Walking Between Rain Drops: Teaching the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict*

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Once a year I teach a course entitled "The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict." Recently I had as a guest speaker General Shlomo Gazit, the former head of Israeli Military Intelligence and former military Governor of the Occupied West Bank. That evening I also had as "guests" a half dozen burly policemen, a very nervous university security head, the university public relations director, a hundred interested faculty and students, and ten or so very determined Palestinian protestors. In the parking lot outside were at least three unmarked police cars and in the police station nearby were backup units ready to come if needed. The protestors lined up along the back wall of the room with their signs containing slogans about the Intifada, the murder of civilians, genocide, and Zionism as racism. It was an exciting evening.

Another semester, I had as a visiting student (someone from the community registered for a single class) a 50-year-old Jewish doctor. Within three weeks he had gone to the dean and the academic vice chancellor complaining that the class was biased against Israel, that the readings were propagandistic, and that I should not be teaching the course. A subsequent hearing involving the doctor, the dean, a neutral colleague, and me went on for an hour and a half with no substantive issues raised beyond innuendo.

A third incident is also worth noting. In 1984 in the wake of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the Sabra and Shatilla massacres, and the deaths of 241 Marines, I was harshly critical of the Lebanese Phalangist party and commented in class that the recently assassinated Bashir Gemayel was a "gangster." The look of distress on the face of one of my Lebanese students was obvious. Afterward, she went into my office and burst into tears. She had been Gemayel's secretary. While acknowledging that he was ruthless in dealing with opponents, she was nevertheless profoundly distressed by my characterization of him. About the Phalange, she simply said, "People are dying for these beliefs. You must try to understand them."

This is not an easy class. It is not easy for professors and it is not easy for students. The course is made doubly difficult by the existence of ideological vigilante groups that set themselves up to monitor those who teach non-Western subjects. Best known in this genre is Accuracy in Academia, formed in the early 1980s to single out and attack by name professors to the left of its own very conservative agenda. Equally disruptive are various ethnic or religio-nationalist groups whose more militant members challenge or attack faculty whose views they oppose.[1]

Fortunately, various professional associations have asserted the right to teach without interference. The American Political Science Association has spoken up on behalf of members "whose research and teaching address political subjects which are inherently controversial," defending "vigorous debate within the classroom" and affirming the right to pursue research and teaching "no matter whose views and interests our findings may offend."[2] Its 1986 convention had a panel discussing how anticivil libertarian groups try to stifle views they dislike.

The APSA also endorsed two resolutions by other organizations, a Joint Statement by the heads of 10 academic and professional associations and an ACLU Statement on Academic Freedom and Civil Liberties Principles. The Joint Statement condemns "the presence in the classroom of monitors for an outside organization," as such a presence generates "a chilling effect on the academic freedom of both students and faculty members." The ACLU insists that "the essence of university teaching is to expose students to the knowledge and ideas that professors deem will further students' education" and states that "professors have no duty to present views which give equal credence or weight to opposing viewpoints." It also affirms that "criticism must be intellectually related to the classwork, not conform to any given ideological standard established by an outside pressure group."

The focus of this essay, however, is not on ways to handle attacks on academic freedom but on ways to teach to facilitate learning. This is a class in which students often arrive with predispositions or preconceptions acquired from their cultural, ethnic, or political backgrounds. Some Christians may see the conflict in biblical paradigms that are essentially ahistorical and ascientific. Jews and Arabs may be predisposed to certain positions and may believe that outsiders are unfairly critical or are insensitive to their problems or viewpoints. Americans in general have long-standing pro-Israel, anti-Arab preferences, exceptional concerns about terrorism, simplistic or romantic views of the Middle East, and a U.S.-centric view of the world that inhibits understanding Middle Eastern politics. There is

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also no denying the existence of antisemitic, anti-Islamic, and anti-Christian views that sometimes affect judgments. Together these produce a tendency to advocacy rather than analysis, a tendency that hampers learning.

In the past decade I have developed certain techniques and approaches that partially neutralize these problems and seem to facilitate learning. Each instructor of course has to develop techniques appropriate to the local student mix, to one's personal style, and to one's paradigm. What follows are my own ideas.

Pedagogical Techniques

More than many other classes, this one requires that professors think through in advance their strategy of education and their pedagogical goals and techniques. They must have clear in their minds what it is they are trying to teach, why some themes are emphasized and others are deemphasized, and how they plan to address the predispositions of students. They must also keep in mind that real education takes place outside the classroom, and that their task is primarily to give students a new and intellectually challenging way to look at data.

For their part, students need to know the problems associated with the class. They must understand that from our culture we inherit predispositions and intellectual baggage that impel us toward certain conclusions. A goal for the class is to move beyond such preconceptions by *unlearning* what we think we know. As one scholar put it, teaching often consists of debunking "sham knowledge."

