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Teaching Israel/Palestine

Guest Editors
Geoffrey D. Claussen, Barış Kesgin, David J. Marshall

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THE JOURNAL OF INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES

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SPECIAL ISSUE

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FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Axel M. Oaks Takacs

When I received a proposal from Geoffrey Claussen, Barış Kesgin, and David Marshall to guest edit a special issue on Teaching Israel/Palestine (emerging from a conference they hosted at Elon University), we were nearly 18 months into the Israeli military's war in Gaza in response to Hamas's attacks in Southern Israel. On this side of the Atlantic, tensions in public spaces and university campuses were fraught. Protests and sit-ins were common. Government and university responses varied; some opened dialogue, while others shut them down. It was difficult to make claims about one side of the conflict or the other without being accused of anti-Palestinian or -Muslim bias or suspected of antisemitism. When one attempted to offer claims that were empathetic to suffering—real or perceived, emotional or physical—on both sides, the charge of "false equivalencies" or "lack of historical context" were quickly cast. It was nearly impossible to discuss the accuracies or inaccuracies of using labels such as genocide, collective punishment, and/or disproportionate response. Educators, scholars, government officials, elected politicians, and religious figures, such as rabbis, priests, and imams, were hesitant to speak openly on the topic, lest their students, colleagues, bosses, constituencies, or co-religionists take umbrage (at best) or seek their ousting (at worst). Of course, there was also no lack of courageous voices taking a stand on these issues; they often suffered the consequences.

Given that context, I decided to pursue this special issue and work for its publication. I did so because it was evident that discourse in public spaces, especially social media, had devolved into vitriolic condemnations, reductive one-liners, and ideological echo chambers. As one of my Jewish colleagues put it in a conversation (I paraphrase), "There is already so much trash out there on the internet. You might as well offer something academic, even if some may disagree with the conclusions." A year since receiving this proposal, nothing much has changed. While I am disheartened that tensions remain fraught and free speech threatened, I am glad that the *Journal of Interreligious Studies* (JIRS) can serve as a venue offering critical, constructive, and generative conversation on how to teach and organize campus events about Palestine/Israel.

I will leave it to our Guest Editors to present the details of this special issue, its contents, and its genesis vis-à-vis the conference they hosted; all this, and more, will be found in their co-authored introduction to follow. Generally, the issue comprises both Invited Scholarly Reflections and peer-reviewed articles. The former category underwent guest editorial and general editorial peer review followed by revisions and re-review before formal acceptance. They were accepted as Invited Scholarly Reflections because their content and arguments offered an academic, peer-reviewable contribution in a reflective mode. Accordingly, they are critical, constructive, generative, and scholarly reflections on teaching and campus organizing around the topic of Israel/Palestine. The peer-reviewed articles underwent guest editorial and general editorial review, followed by revision requests. After initial revisions were received, the articles were then sent to double-blind peer review, with some of them undergoing triple-blind peer review in the event of tiebreakers. As the editor, I was responsible for the peer-review process and therefore made certain that the pair or set of reviewers was marked by viewpoint, religious, and ethnic diversity.

Notwithstanding, I do not doubt that some readers may disagree with the premises or conclusions of some of these articles. However, this is not unique to pieces written on the topic of Palestine/Israel. Any academic article is open to scholarly critique regarding its premises, methods, theories, data analysis, evidence, arguments, interpretations, conclusions, and more. Some may offer more facile objections, such as the lack of explicitly pro-Zionist positions or the articles' relative agreement on definitions regarding genocide and antisemitism. This may be true. But the articles express a scholarly responsibility that is unmistakable in their arguments, evidence, and citational practices. Readers with disagreements are invited to craft their own articles proposing alternative approaches to Israel/Palestine and submit them to the journal for review. This is the nature of scholarly dialogue and debate. Concepts such as antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-Muslim or -Palestinian bias, anti-Judaism, Zionism, and genocide are contested and, as academics, it would be unwise to leave their definitions to untrained non-experts. Future articles, if submitted, peer-reviewed, and accepted, could certainly present alternative conceptualizations.

I am pleased that the JIRS can do its part in elevating the conversation around the topic of teaching Palestine/Israel. The articles and reflections are stimulating. They all arise from concrete teaching and event-organizing experiences. Furthermore, they register real tensions (e.g., the role of affect in teaching and the value, or lack thereof, in pursuing narrative approaches to the topic). The pieces discuss imaginative genres in teaching (music and graphic narratives), point out pervasive problems in current practice (e.g.,

single events rather than series, the myth of balance), and represent the institutional diversity of higher education. I am certain this issue will serve as a crucial resource for educators.

Let me also add that this issue closes with two unrelated book reviews:

- *Ibn ʿArabī's Religious Pluralism: Levels of Inclusivity*, by Faris Abdel-hadi; reviewed by Yusri Mohamad Ramli
- *From Outlaw to In-Law: How Multicultural Interfaith Couples Can Become Agents for Social Change*, by Tanya Sadagopan; reviewed by Matthew Maruggi

This issue and its distribution would have not come together without the proficient and superb work of Lydia Bremer-McCollum (Assistant Editor), Sze-Long A. Wong (Design and Production Editor), Mark Spinnenweber (Graduate Research Fellow), and Aubrey Chavez (Social Media and Website Manager). My sincere gratitude is extended to all of them.

Axel M. Oaks Takacs, Th.D.
Editor-in-Chief
Journal of Interreligious Studies

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GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

A Special Issue on Teaching Israel/Palestine

In the United States today, few subjects generate as much public controversy as Israel/Palestine. Especially since the October 2023 Hamas-led attacks on Israel and the initiation of Israeli attacks on Gaza, US politicians and media figures have given unprecedented attention to the ways that universities engage with questions about Palestine and Israel. Students have organized encampments and walkouts; legislators have summoned university presidents to account for their institutions' responses; faculty have faced professional consequences for public statements; and academic freedom has come under direct threat. Media coverage would suggest that universities in the US have been overwhelmed by questions about Israel/Palestine and have struggled to address them.

We believe, however, that faculty on many US university campuses are teaching about Israel/Palestine with real success. Even amid the threats and pressures they are facing, faculty across disciplines are successfully challenging their students to think deeply and critically about contested questions related to Israel/Palestine. Students who encounter the subject in well-designed courses and faculty-led programs emerge not paralyzed by the controversy but better equipped to understand it. Their instructors are teaching them to think more critically about their own frameworks, to carefully evaluate claims, and to grapple seriously with questions about justice.

The three of us are faculty members at Elon University who teach about Israel/Palestine through our own disciplinary lenses—Religious Studies, Political Science, and Geography, respectively. Inspired by our own experiences of teaching, by stories from colleagues, by Elon's commitment to hosting conversations about outstanding teaching, and by our sense of the importance of teaching about this subject in the United States while a US-backed military campaign was killing tens of thousands of people in Gaza, we convened (with our colleague Brian Pennington) a symposium to discuss teaching Israel/Palestine at Elon in February 2025.

The symposium was part of a symposium series at Elon, "On the Edge," organized by Dr. Pennington, Director of Elon's Center for the Study of Religion, Culture, and Society and Professor of Religious Studies. We are extremely grateful to Dr. Pennington for organizing the symposium, and for his vision for the "On the Edge" series. These symposia, he has written, bring together "scholars working at the theoretical and methodological boundaries of those fields that have a stake in the critical analysis of religion … to exercise a self-conscious attention to methodological advances that can be made through interdisciplinarity," contributing "to a richly contextualized and multi-layered understanding of the role of religion in societies past, present, and future."[1] Our symposium brought together colleagues from a range of fields, including Religious Studies, Political Science, English, Comparative Literature, Journalism, Political Science, History, Geography, Sociology, Anthropology, Education, Peace and Conflict Studies, Middle East Studies, and Jewish Studies, and our discussions during the symposium drew on insights from each of these fields.

Our subject was Teaching Israel/Palestine—or, alternatively, Teaching Palestine/Israel—rather than simply "Teaching Israel" or "Teaching Palestine." We asked teacher-scholars who participated in the symposium to focus on teaching about relationships and conflicts between Israel and Palestine or between Israelis and Palestinians rather than focusing on one or the other. We asked them to share about how they engaged students, responded to current crises, and navigated threats to their teaching. We asked them to share about how their teaching was challenging students to become more open-minded, more critical-minded, and more thoughtful; how their teaching might play some part in furthering justice and liberation; how student learning was persisting and flourishing even in a political climate that is so hostile to critical thinking about Israel/Palestine; and how they were persisting in teaching even while being targeted, blacklisted, harassed and surveilled. Our colleagues responded with incredible insight as they shared both about the enormous challenges they faced and the successes that they experienced.

The papers in this special issue were, for the most part, papers first presented at our 2025 symposium; not all of the fields represented at the symposium are represented here, but we were able to include perspectives from a range of disciplines. Though the contributors to this special issue come from diverse disciplines, institutional contexts, and backgrounds, what they share is a set of ethical and pedagogical concerns that motivated the

1 "On The Edge: General Information," Elon University, https://www.elon.edu/u/academics/csrcs/on-the-edge/general-information.

symposium in the first place. What does ethical teaching look like in a moment of mass violence and suffering? How should educators navigate tensions between dialogue, advocacy, and justice? What role do issues of identity, emotion, and power play in shaping pedagogy? How can classrooms and campuses balance student support with the need to push students beyond the comfort of their own view of the world? Finally, how can institutions better protect intellectual inquiry and academic freedom when under intense public scrutiny and political pressure?

The contributors to this special issue approach these questions in different ways. They differ in their understandings of the conflict, in their pedagogies, and in educational goals. Some approaches presented here focus on dialogue across difference, while others emphasize questions of power, decolonization, and justice. Issues of affect, empathy, community-building, or narrative complexity are addressed in different ways as well. We regard these differences not as a deficiency but as evidence of the richness and urgency of contemporary debates about teaching Israel/Palestine, as well as evidence of the care and creativity that our colleagues demonstrate in approaching this important issue.[2] This issue is not written in one voice, nor have we sought to impose a single, unified framework on this issue. Just as many contributors emphasize the need for nuanced polyvocality in approaches to teaching a subject that is often reduced to binary thinking and false equivalencies, so too do we encourage a diversity of teaching strategies depending on different institutional contexts and learning goals.

The first two articles reflect on general models for ensuring robust and inclusive learning environments on college campuses. Maha Nassar's article, "A Comparative Framework Approach for Teaching and Talking about Palestine/Israel," offers a comparative pedagogical model for teaching Palestine/Israel that distinguishes among frameworks of peace through surrender, peace through dialogue, and justice through liberation, and shows

2 Indeed, as the reader has no doubt noticed already, different naming conventions are also used throughout this special issue, including Israel/Palestine, Palestine/Israel, Israeli-Palestinian, and Palestinian-Israeli, reflecting different scholarly traditions, political commitments, and pedagogical choices. Again, rather than impose a single nomenclature on these or other contested terminology, we have preserved these differences to highlight the crucial importance of considering questions of framing, perspective, and power when teaching this topic. The special issue's title, "Teaching Israel/Palestine" is not an attempt to privilege one naming convention over another. Rather, it reflects the specific scholarly milieux and institutional context out of which this symposium was born. The title was not easily arrived at and it became a source of healthy debate and discussion before and during the symposium.

how making these frameworks explicit can foster more inclusive and intellectually honest conversations in the classroom and beyond. Atalia Omer's article, "A Subversive Pedagogy for Teaching Palestine/Israel," offers a decolonial pedagogical model for teaching Palestine/Israel that situates the subject within longer histories of empire and settler colonialism, names realities with conceptual precision, foregrounds marginalized Palestinian and Jewish narratives, and challenges the institutional policing of discourse.

The next two articles explore how artistic and cultural forms—graphic narratives and music—can serve as powerful pedagogical tools for teaching Palestine/Israel in the classroom. Brian Hillman's article, "Teaching The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict Through Graphic Narrative: Identity, History, Violence," contends that graphic narratives can enrich the teaching of Palestine/Israel by making visible the interplay of identity, memory, and historical narration while also inviting students to consider how violence is depicted, witnessed, and interpreted across different narrative traditions. Oren Kroll-Zeldin's article, "Harmonizing Narratives: Teaching Palestine/Israel through Music in the Post-October 7 Classroom," offers a pedagogical model for using Palestinian and Israeli music to deepen student engagement, showing how music can humanize the subject, illuminate cultural and political complexities, and foster critical, multi-narrative learning in accessible ways.

The next article turns our attention to the challenges of organizing campus-wide events focused on Israel/Palestine. In "Israel/Palestine and Campus-Wide Teaching-Learning Events: The Challenges of Affect, The Role of Intellectual Empathy," Laurence Roth and Nicholas Clark draw on their experiences in organizing a panel at Susquehanna University. They argue that the success of campus-wide conversations depends on recognizing emotional investments and encouraging intellectual empathy among participants.

Benjamin Sax's article, "Dialogues on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Baltimore: Interreligious Missteps and Opportunities," considers the challenges of teaching Israel/Palestine to broader, interreligious communities. He argues that dialogical practices must preserve relationship, encourage honesty and self-reflection across profound disagreement, and resist efforts to shut down dialogue through accusations of antisemitism.

Liora Halperin's article, "Teaching Israel/Palestine When the Stakes are Highest," argues that educators must teach Israel/Palestine by exploring intertwined histories marked by profound asymmetries of power, sovereignty, and historical erasure. She advocates classroom practices that help students

inhabit multiple perspectives while recognizing the ethical and political consequences of how the subject is framed.

"Teaching Israel/Palestine as Jews: Negotiating Identity, Power, and Politics in the Classroom," builds on a roundtable conversation that took place at the symposium between Hilary Kalisman, Michal Raucher, and Emily Schneider. They reflect on how their identities as Jewish Americans shape their approaches to teaching Israel/Palestine, how they engage students' diverse identities, and how they navigate institutional pressures, campus politics, and the weaponization of antisemitism.

Mahan Mirza, in "Effective Both-Siderism in the Midst of a Genocide: Whiplash Pedagogy on Israel-Palestine," reflects on his experience co-leading a campus-wide initiative at the University of Notre Dame that paired opposed narratives of Israel/Palestine in classroom and public settings; his co-leader, Tzvi Novick, also responds to Mirza's reflection. Mirza and Novick consider the successes and challenges of this initiative.

Russell Arnold's reflection, "Teaching Israel/Palestine to Build Community on Campus," argues that studying Israel/Palestine may help students and faculty foster braver, more generous conversations across difference. Drawing on the insights of Parker Palmer, he emphasizes shared responsibility, valuing otherness, the creative holding of tension, and cultivating the agency and community needed for just action.

Finally, in "From Radical Hospitality to Radical Hope: Higher Education and the Imperative for Justice," Diya Abdo draws on her perspective as a Palestinian scholar, her family's background of forced displacement, and her experience as founder of Every Campus a Refuge (ECAR) to ask how we can move beyond notions of radical hospitality and empathy in higher education toward a commitment to radical accountability, justice, and hope.

No single contribution here provides the definitive approach to teaching Israel/Palestine. Nor does this special issue pretend that pedagogy and education alone are solutions to the massive suffering taking place in Palestine/Israel. Nevertheless, in bringing together this special issue, we stand firm in our belief that universities remain one of the few spaces where sustained engagement on this urgent matter is possible. Universities and educators must not shirk the responsibility to teach about this topic, simply because it is difficult and often costly to do so. For us to embrace the radical hope that Abdo advocates in her piece, we must recognize the vital role that we as educators play in *informing* (not dictating) the perspectives and attitudes of emerging citizens, scholars, and leaders, and that pursuing

pedagogies of justice and empathy in our classrooms can be a powerful means of promoting justice and healing in the world.

