

Attack on America's Middle East Studies

Curbing Academic freedom on US campuses

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Professor Joel Beinin and Professor Lisa Hajjar spoke about the attack on Middle East Studies and academic freedom on America's university campuses post Sept. 11.

Beinin is a professor of Middle East history at Stanford University. He has lived in both Egypt and Israel, visits the Middle East frequently and he is interviewed by the media regularly. Beinin is the author or editor of seven books and his writing focuses on workers, peasants and minorities in the Middle East. He is a recent contributor to the book, "Academic Freedom after September 11," edited by Beshara Doumani.

Hajjar is a sociologist and an associate professor in the Law and Society Program at the University of California - Santa Barbara. She is the author of the book, "Courting Conflict: The Israeli Military Court System in the West Bank and Gaza."

Since Sept. 11 private advocacy groups that promote U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and the war on terror have targeted professional academics who disagree with right-wing agendas. Although the assault on academic professionals who disagree with U.S. foreign policy is not new, the right-wing, thought police have been churning the political rhetoric against professors who express "patriotic incorrectness."

"The neoconservatives have a knee-jerk understanding of Israel and the Middle East," Beinin said. "They can't win in a fair intellectual fight, their ideas are passé."

Beinin explained that right-wing advocacy groups, such as Campus Watch and The David Project compile offensive dossiers on people that contain selective quotes from professors taken out of context.

On their web site Campus Watch states their campaign "...supports the unencumbered freedom of speech of all scholars regardless of their views..." but that "academic freedom does not mean freedom from criticism, to the contrary no one enjoys privileges in the free marketplace ideas." The campaign established "The Columbia Project," which will provide detailed studies of what they believe are "...problems with Columbia University's Middle East Studies faculty." In the coming months they will be publishing these studies.

Their web site has a list of recommended professors and their areas of expertise. When they link to media sources about professors with whom they are in disagreement, the information is article length. Based on the description they provide about the Columbia Project, it sounds like this information will be article length also. Why is there a disparity between the quantity and source of information for the campaign's recommended professors and the professors

they oppose?

In their mission statement Campus Watch states their organization "...reviews and critiques Middle East studies in North America, with an aim to improving them." If the organization's purpose is to monitor what they believe is balanced and imbalanced education of the Middle East, then it would be more constructive for its members to expend time, energy and resources into writing more about the organization's recommended professors. Perhaps the media focuses their attention on professors whose courses are more challenging.

When some of these groups are on the offensive, they compile reports on professors. On November 11, 2001 the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (Founded by Lynne Cheney and Senator Joseph Lieberman in 1995) published the report, "Defending Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America and What Can Be Done About It." The report contains selective quotes from 117 university and college faculty staff who expressed some degree or reluctance about the invasion in Afghanistan. Basically, the ACTA listed academic professionals who disagreed with their political agenda. One of the professors listed in the report was Beinlin. "They are way off the mark on reasonable political discussion," he added.

The ACTA explains that their report "...calls on colleges and university trustees to make sure their institutions offer strong core curricula that pass on to the next generation the legacy of freedom and democracy."

Even funding for representatives of Palestinian non-governmental organizations to attend the UN World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa from Aug. 31 through Sept. 7, 2001 was put under scrutiny. One of the themes of the conference was racism against indigenous peoples.

Media outlets and their associates in Congress questioned funding Palestinian participation in the conference. In the weeks leading up to the conference there was debate about the conference' address of Zionism and slavery reparations. In the end the U.S. did not send at that time U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell. There was extensive debate about the language in the final conference declaration regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and criticism of Israel.

At forums people express their beliefs freely because they engage in critical discussion, debate and inquiry. When the U.S. did not send the secretary of state to the conference, it sent a strong message about U.S. dialogue and diplomacy with the international community.

After Sept. 11 "Even funding an Israeli human rights activity has become suspect activity," Beinlin added. He was talking about the organization Rabbis for Human Rights, which has a record of speaking out against Israel's human rights violations of the Palestinians.

Some members of these academia watchdog groups resort to derogatory remarks about academics, the misrepresentation of their course curricula and scholarly works. For example, one web site linked to an article that claims one professor's book is a "disgrace," and the reality that other people were passed up for her job was considered "deplorable."

Are these scathing statements constructive criticism?

Hajjar, whose argumentation style packs a rhetorical punch, explained that during the post 9/11 period the concerted efforts of these advocacy groups has elevated into take-back-the-campus campaigns. These government and campus operations contribute to American's fear and anxiety, which gives these campaigns an aura of legitimacy. The groups claim there is a lack of balanced teaching because the majority of academics vote democratic.

As a result of the professors' voting records, these groups surmise bias and disloyalty exists on America's college campuses that will dissuade naïve students. "They're asserting the notion that universities are incapable of regulating themselves," Hajjar added. At the basic level the attack is on the liberal value of critical inquiry, she said, especially when people engage in critical thinking and discussion about Middle East politics and the role of U.S. foreign policy.