> Students are given a truth and they resist it: they see a new perspective and they fight it. But, as George Bernard Shaw pointed out, education consists of ridding ourselves of illusions and of acknowledging that we need to shed our blinders in order to appreciate the full magnitude of a finding. We shall know the truth and it shall make us uncomfortable as well as free. (Smith 1970)

Students must understand that their obligation as students is not only to learn objective facts but to study political positions, points of view, and paradigms until they are able to explain and defend them before their detractors. Happily, discussing the problem with students seems to work. Stating such goals openly and candidly pushes students slightly off balance, making it clear that the simple accumulation of facts is insufficient and that each student has work to do.

Fairness and Objectivity

On the other side of the desk, the obligation of the professor is not simply to transmit information in a neutral way but to facilitate and promote learning. This obligation—so stated—raises the inevitable question of where fairness and neutrality fit into the model. Within a context of recognized professional discretion, fairness falls into three categories.

First, a professor must include a balance of material that not only reflects the complexity of the topic but provides a learning experience. This means that not each view will receive equal attention. Deciding what will be emphasized and what will be skimmed is a judgment call which different professors make differently. Also, a judgment could change across time. In the past, for example, my reading list included more selections from the Israeli peace movement, less from the nonaccommodationist right. Now the pattern is reversed, based on a judgment that the militant right has risen in significance and that mastering the logic of the right provides a greater learning experience than understanding the logic of accommodation.

A second dimension of fairness involves the treatment of alternative ideological, political, or paradigmatic models. To take an example, many Americans—particularly Protestants and Jews—are oriented to a biblical interpretation of historic events inconsistent with secular political science models. This has led to a strong pro-Zionist interpretation of reality (Stockton 1987). It also leads to ahistorical thinking ("They have been fighting for 2,000 years"). Rather than simply dismiss or ignore these religious models, a more helpful approach is to address them openly, summarize them faithfully, note that many people embrace them, and point out that they are relevant in that those who accept them may well act upon them.

A third issue involves those political preferences or predispositions held by the professor. Fairness does not require the suppression of such perspectives. On the contrary, expressing and acknowledging them can facilitate the educational process. For example, when discussing political groupings within the Jewish and Palestinian nationalist movements, I frequently say, "Most of my friends are from this side," or "I really don't feel at ease with the views of this group but let's see if we can understand why they see things the way they do."

Making such statements serves two purposes. First, it reduces suspicion that the professor has some secret agenda. Second, identifying one's position is another way of saying that ideological predispositions are not always purely rational and that learning does not require a compromise of principles, a point that is itself a valid lesson. Third, a professor able to summarize fairly and without distortion a viewpoint not to one's own taste is in a sense "modeling" professional behavior.

Initial Orientation

At the beginning of the semester, several early classes are dedicated to orienting the students. In the first full hour I go over maps and familiarize students with nearly 100 geographical features and places likely to be encountered during the semester. I give a map quiz on these names a week later. This provides students with a physical overview of the region and the spatial orientation to read their assignments with confidence.

Students also need orientation to time. They simply do not know when events happened and in what sequence. They need a time chart

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going back to the Bible, including the Davidic kingdom, the destruction of Roman Judea, the rise of Islam, the split between Shiite and Sunni Islam, the Crusades and the Crusader States, the Ottoman invasions, and on to the origins of Zionism and the events of the twentieth century. I have prepared several historical outlines to fill these gaps. A longer, 12-page outline passed out with the syllabus includes a host of details not really needed but useful for reference. Shorter ones (1–2 pages each) focus on subtopics such as Jewish Nationalism, Palestinian Nationalism, U.S. Policy, or specific events (the 1936 uprising, the 1982 Lebanon War). The shorter ones are passed out during the class when that topic is addressed.

Students also need orientation to terminology. There is a whole new vocabulary that most have never encountered or have encountered in nonprecise ways. Sometimes these terms are technical (what is "Zionism") and sometimes they are simply specialized (the distinction between diaspora and exile). The differences among religious, ethnic, and cultural groupings need clarification. Students need to recognize that Arab and Jew are cultural terms, that not all Arabs are Muslims, that most Muslims are not Arabs, and that most Israeli Jews are not Western (Ashkenazi).

Vocabulary as Minefield

This is a course where the simple use of a place name can be controversial. Referring to "Temple Mount" or "Haram al-Sharif" can send hands flying into the air from the other side. Referring to Jerusalem as a part of Israel can provoke a question as quickly as referring to East Jerusalem as NOT a part of Israel. And there are the dual names: do we say Hebron or Khalil, Nablus or Sheckem? While most students are satisfied with whatever the professor says, there are ideological groups that see even simple vocabulary as part of an ongoing battle for the legitimacy of their particular positions. My approach is to follow American government usage. Thus, East Jerusalem is not a part of Israel, and Hebron and Nablus are the names of those ancient cities.