Geoffrey D. Claussen
Barış Kesgin
David J. Marshall
Guest Editors

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ARTICLE

A Comparative Framework Approach for Teaching and Talking about Palestine/Israel

Maha Nassar

Abstract

How can we expand our conversations about Palestine/Israel to include a fuller range of student perspectives? In this article, I propose a "comparative framework approach" to help educators, facilitators, and administrators foster better conversations in classrooms, on campuses, and beyond. In contrast to approaches that center identity as sources of friction to be transcended, I argue that focusing on frameworks more effectively includes the perspectives of pro-Palestine students who center decolonization in their ethical worldviews. Drawing on insights from critical religious literacy, I outline three frameworks—peace through surrender, peace through dialogue, and justice through liberation—that have shaped discourse on Palestine/Israel in the United States. I then show how different frameworks have developed historically and have informed interreligious encounters, including during the 2024 student encampments. Last, I suggest ways to incorporate the comparative framework approach to ensure that all students are supported in their intellectual, personal, and ethical journeys.

Keywords

Palestine/Israel, comparative frameworks, interreligious encounters, critical religious literacy, student encampments, colonialism, decolonization

On April 17, 2024, 50 Columbia University students set up a "Gaza Solidarity Encampment" on their campus lawn. Six months had passed since the October 7th Hamas-led attack on Israel, and the Israeli bombing campaign and ground invasion of Gaza were still ongoing. Five days later, Jewish students at the encampment hosted a "Gaza Liberation Seder," reading passages from a Passover *Haggadah* written just for the occasion. The student leading the ceremony welcomed supporters from all faiths saying, "As we move through this seder, we will be exploring what it means to celebrate Passover during an ongoing genocide, what it means to tell stories of Jewish displacement and persecution as the Palestinian people have their land colonized in the name of 'Jewish safety.'"[1]

The seder was one of hundreds of interreligious solidarity activities that were held at over 100 Gaza solidarity encampments on US campuses between April 17 and June 7, 2024.[2] Indeed, interreligious solidarity activities, in which members of Muslim, Jewish, Christian, and other faith groups partook in each other's religious rituals and learned about each other's beliefs, were a major feature in many of the pro-Palestine student activities that spring. As a student journalist at The Ohio State University reported, "the protests mostly consist of chanting, praying and singing."[3]

Meanwhile, several longstanding interfaith dialogue programs crumbled. "It's set us back at least 20 years," one interfaith leader lamented. "It's changed everything."[4] Observers noticed a particular "cooling" in Muslim-Jewish interfaith activities as programs were cancelled and friendships grew strained.[5] Some leaders who had spent decades building programs dedicated to interfaith dialogue tried to revive such efforts, but the results were

The author thanks Lauren Cohen, Scott Lucas, Atalia Omer, Mezna Qato, Barry Trachtenberg, and the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

1 Alisa Solomon, "Celebrating Seder at Columbia's Gaza Solidarity Encampment," *Hyperallergic*, May 7, 2024, https://hyperallergic.com/912288/celebrating-seder-at-columbia-gaza-solidarity-encampment/.

2 Erica Chenoweth, Soha Hammam, Jeremy Pressman, and Jay Ulfelder, "Protests in the United States on Palestine and Israel, 2023–2024," *Social Movement Studies* 25, no. 2 (2024): 1–14.

3 Catherine Kim, "What's Really Happening on College Campuses, According to Student Journalists," *Politico*, May 3, 2024, https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/05/03/college-campus-protests-israel-gaza-student-journalists-00155672.

4 Ken Chitwood, "'It's Changed Everything': Interfaith Dialogue in the Wake of October 7, 2023," *Interfaith America*, October 3, 2024, https://www.interfaithamerica.org/article/interfaith-dialogue-october-7/.

5 Tom Gjelten, "A Cooling: Jewish-Muslim Interfaith Work after October 7 and Gaza," *Moment Magazine*, February 23, 2024, https://momentmag.com/interfaith-

generally anemic.[6] Likewise, across college and university campuses friendships frayed and social maps were redrawn over disagreements on how to what was happening in Gaza, Israel, and the region.[7]

What accounts for such contrasting scenes of interreligious relations? I contend that one major factor was the encampment participants' embrace of a shared anticolonial *justice framework* that stressed Israeli settler-colonial structures of oppression, rather than religious difference, as the main source of violence between Israelis and Palestinians.[8] According to this justice framework, the religious identities of students were not sources of division to be transcended. Rather, they were part of a shared spiritual nourishment that helped them support each other as they worked to dismantle those structures of oppression and to envision a system that upholds human rights and dignity for all.

I contend further that this approach challenged the assumptions of more commonly held identity-based *peace frameworks*. Such frameworks tend to assume an *a priori* correlation between ethno-religious identities and certain sets of political beliefs. The hope is that through interfaith dialogue, moderates from different faiths can "transcend" their ethno-religious identities, build personal friendships across the divide, and marginalize their respective extremists in ways that will eventually lead to peace.[9] Yet as Atalia Omer has shown, many interfaith dialogue activities rest on Western epistemologies of religion that ignore the colonial roots of most so-called religious conflicts and prioritize creating a veneer of intercommunal peace over achieving real political justice.[10]

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jews-muslims-after-october-7-gaza/?srsltid=AfmBOoqDMW7M8UfgWpA6-3Digu8EOp7G1TCtORvzhqRDebjIfyi2nsdq.

6 Chitwood, "'It's Changed Everything.'"

7 Eitan Hersh and Dahlia Lyss, "A Year of Campus Conflict and Growth: An Over-Time Study of the Impact of the Israeli-Hamas War on the U.S.," *Jim Joseph Foundation*, September 2024, https://jimjosephfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Hersh_Final_Report_Campus_Conflict_and_Growth.pdf, 52–54.

8 In doing so, they drew on an extensive body of scholarship that documents and explains why the settler colonial framework is applicable to the Palestinian/Israeli context. A useful overview of this literature can be found in Areej Sabbagh-Khoury, *Colonizing Palestine: The Zionist Left and the Making of the Palestinian Nakba* (Stanford University Press, 2023), 9–18.

9 Cameron Howes and James Walters, "Identity Transcendence as a Response to Religious Conflict: Understanding Effective Student Engagement with Israel and Palestine," *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 46 (2025): 30–51.

10 Atalia Omer, *Decolonizing Religion and Peace-Building* (Oxford University Press, 2023); Atalia Omer, *Days of Awe: Reimagining Jewishness in Solidarity with Palestinians*

In this article, I argue that adopting a "comparative framework approach"—one that takes seriously the perspectives of justice-oriented students—is urgently needed in the post-October 7th higher education landscape. Doing so, I maintain, not only ameliorates imbalances found in many interfaith encounters on college campuses, but also helps facilitate more robust classroom discussions and more inclusive campus programming on Palestine/Israel.[11] In particular, I show how the comparative framework approach better accounts for the perspectives of students who are firmly committed to the idea of Palestinian liberation. As anthropologists Lara Deeb and Jessica Winegar have shown, those perspectives have historically been marginalized or silenced on North American college and university campuses.[12] As a result, many students—particularly from Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian backgrounds—have felt isolated, besieged, and attacked by their own universities.[13]

I argue further that the comparative framework approach can ameliorate some of the blind spots that educators and facilitators of interreligious encounters may have when they manage student conversations about Palestine/Israel. While much attention is paid to how such debates intersect with antisemitism, little if any attention is paid to the ways in which discussions of Palestine/Israel intersect with anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, and anti-Palestinian racism.[14] As Rev. Canon C. Denise Yarbrough, Director of Religious and Spiritual Life at the University of Rochester, noted about an earlier campus episode, "Palestinian students and their allies struggle to have their stories heard in an American culture that knows the Israeli Jewish narrative best. They also struggle to be heard when these conflicts erupt, in

(University of Chicago Press, 2019).

11 I use the term "Palestine/Israel" throughout this article to signify a shared and contested geography, while deliberately foregrounding Palestinian histories and experiences. The slash marks both the entanglement and tension between these entities, without collapsing them into a single narrative.

12 Lara Deeb and Jessica Winegar, "Resistance to Repression and Back Again: The Movement for Palestinian Liberation in US Academia," *Middle East Critique* 33, no. 3 (2024): 313–34.

13 "Rupture and Repair: A Report by the Stanford Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian Communities," *Stanford University*, May 2024, https://news.stanford.edu/__data/assets/pdf_file/0031/156586/MAP-final-report-2024.pdf; "Final Report of the Presidential Task Force on Combating Anti-Muslim, Anti-Arab, and Anti-Palestinian Bias," *Harvard University*, April 29, 2025, https://www.harvard.edu/task-force-on-anti-muslim-and-anti-arab-bias/.

14 For a recent example of this tendency, see Rachel Mikva, *Interreligious Studies: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 176–208.

part because they simply do not have the influential allies and communal resources that are available to Jewish students" who support Israel.[15]

Such blind spots stem in part from the colonial legacies that continue to shape interreligious encounters. As religious studies scholar Adil Hussain Khan explains, the civilizational assumptions and biases that shaped interreligious encounters during the colonial period now find expression in determinations of who can participate in interreligious encounters and what topics are deemed worthy of discussion.[16] As I show below, these colonial legacies often shape interreligious encounters as they relate to Palestine/Israel, both by assuming religious identities and political viewpoints to be co-constitutive and by pre-determining the participants, parameters, and outcomes of such encounters. Atalia Omer, Diane Moore, and Hilary Rantisi have offered a helpful path forward. They propose fostering a *decolonial religious literacy* that seeks to "undo conceptually and sociologically the colonial reduction of communities to their presumed religious belonging." This approach supports students as they explore a wider array of perspectives that include examining colonialism's ongoing impact on current events.[17] Whereas the program discussed by Omer et. al. involved taking students to the region, in this article I present a pedagogical tool that can be used on our own campuses. As I outline below, students at the encampments offered us innovative ways to think about how interfaith activities intersect with broader moral and political worldviews, challenging us to rethink the goals and parameters of interreligious encounters as they relate to Palestine/Israel.

I come to this analysis as the Palestinian-American-Muslim daughter of refugees who were expelled from their homeland in 1948. I also approach this work as a scholar specializing in Palestinian and Israeli history; as an educator with nearly three decades of experience teaching history and religion in secondary, post-secondary, and professional settings; and as a community leader who has led interreligious activities in mosques, churches, synagogues, and civic spaces. My academic, educational, professional, and community-based experiences have led me to create an original three-part

15 C. Denise Yarbrough, "Antisemitism and Israel: Tales from the Interreligious Dialogical Minefield," in *With the Best of Intentions: Interreligious Missteps and Mistakes*, ed. Lucinda Mosher, Elinor J. Pierce, and Or N. Rose (Orbis Books, 2023), 205.

16 Adil Hussain Khan, "Theorizing Interreligious Relations," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 92 (Fall 2024): 16–36.

17 Atalia Omer, Diane L. Moore, and Hilary Rantisi, "Touring Absences, Erasures, and Futures in the Unholy Land: A Religiously Literate Diasporic Reading of Palestine/Israel," *Palestine/Israel Review* 1, no. 2 (2024): 313–42.

typology that, I contend, better captures the varied perspectives and assumptions as they relate to Palestine/Israel. By helping my students understand the explicit and implicit assumptions that inform these three frameworks, I not only help them articulate their own worldviews and ethical commitments. I also help them engage more constructively with those who hold divergent worldviews, regardless of their identity.

In the pages that follow, I first define and trace the development of three conceptual frameworks—*peace through surrender*, *peace through dialogue*, and *justice through liberation*—that capture the wide range of perspectives on Palestine/Israel. Next, I explain how the peace frameworks became the dominant ones in the United States, how the justice framework was historically marginalized, and why it has gained traction in recent years. I then contrast interreligious encounters that privilege the peace frameworks with those that emanate from the justice framework, focusing on the spring 2024 pro-Palestine student encampments. Last, I offer some practical ways to apply the comparative framework approach to create more inclusive and supportive classroom and campus environments.

Defining the Three Frameworks

Given how much Palestine/Israel is part of US media and political discourse, many American young adults have already formed some basic opinions around this topic prior to reaching us.[18] The comparative framework approach invites them to reflect on the conceptual frameworks that undergird their opinions and those of others. A *conceptual framework* is a system of interconnected beliefs and experiences that structure how we understand the world around us. When we want to learn about something, conceptual frameworks help us frame our questions, decide which data points are relevant, and interpret our findings.[19]

When introducing this concept to my students, I invite them to think of a picture frame that directs our focus to what is inside the frame rather than what is outside it. Our frameworks are informed by our: 1) values, beliefs and assumptions; 2) lived experiences and personal connections; and 3) choice and interpretation of data points. No single frame can contain all the assumptions, experiences, and data points that exist on a given topic; we

18 This trend predates October 7th. See Lydia Saad, "Young Adults' View on Middle East Changing Most," *Gallup News*, March 24, 2023, https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/472796/young-adults-views-middle-east-changing.aspx.

19 Yosef Jabareen, "Building a Conceptual Framework: Philosophy, Definitions, and Procedure," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 8, no. 4 (2009): 49–62.

necessarily choose what to emphasize and what to de-emphasize. The goal of a comparative framework analysis is not to prove one framework "right" and another one "wrong." Rather, the aim is to reflect on what is included in—and excluded from—each frame.

I introduced my framework approach in fall 2021 during a public lecture I gave on the topic of compassion. My aim was to explain how and why US public opinion had shifted in recent years from showing more compassion for Israelis than for Palestinians to showing increased compassion for Palestinians.[20] I articulated two frameworks, a peace framework and a justice framework, and I explained how personal stories can inform and shift people's selection of frameworks. I soon realized that a single peace framework did not adequately capture the range of views within it, leading me to add a third framework. Since 2022, I have used the comparative framework approach in my introductory undergraduate course on modern Middle Eastern history and my co-convened undergraduate-graduate course on the "History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict." I have also introduced the comparative framework approach in over two dozen presentations to students, educators, university administrators, faith leaders, policy experts, and general audiences.

I find that taking a framework-based approach, rather than an identity-based approach, is useful in facilitating constructive conversations because it allows participants to ponder other frameworks without feeling like they are betraying their own identities. This approach also helps us avoid reductive assumptions about particular religious identities correlating with certain political views. In recent years we have seen members of many faith groups, including American evangelicals and Jewish Americans, increasingly divided over questions related to Israel.[21] Therefore, the three frameworks I lay out below are defined by their respective outlooks, rather than by the predominant religious identities of their respective adherents.

The first framework is what I call the "peace through surrender" framework. This framework posits Zionism as a core element of Jewish identity, grounded in the belief that the Jewish people have an absolute right

20 Maha Nassar, "Compassion for Whom: Shifting U.S. Conversations about Palestinians and Israelis," SBS Downtown Lecture Series, University of Arizona, October 20, 2021, 1 hr. and 23 min., available on YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VwY5fP9-8PI&t=1125s.

21 These divides are often (though not always) along generational lines. See Jordan Muchnick and Elaine Kamarack, "The Generation Gap in Opinions Toward Israel," *Brookings*, November 9, 2023, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-generation-gap-in-opinions-toward-israel/.

to establish, maintain, and defend a Jewish state in their ancestral homeland.[22] This framework sees the modern state of Israel as an expression of that right, made necessary by the long history of antisemitism that culminated in the ravages of the Holocaust.[23] Circulating widely within the Israeli and American right, this framework tends to downplay or ignore Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim personal and religious connections to the land, and the legitimacy of their national aspirations within it.[24] It often attributes criticism of Israel to antisemitism, which it deems to be endemic not only in the west, but also in Arab, Muslim, and Palestinian societies.[25] It draws heavily on the logic of Revisionist Zionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky who wrote in 1923 that "both peoples can live together in peace" only when Palestinians accept that they "can make no breach in the iron wall."[26] Thus, according to this framework, only when Palestinians *surrender* to Israel's military and political domination can *peace* take hold.

The second framework is what I call the "peace through dialogue" framework. It shares with the first framework a belief that Zionism is a core element of Jewish identity, and that Israel is a legitimate expression of that identity. Mindful of the long history of antisemitism and the legacies of the Holocaust, this framework also insists on the necessity of Israel's existence to safeguard the future of the Jewish people. But unlike the first framework, it also holds that Palestinian ethno-national and religious claims to the land should be accommodated, albeit not at the expense of Israel's security and character as a Jewish state.[27] While it, too, holds that peace is the final goal, this framework tends to hold extremists on both sides as primarily responsible for the ongoing conflict.[28] According to this framework, *peace* can

22 See David Novak, *Zionism and Judaism: A New Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Yitzhak Conforti, *Zionism and Jewish Culture: A Study in the Origins of a National Movement*, trans. Jessica Setbon (Academic Studies Press, 2024).

