

TEACHING STUDENTS HOW NOT WHAT TO THINK ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT

When Israel proclaimed its independence in 1948, it lodged itself in our imagination as a progressive cause celebrated across the globe. But despite the development of a vibrant democracy and robust economy, its titanic struggle for survival has damaged its special status as an enduring symbol of liberation. The story of a people returning to its ancient land to build a new kind of social order and community has been replaced by a tale of Israel as the singular source of much of the world's evils. Once a trope for national redemption, Israel is now viewed as the cause of Palestinian dispossession and dispersion and of even spreading a political agony across the Middle East.

My own teaching could not remain unaffected by the profound changes sweeping the campus nor could I ignore that a new language and set of assumptions about the Middle East Conflict--profoundly disruptive of my most cherished beliefs about the scholarly enterprise--now carries significant authority . Seeing the course I offer through the lens of my students, however, spurred me to focus less on why the Conflict occurred than on how it unfolded. These two different ways of understanding the Conflict lead in different directions. The question of 'how' encourages an examination of interactions and decisions that produces outcomes at certain junctures probing the many ways the available options were defined and accounting for why some were chosen and others rejected. By contrast, the search for the 'why' of this Conflict may have the appeal of identifying a single cause, but also inevitably produces the distorting effect of

succumbing to what are defined as long-term trends--not visible at all times--and to rendering judgment and apportioning blame.

But let me take my perspective out of the realm of the abstract and put it into the classroom. I begin the course 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, I see my task as instructor as helping 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. The initial readings, including excerpts from books or articles by Edward Said, Fawaz Turki, Hillel Halkin, Amos Oz, and Aaron Soloveitchik¹, encouraging 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 Edward Said piece introduces students to the notion of Zionism as an appendage of Western imperialism. 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. 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,

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.

while Edward Said is enraged by what he perceives as 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.

Moreover, and perhaps, more significantly, Said's polemic makes clear how much the paradigm on political and moral rights has changed. More than thirty-five years ago, when Said's text first appeared, the 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.

Israelis and Palestinians pay a very high price for their nationalist commitments and ambitions, and the reasons for accepting those burdens 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 lands 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, violence still seems 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 waging wars not entirely 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.

The class has had a number of memorable moments many coming during the debates I structure on some topic that is a current focus of controversy—one year, the security fence or wall; in another, the return to negotiations; a third, on Jerusalem. 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 that 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.

Many of the students have very personal and emotional connections to the issues, particularly to those concerning Jerusalem. To spark discussion and awareness, I encourage students to think about how they might respond if they were born in another country, raised in another religion, and found themselves to be bearers of another history. Moreover, I urge them to think about Jerusalem as a city whose most notable resident is God and precisely for that reason, a site of endless conflict and perpetual war. Jerusalem may be the house of the one God, but it is the temple of three religions and claimed as the capital of two peoples. It is also said, of course, that it is the only city to exist twice — in heaven and on earth--and that means it exists in fact and in the imagination. The

Abrahamic religions were born there, and it doesn't take much imagination to believe in the prophecy that the world will supposedly end there as well.

The feelings stirred up by the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis are so deeply held that examining it without taking sides is difficult. But the terrible toll exacted by this hundred years' war should command intellectual analysis, not political advocacy, or the academy, itself, will become one of its casualties.

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