Relevance

The concept of relevance is critical throughout, in the preparation of time charts, a document reading list, or lecture material. The rule is this: historical events and readings are included only if they are relevant to the ongoing situation and if they help illuminate the conflict. Thus in the lecture "Background to Zionism," Moses Mendelssohn is discussed at some length while Moses Maimonides is not mentioned at all. This is perhaps the inverse of how most Jews would rate the significance of these two men.

But the reasons for inclusion or exclusion are consistent with the goals of the course. Mendelssohn is included because he insisted that Jews identify fully with their native countries, participate in local politics, and be concerned about the welfare of non-Jews. These are important aspects of diaspora Jewish thinking and find resonance in some Israeli political groups (at least points two and three). On the other hand Maimonides, the greatest of the Sephardic scholars, is significant to Jewish history but not to the conflict. By a similar logic, the great Arab thinker Ibn Khaldun is not mentioned in the course in spite of his importance to Arab intellectual history.

Making Lemonade

When I first taught this class I was concerned that students from involved ethnic or political groups would be resistant to certain aspects of the curriculum. The typical class has Lebanese, Jewish, Palestinian, Iraqi, and Armenian students, as well as Christian Zionists. From colleagues on other campuses I had heard stories of disruptions and confrontations. I was concerned.

Generally speaking, my fears have been unrealized. Affected students have tended to be open minded and willing to listen. While we cannot be certain why this is so, one hypothesis is that on my campus students do not sign up for the class unless they believe there is something they can learn.

Going a step further I would add that students of diverse ethnic backgrounds have proven to be a major asset, both in the classroom and outside. They can serve as resource persons about their own communities, helping other students understand things a professor could never teach. They frequently volunteer their families or personal experiences, and I sometimes call upon them to comment on matters.

When I use students as resources (only when they have made clear their willingness to speak), I do so in a way that does not push them into a corner ("Tell us, Mr. X, what do you people think?") Rather, I treat them as experts, asking them to contribute their observations, not their predispositions. For example, when a controversial issue comes up, one can ask, "When you hear people discuss this what do they say?" Such an approach protects students from argumentative reactions and from stating opinions that might be taken either by themselves or by others as having group validity. The technique also treats students with respect.

Out of the classroom, involved students are perhaps even more valuable. This is a class where as much learning can take place in the cafeteria as in the lecture hall. Many students have never had a conversation with a Palestinian or a Jew or a Lebanese Shiite. The opportunity to do so is often a profound experience. It also generates friendships, an unexpected but rewarding byproduct of the class.

There is also a personal benefit that a professor receives from teaching the class: the opportunity to learn from students. Like many others in small institutions I developed the class before undertaking field work in the region. My first semester three Palestinians enrolled and were not pleased at how I described their goals. One afternoon all three marched into my office to

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say "We think you don't understand Palestinian viewpoints." My response, "so teach me," set them to work doing exactly that, bringing hard-to-get materials and position papers, and explaining the incredibly diverse range of viewpoints within the PLO. Every semester since, I have told this story (and others) to classes and have invited them to contribute to my education. To my benefit, they continue to do so: Druze, Shiites, Hezbollah, Zionists, non-Zionists, Kahanists, Fatah, Islamists, Armenians, Jordanians, Egyptians, Iraqis, and others.

The Domestic Frame of Reference

Many students have a serious problem dealing with ethnic politics. Comments early in the semester about "the Jewish lobby" or "the Arab lobby" often seem more judgmental and suspicious than analytical. Likewise, many students have stereotypical views of Jews and Arabs. Rather than ignore these problems, I incorporate them into the syllabus. A three-week unit on "The American Connection" includes not only data on public opinion but also on the Jewish and Arabic communities in the United States, their class profile, their major organizations, their major goals, their internal disagreements, and the resources they bring into play as they attempt to influence policy outcomes. The unit also covers ethnic stereotyping, using both public opinion studies and a cartoon collection I have gathered (Stockton 1994).

The unit also facilitates openness to different viewpoints and to those who hold them. Students need to know that others disagree with them. Professors can facilitate this by acknowledging diversity. ("Some of you may find this difficult to understand but there are Jews who think there might come a time when they could be expelled from this country. In fact, there are Arabs who fear the same thing.")

Such a statement acknowledges the legitimacy of those views and forces students to consider whether they might have some validity. Students with such views feel less isolated and everyone has to realize that other unusual views might also be present. The articulation of these views grants the professor credibility with those who hold them (and with others who will have their views acknowledged in turn).