23 See, for example, Alexander Yakobson and Amnon Rubenstein, *Israel and the Family of Nations: The Jewish Nation-State and Human Rights* (Routledge, 2009).

24 See, for example, Adi Schwartz and Einat Wilf, *The War of Return: How Western Indulgence of the Palestinian Dream Has Obstructed the Path to Peace* (All Points Books, 2020).

25 See, for example, Robert S. Wistrich, *A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad* (Random House, 2010).

26 Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky, "The Iron Wall (*Rasswjet*)," originally published in *Deutsches Heft*, November 4, 1925 [1923], https://en.jabotinsky.org/archive/search-archive/item/?itemId=158379.

27 See, for example, Ruth Gavison, "The Jews' Right to Statehood: A Defense," *Azure* 15 (2003): 70–108.

28 See, for example, Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

only be achieved through *dialogue* and negotiations in which moderates on both sides make painful compromises and marginalize their respective extremists. Popular in American, Western and Israeli liberal circles, this framework informs most traditional interfaith dialogue efforts, "people-to-people" programs, and calls for a two-state solution.[29]

The third framework is what I call the "justice through liberation" framework. This framework downplays the identitarian aspects of Zionism and instead adopts a structure-based analysis. It understands Zionism as a settler-colonial ideology and political project that undergirds the state of Israel.[30] It further holds that Israel's colonial structures—that is, the laws and policies that privilege Jews over non-Jews and restrict Palestinian freedom—are the core drivers of violence.[31] This framework shares with other anticolonial frameworks the belief that colonialism is the defining feature of the twentieth century, not only for Palestine, but for most of the world's population.[32] While it does not oppose peace as a worthwhile goal, this framework insists that a prerequisite for peace is *justice*, achieved through Palestinian *liberation* from settler-colonial domination. As such, it tends to be critical of the so-called two-state solution and offers alternative paths for thinking about possible solutions.[33]

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29 Recent expressions of this framework include Raja Khouri and Jeffrey Wilkinson, *The Wall Between: What Jews and Palestinians Don't Want to Know About Each Other* (Olive Branch Press, 2023); Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP), "About ALLMEP," *Alliance for Middle East Peace*, last updated 2025, https://www.allmep.org/about-us-allmep/; and Omar M. Dajani and Limor Yehuda, "A Two-State Solution That Can Work: The Case for an Israeli-Palestinian Confederation," *Foreign Affairs*, September 19, 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/two-state-solution-can-work.

30 Fayez Sayigh's foundational 1965 work, *Zionist Colonialism in Palestine*, Palestine Monographs 1 (Research center Palestine Liberation Organization, 1965) available at: https://www.freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC12_scans/12.zionist.colonialism.palestine.1965.pdf.

31 Tariq Dana and Ali Jarbawi, "A Century of Settler Colonialism in Palestine: Zionism's Entangled Project," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 24, no. 1 (2017): 1–23; Elia Zureik, *Israel's Colonial Project in Palestine: Brutal Pursuit* (Routledge, 2016).

32 Nader Hashemi, "Palestine and the Politics of Muslim Identity," in *The Promise of Sharīʿa: Studies in Honor of Professor Khaled Abou El Fadl*, ed. Rami Koujah and Josef Linnhoff (De Gruyter, 2025), 185–209; Pankaj Mishra, *The World After Gaza: A History* (Penguin Random House, 2025), 15.

33 Leila Farsakh, ed., *Rethinking Statehood in Palestine: Self-Determination and Decolonization Beyond Partition* (University of California Press, 2021); The Palestinian Technical Working Group, "A Palestinian Armistice Plan: Charting a Rights-Based Transition for Palestinian-Israeli Peace, *Cambridge Initiative on Peace Settlements*, June 2025, https://cambridgepeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Palestinian-Armistice-Plan.pdf.

"Religion" occupies different positions in each of these frameworks. The peace-through-surrender framework emphasizes the role of political Islam as a whole, while the peace-through-dialogue framework tends to cast blame on Muslim and Jewish extremists.[34] In contrast, the justice framework rejects the notion that religion, religious identity, or even religious extremism are to blame in and of themselves. It argues against what it perceives as a false equivalency between Jewish religious movements that seek to further entrench Israel's colonization of Palestine, and Muslim religious movements that seek to end Israeli colonialization.[35] This framework further holds that defining the "Palestinian-Israeli conflict" as one driven by religious difference erases the rich history of Jewish anti-Zionism and obscures the settler-colonial contours of the Zionist political project.[36] Such religion-based understandings of the conflict also erase the perspectives of Palestinian Christians who adopt the justice framework and who see Christian Zionism as anathema to their own religious beliefs.[37]

Likewise, the three frameworks hold different understandings of "violence." The peace-through-surrender framework insists that peace will only come to the region when Palestinians surrender to a decisively victorious Israel.[38] The peace-through-dialogue framework typically emphasizes the need to eliminate hostility on both sides through education, dialogue and mutual understanding.[39] By contrast, the justice framework foregrounds Israeli colonial, structural, and epistemic violence that harms

34 See, respectively, Mordechai Kedar, "The Central Obstacle to Peace Between Israel and the Palestinians Isn't Politics," *Mosaic*, October 3, 2025, https://ideas.tikvah.org/mosaic/essays/responses/the-central-obstacle-to-peace-between-israel-and-the-palestinians-isn-t-just-poli; and Ron Kronish, "The Role of Religion and Interreligious Dialogue in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," in *Routledge Companion to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, ed. Asaf Siniver (Routledge, 2022), 276–87.

35 Khaled Hroub, "Religion and Palestinian Nationalism," *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Nationalism*, ed. Jeffrey Haynes (Routledge, 2025), 291–309.

36 Anne de Jong, "Zionist Hegemony, the Settler Colonial Conquest of Palestine and the Problem with Conflict: A Critical Genealogy of the Notion of Binary Conflict," *Settler Colonial Studies* 8, no. 3 (2018): 364–383; Nadim N. Rouhana, "Religious Claims and Nationalism in Zionism: Obscuring Settler Colonialism," *When Politics Are Sacralized: Comparative Perspectives on Religious Claims and Nationalism*, ed. Nadim N. Rouhana and Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 54–87.

37 See, for example, Mitri Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, the People, the Bible* (Orbis Books, 2023); and Munther Isaac, *Christ in the Rubble: Faith, the Bible, and Genocide in Gaza* (Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Co., 2025).

38 Daniel Pipes, *Israel Victory: How Zionists Win Acceptance and Palestinians Get Liberated* (Wicked Son, 2024).

39 Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace,* 144–85.

Palestinians every day. Like other epistemologies that stem from the global south, the justice framework sees anticolonial resistance as a response to—and an attempt to dismantle—the far more pervasive violence of colonial domination itself.[40]

Some may object that defining frameworks in this way neither accounts for how notions of justice inform Zionist thought, nor addresses the myriad perceived shortcomings of settler colonial theory.[41] To clarify, these frameworks do not fully encompass the varied approaches to thinking about these topics. The comparative framework approach does not seek to pigeonhole a person's views or to insist that one framework has a monopoly on truth. Rather, the goal is to help students' and participants' dominant framework leads them to prioritize certain values, experiences, and data points, and to interpret them within a larger set of shared understandings.

This approach builds on elements of the "dual narrative" pedagogy that many instructors of Palestine/Israeli adopt in their classrooms.[42] It aims to bring elements of this pedagogy to interreligious encounters, but without pre-setting the parameters of acceptable discourse, assuming that ethnicities and frameworks are coterminous, or occluding students' justice-oriented worldviews. As we interrogate our own frameworks and learn more about the frameworks of others, the hope is that we can more effectively include the perspectives of students whose frameworks are often overlooked during interreligious encounters.

The first step in this process is understanding how these frameworks have emerged, to which we now turn.

Historical Emergence and Salience of the Three Frameworks

Most mainstream discourse in the United States on Palestine/Israel is essentially a debate between the two peace frameworks.[43] The justice

40 Hashemi, "Palestine, 190–94."

41 See, respectively, Chaim Gans, *A Just Zionism: On the Morality of the Jewish State* (Oxford University Press, 2008) and Adam Kirsch, *On Settler Colonialism: Ideology, Violence, and Justice* (W.W. Norton and Company, 2024).

42 See Rachel S. Harris, ed., *Teaching the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Wayne State University Press, 2019); and Aaron Hahn Tapper and Mira Sucharov, eds. *Social Justice and Israel/Palestine: Foundational and Contemporary Debates* (University of Toronto Press, 2019).

43 Amy Kaplan, *Our American Israel: The Story of an Entangled Alliance* (Harvard University Press, 2018).

framework—and pro-Palestinian viewpoints more broadly—have been largely dismissed, marginalized, and often criminalized, including within nominally progressive circles.[44] A brief historical overview traces how the peace frameworks became so deeply embedded in Western discourse and why the justice framework has recently gained traction, especially among young people.

Medieval European writers often depicted Islam as an existential threat to Christianity, a tendency that informed—and was exacerbated by—the Crusades, the Reconquista, and the Inquisition.[45] During the colonial period, Orientalist portrayals of Muslim and Arab societies as exotic, backward, and dangerous served to justify the conquest and plunder of their lands. Muslims and Arabs who fought against colonial rule were frequently portrayed as threats to Western civilization.[46]

In the United States, histories of religious prejudice, immigration, and foreign policy likewise marginalized the justice framework. For decades, Muslims were not considered to be "free white men" and were therefore largely barred from obtaining US citizenship. Changes in US immigration law in 1965 facilitated a larger number of people from Muslim-majority countries to immigrate, often to seek higher education and employment opportunities. Yet, as legal scholar Sahar Aziz shows, Muslim Americans were often racialized as "other," inferior, and threatening. She points to four factors that contributed to this racialization, including: "(1) White Protestant supremacy, (2) xenophobia arising from coercive assimilation into Western European cultural norms, (3) Orientalism, and (4) American empire in Muslim-majority countries."[47] These structures of domination contributed to the marginalization of Muslim American perspectives—which often align with the justice framework—in American public discourse.

The post-1965 waves of immigration also included growing numbers of Palestinians. Some were refugees who had been expelled from Palestine in 1948; others left behind families who were suffering under Israeli military occupation. They understood how America's military and diplomatic support for Israel directly harmed their people, yet many were also struck by

44 Khaled Elgindy, *Blind Spot: America and the Palestinians from Balfour to Trump* (Bloomsbury, 2019); Marc Lamont Hill and Mitchell Plitnick, *Except for Palestine: The Limits of Progressive Politics* (The New Press, 2021).

45 Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 [2004]), 21–37.

46 Lockman, *Contending Visions*, 66–99.

47 Sahar F. Aziz, *The Racial Muslim: When Racism Quashes Religious Freedom* (University of California Press, 2022), 4–5.

the widespread ignorance in the United States about the realities that Palestinians faced. Some Palestinians launched efforts to raise public awareness. They hoped that teaching Americans about Israel's violations of Palestinian human rights would convince the American public (and politicians) that unconditional US support for Israel ran afoul of America's self-proclaimed image as a champion of peace and human rights in the world.[48] Some activists tapped into more radical orientations of New Left and Black nationalist groups, drawing "parallels between Palestinian freedom fighters and other Third World revolutionaries in a strategy to gain broader support."[49]

But that justice framework—which portrayed the conflict as stemming from colonial oppression, rather than from religious difference—ran counter to the peace-through-surrender framework that was then dominant in the United States. The latter framework, popularized by the bestselling 1958 novel, *Exodus*, and the 1960 blockbuster movie of the same name, celebrated Israel's independence as a heroic culmination of Jewish religious yearning and as a modernizing project akin to that of the United States. This framework centered the Holocaust—not decolonization—as the central event of the twentieth century, and it depicted Palestinian resistance to Zionist colonialism as being rooted in animus against Jews, rather than in anticolonialism.[50]

Throughout the 1970s and '80s, Palestinians formed alliances with other peoples from the global south and drew on a shared language of decolonization. In the United States, Palestinians were active in the movement to end apartheid, and anti-apartheid activists supported the Palestinian cause. As South African anti-apartheid leader Nelson Mandela explained in 1990, he identified with Palestinians because "just like ourselves they are fighting for the right of self-determination."[51]

48 Pamela E. Pennock, *The Rise of the Arab American Left: Activists, Allies, and Their Fight Against Imperialism and Racism, 1960s–1980s* (Univeristy of North Carolina Press, 2017).

49 Pennock, *Rise*, 59.

50 Kaplan, *Our American Israel*, 58-93; Maha Nassar, "Exodus, Nakba Denialism, and the Mobilization of Anti-Arab Racism," *Critical Sociology* 49, no. 6 (2023): 1037–1051. To see how this history is filtered through a peace-through-surrender framework, see Walter Russell Mead, *The Arc of a Covenant: The United States, Israel, and the Fate of the Jewish People* (Knopf, 2022).

51 Huthifa Fayyad, "Nelson Mandela and Palestine: In His Own Words," *Middle East Eye*, February 11, 2020, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/nelson-mandela-30-years-palestine.

With the end of the Cold War and the emergence of the US as the sole remaining superpower, the language of decolonization waned. Palestinians began calling for a truncated state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip instead. As global calls for a two-state solution grew louder, the peace-through-dialogue framework gained salience. During the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations known as the Oslo peace process (1993–2000), the US cast itself as an honest broker between two groups of roughly equal power, urging each side to make painful concessions and marginalize their respective extremists. Palestinians were now reframed as potential partners for peace, but only if they engaged in dialogue and discarded their calls for full national liberation.[52]

The peace-through-dialogue framework proved frustrating to Palestinians. Those living under Israeli occupation continued to face interrogations at militarized checkpoints, late-night army raids on their homes, arbitrary arrest and detention, incarceration without trial, and state-inflicted physical and sexual torture.[53] These well-worn tools of colonial domination impacted the daily lives of all Palestinians living under Israeli military rule (and continue today).[54]

But the impact of this colonial violence was largely ignored by both peace frameworks. Instead, they focused on instances of Palestinian violence, most notably suicide bombings, decoupling this phenomenon from its broader colonial context.[55] The peace-through-surrender framework cited such instances of Palestinian violence to advance the claim that Palestinians as a whole were uninterested in achieving a negotiated peace.[56] Meanwhile, the peace-through-dialogue framework tended to set up a "good Palestinian/bad Palestinian" binary: Palestinians who embraced the Oslo process were

52 Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* (Macmillan, 2005). For a critical assessment of the US role in Israel-Palestinian negotiations, see, Rashid Khalidi, *Brokers of Deceit: How the US Has Undermined Peace in the Middle East* (Beacon Press, 2013).

53 Amnesty International, "Israel's Apartheid Against Palestinians: Cruel System of Domination and Crime Against Humanity," *Amnesty International*, February 1, 2022, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde15/5141/2022/en/.

54 Rania Muhareb, et. al., "Israeli Apartheid: Tool of Zionist Settler Colonialism," *Al-Haq*, November 29, 2022, https://www.alhaq.org/cached_uploads/download/2022/12/22/israeli-apartheid-web-final-1-page-view-1671712165.pdf.

55 On the relationship between suicide bombings and colonial violence, see Nasser Abufarha, *The Making of a Human Bomb: Ethnography of Palestinian Resistance* (North Carolina University Press, 2009).

56 See, for example, Kenneth Levin, *The Oslo Syndrome: Delusions of a People Under Siege* (Smith and Kraus, 2005).

hailed as pragmatic moderates while critics were denounced as anti-peace extremists.[57]

Meanwhile in the United States, Muslims, Arabs, and especially Palestinians continued to be racialized as a threat. This resulted in increased government persecution, often done in the name of "combating terrorism."[58] Government persecution intensified in the wake of the Second Intifada (2000–2005), the September 11th attacks, and the so-called Global War on Terror. Law enforcement officials conducted sweeping raids of homes, offices, and mosques, and they arrested, detained, and deported thousands of Muslims, Arabs, and Palestinians, sometimes relying on secret evidence to do so.[59]

As a result, throughout the 2000s, members of these communities—and their allies—were subjected to two hegemonic peace frameworks that proved difficult to overcome. The peace-through-surrender framework cast Muslims, Arabs, and Palestinians as inherently threatening, while the peace-through-dialogue framework set up political litmus tests (such as "condemning terrorism") for them to be conditionally accepted as moderates. Meanwhile, Israeli colonial violence—and Palestinians' experiences of that violence—continued to be erased in news coverage, K-12 curricula, and wide swaths of academia. [60] Those erasures further entrenched the peace frameworks in American discourse while marginalizing the justice framework.