"The major question that is imperative to address is how universities and intellectuals should relate to national crisis, to war," Hajjar said. "The right-wing position is that universities and academics should service the State agendas," and for some reason these groups think academia should not provide the space and place for legitimate criticism of U.S. policy.

The principles of academic freedom were established by the American Association of University Professors, founded in 1915 by Arthur O. Lovejoy and John Dewey, and by the Association of American Colleges (now called the Association of American Colleges and Universities). Hajjar reviewed the history of academic freedom, including the basic principles outlined in the AAUP's 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure.

The Principles of Academic Freedom

In brief, the principles of academic freedom are: academics have freedom of inquiry and research; academics have freedom in the classroom; and academics have freedom of extramural rights and actions. The third standard makes note: "When they speak or write as citizens, they should be free from institutional censorship or discipline, but their special position in the community imposes special obligations. As scholars and educational officers, they should remember that the public may judge their profession and their institution by their utterances. Hence they should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution."

Whether in public, in publication or in the classroom, scholars have the right to speak freely, without the concern that advocacy groups, especially those affiliated with political parties will do everything in their power to question the legitimacy of scholars' expressed beliefs and the material they use for course instruction. Professional, academic standards are already in place - academics understand universities' expectations.

For decades these principles have been in effect. The rules are clear. Why, all of the sudden, do campaign groups think they have the right to jeopardize tenure opportunities for academics who disagree with their political beliefs by pressuring the academic institutions where they work? The potential threat to cut funding to institutions of higher education because faculty members of a university disagree with a group's political agenda is coercion.

Is it okay for people to campaign people out of jobs? Is this the beginning of academic

oppression? Is this the end of educational opportunities for the youth of America?

Is this the end of democracy?

Members of Congress and Universities' Professional Standards

The implementation of such policies has already reached Congress. On February 2, 2005, members of the House of Representatives introduced H.R. 509 (formerly H.R. 3077). The bill wants to amend and extend title VI of the Higher Education Act of 1965. Sponsors of the bill want to institute that the Secretary of Education install an International Advisory Board to supervise the 120 international studies programs in the U.S.

If the bill passed one interpretation of its implementation is that it would allow anyone to register a complaint to a university's administration. Once filed it would have to be resolved by the university within 60 days. Otherwise, the government could freeze funds to the university. However, when I contacted a House Representative's office I could not confirm this interpretation.

Section 633 details the functions of the board. There would be seven members, and two of them "...shall be appointed to represent Federal agencies that have national security responsibilities..." and the board would have specific duties. Here are some excerpts:

"(A) review and comment upon the regulations for grants under this title;

(B) monitor, apprise, and evaluate a sample of activities supported under this title based on the purposes and objectives of this title in order to provide recommendations for improvement of the programs under this title;

(C) make recommendations that will assist the Secretary and the Congress to improve the programs under this title to better reflect the national needs related to the homeland security..."

(D) make recommendations to the Secretary and the Congress regarding such studies, surveys, and analyses of international education that will provide feedback about the programs under this title and assure that their relative authorized activities reflect diverse perspectives and the full range of views on world regions, foreign languages, and international affairs;

(E) make recommendations that will strengthen the partnerships between local educational agencies, public and private elementary and secondary education schools, and grant recipients under this title..."

(F) make recommendations on how institutions of higher education that receive a grant under this title can encourage students to serve the nation and meet national needs in an international affairs, international business, foreign language, or national security capacity."

There is more elaboration of subsection F in section 634: Recruiter Access to Students and Student Recruiting Information. Here is an excerpt: "Each institution of higher education that receives a grant under this title shall assure that - (1) recruiters of the United States Government and agencies thereof are given the same access to students as is provided generally to other institutions of higher education and prospective employers of those students for the purpose of recruiting for graduate opportunities or prospective

employment.”

Basically, if the bill passed academic institutions would have to enable military recruitment and encourage students to respond favorably. The advisory board would provide surveillance and external judgment to ensure recruiting conditions on America’s college campuses are conducive to the bill. On June 16, 2005, the bill was amended by voice vote, so it resides with one of the House’s full committees called the Education and Workforce Committee. It has not gone to the House floor for a full vote.

“The alliance between these kinds of national Jewish (American-Likud) organizations, right-wing Protestant Evangelicals to promote diversity legislation H.R. 3077 (now H.R. 509) is the idea that professors would be forced to present a certain amount of pro-Israel material in the classroom,” Beinin said. “It is quite significant and it is a problem.”

However, a college student stood up from the audience and said the textbooks for his current semester of classes are pro-Israel because he does not hear his history: Palestinian history. When he asks his teacher questions after class, the teacher speaks more freely. When the teacher is in front of the entire class he presents material from the book. So do America’s college professors feel the pressure to demonstrate patriotic correctness already?

Perhaps the answer to this disagreement is found in what Beinin said. When it comes to academic freedom, “Let a hundred flowers bloom. Let people debate and let the best person prevail. This is not an academic tempest teapot.”

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