Handling Hot Potatos

Some issues are so divisive that they have the potential to damage a class. Many of these are from what may be called the rhetoric wars: Is Zionism racist? Did Arabs, Zionists, or both collaborate with Nazis? Who caused the refugee flight of 1948? Were Begin and Arafat terrorists? These issues cannot be avoided. The question is how to handle them. To begin, students must be told up front that these are highly emotional issues and that discussing them tends to generate more heat than light.

I have a three-part approach to handling such issues: first, I outline the facts upon which neutral observers agree; second, I summarize the ways different groups interpret those events or the arguments they make; finally, I assess the various arguments and positions, giving my own conclusions. If stages one and two are done well, objections at stage three will be minimal.

Reading Assignments

Although there is no standard text in this course, students need two types of readings: an integrative overview and a sampling of Israeli and Palestinian perspectives. My current text is Smith's *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, combined with a documents packet. Although Smith's historical approach de-emphasizes many contemporary political factors, his focus on the internal Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the book's solid scholarship make it valuable. It also fits my approach to the conflict as a century-long civil war. And students find it readable.

Central to the course, however, are the primary sources. While there are popular collections available (Khalidi 1987; Laqueur and Rubin 1984), I did what others have done and created a document packet to fit my approach. It includes policy statements, speeches by leaders, resolutions, diplomatic agreements, proposals. Some documents are historical, some more contemporary.

For students, reading documents is a rich educational experience. Not only do documents bypass the second-hand misinterpretations sometimes passed off as analysis, but they enable students to discuss without advocating. Reading and deconstructing a document (often in class) forces students to think about what they have read. Pointing out the frequent divergence between rhetoric and policy can be a striking learning experience. On course evaluations, students frequently comment that they found reading and analyzing primary documents one of the most valuable aspects of the class. They often comment that they had not known how to read policy statements prior to the course.

Written Assignments

Many students have been assailed with a barrage of what might be called advocacy or point-of-view analysis. Their tendency is to repeat what they heard before the class with no new learning. One weapon in attacking this problem is the written assignment. In addition to quizzes and examinations, students write one or two take-home essays plus a take-home final. These are four or five pages in length. Though the assignments vary across time, the following have proven successful. Note that questions typically have built-in options.

Essay One: Students have read and discussed the PLO *Charter*, Herzl's *The Jewish State*, the PFLP Platform, Jabotinsky's *The Iron Wall*, essays by Martin Buber, Arafat's "Gun and Olive Branch" speech and the HAMAS *Charter*. The assignment is to compare two perspectives: two Zionists, two Pal-

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estinians, *Der Judenstat* and the *PLO Charter*, Herzl and another text, the HAMAS *Charter* with another text. Papers are marked "blind" by ID number to assure students that classroom comments will not influence grades. They are also warned that normative or judgmental essays will be penalized as will evidence of agreement or disagreement with positions or groups. Their task is to analyze, not advocate.

Essay Two: Having studied "The American Connection," students are given a choice of two topics: The first asks them to compare the political influence of Jewish Americans and Arab Americans and to explain why Jews are more influential than Arabs. The second posits that American attitudes toward Jews and Arabs have in common certain hostile images and asks students to discuss this.

Conclusion

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a topic of exceptional complexity. Leading students through a maze of data and a minefield of smoke and rhetoric is a major task. It requires not only the education of students but the ongoing education of the professor.

There is a certain risk in teaching this class but it is a risk worth taking. The topic provides unlimited challenge and intellectual stimulation. It touches upon all the fields that political scientists find so fascinating: power, ideology, political and ethnic mobilization, leadership, violence, political influence, justice. It is a constant encouragement to research and reading. And it deals with a subject of exceptional importance. If my experience is typical, it will be a class that draws the instructor back time and again.

Notes

*John Smith and Jane Stockton offered helpful comments.

1. Some other incidents show the extent of the problem. A Muslim colleague had his public lecture on the book *The Satanic Verses* disrupted by Islamic militants. A visit by Noam Chomsky to the University of Michigan campus was denied institutional sponsorship after protests from pro-Israeli faculty. A California professor who specializes in Ottoman history was threatened by Armenian militants and was given protective leave by his institution. The Israeli lobbying group AIPAC has publications naming faculty members who are allegedly engaged in "propaganda" against Israel (Goott and Rosen 1983; Kessler and Schwaber 1984). And on my own campus, the chancellor canceled sponsorship of a panel on national self-determination during Martin Luther King Week because it featured Palestinian and South African speakers but had no Israeli perspective and hence was not balanced.
2. All statements are reproduced in *PS* (September 1986). The Middle East Studies Association and the American Anthropological Association adopted resolutions specifically addressing attacks by pro-Israeli groups on those who teach Middle East subjects.

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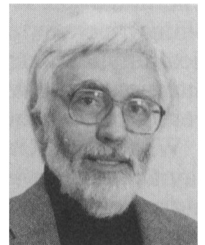
About the Author



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