Despite these structural barriers, over the past two decades, the justice framework has gained traction, especially among young people. Young Americans are generally more diverse and more interested in enacting social and political change, while new media and social media platforms allow them to learn (often from other young people) how different structures of power intersect with one another.[61] The rise of other justice-oriented

57 I draw here on Mamdani's "good Muslim/bad Muslim" binary. See Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (Harmony, 2005). For an example of this framework, see Ross, *The Missing Peace*. On how Palestinians contended with these discursive constraints, see Edward W. Said, *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After* (Vintage, 2007).

58 Aziz, *The Racial Muslim*, 113–32.

59 Aziz, *The Racial Muslim*, 169–89; Khaled Beydoun, *American Islamophobia: Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear* (University of California Press, 2019).

60 Evelyn Alsultany, Arabs and *Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York University Press, 2012); Antero Garcia, Rubén A. González, Kristen Jackson, and Nicole Mirra, "Teaching About Palestine in US Schools From the 1980s to Present Day: A Systematic Review of Research," *Educational Researcher* (2025): DOI: 0013189X251365922; Lara Deeb and Jessica Winegar, *Anthropology's Politics: Disciplining the Middle East* (Stanford University Press, 2020).

61 "Americans Under 30 Now About Equally Likely to Trust Information from

movements, including racial justice, climate justice, and gender justice movements, has further normalized critiques of structural violence while foregrounding the need to dismantle oppressive systems.[62]

For many young people whose families hail from the global south, the legacies of colonialism—coupled with their news consumption habits—deeply impact their views on Palestine. They often follow social media accounts of young Palestinians living under occupation, allowing them to see firsthand (and in very visceral ways) Israel's discrimination, dehumanization, and killing of Palestinians. Those images often echo their own families' painful stories of colonial violence, leading them to develop of deep sense of connectedness with Palestinians. Muslims in particular are pained that Israel's restrictions on praying at the Aqsa Mosque (Islam's third holiest site) and desecration of Muslim holy sites continue unabated.[63] These policies, along with the exhaustively documented Israeli abuses of Palestinians human rights, "serve as a constant reminder for Muslims [and their allies] that colonialism is alive and well."[64]

In response, young people in the US have begun revisiting the tools of decolonization that helped earlier movements end formal colonial rule. In 2005, they began mobilizing around the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, modeled on the South African campaign that helped end apartheid there.[65] On college and university campuses, student activists worked across broad coalitions to pass BDS resolutions at their respective institutions.[66] Such campaigns, coupled with a broad range of transnational

National News Outlets, Social Media," *Pew Research Center*, October 29, 2025, available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/10/29/how-americans-trust-in-information-from-news-organizations-and-social-media-sites-has-changed-over-time/sr_25-10-29_trust-in-info_2/.

62 Melissa Deckman, "The Power of Diverse Networks among Young Americans," *Public Religion Research Institute* (*PRRI*), January 30, 2024, https://prri.org/spotlight/the-power-of-diverse-networks-among-young-americans/; "The Gen Z Activism Survey," *United Way of the National Capital Area*, March 5, 2024, https://unitedwaynca.org/blog/gen-z-activism-survey/.

63 Amnesty International, "Israel's Apartheid," 176; US Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, "West Bank and Gaza 2023 International Religious Freedom Report," *US Department of State*, 2024, https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/israel-west-bank-and-gaza/west-bank-and-gaza/.

64 Hashemi, "Palestine," 200.

65 For more on the BDS movement, see "BDS Call," *BDS Movement*, 2025, https://bdsmovement.net/bds-call.

66 For a list of successful BDS campaigns, including on college campuses, see "US BDS Victories," *US Campaign for Palestinian Rights*, published July 25, 2022, last

pro-Palestine activism, ushered in a profound shift in US public opinion on Palestine.[67]

Seeking to quell the pro-Palestine student movement and the BDS campaign, pro-Israel advocacy organizations have sought to label them as antisemitic. Canary Mission, founded in 2015, targets hundreds of pro-Palestine students and professors by posting their photos, dossiers, and personal information online to dox them and to jeopardize their employment.[68] Such campaigns, in line with the peace-through-surrender framework, often draw on anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, and anti-Palestinian racist tropes in an effort to silence pro-Palestine speech.[69]

In the face of these intimidation tactics, university leaders have frequently been caught flat-footed in the face of campaigns that seek to demonize Palestinian and pro-Palestine students. While administrators often issue statements affirming students' right to free speech, they tend to simultaneously disavow "hate speech." Yet by characterizing calls for Palestinian liberation as hate speech, such statements unwittingly adopt elements of the peace frameworks while delegitimizing the justice framework. In doing so, such statements can perpetuate anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, and anti-Palestinian racist tropes, even as universities try to incorporate these groups into their diversity initiatives.[70]

With this understanding of the three frameworks, their history, and their salience, we next examine how these frameworks have shaped interreligious encounters.

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updated March 14, 2025, https://uscpr.org/activist-resource/boycott-divestment-and-sanctions/bdswins/.

67 Karam Dana, *To Stand with Palestine: Transnational Resistance and Political Evolution in the United States* (Columbia University Press, 2025). Regarding the shift in US public opinion over the past two decades, see "Less Than Half in U.S. Now Sympathetic Toward Israelis," *Gallup*, March 6, 2025, https://news.gallup.com/poll/657404/less-half-sympathetic-toward-israelis.aspx.

68 Middle East Studies Association Committee on Academic Freedom, "Exposing Canary Mission: A Resource for College and University Leaders," *Middle East Studies Association*, April 18, 2018, https://mesana.org/pdf/Exposing_Canary_Mission.pdf.

69 Omar Zahzah, "The New McCarthyism: On Canary Mission's Toxic Blacklisting of Pro-Palestinian Sentiment," *Literary Hub*, September 24, 2025, https://lithub.com/the-new-mccarthyism-on-canary-missions-toxic-blacklisting-of-pro-palestinian-sentiment/.

70 Evelyn Alsultany, *Broken: The Failed Promise of Muslim Inclusion* (New York University Press, 2022), 193–207. For more on anti-Palestinian racism, see "Anti-Palestinian Racism: One-Page Summary," *The Institute for the Understanding of Anti-Palestinian Racism*, last updated 2025, https://antipalestinianracism.org/anti-palestinian-racism-one-page-summary/.

Interreligious Encounters through the Peace and Justice Frameworks

The peace-through-surrender framework, which often casts Islam and Muslims as being inherently hostile to Jews and the West, tends to show little interest in interreligious encounters. As a result, most traditional interfaith dialogue programs emanate from the peace-through-dialogue framework. Yet by utilizing religion as "a depoliticizing peacebuilding instrument, a 'soft power' deployed in reconfiguring realities of domination," such programs can end up reproducing systems of hierarchy and control that marginalize those who adopt the justice framework.[71]

We see such marginalization in otherwise well-meaning programs that seek to facilitate interfaith dialogue. For example, published training manuals for interreligious encounters on US college campuses tend to center Zionist students' personal attachments to Israel while downplaying or ignoring the personal attachments and ethical commitments that Palestinian students and their allies have toward Palestine. In a recent handbook aimed at helping student affairs staff navigate religious difference, the three chapters that discuss Palestine/Israel all highlight Zionist Jewish students' feelings and connections to Israel. But they do not contain any discussion of how Palestinians and their allies personally relate to Palestine, whether as a homeland, a holy land, or an ethical calling. The pro-Palestine perspective is only offered within the context of abstract political debates.[72] Practitioners are therefore left with a myopic view of how students personally engage with Palestine/Israel.

Such presentations also ignore how colonial legacies shape students' worldviews. Centering Jewish attachments to Israel can erase the ways in which Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian students, along with their allies, deeply believe that their moral, ethical and religious commitments to combat oppression in all its forms require them to stand publicly for Palestinian liberation. And students frequently do so despite the physical and professional risks they face. As the Muslim Law Student Association at the University of Michigan explained in 2021, "[p]rofessional retaliation for

71 Omer et al., "Touring Absences," 318.

72 Kathleen M. Goodman, Mary Ellen Giess, and Eboo Patel, eds. *Educating about Religious Diversity and Interfaith Engagement: A Handbook for Student Affairs* (Stylus Publishing, LLC, 2019). The three chapters are: Megan Lane, "When Causes Collide: Exploring Intersectionality and the Middle East Conflict," 187–93; Megan Lane, "Engaging with Religious Diversity on a Regular Basis," 194–99; and Sheila Katz and Josh Feigelson, "Understanding Jewish Students on Campus," 246–60.

Palestine related work is not a Muslim-specific issue, however, it impacts the Muslim community in disparate ways." Yet, they insisted, they would remain steadfast in their work because "the shared trauma Muslims experience by witnessing the destruction of Palestinian communities, the desecration of revered Islamic holy sites, and the Islamophobic language often surrounding the issue is undeniable."[73]

Despite their deep personal, spiritual, and ethical commitments to Palestinian liberation, all too often Muslims are expected to downplay those commitments during interfaith gatherings. Foregrounding Palestinian experiences in interfaith settings is often portrayed as "partisan" and a violation of the supposed "neutral, apolitical space" of interfaith dialogue.[74] Muslims also worry that their efforts to make Palestinian experiences more visible will result in them being labeled antisemitic.[75] In recent years, the term "faithwashing" has emerged to describe how interreligious gatherings are set up in ways that foreclose discussions of Palestinians' experiences and the moral stakes of affirming clearly their right to live freely in their homeland. The result has been a growing discomfort among Muslims to engage in interreligious activities.[76]

October 7th and the Genocide in Gaza: Institutional Responses and Student Encampments

The consequences of these longstanding asymmetries became apparent in the aftermath of the October 7th attack and the subsequent genocide in Gaza.[77] Presidential statements sent in the days immediately following

73 Cited in Evelyn Alsultany, *Broken*, 202.

74 See for example, Yehezkel Landau, "Adaptive Facilitation: A Requirement for Interfaith Discussions on Israel/Palestine," in Mosher, et. al., eds., *With the Best*, 116.

75 Sahar Aziz and Mitchell Plitnick, "Presumptively Antisemitic: Islamophobic Tropes in the Palestine-Israel Discourse," *Rutgers Law School's Center for Security, Race and Rights*, November 2023, https://csrr.rutgers.edu/issues/presumptively-antisemitic/, 48–50.

76 Sunaina Maira, "Muslim American Youth and Post-9/11 Islamophobia: Interfaith Activism and the Limits of Religious Multiculturalism," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Islamophobia*, ed. Irene Zempi (Routledge, 2019), 379–95.

77 Raz Segal was the first genocide scholar to publicly state that Israel was committing a genocide in Gaza. See Raz Segal, "A Textbook Case of Genocide," *Jewish Currents*, October 13, 2023, https://jewishcurrents.org/a-textbook-case-of-genocide. Since then, numerous other scholars and international bodies have concluded that Israel is conducting a genocide in Gaza. See, for example, United Nations Independent Commission of Inquiry, "Legal Analysis of the Conduct of

October 7th frequently adopted one-sided, pro-Israel framings.[78] In some cases, presidential statements made Palestinian and pro-Palestine students feel directly attacked.[79] In other cases, vague wording left them unsure about where they stood with their institutional leadership.

Within the first few weeks alone, Israel's bombing of camps, hospitals, and other civilian targets in Gaza had killed nearly 9,000 Palestinians, mainly civilians.[80] Justice-oriented students followed the news through direct reporting from friends and local journalists in Gaza. Reports included horrific firsthand accounts of civilian deaths and stomach-churning images of maimed and charred Palestinian bodies. Moved by their personal connections and ethical commitments to the people of Gaza, and building on years of transnational solidarity activism, student activists decided to do what they could to choke off the seemingly endless supply of US aid and weapons to Israel. To that end, they sought to uncover their universities' financial ties to companies that profited from the genocide in Gaza and to urge them to divest.[81] Most administrators refused to disclose, let alone divest from, their universities' investments. The refusals spurred an unprecedented wave of student protests demanding an immediate ceasefire, that universities disclose their financial investments, and that they divest from companies that profit from genocide.[82]

Israel in Gaza Pursuant to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment for the Crime of Genocide," *United Nations Human Rights Council*, September 16, 2025, https://www.un.org/unispal/document/commission-of-inquiry-report-genocide-in-gaza-a-hrc-60-crp-3/.

78 Hilary Houlette, "Amid the Fray: A Thematic Discourse Analysis of Presidential Statements Issued in Response to the 2023 War in Israel and Palestine," *Innovative Higher Education* 49, no. 5 (2024): 927–952.

79 Paola Rodriguez, "Pro-Palestine Protest Canceled Following UA President Statement," *Arizona Public Media*, October 12, 2023, https://news.azpm.org/p/azpmnews/2023/10/12/217767-pro-palestine-protest-canceled-following-ua-president-statement/; Mariam Hawatmeh, "Belonging Through Collective Forbearance: A Case Study of Resilience, Campus Climate and the Experiences of Arabic-Speaking International Students at the University of Arizona" (PhD diss., The University of Arizona, 2025).

80 "Israel-Palestine Crisis: Gaza's North Cut Off from Aid; Death Toll Rising," *UN News*, November 2, 2023, https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/11/1143107.

81 Derek Seidman, "Using Research to Uncover Campus Complicity in Genocide," *Jacobin*, September 29, 2024, https://jacobin.com/2024/09/power-research-universities-palestine-1968.

82 On the size of the protests, see "Israel/Palestine Protest Data Dashboards," Crowd-Counting Consortium, February 26, 2024, https://ash.harvard.edu/articles/crowd-counting-blog-israel-palestine-protest-data-dashboards/. On protesters' demands, see "'Divest from Israel': Decoding the Gaza Protest Call Shaking US Campuses," Aljazeera, April 30, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/

Instead, several universities convened interfaith dialogues. But such events proved unsatisfactory to justice-oriented students because they did not see religion as the source of the problem to begin with. As one Muslim student at the University of Michigan explained, "You can't have your chaplains meet up for so-called authentic, respectful dialogue in a sanitized setting when students feel so deeply about their university being complicit in a genocide."[83] Students expressed frustration that their chaplains were misdiagnosing the problem, and in doing so, failing to provide students with the tools they needed to confront what they saw as the most pressing moral and spiritual challenge of their lives.

Other universities launched campus events on "Islamophobia and Antisemitism." But these, too, left justice-oriented students feeling alienated. By framing Israel's war in Gaza—and its reverberations on US college campuses—as a conflict rooted in religious animus, university leaders actively privileged the peace frameworks over the justice framework. Moreover, using the term "Islamophobia" further erased Palestinians' unique experiences as well as the political and military contexts that justice-oriented students saw as the core driver of conflict.[84] Likewise, pairing the term "Islamophobia" with "antisemitism" erased the experiences of anti-Zionist Jews and reinforced stereotypes about Arabs, Muslims, and Palestinians being inherently antisemitic.[85] Thus, framing university-led conversations in this way narrowed the range of permissible viewpoints and eroded these students' trust that their universities were spaces for critical inquiry and moral courage.

By April 2024, the genocide in Gaza had passed the six-month mark with no end in sight. International organizations issued grim reports: over 32,000 Palestinians killed, 75% of the population displaced, 84% of health facilities damaged or destroyed, and a collapsed education system.[86] Student

news/2024/4/30/divest-from-israel-breaking-down-the-us-student-protesters-demands.

83 Dilshad D. Ali, "After Spring Protests and Encampments: How Chaplains are Caring for Student Spiritual Health," *Interfaith America*, October 10, 2024, https://www.interfaithamerica.org/article/chaplains-caring-student-spiritual-health/.

84 Evelyn Alsultany, "Antisemitism and Islamophobia: The University's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion Response to October 7, 2023," Journal of Palestine Studies 53, no. 4 (2024): 8–24, 11.

