor of Palestinian national rights. In his book, Said devotes more time to denouncing Zionism than to depicting the nature and characteristics of Palestinian national identity. As Hillel Halkin remarks in his reply, while Said is enraged by what he perceives is the neglect and lack of serious attention directed at the humiliations that continue to be visited upon Palestinians, he offers no comparable respect for or recognition of the national right to self-determination asserted by the Jewish people. To speak of Zionism as an appendage of Western imperialism is simply lacking an elementary historic perspective. Zionism is, he claims, no more than an instrument for dispossessing a people and for downgrading a nation into a problem. He heaps scorn on the support for Israel proffered by liberal humanists across the globe.

Moreover, and perhaps, more significantly, Said's polemic makes clear to my students the historical constraints defining the international consensus on political and moral rights. More than thirty years ago, when Said's text first appeared, the

¹ Edward W. Said, *The Question of Palestine*, New York: Times Books, 1979, pp. 3-37; 56-82; Fawaz Turki, "The Future of a Past: Fragments From The Palestinian Dream," *The Journal of Palestine Studies*, Spring, 1977, pp. 66-76; Hillel Halkin, "Whose Palestine," *Commentary*, May, 1980, pp. 21-30; Amos Oz, "The Meaning of Homeland," *Zionism The Sequel*, New York: Hadassah Books, 1998, pp. 248-254; Aaron Soloveichik, "The State of Israel: A Torah Perspective," *Tradition*, [Winter, 1990]: 1-11.

international consensus evinced sympathy for Israel's struggle for peace and stability. Now the infrastructure of international politics has experienced a whiplash-induced shift in the direction of the Palestinian cause as part of the language and institutional commerce of human rights. This paradigm shift claims to be moral [and by definition, universal] rather than political, but it is organized around power and interests and constitutes a significant achievement for Palestinians who labored long and hard with Arab financial support to assimilate their national claims into the discourse on human rights. These lofty ideals of human rights that bring together people across national, ethnic, class, and gender borders do so in response and in service to particular economic and political forces and interests. This is not to deny that many people all around the world put their lives on the line for ideals. This is to assert, as my students come to recognize, that they do so within a system of values and priorities, reflective of interests--sometimes consciously embraced, often unconsciously accepted--that structure their actions, expectations and choices.

Several years ago I decided I could best reach students by framing the course around the options available at critical moments during the long course of the conflict. Israelis and Palestinians pay a very high price for their nationalist commitments and ambitions, and the reasons for accepting that burden when its implications are so fully clear must be put front and center of any course on the Middle East conflict. But no less important is an examination of the effectiveness of strategies and tactics and of the reasons why Zionists were far more successful than Palestinians in reaching their political goals. Consider the damages resulting from the Palestinian decision to stake their political future for so many decades on absolute opposition to the establishment of a

Jewish state in any part of Palestine. The class and I talk about the consequences flowing from this principled stance and the very high price paid by Palestinians in lives lost, villages erased, and land forever gone. Or analyze, as I gently prod my students to do, the periodic effects of unleashing outbursts of murderous force that pull such large numbers of Palestinians into its cataclysmic center of gravity. Palestinian [and for that matter, Arab] political leaders have embarked on military campaigns that left their costly expressions in the wreckage of both societies and polities as well as of individual lives. Why, I ask my students, were such leaders as unwilling or unable to prepare adequately for war in 1947 as in 1967 entrapping their people in the kind of chaos they could not long endure. Examining the decisions of the past builds stronger analytic authority for evaluating the choices made in the present. It comes as no surprise to my class that even after years of unremitting strife presumably altered the official Palestinian standpoint and committed its leadership to engaging in diplomatic negotiations with Israel--compensating, perhaps, for the suffering brought on by the first Intifada--violence still seemed a compelling means of propelling their cause forward. Thus the political benefits conferred by the Oslo Process produced the outrages of another Intifada as Palestinian leaders seemed incapable of subordinating the promises of a redemptive politics with its magical goals of wiping away all injustice to the practical compromises necessary to get a state.

Applying this calculus to Israel, the question for my class becomes whether this country, too, has been rightly led to pursue strategies offering the best chance of escaping the untold expense of continued bloodshed or whether failures of imagination have

forfeited opportunities for peace and degraded the capacity to recognize the dangers of re-mapping the state's borders even after wars not of its own making. So, I ask my students to calculate the costs and benefits of founding settlements in the areas conquered from Jordan in June, 1967, part of the historic land of Israel and its landscape of sacred sites. It may have bestowed both a renewed spirit and religious energy on Zionism--arguably an asset--but did it not also impose on Israel major responsibility for the Palestinian problem, an accounting that may have complicated the nation's foreign relations, raised the costs of its common defense, and produced a prolonged policy paralysis with its own downward political dynamic.

My course on the Arab-Israeli Conflict is one of many intermediate level classes in Smith's Government Department. It fulfills a disciplinary requirement for majors, but it also attracts students pursuing a wide array of studies across the College. Typically, there are as many Arab as Jewish students in my class, although most enroll just to learn something about what appears an endless conflict between sworn enemies that continually dominates the headlines. To equip students with the skills required to understand the ferment of the confrontation, I structure a debate on some topic that is a current focus of controversy—one year, the security fence or wall; in another, the return to negotiations. I ask students to take on positions normally at odds with their own personal preferences or loyalties. I have had students from Saudi Arabia and other parts of the Arab world—some who wear the hijab—represent Israeli Likud politicians, and there are Jewish students who assume the mantle of Hamas or of the al-Aqsa Brigades. Interestingly, my Arab students typically remark that they are happy their fathers are not around to see them perform. Even before the Middle East Conflict sought the shelter of

academic freedom across the American campus, I assumed the free speech in the classroom was intended to provide the opportunity to examine this complex emotional political issue in all its dimensions but primarily as a lively intellectual inquiry.

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