85 Alsultany, "Antisemitism"; Aziz and Plitnick, "Presumptively Antisemitic."

86 "Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel: Flash Update # 149, *United Nations OCHA*, April 3, 2024, https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-149#:~:text=Between%207%20October%202023%20and, according%20to%20MoH%20in%20Gaza; "Gaza Strip Interim Damage

activists saw their universities' refusal to disclose and divest as a function of outside pressures from donors, parents, alumni, trustees, and politicians. In response, some students decided to ratchet up their counterpressure. As a Columbia encampment spokesperson explained, "We have tried referendums, we have tried peacefully protesting—at every turn, they [university officials] have violated their own policies to crack down, and so we decided that an escalation was necessary because we refuse to have this [genocide] go on for any longer."[87]

Student protesters reported that the encampments were some of the only places on campus where they felt empowered to channel their personal pain into a movement for broader change. As one student from Middlebury College explained, the encampment "was really a community collectively doing what we feel like we could to influence the ongoing genocide but also challenge the systems of domination that are furthering the genocide, the same systems that are doing so much bad."[88] For many students, the encampments were not just about supporting the Palestinians, but about challenging broader structures of injustice, including on their own campuses.

In a bid to force the encampments to disband, administrators at several schools cut student protesters off from institutional access, including access to chaplains. In response, student protesters began to lead their own interreligious encounters in ways that reflected their shared justice framework. At the Harvard encampment, students jointly offered Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Indigenous, and Jewish blessings. In contrast to traditional interfaith services, the student protesters saw their shared religious rituals as being in service to—not in place of—collective work toward Palestinian liberation. As Harvard Divinity School graduate student Shir Lovett-Graff explained, "It was a really incredible opportunity to redefine what multifaith gathering could look like … to share ritual traditions with

Assessment," *The World Bank*, Summary Note, March 29, 2024, https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/14e309cd34e04e40b90eb19afa7b5d15-0280012024/original/Gaza-Interim-Damage-Assessment-032924-Final.pdf.

87 Instagram post, NYCPYM, April 17, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C54bO1gNkqq/?hl=en. See also Anna Rajagopal and Kaitlyn Cook, "Columbia's Gaza Solidarity Encampment: A Timeline," *Institute for Palestine Studies* blog, May 4, 2024, https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1655523.

88 "Anonymous Gaza Solidarity Encampment Oral History Transcript," *Middlebury College Special Collections*, 2025, https://archive.org/details/moh_c181_2025-encampment-senior-student_002.

people not from those traditions, and to re-create those traditions within a Palestine justice framework."[89]

Student protesters also saw interfaith gatherings as a means of mutual protection. At the University of California, Berkeley, Muslims at the encampment there gathered for Friday communal prayers while allies formed a protective cordon around them, ensuring that worshippers would not be attacked by police or counter-protesters. Together they listened to sermons about Muslims' duty to protect the weak and to stand up to tyranny, highlighting the intersections between Islamic teachings and the justice framework.[90]

These types of gatherings were especially meaningful for students who felt under attack by their own universities. Columbia University student Serena Rasoul reported feeling isolated on her campus as a Palestinian American, especially in the weeks following October 7th. For her, the encampment "was just such a joyful experience" because it "was the only place that we felt safe and could fully be our authentic selves." That authenticity was enhanced by being in community with people from different religions. Rasoul explained, "We had Buddhist meditation circles early in the morning, we had Shabbat dinner on Fridays, we had a Seder dinner for Passover, we had salah [Muslim prayers] throughout the day on Sunday."[91]

Jewish protesters in the encampments often undertook the additional hermeneutical move of decoupling Judaism from Zionism, thereby reorienting their historical and religious traditions toward what they saw as a more inclusive understanding of liberation.[92] With the Columbia encampment falling on Passover, graduate student Jared Kannel explained how he rejected an identity-centered understanding of the holiday, observing it instead within a broader justice framework: "Passover is the story of our escape from slavery in the land of Egypt, and I think we need to recognize

89 Quoted in Chloë-Arizona Fodor, "'The protest is a ritual': How faith found a place in Palestine solidarity encampments," *Religion News Service*, June 13, 2024, https://religionnews.com/2024/06/13/encampment-ritual/.

90 Hatem Bazian, "Juma at UC Berkeley's Solidarity Camp," posted April 26, 2024, YouTube, 1hr. and 19 min., https://www.youtube.com/live/V64QlRPDfN0?si=fk6eVABHzqF4c-W3.

91 Kholood Eid, "The Beauty of the Gaza Encampment at Columbia," *Hammer & Hope* 4, Summer 2024, https://hammerandhope.org/article/columbia-encampment-gaza.

92 In doing so, they were drawing on a larger tradition of Jewish anti-Zionist praxis. See Omer, *Days of Awe*.

that on Passover it's important to stand up for oppressed people everywhere, whether they're Jewish or not."[93]

In other words, far from seeing religious difference as a source of friction that needed to be transcended for the sake of achieving peace, students at the encampments treated each other's religious traditions as a shared source of spiritual nourishment as they worked together toward achieving justice. In doing so, they developed their own decolonial religious literacy that centered on their belief that the liberation of all people is interdependent.

Within a few weeks, these interreligious solidarity activities were quashed, along with the encampments themselves. On several campuses, administrators sent in police to break up the gatherings, issued suspensions to student leaders, and withheld diplomas from those about to graduate.[94] Such actions further reinforced the stereotype that pro-Palestine activists – and the justice framework they espoused – were inherently dangerous. The results were a chilling of speech and a reluctance among students of various political beliefs to talk about Palestine/Israel.[95] Palestinian students and their allies were hit especially hard. Studies conducted by Stanford and Harvard universities reported that longstanding institutional biases, coupled with university responses to student protests paved the way for pro-Palestine students to be harassed, doxed, and attacked on and off campus, as well as online.[96] These narratives and policies also served as the political scaffolding that the Trump administration later used to arrest and try to deport pro-Palestine students.[97]

93 "Inside the Seder Dinner on Columbia's Gaza Protest Encampment," *CNN*, April 23, 2024, https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/23/us/video/seder-passover-columbia-university-protests-ny-digvid.

94 Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) and College Pulse, "2024 Student Encampment Protests Report," 2024, https://reports.collegepulse.com/hubfs/Student_Encampment_Protests.pdf?hsLang=en.

95 "2025 College Free Speech Rankings Expose Threats to First Amendment Rights on Campus," *FIRE*, September 5, 2024, https://www.thefire.org/news/2025-college-free-speech-rankings-expose-threats-first-amendment-rights-campus.

96 Stanford University, "Rupture and Repair;" Harvard University, "Final Report."

97 American Association of University Professors (AAUP), "Crackdowns on Campus Protest," *AAUP*, December 2024, https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/AAUP_Campus_Protests.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com; "Trump and Project Esther Seek to Dismantle Campus Advocacy for Palestinian Rights," *Institute for Middle East Understanding Policy Project*, Policy Project Memo, 2025, https://www.imeupolicyproject.org/memos/trump-and-project-esther-seek-to-dismantle-campus-advocacy-for-palestinian-rights.

Looking Ahead: Addressing Imbalances on Campus and Beyond

Thus far, we have discussed cases of interreligious encounters in which participants generally share the same framework. Looking ahead, the challenge for colleges and universities will be to foster more inclusive campus programming that engages people across different frameworks. The good news is that interreligious studies scholars, educators, and practitioners—working together with subject matter experts—are well-positioned to contribute to this effort.

To be sure, college and university campuses face differing levels of pressure—both internal and external—that will inform what types of activities can be undertaken. Likewise, many facilitators may be uncomfortable wading into what they see as risky political territory. Yet, as we have seen above, efforts to strip interreligious encounters from their broader political context can end up silencing those students whose perspectives and lived experiences do not allow for such segmentation.

Below I offer six suggestions to begin ameliorating some of the current imbalances on campus and beyond.

1. *Undertake self-reflection*. Each of us has a primary framework that shapes how we approach conversations about Palestine/Israel. Those who claim to be "neutral" or say they see "both sides of the conflict" are likely operating from the peace-through-dialogue framework. The goal here is to critically reflect on how we acquired our primary framework and begin learning more about other frameworks. Ask yourself: What underlying values and assumptions inform how I see the world? What lived experiences, personal connections, and media selections shape my worldview? Which frameworks are less familiar to me? How can I learn more about those frameworks?

2. *Encourage comparative framework analyses*. When facilitating interactions, whether during interreligious encounters, class meetings, or campus events, encourage participants to compare their own primary framework with those of others. A comparative framework analysis—in which participants compare texts, pictures, media stories, etc. and discuss their underlying assumptions—can help them process different worldviews in ways that are not directly tied to their identity. Be sure the justice framework is included: Efforts to discourage the use of terms like "settler colonialism," "apartheid," and "genocide" in discussions of Palestine/Israel effectively try to

delegitimize the justice framework. While these terms may offend some people, they are central to any analysis of structural power in Palestine/Israel. Avoiding them would further exclude the justice framework.

3. *Center frameworks over feelings*. As students encounter unfamiliar frameworks, they may experience discomfort and even feel aggrieved. Such feelings are normal, especially if they feel their identity is being attacked. Teachers can create "spaces of repair" in their classrooms to help students move through discussions of controversial topics.[98] It is also imperative that facilitators help students recognize the difference "feeling unsafe" and "being unsafe." This is especially urgent given the ways in which the IHRA definition of antisemitism and allegations of Jewish unsafety have been used by outside groups to demonize and silence pro-Palestine students.[99] To be sure, we must confront instances of antisemitism when they occur, but we should do so as part of our shared commitment to ending all forms of discrimination.[100]

4. *Host series, not dialogues.* Single events that purport to present "both sides" of a topic related to Palestine/Israel are usually ineffective. Conversations in which all participants share a peace-through-dialogue framework tend to minimize the role of colonial violence as a central driver of conflict. Events in which speakers come from different frameworks frequently devolve into heated debates that provide little educational value. Rather than "one-and-done" events, consider hosting a series of talks, film screenings, and art exhibits that include the justice framework. Ensure the histories, analyses, and experiences of colonialism and decolonization are well represented.

98 Lisa Dillinger, "A Duty to Repair: Navigating the Context and Complexity of Discussing Controversial Issues," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 44, no. 4 (2025): 377–394.

99 AAUP and Middle East Studies Association (MESA), "Discriminating Against Dissent: The Weaponization of Civil Rights Law to Repress Campus Speech on Palestine," November 2025, https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/2025-11/Discriminating-Against-Dissent_0.pdf.

100 See Shane Burley and Ben Lorber, *Safety Through Solidarity: A Radical Guide to Fighting Antisemitism* (Melville House, 2024); and "Curriculum on Antisemitism from a Framework of Collective Liberation," *PARCEO*, https://www.antisemitismcurriculum.org.

5. *Resist outside pressure campaigns*. Expanding campus programming in this way may lead to accusations of platforming antisemitic viewpoints. Recognize that such accusations are often intended to shut down more inclusive conversations about Palestine/Israel.[101] It is imperative that universities stand firm in their commitment to free speech and academic freedom while also rejecting efforts to link expressions of the justice framework to antisemitism. The same holds for campus protests. To be sure, universities have a responsibility to set time, place, and manner rules and to maintain firm norms against harassment and personal attacks. But the rules must be applied equally, fairly, and transparently.

6. *Learn from student protesters.* The field of interreligious studies awaits further research into the interfaith solidarity activities that were held at the encampments. Scholars should work with organizers to collect and archive encampment ephemera (scriptures, reading lists, social media posts, etc.) and undertake in-depth textual analyses. In addition, more surveys, interviews, and longitudinal studies of encampment participants are sorely needed. They can help us better understand how the spiritual nourishment participants received from their peers has impacted them over time.

In sum, using a comparative framework analysis in discussions of Palestine/Israel incorporates a wider range of experiences and perspectives than traditional dialogue formats allow. This is especially needed given the historic exclusion of those whose lived experiences and ethical worldviews lead them to adopt the justice framework. While this approach does not claim to have all the answers, it can help us ask better questions, engage more student perspectives, and create more inclusive campus climates. Similar comparative framework analyses can also be used to facilitate discussions of other controversial topics. As we face a range of forces that seek to silence dissident voices in the United States and around the world, doing this work is more important than ever.

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101 AAUP and MESA, "Discriminating Against Dissent."

***Maha Nassar**, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the School of Global Studies and the School of Middle Eastern and North African Studies at the University of Arizona.*

The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles, essays, and other contributions published in the Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS) are solely those of the respective contributors and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views, opinions, or positions of the JIRS publishing partners, the JIRS editorial staff, editors, editorial board, or the employees, officers, board of directors, advisory board, affiliates, or financial sponsors of Interreligious Studies Media (ISM).

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ARTICLE

A Subversive Pedagogy for Teaching Palestine/Israel

Atalia Omer

Abstract

In this article I show that teaching with intellectual integrity means we have to name what the evidence presents as what it is. Teaching with intellectual integrity means resisting the overwhelming force of institutional gaslighting. I first sketch what the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism is and its history before turning to how its adoption makes teaching Palestine/Israel with intellectual integrity impossible by design. I then discuss, secondly, how I navigated the demands of intellectual (and ethical) integrity in my courses on Palestine/Israel. I introduce my multifocal pedagogical methodology and use of the syllabi to counter epistemic violence. Finally, I return to the question of why it is crucial to use the correct words and concepts to describe what we are talking about when we teach Palestine/Israel and why such intellectual integrity and analytic precision not only rectify the epistemic violence that denied Palestinian narratives of what Zionism has meant for their experiences. Such analytic clarity also reaches beyond Zionist and Israeli historiography to multiple Jewish counter-archives. Introducing students to alternative Jewish historical and religio-cultural archives is especially generative in situating the study of Palestine/Israel within a broader examination of Christian European modernity and in pointing toward a constructive reimagining of Jewishness in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Keywords

Palestine/Israel, decolonial pedagogies, epistemic violence, Gaza genocide, Title VI, academic freedom, IHRA; Israel Studies, Palestine Studies, Nakba, "The New Antisemitism", settler-colonialism, weaponized antisemitism

The Challenge of Teaching with Integrity in the Academic Gulags

In a discussion on the Chris Hedges Report (released on October 8, 2025), eminent Palestinian historian Rashid Khalidi reflected on "the anticipatory obedience" of US universities and their exploitation of the post-October 7th moment to push forward goals they have long pursued—specifically, reducing the ability to teach honestly about Palestine and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Khalidi said: "I just want to talk about ... what do we lose by creating, in essence, these academic gulags where any criticism of genocide can see you suspended or expelled?" He specifically refers to how his own Columbia University embraced the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, a definition widely challenged and discredited by scholars of antisemitism, who also proposed alternative definitions that distinguish between a political project in the MENA region and Jewish communities.[1] For Khalidi, adopting the IHRA definition has effectively prevented him from teaching his courses at Columbia with academic integrity and evidence-based accountability. As a result, he decided to teach them off campus in Fall 2025.

IHRA is the acronym for the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, which put forward a working definition of antisemitism that has already become hegemonic before, but in an accelerated fashion since the time of the Gaza genocide. It grounds itself on the conflation and equation of Jews with Zionism and Israel as a political project. A series of examples includes a stipulation that any discussion of Israel as "a racist endeavor" amounts to antisemitism. Based on this example alone, it becomes impossible to actually teach Palestine/Israel with integrity without being subjected to what Khalidi calls "Kangaroo Courts," or the disciplinary bodies put in place by universities, often inhabited by people who are not experts in the study of antisemitism as a historical phenomenon. Similarly, Khalidi's long-time colleague Marianne Hirsch at Columbia University, the William Peterfield Trent Professor Emerita of English and Comparative Literature and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, withdrew from teaching her post-retirement course because Columbia adopted the IHRA definition. A daughter of Holocaust survivors, Hirsch, who teaches

1 E.g. British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) and European Legal Support Center (ELSC), "Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom in the UK Higher Education: The Adverse Impact of the IHRA Definition of Antisemitism," *Institute for Jewish Policy Research*, September 2023, https://archive.jpr.org.uk/object-3797; Moshe Behar, "The IHRA's Careless Conflations on Antisemitism (and a Few Alternatives)," *Contending Modernities*, March 25, 2021, https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/global-currents/inhra-careless-conflations/.

about genocides, shared in an interview with the Associated Press that "A university that treats criticism of Israel as antisemitic and threatens sanctions for those who disobey is no longer a place of inquiry … I just don't see how I can teach about genocide in that environment."[2]

I start with these notable examples to highlight the repressive and punitive regime under which teaching about Palestine/Israel occurs, raising serious concerns for academic freedom overall. Facing this repression and widespread top-down efforts to control and manipulate the narrative, the pedagogical conversation effectively ceases to be truly pedagogical. Before proceeding, I anticipate claims of false equivalence that respond to critiques such as Hirsch's and Khalidi's by asserting that Middle East Studies departments are fully dominated by anti-Zionist professors whose ideology infuses their teaching. According to this line of argumentation, which was also articulated by one of the anonymous referees of this article, identical claims of academic repression could be equally "made by the other side." Let me underscore that "the other side" is not, by definition, delegitimized or even criminalized as in the case with Palestine Studies. As a third referee of this article underscored in response to the argument of false equivalency, maybe it is true that every faculty member at Columbia is an anti-Zionist, but that does not make it true that they, or their pedagogy, is antisemitic. The IHRA definition has been used to make this claim and effectively partake in Palestinian scholasticide, a term depicting the actual destruction of Palestinian universities, schools, museums, archeological sites, and so forth in Gaza as it is extended into our classrooms and universities in Western academia, which gutted Palestine-related programs and also participated in whitewashing a genocide. Indeed, genocide, when the evidence of which is livestreamed on our phones, is not a topic for a pro-con debate.[3] Hence, I argue (with many others) that the weaponization of antisemitism (to be

2 Jake Offenhartz, "A Columbia Genocide Scholar Says She May Leave Over University's New Definition of Antisemitism," *Associated Press*, July 24, 2025, https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/columbia-genocide-scholar-says-she-040633909.html.

3 Harvard University provides a prime example of an elite university that, in the aftermath of October 7th 2023, gutted (while increasing collaboration with Israeli institutions and creating further opportunities for Israeli scholars). See, for example, Dhruv Patel and Grace E. Yoon, "Harvard Suspends Research Partnership With Birzeit University in the West Bank," *The Harvard Crimson*, March 27, 2025, https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2025/3/27/harvard-suspends-birzeit-partnership/ and Susan Jaffe, "Harvard Fires Director of Center for Health and Human Rights," *The Lancent*, January 3, 2026, https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(25)02638-8/abstract?rss=yes.

distinguished from actual, mostly white Christian supremacist forms of antisemitism) affects classroom pedagogy. I am not discussing the various ways faculty orient to certain ideologies or political sensibilities. Such conversations could go on *ad infinitum* and often serve as a distraction. This is a distraction tactic designed to redirect one's attention from overwhelming evidence that unsettles a narrative about Jewish Zionist innocence and ontological victimhood. There are "Israel Studies" programs and well-funded chairs and fellowships around the US and internationally. It is possible that there are faculty members who share ideological proclivities and pedagogical approaches there as well. However, the IHRA definition of antisemitism makes a program like "Palestine Studies" perforce antisemitic. [4] This is a methodological, pedagogical, and institutional problem.[5]

That is why Jewish Voice for Peace's Academic Council, along with Academics for Peace, organized an action in April 2025 where scholars openly violated the IHRA definition, exposing its absurdities and specific restrictions on academic freedom. Thirty-five scholars, most of whom are Jewish, participated in this act of civil disobedience and recorded themselves. This campaign to defy the IHRA definition highlights the classroom as a site of *non-learning* and underscores why our syllabi have become frontline conflict zones and sites of scholasticide. In fact, Israeli policymakers as early as the 2000s viewed American college students as enemies because they, as part of a global justice movement, threatened Israel's narrative.[6] As a result, colleges

4 For an exposition of the manufacturing of a distinct field of "Israel Studies" and the discrediting of Palestine Studies, see Pappé, Ilan, Tariq Dana, and Nadia Naser–Najjab. "Palestine Studies, Knowledge Production, and the Struggle for Decolonisation." *Middle East Critique* 33, no. 2 (2024): 173–93.

5 I share with the reader my engagement with the anonymous readers to highlight how deep the deployment of IHRA goes in terms of gatekeeping against scholarship that disrupts the conflation of Jews and Judaism with Zionism and the historical and political realities of the Israeli Zionist project.

6 For example, the Reut Institute, an influential Israeli think tank with ties to the formation of Israeli policies, ascertained in a 2010 report that rather than military forces in the region, the global solidarity movement in support of Palestinian rights constituted the most grave "existential threat" to Israel in the aftermath of the Second Lebanon War and Cast Lead operation in Gaza and therefore needed to be neutralized as a key strategic goal. Hence, a massive investment was directed to fighting the so-called delegitimizing network. In a high-level policy event (the Herzliya Conference) focusing on Israeli national security in 2010, the Reut Institute called Israel to focus on "sabotaging" the "delegitimization" networks through especially lawfare tactics in the US, targeting human rights organizations, NGOs, and college student activists to be combined with increased hasbara tactics to control the narrative about Israel's justness (without actually changing policies on the ground). The Reut Institute's recommendations at the time (which were

became hubs of intense *hasbara*—propaganda or public diplomacy, literally "explaining"—that often fueled and activated Islamophobia and weaponized antisemitism. Consequently, criticism of Israel shifted from issues of free speech and expression to accusations of "hate crime" and "discrimination" under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which bans discrimination by employers based on race, color, sex, and national origin. The IHRA definition stems from years of sharpening efforts and the anti-antisemitism industry. The events of October 7th and their aftermath have further advanced it as a tool to criminalize criticism of Israel and the lives of Palestinians, because the definition, as I will demonstrate below, is rooted in anti-Palestinian racism and Islamophobia.

Teaching Palestine/Israel accurately and from multiple perspectives in US academia, as in other parts of Western academia, requires one to violate the IHRA definition. I am a scholar of Jewish Studies, Religious Studies, Peace Studies, and Palestine/Israel Studies, with a focus on religion, ethics, and politics. I have centered my research on Jewish critics of Zionism, a political ideology, as well as what the case of Palestine/Israel reveals about thinking regarding religion, violence, and conflict transformation or justice-oriented peacebuilding—specifically, efforts that aim to recognize and address historical harm. I am based at the University of Notre Dame, where I teach courses on Palestine/Israel. I use comparative explanatory analytic-descriptive categories such as genocide, apartheid, settler colonialism, military occupation, and (anti-colonial) human rights norms to describe and analyze empirical realities, which, in turn, demystify the modern history of Palestine/Israel. Most of what I teach and the scholarship I produce, including my ethnographic work with Jewish critics and activists in the US and Palestine/Israel, violates the IHRA framework. In particular, my classes violate what is listed as example 7 out of the 11 that the IHRA definition indicates as amounting to "antisemitism," namely "[d]enying the Jewish

immediately implemented as foreign policy integrated into a revised national security paradigm) stipulated that "Israel must identify and focus its efforts on global hubs of delegitimization … In this context, Israel should sabotage network catalysts and drive a wedge between its component parts, primarily between soft critics of Israeli policy and delegitimizers of its existence" (see Reut Institute, "Building a Political Firewall Against Israel's Deligitimization Conceptual Framework" Policy Paper [March 2010], https://20a1ea9b-cbf6-4da3-88fd-ab21d8ba06cc.filesusr.com/ugd/1bfcb5_d59cc682a61444439b12462b75e1fbb5.pdf) The Foundation for Middle East Peace (FMEP) also links to databases that track legal efforts on state and federal levels to criminalize boycott, divestment, and sanctions campaigns since 2014. See FMEP, "Anti-Boycott Legislation—Israel/Palestine," Research Data, last updated May 31, 2026, https://lawfare.fmep.org/resources/anti-boycott-legislation-israel-palestine/.

people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor," and example 10, which states: "Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis." Both these examples expose the foundations of anti-Palestinian racism, which involves denying the Nakba, failing to acknowledge Palestinian indigeneity in historic Palestine, dehumanizing Palestinians, and justifying violence against them.[7]

Nakba is the Arabic word that describes the catastrophic depopulation of Palestine from 1947 to 1949, during what is also called the Israeli War of Independence in Zionist lore.[8] Notably, the settler colonization of Palestine began before this historical event and has continued since. Palestinians have experienced Zionism not as a redemptive idea but as a settler colonial reality. Zionist redemptive violence has meant Palestinian denial and destruction. Political Zionism, from its beginning and through Israeli policies, has been driven by the goal of creating and maintaining a Jewish-majority nation-state in Palestine. The demographic starting point in 1917, when a British colonial administrator "promised" the land for the creation of "a Jewish home" in what is known as the Balfour Declaration, is a straightforward matter of numbers. Only 6% of historic Palestine was Jewish at the time. Even if this number reflects the pre-Zionist Palestinian Jewish community, it offers a pedagogical anchor to show the minoritization of non-Jews in the land as the upshot of settler colonial processes.

As Mahmood Mamdani shows, the second *Aliyah*, or wave of Jewish colonization from Europe, following the 1903 Kishinev pogrom (1904–1914), began the process of incorporating the Indigenous Jewish Palestinian community, at the time Ottoman subjects like their non-Jewish neighbors, into the Euro-Zionist project that sought from its inception to establish a "Jewish state" distinct from the Jewish society that had lived in Palestine throughout the centuries. This is where, for Mamdani, the difference between settlers and immigrants is pivotal and illuminating. He distinguishes between the immigrant "Jews who made pilgrimage to Palestine" historically and who "chose to become members of a preexisting local political community" and the Jewish settler colonialists who came from Europe starting in the early twentieth century. "Immigrants are unarmed; settlers come armed with both weapons and a nationalist agenda. Immigrants come

7 For an incisive account of Nakba denialism, see Esmat Elhalaby, "Nakba Denial: On the Politics of History and Genocide," *P&RAPRAXIS* (2025), https://www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/nakba-denial.

8 For examples of scholars who interrogate the pre-Nakba processes of depopulation, see Areej Sabbagh-Khoury, *Colonizing Palestine: The Zionist Left and the Making of the Palestinian Nakba* (Stanford University Press, 2023).

in search of a homeland, not a state; for settlers, there can be no homeland without a state. For the immigrant, the homeland can be shared; for the settler, the state must be a nation-state."[9] Introducing students to the incorporation of Arab-Jews (and their de-Arabization), including Jews in Palestine, into the Euro-Zionist frame is indeed a pivotal pedagogical move in disrupting homogenizing and hegemonic accounts of Jewish history and destiny.[10]

The Nakba, which also denoted the shift from the method of land purchase to active military means to enact Palestinian dispossession, was devastating in giving Zionist militias—later the Israeli military—a moment to expand beyond what was decided in the UN Partition Plan (UN Resolution 181) and to "cleanse" or "Judaize" this territory, concepts used already in the pre-Nakba decades.[11] Indeed, the Jewish National Fund (JNF) and other Yishuv mechanisms were dedicated to "Judaizing" the land and "Judaizing" labor. Lands purchased systematically by the JNF were declared "redeemed" and "Judaized," or ready for "Judaization." This raises a complex and important question about what exactly makes land "Jewish." This should be a key question for any course on Palestine/Israel that aims to promote genuine religio-political literate understanding rather than simply reproducing nationalist redemptive narratives or, even more reductively, abstracting the analysis from its historical, material, and empirical realities to a "religious" and ahistorical (or anti-historical, messianic, and Manichean) terrain concerning a presumed incompatibility between Muslims (often interchangeable with "Arabs" in this discourse) and Jews. At this juncture, Mamdani's immigrant-settler distinction opens the door for students to encounter historical Jewish life and thought in Palestine and the broader Arab and Muslim region. Opening this door disrupts the redemptive-biblical anti-intellectual frame.

Therefore, when teaching about Palestine/Israel, one of the most perplexing and ethically challenging issues to navigate is the conflation of Israel with Jews. This conflation underpins the IHRA definition as a way to defend a political project rather than necessarily protecting Jewish people. In

9 Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities* (Harvard University Press, 2022), 253.

10 For a window into the complex, evolving social identities of the people of Palestine in the 1910s and 1920s, see, for examples, Hilel Cohen, *Year Zero of the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1929* (Brandeis University Press, 2015) and Abigail Jacobson, *From Empire to Empire: Jerusalem Between Ottoman and British Rule* (Syracuse University Press, 2011).

11 For a discussion of the Nakba before the Nakba, see Sabbagh-Khoury, *Colonizing Palestine* and Patrick Wolfe, "Purchase by Other Means: The Palestinian *Nakba* and Zionism's Conquest of Economics," *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012): 133–171.

fact, the working definition and its variations do not focus on more traditional antisemitism that originates from White supremacist Christian nationalist movements, as I will discuss below and as evident in the fracturing of MAGA (referring to the confluence of forces Donald Trump coalesced in his campaigns and administrations), where Israeli influence on American foreign policy, such as the decision to attack Iran, is filtered through classical antisemitic conspiracy theory tropes.[12] Indeed, there are robust traditions and social movements of anti-Zionist Jews who support Palestinian solidarity not despite being Jewish but because they are Jewish. However, according to IHRA's criteria, they are considered "antisemitic," which clearly violates their religious freedom to define their Jewish identity as they see fit, especially as they are directly challenged by the ethical demands Palestinians place on them.[13] Further perplexing is the anti-intellectualism that an IHRA-approved syllabus surfaces. If the IHRA definition also frames what is allowed to be included in an academic journal's special issue on teaching Palestine/Israel, then this special issue and the academic journal simply corroborate with such anti-intellectualism and an assault on Palestinian narratives as well as critical Jewish narratives and actors. Notably, you are reading this article because of a series of editorial decisions that have not adhered to the argument of false equivalency and the

12 This point concerning the MAGA fracturing on Israel and "the Jews" is related but beyond the scope of this article. For an important analysis on this issue, see Ben Lorber and Jess Schwalb, "The Zionist Right Has a MAGA Problem" *Jewish Currents*, November 26, 2025, https://jewishcurrents.org/the-zionist-right-has-a-maga-problem; and Ben Lorber, "Nick Fuentes Has Officially Breached the MAGA Gates," *The Nation*, November 4, 2025, https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/nick-fuentes-carlson-israel-maga/tnamp/.

13 For works that illuminate the traditions of Jewish-American Palestine solidarity organizing and other legacies of social justice oriented anti-Zionist Jewish intellectual and political traditions, see, for examples, Marjorie Feld, *The Threshold of Dissent: A History of American Jewish Critics of Zionism* (New York University Press, 2024); Geoffrey Levin, *Our Palestine Question: Israel and American Jewish Dissent, 1948–1978* (Yale University Press, 2023); Benjamin Balthaser, *Citizens of the Whole World: Anti-Zionism and the Cultures of The American Jewish Left* (Verso, 2025); Atalia Omer, *Days of Awe: Reimagining Jewishness in Solidarity with Palestinians* (The University of Chicago Press, 2019); Oren Kroll-Zeldin, *Unsettled: American Jews and the Movement for Justice in Palestine* (New York University Press, 2024). For an analysis that examines how and why the imposition of the IHRA definition entails policing the boundaries of who is acceptable and who is not acceptable Jew, see Itamar Mann and Lihi Yona, "Defending Jews from the Definition of Antisemitism," *UCLA Law Review* 71 (December 2024): 1151–1217, https://www.uclalawreview.org/defending-jews-from-the-definition-of-antisemitism/.

anti-intellectual and anti-Palestinian racist dehumanizing refusal of evidence, enabled by the mainstreaming of IHRA.

Still, IHRA has been aggressively promoted, especially after October 7th, and has been adopted by academic institutions of higher learning, including, as noted, Columbia. The University of California Board of Regents likewise voted in March 2026 to embrace IHRA in its effort to settle a lawsuit advanced by the Brandeis Center in 2023 seeking to delegitimize criticism of Israel.[14] Others, such as Harvard University and New York University (NYU), among other institutions, also divert people's attention from what is actually happening on the ground in Palestine/Israel.[15] A first comprehensive and evidence-based study by the American Association of University Professors and the Middle East Studies Association found, according to AAUP General Counsel Veena Dubal that "the Civil Rights Act of 1964—which passed in response to years of nonviolent civil disobedience against racial injustice—is being cynically misused to squash political dissent and speech that advocates for the human rights of Palestinians … This is a perverse outcome."[16] The report shows that despite the surge in investigations of "antisemitic" allegations, "all but one of the 102 antisemitism complaint letters analyzed focus on speech critical of Israel or Zionism with no reference to Jews or Judaism as antisemitism; 50 percent of the complaints consist solely of such criticism." "[B]ecause of their expertise on the region," Members of the Middle East Studies Association, the summary of the task force report surmises, "have long borne the brunt of

14 Strategic Communications, "UC Berkeley's Statement Following Brandeis Center Suit Settlement," *UC Berkeley News*, March 19, 2026, https://news.berkeley.edu/2026/03/19/uc-berkeleys-statement-following-brandeis-center-suit-settlement/.

15 See, for example, Benjamin Eidelson and Deborah Hellman, "Antisemitism, Anti-Zionism, and Title VI: A Guide for the Perplexed," *Harvard Law Review* 139, no. 1 (2025): https://harvardlawreview.org/forum/vol-139/antisemitism-anti-zionism-and-title-vi-a-guide-for-the-perplexed/.

16 Task Force on Civil and Human Rights, "Discriminating Against Dissent: The Weaponization of Civil Rights Law to Repress Campus Speech on Palestine," Middle East Studies Association (MESA), November 5, 2025, https://mesana.org/advocacy/task-force-on-civil-and-human-rights/2025/11/05/discriminating-against-dissent-the-weaponization-of-civil-rights-law-to-repress-campus-speech-on-palestine?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAc3J0YwZhcHBfaWQPNDA5OTYyNjIzMDg1NjA5AAEeNwa6BL20b6guuYkO47rf4R_9hF8e_p0AztkXml1kcOdYyt1ZWVeUYGTRH4w_aem_7FYp3Ifs57pRLOiLoNQ3bA. For the full report, see American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and MESA, "Discriminating Against Dissent: The Weaponization of Civil Rights Law to Repress Campus Speech on Palestine," November 2025, https://mesana.org/pdf/Discriminating_Against_Dissent_Report.pdf.

allegations that falsely equate criticism of Israel with antisemitism."[17] This points to the epistemic level as a critical site of struggle and subsequently to our classrooms as either participants or disruptors of discursive violence shaping understanding and framing of Palestine/Israel.

Some institutions of higher learning have gone further to define Zionism as a protected category. Consequently, as they invoke Title VI, criticizing Zionism shifts from a matter of free speech and academic freedom to potential legal discrimination that could threaten the institutions' federal funding. The conflation of Jews with a political project in the MENA region, which IHRA articulates, uses Title VI to codify the boundaries of Judaism. The absurdity and danger of this move cannot be overstated, especially considering the risks it poses to "the wrong kind" of Jews—those who reject Zionist ideology and politics. Ironically, under the guise of "protecting Jews," weaponized antisemitism reduces all Jews to an essentialized and fetishized set of characteristics. The irony becomes even starker when Christian institutions and groups accuse Jews and Jewish-Israelis of not being truly Jewish because they supposedly fail to follow a predetermined script they expect "the Jews" to enact. I have personally experienced this, being repeatedly accused in my scholarship and teaching of not being "a real" Jew or "a real" Israeli.[18] My pedagogy challenges this scripted discourse that delimits an intellectually and ethically honest pedagogy about Palestine/Israel. How can we teach Palestine/Israel if any departure from a predetermined script and ideological boundary is immediately subject to litigation, silencing, character assassinations, academic gulags, and professional death/suicide? The problem to navigate is how to demystify the appearance of erudition that covers up the role of Palestine/Israel education in reproducing epistemic and political violence.

17 Task Force on Civil and Human Rights, "Discriminating Against Dissent."

18 See Atalia Omer, "I'm an Israeli Professor. Why is My Work in Harvard's Antisemitism Report?" *The Guardian*, May 9, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/09/im-an-israeli-professor-why-is-my-work-in-harvards-antisemitism-report. Likewise, on June 2, 2026, a group of Jewish Columbia University professors whose views diverge from IHRA filed claims with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission for the being penalized on campus for literally being the wrong kind of Jews. One of the claims, for example, reads: "It was clear that the University's leadership embraced a stereotype that all Jews think alike, something that I find deeply offensive." See "Columbia Professors Bear Witness To the University's Antisemitic Discrimination Against Jews who Are Critical of Israel," published online, last updated June 3, 2026, https://sites.google.com/view/columbiauniversityantisemitism.

IHRA and related tools have opportunistically been adopted, as articulated explicitly in Project Esther of the Heritage Foundation (an addendum to this Foundation's "Project 2025" which outlines the blueprint for the second Trump administration's policies), by forces with regressive, racist, and Christian-centric agendas who capitalized on the use of antisemitism to whitewash an assault on academic freedom, LGBTQI rights, women rights, and affirmative action policies.[19] Suppose one aspires to teach Palestine/Israel, rather than reproduce Zionist hasbara or flawed explanatory frames that function to obscure root causes and delimit our ability to name what we learn and see using the precise analytic words and descriptive terms. In that case, we must violate the IHRA definition. Teaching with intellectual integrity means we have to name what the evidence presents as what it is. Teaching with intellectual integrity means resisting the overwhelming force of institutional gaslighting and gulaging. In what follows, I first sketch in more detail what IHRA is and its history before turning to how its adoption makes teaching Palestine/Israel with intellectual integrity impossible by design. I then discuss, secondly, how I navigated the demands of intellectual (and ethical) integrity in my courses on Palestine/Israel. I introduce my multifocal pedagogical methodology and use of the syllabi to counter epistemic violence. Finally, I will return to the question of why it is crucial to use the correct words and concepts to describe what we are talking about when we teach Palestine/Israel and why such intellectual integrity and analytic precision not only rectify the epistemic violence that denied Palestinian narratives of what Zionism has meant for their experiences. Such analytic clarity also reaches beyond Zionist and Israeli historiography to multiple Jewish counter-archives. Introducing students to alternative Jewish historical and religio-cultural archives is especially generative in situating the study of Palestine/Israel within a broader examination of Christian European modernity and in pointing toward a constructive reimagining of Jewishness in the MENA region.

19 Project Esther was published by The Heritage Foundation on the first anniversary of the Hamas-led attack on October 7th. This document is an addendum document to the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 which has provided the blueprint for the second Trump Administration's repressive policies. The weaponization of antisemitism in the aftermath of October 7th provides an opportunistic tool to mobilize the appearances of anti-racist discourse while promoting racist agendas. See also Darryl Li, "The Rise and Fall of Baby Boomer Zionism," *Hammer & Hope* 3, Spring 2024, https://hammerandhope.org/article/boomer-zionism; and Neve Gordon, "Antisemitism and Zionism: The Internal Operations of the IHRA Definition," *Middle East Critique* 33, no. 3 (2024): 345–360. Under the pretense of "protecting Jews," the regressive and conservative forces can proceed with their assault on the academy.

IHRA's Background

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance is an international body established in 1998, tasked with thinking about the Holocaust as a global memory, with the intent to yield universally applicable pedagogies and memory curation of "never again." IHRA comprises 35 member states, bringing together experts, educators, policymakers, and diplomats. In its founding Stockholm Declaration (2000), it singles out the Holocaust as a unique event that threatened "civilization," thereby its lessons possess a universal significance. The inverse certainly is also the case; the Declaration "bestows uniqueness also on antisemitism, perceived as the key cause of the Holocaust, and on Israel, perceived as the post-Holocaust response."[20] Genocide Studies as a field of study has long problematized the singularity of the Holocaust, centering an analysis of European modernity/coloniality as predicated on multiple genocides against colonized and subjugated people.[21] De-exceptionalizing the Holocaust does not make it less of a horrendous crime against humanity, but it does situate it within a broader story of European modernity and its imperial, colonial, and settler-colonial projects, exposing the boomeranging of technologies and ideologies of extermination from the colonies back to Europe.[22] Yet, IHRA's privileging of the Holocaust's singularity (even upon its presumably universal lessons) has functioned to deny the Palestinian Nakba as an ongoing reality that has escalated into a genocide from 2023 to 2025. Indeed, the IHRA definition is predicated on anti-Palestinian racism.

This so-called IHRA's Working Definition on Antisemitism was adopted at the 2016 meeting in Bucharest, Romania. The history of this definition traces back to American Jewish lawyer Kenneth Stern, who wrote and published it in his role as the director of the antisemitism desk at the

20 Raz Segal and Sahar Aziz, "Threats to Free Speech and Palestinian Civil Rights: The IHRA Definition of Antisemitism," Issue Brief, Rutgers Law School, Center for Security, Race, and Rights, https://csrr.rutgers.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/final-csrr-ihra-issue-brief.pdf, 4.

21 E.g., Dirk A. Moses. "Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the 'Racial Century': Genocides of Indigenous Peoples and the Holocaust," *Patterns of Prejudice* 36, no. 4 (2002): 7–36.

22 The concept of the imperial boomeranging was articulated by many critical theorists but is traced back to Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (Monthly Review Press, 2000), 36. For a recent analysis of the boomerang effect of how US-patronage of the oppression, destruction, and dispossession against Palestinians has traveled back to authoritarianism at home in the US, see Noura Erakat, "The Boomerang Comes Back," *Boston Review* (Winter 2025), https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/the-boomerang-comes-back/.

American Jewish Committee in 2005. The definition was originally posted on the website of the European Union Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia. In this early version, the definition was adopted by a variety of official and non-official government and non-governmental organizations. It is also well known that, since those early days, Stern has written extensively, stating that he never intended what he drafted to become a legally binding definition, highlighting its ambiguities, potential pitfalls, and possible manipulations.[23] However, the IHRA definition was introduced and promoted by Zionist actors aiming to shield Israel from delegitimization and criticism, thereby enhancing the use of accusations of antisemitism as a hasbara tool.[24] The result has been the persistent denial of Palestinian rights and narratives, along with a deceptive framing of Israeli aggression as self-defense and Jewish self-fulfillment, completely ignoring the historical and material implications of the abstract ideas of "Jewish redemption" and "return" for Palestinian lives. However, such spins are more difficult to maintain after more than a two-year-long live-streamed genocide. This explains why the enforcers of the epistemic violence that characterizes academic spaces in the US have intensified and doubled down on their repressive measures, dismantling programs and collaborations that threaten the overall Nakba denialism that underpins "acceptable" obedient teaching.

23 Kenneth Stern, "A Bad Deal: By Adopting the IHRA Definition of Antisemitism, Universities are Sacrificing Academic Freedom," *The Knight First Amendment Institute*, Columbia University, September 5, 2025, https://knightcolumbia.org/content/a-bad-deal-why-using-the-ihra-definition-of-antisemitism-on-campus-is-incompatible-with-academic-freedom-and-students-right-to-open-inquiry; and Stern, "I Drafted the Definition of Antisemitism. Rightwing Jews Are Weaponizing It," *The Guardian*, December 13, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/13/antisemitism-executive-order-trump-chilling-effect.

24 For a sample of the extensive research supporting this argument, see Antony Lerman, *Whatever Happened to Antisemitism? Redefinition and the Myth of the "Collective Jew"* (Pluto Press, 2022), 127–29; Kenneth Stern, *The Conflict over the Conflict: The Israel/Palestine Campus Debate* (New Jewish Press, 2020), 149–51; David Feldman and Marc Volovici, "The Pure Essence of Things: Contingency, Controversy and thru Struggle to Define Antisemitism and Islamophobia," in *Antisemitism, Islamophobia, and the Politics of Definition*, ed. David Feldman and Mac Volovici (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 3–19; Jan Deckers and Jonathan Coulter, "What is Wrong with the International Holocaust remembrance Alliance's Definition of Antisemitsm?," *Res Publica* 28, no. 4 (2022): 733–52; Peter Beattie, "Anti-Semitism and Opposition to Israeli Government Policies: The Roles of Prejudice and Information," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 15 (2017): 2749–67; and Barry Trachtenberg, "The End of Antisemitism: How the Fight Against Hate Became a Weapon of Repression," *Contending Modernities*, December 19, 2025, https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/global-currents/end-of-antisemitism/.

Nakba denial is ingrained, as the aforementioned 7th example of the IHRA definition conveys, and it appears in the insistence on framing "the conflict" as between two nations (one land) rather than naming it settler colonialism and apartheid, as recognized by the international consensus of human rights organizations.

The weaponization of antisemitism and the ascendence of the IHRA's definition, therefore, reveal an effort to suppress decolonial epistemic interventions that have entered fields of study in the Western academy (beginning in the 1960s but coming to fruition in the 1990s), such as Settler Colonial Studies and Indigenous Studies, which interpret Palestine through these conceptual lenses and de-exceptionalize it. Applying the conceptual frame of settler colonialism to the study of Zionism has threatened hasbara actors who, spearheaded by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), manufactured a scholarly discourse and a political project in 1974 under the rubric of "The New Antisemitism."[25] The latter's scaffolding has been Islamophobic campaigns, dehumanizing Palestinians and projecting on them the label of "Nazis," "Muslim terrorists," and "Amalekites," among other Manichean tropes. Discursive maneuvers that also contribute to abstracting the specificities of the Palestinian struggle and resituate it on a Manichean "civilizational" terrain. Fearing a loss of the Zionist narrative of return and redemption (from the ashes) and the loss of innocence as an ontological victim, by the 1990s, Israeli hasbara fixated aggressively on equating anti-Zionism with antisemitism and reducing all "the Jews" to a singularity and an essence (which is ironically antisemitic).[26] Further, the "new antisemitism" discourse portrayed "the Muslim" as the enemy of "the Jew," now signifying a "Judeo-Christian" civilizational positionality. Capitalizing on the post-September 11 escalation of Islamophobia during the "war on terror," Israeli and Zionist hasbara in the early 2000s reacted to the momentous epistemic shifts in understanding Palestine/Israel. Such shifts in the international arena included the United Nations World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa, in 2001, which failed to pass an official condemnation of Zionism as racism (a resolution which passed the UN General Assembly in 1975 to be revoked due to immense pressures by 1991). The subsequent mounting mobilization of international law mechanisms and bodies to expose Israeli crimes, including of apartheid, military occupation, and genocide for decades was responded to (by the ADL and the American Jewish Committee as key actors) as "antisemitic", thereby delegitimizing evidence based arguments and revealing how the IHRA definition has been

25 Segal and Aziz, "Threats to Free Speech," 3.

26 Lerman, *Whatever Happened to Antisemitism*.

deployed, like other earlier maneuvers to spin Israel's aggression as self-defense, in anti-evidentiary mode to contain and control knowledge. The massive effort to deny evidence and spin a human wrong as a human right (to dominate, destroy, deny, depopulate) exposes why adopting the IHRA definition in academia entails an embrace of anti-intellectualism. It is also antisemitic by insisting on essentializing characteristics of all Jews and its disregard for actual Jews over and against protecting a political project.[27]

IHRA clearly predates the second Trump administration, which has used Project Esther's weaponized antisemitism to suppress academic freedom and target marginalized groups, using Palestinians and Palestine solidarity activists as proxies. Released on the one-year anniversary of October 7, 2023, Project Esther opportunistically leverages the long-standing weaponization of antisemitism (also known as the anti-antisemitism industry) to silence debate and criticism of Israeli policies against Palestinians, as well as the Islamophobic anti-Arab, anti-Palestinian, and anti-Muslim racism and "counter-terrorism" tactics developed during the so-called war on terrorism to push technofascism, neoconservative, regressive, and White supremacist agendas. In an ironic twist, Project Esther invokes a classic antisemitic conspiracy trope of a cabal pulling strings but attributes it to a "Hamas network" and a related network of "woke" enablers that need to be eradicated, including supposedly gullible Jewish critics of Israeli policies and Zionism. The (Christian) drafters of Project Esther build from the conflation of Jews and Israel (a political project) through the Islamophobic maneuvering to render any critics of Israel and Zionism as not only antisemitic but also anti-American. Project Esther, as it escalates IHRA, further diminishes the possibility of a rigorous teaching of Palestine/Israel. As soon as the second Trump Administration took office, as noted, Harvard University, while otherwise supposedly taking on the mantle of fighting for academic freedom, embraced the IHRA framework (or "the Palestine exception" for academic freedom) and declared Zionism as a protected category, which means a protection under anti-discrimination laws.[28] Since

27 "Classical" modalities of antisemitism thrive and are on the assent also an outcome of the growing alliances of White supremacist Christian nationalism with Zionism. For example, there is a religious liberty clause in the weaponization of antisemitism in the US to respect people's right to say that "Jews killed Jesus." See, Jacob Kornbluh, "Why the Antisemitism Awareness Act Now Has a Religious Liberty Clause to Protect 'Jews Killed Jesus' Statements," *Forward*, April 29, 2025, https://forward.com/fast-forward/716347/antisemitism-bill-congress-jews-jesus/.

28 For a layered discussion of the Palestine Exception and its long legacy in the American academy in particular, see Palestine Legal & Center for Constitutional Rights, "The Palestine Exception to Free Speech: A Movement Under Attack in

October 7th, therefore, the promotion of the IHRA definition became even more aggressive with dismissal of the fact that hundreds of experts in Jewish Studies, scholars of antisemitism, and genocide studies have discredited IHRA as intellectually dishonest in counter efforts to define antisemitism, such as the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism and the Nexus Document, "Understanding Antisemitism at Its Nexus with Israel and Zionism," initially published in 2020.[29] The result is not only the denial of Palestinian humanity, dignity, and historical facts (and what is termed anti-Palestinian racism) but also an assault on evidence and learning. The IHRA definition reveals how our universities are becoming anti-intellectual strongholds of ideological policing. Any discussion about teaching Palestine/Israel must confront this issue and the broader implications of the Palestine exception, rather than pretending there isn't a powerful force that has suppressed our academic freedom for decades through the delegitimization of Palestinian scholarship and narratives. This infrastructure of the Palestine exception has become an effective tool for the authoritarian takeover of universities overall.

What is "It"? When did "It" Start?

The teaching of Palestine/Israel in American and other western academic spaces entailed navigating an entrenched orientalist epistemic form of violence. This navigation means intentionality in foregrounding Palestinian scholarship in my IHRA-violating syllabi. Hence, I first intentionally explain to my students the thought process that went into syllabus construction and why this process is complex, as it pushes against epistemic violence. Second, I introduce students methodically to Edward Said's critique of orientalism and convey to them the need for self-reflexivity about our own location in the academy and Said's critique (drawing on an intellectual genealogy including Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci) of the relation between knowledge and power. The key takeaway point for the students is that

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the US," *Palestine Legal*, September 2015, https://palestinelegal.org/the-palestine-exception.

29 Notably, the Biden administration did not adopt IHRA in its mammoth antisemitism strategy, and in the US context a pattern of court decisions has suggested it has little purchase on the thinking of judges handling First Amendment and antidiscrimination cases. Still, IHRA's underlying premise and conflation of Jews with the Zionist political project are so entrenched that October 7th offered an opportune moment to push its adoption across multiple state and national institutions as well as academia as I highlight here since this essay is on pedagogies.

knowledge is not innocent, and our positionality needs to be interrogated as part of the learning (and unlearning) process.

In discussing Said's critique of orientalism as the discursive authorization of western colonialism, we zoom in on his discussion of Napoleon's expedition to Egypt (1798) and why he took with him a fleet of scholars (botanists, anthropologists, etc.) to study the "Egyptian mind." We reflect in class on why there was no counter-expedition by the Egyptians to study the "French mind" and what that means for our understanding of the relations between power and the production of knowledge. In some more advanced courses, we also carefully read Said's classic "Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims" as a foundational text at the outset of our journey through the syllabus.[30] This article is extracted from Said's *The Question of Palestine*, the second in his trilogy, which also includes *Orientalism* and *Covering Islam*, all of which clarify the landscape of epistemic violence in which the question of how to teach Palestine/Israel is located.[31] I invite the students to reflect on the discursive conditions within which their learning experiences are performed as if innocently. Said writes with his characteristic analytic sharpness about the imperial discourse within which political Zionism was embedded: "Imperialism was the theory, colonialism the practice, of changing the uselessly unoccupied territories of the world into useful new versions of the European metropolitan society."[32] Zionism as a colonial reality in Palestine, as a matter of the conditions for its fulfillment, has meant the denial and elimination of non-Jews in the land. It is the simplicity of land and demographics at the heart of settler colonial logic (maximize land, minimize natives on the land). Accordingly, Said writes: "[A]ll the constitutive energies of Zionism were premised on the excluded presence, that is, the functional absence of 'native people' in Palestine."[33] Any pedagogy on Palestine/Israel that brackets and ignores this basic analysis is intellectually dishonest and embedded within methodological nationalism and Zionist frames. At the same time, the imposition of the IHRA's definition makes such teaching with integrity impossible.

30 Edward W. Said, "Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims," *Social Text* 1 (1979): 7–58.

31 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Pantheon Books, 1978); Said, *The Question of Palestine* (Times Books, 1979); Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (Random House, 1981).

32 Said, "Zionism," 28.

33 Said, "Zionism," 29.

In addition to Said, I intentionally introduce the students to other Palestinian thinkers who have used the analysis of settler colonialism and located the Zionist movement within its imperial nest from the onset and decades before the academic field of Settler Colonial Studies was shepherded by primarily White scholars such as Patrick Wolfe and Lorenzo Veracini from Australia, New Zealand, and the US. These readings include, for example, Fayez Sayegh, "Zionist Colonialism in Palestine (1965)," which shows with clarity Zionism's or the Yishuv (the pre-state Zionist infrastructure in the land) reliance on British imperialism, the logic of racial segregation of space and labor, and force.[34] Introducing the students to Sayegh and to generations of other Palestinian scholars who have used this comparative analytic frame clarifies contrasts and tensions between the Zionist production of Jewish history in abstraction from Palestinian realities of depopulation.[35] Suppose the classroom experience takes Zionist claims without letting Palestinian interlocutors challenge them. In that case, the classroom is no longer a site of inquiry and evidence-based learning but a place to reproduce appeals to Jewish biblical (articulated as secular, aka "historical," or religious) entitlements, shifting the conversation from historical and political time to a messianic, teleological, and ahistorical narrative frame. Indeed, Said's early intervention directly challenges the later logic that underpins the IHRA's definition and stipulations for the containment of Palestine/Israel pedagogies. IHRA seeks to remain at the level of Jewish-Zionist abstraction where Jewish self-determination is enacted in biblical/messianic rather than material/historical temporality. Locating the analysis in history requires an ethics of relationality in which the fulfillment of self-determination and the creation of a Jewish-majoritarian political project necessitated the praxis of settler-colonialism (the displacement and replacement of the natives).

34 Fayez Sayegh, "Zionist Colonialism in Palestine (1965)," reprinted in *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012): 206–25.

35 See, for examples, Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Sabbagh-Khoury, *Colonizing Palestine*; Rana Barakat, "Writing/Righting Palestine Studies: Settler Colonialism, Indigenous Sovereignty and Resisting the Ghost(s) of History," *Settler Colonial Studies* 8, no. 3 (2018): 349–363; Lila Abu-Lughod, "Imagining Palestine's Alter-Natives: Settler Colonialism and Museum Politics," *Critical Inquiry* 47 (Autumn 2020): 1–27; Raef Zreik, "When Does a Settler Become a Native? (With Apologies to Mamdani)", *Constellations* 23, no. 3 (2016): 351–64; Ibrahim Abu-Lughod and Baha Abu-Laban, *Settler Regimes in Africa and the Arab World: The Illusion of Endurance* (Medina University Press International, 1974); Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Stephen Sheehi, "Abolitionism, Settler Colonialism and State Crime," *State Crime Journal* 12, no. 2 (2023): 132–145.

Hence, foregrounding Palestinian scholars working within a comparative settler-colonial analytic frame is precisely where pedagogy happens. Actual teaching happens when the epistemic violence is exposed and transgressed. It is crucial to take on Said's challenge and let Palestinians narrate their story.[36] Often, such a pedagogical choice to center the colonized is delegitimized as counterproductive or "antisemitic." Critics might argue that beginning the syllabus immediately in a deconstructive mode with Said's work, without giving the students an opportunity to read the Zionist narratives and learn about the motivations of their proponents, is wrong. Such critics might ask, "Are students given a chance to understand why some European and Middle Eastern Jews would have embraced Zionism? And what did it mean to them?" Such critics might further argue that "students don't only need to learn how ideas are constructed and how they shape our vision of the world. They also need to learn about the ideas themselves, and why they resonate with people." In response, others might say: "Why should the instructor start with the narrative of the colonialists (even if they were persecuted in a different context)? Why is it impossible, or irresponsible, to start the narrative from the perspective of the colonized? Why is it irresponsible to demystify 'Zionist ideology?'" Palestinians have a narrative. Why should it always come second, or always as a response to Zionism?" Imagine how American history would be understood if we learned it first from Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*? Critical thinking requires decolonizing aspects of education. University classrooms should be the place for this type of pedagogy.[37] Starting with why people believe or support Zionism wouldn't change or challenge the "rigid binaries" of oppressors-oppressed, the critics assume when they urge and require us to center Zionist thought and experiences

Indeed, what is intriguing about Said's classic 1979 article is how he simultaneously outlines, with intimacy, what the Zionist idea has meant for Zionists and how it is nested within imperial discursive formations, as well as what it has empirically meant for indigenous Palestinians in Palestine. "Everything the Zionists did in Palestine they did, of course, as settler colonialists, yet everything they did in Palestine was enacted on the world stage … in a rhetoric and costume fundamentally of the same sort as the cultural currency of the period. Thus, Zionism initially portrayed itself as a movement bringing civilization to a barbaric and/or empty locale … Later

36 Edward Said, "Permission to Narrate," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13, no. 3 (1984): 27–48.

37 See Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Beacon Press, 2014).

… Zionism transformed itself into a movement bringing Western democracy to the East."[38] Said directs attention to the erasure of the people actually living in the land and their connections to broader movements such as Arab nationalism at the moment of their colonization by Euro-Zionists under the patronage of Britain. The epistemological orientalist violence manifests in the fact that "[v]ery little is said about what Zionism entailed for non-Jews who happened to have encountered it; for that matter nothing is said about where outside Jewish history it took place and from what in the historical context of nineteenth century Europe Zionism drew its force."[39] Said's points highlight the urgent need to bring the analysis down, so to speak, from the level of the biblical imagination to historical materiality and to a multifocal, multiperspectival analysis that is often deeply constrained by methodological nationalism in classroom teaching of Palestine/Israel.

In addition to disrupting the negation of Palestinian perspectives, experiences, and political aspirations, Palestine/Israel pedagogy within the IHRA framework entails a denial and negation of the Jewish tradition itself. Since this journal centers on "interfaith" inquiries and practices, it is essential to underscore that the meaning of "Jewish" in the construct and the practices of the "Jewish State" has to be interrogated, as it has been by scholars such as Yaacov Yadgar and Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, among many others with historical and hermeneutical fluency.[40] Namely, what precisely "Jewish" means in Palestine/Israel and for Jews in other contexts, *and* what precisely it has meant for Palestinians for over a century of "contact" with Zionism. Indeed, as the aforementioned Palestinian interlocutors have stressed for decades, the story of self-fulfillment, "rebirth," and "redemption" for Zionism and the people who became embedded in this political formation has meant a narrative of displacement, depopulation, domination, and denial of humanity for Palestinians. It has meant, in the jargon of settler colonial studies, Palestinian *displacement* and their *replacement* by the settlers. This historical, political, and ethical point requires grounding the analysis in historical, political, and ethical frames, rather than in a secularized and then religionized biblical messianic timeline and land entitlements.

Raz-Krakotzkin's witty and whimsical characterization of the secular Zionists' founding fathers and mothers is illuminating: "[T]hey did not

38 Said, "Zionism," 12.

39 Said, "Zionism, 10.

40 Yaacov Yadgar, *To Be a Jewish State: Zionism as the New Judaism* (New York University Press, 2024); Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, *Mishna Consciousness, Biblical Consciousness: Safed and Zionist Culture* (Van Leer Institute Press and Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2022).

believe in God, but God gave them the land."[41] This has caused ongoing tensions between the historical and comparative analysis of Zionist settler colonialism and the ways biblical narratives are used to justify a settler colonial reality, portraying it as re-indigenization or the teleological fulfillment of Jewish history. Indeed, narratives of return to a land where the settlers have never been are not unique to the settler colonization of Palestine by European Jews under the patronage of the British Empire. Manufactured (but probably authentically felt and experienced) narratives of chosenness and return are found in other cases of settler colonialism, as well as the use of the Bible to claim a providential license for the act of depopulating a presumably *terra nullius* and replacing the natives with a new society. Indeed, the discourse of Manifest Destiny in the land that became the US also deployed the tropes of Amalekite, chosenness, and providential calling for land conquest (and bringing "civilization," "progress," "democracy," and other "good news").[42]

To identify settler colonialism as an illuminating lens through which to explain and teach Palestine/Israel is not to discount other explanatory frames, such as nationalism. On the contrary, we need to convey to the students a multifocal interpretive scope. What the settler colonial analytic comparative lens does, however, is disrupt pedagogical approaches to Palestine/Israel that normalize it as a "conflict" between two nationalisms over one land. It further disrupts lazy framings of the discussion as "interfaith," which IHRA seeks to entrench in conflating "the Jews" with the political project of Israel. Situating Zionism within a more extended European colonial history and a racialized account of religion also clarifies where alternative Jewish histories and hermeneutics can enter the syllabus and destabilize the conflation of Jews with a genocidal settler colonial project. Hence, naming things as they are by using the most clarifying (and de-exceptionalizing) analytic frames also entails introducing students to the distinctions between "Zion" and "Zionism," and between Jews and their diverse and plural histories and hermeneutical praxis. It is indeed crucial to introduce students to how a reductive reliance on a selective reading (and reenactment) of the biblical texts, such as the conquest traditions or the anti-Roman rebellions of antiquity, at the expense of centuries of Jewish histories

41 This point is captured and unpacked in Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, "Religion and Nationalism in the Jewish and Zionist Context," in *When Politics Are Sacralized: Comparative Perspectives on Religious Claims and Nationalism*, ed.Nadim N. Rouhana and Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 33–53.

42 John Corrigan, "Amalek and the Rhetoric of Extermination," in *The First Prejudice: Religious Tolerance and Intolerance in Early America*, ed. Chris Beneke and Christopher S. Grenda (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

in the plural and geographic diversity, reproduces an essentializing singularity of Jewish history and destiny that is rooted in Christian Europe. This also negates the many layers of history spanning centuries of the Land itself.[43]

Therefore, the Palestine/Israel syllabus has to address the multiple Zionist negations that shape and contain the pedagogical horizons. In addition to addressing the negation of Palestinian humanity and indigeneity and the negation of the Jewish tradition and hermeneutics that put guardrails against false messianism, the syllabus needs to highlight the negation of Arab-Jewish histories and legacies of Jewish lives in Muslim and Arab contexts, including in Palestine. The syllabus thus introduces students to critical Mizrahi scholarship and unsettling of Euro-Zionism from the perspective of "its Jewish victims" as Ella Shohat powerfully engages with Edward Said's analysis, understanding the experience of Jews who became incorporated in European Zionism through the same analytic lens as Palestinians albeit recognizing their differences, especially over time as Jews from Arab and Muslim lands became assimilated into the "Jewish" regime.[44] Students need to grapple with how Palestine/Israel relates to the concept of the "Judeo-Christian" and the assimilation of Jews into the framework of European coloniality/modernity and a "civilizational" struggle, positioning Jews as "buffer communities," such as during the French colonization of Algeria. This approach disrupts the more historically accurate conditions of Judeo-Muslim coexistence and communal interwovenness.[45] Rendering "Jews" and "Muslims" or "the Jew" versus "the Arab" as enemies and as antagonistically locked in an eternal conflict is a colonial and neocolonial discursive tool. Hence, introducing the students to texts such as Avi Shalim's memoir that depicts Jewish life in Baghdad where communities were interwoven with one another rather than reduced to their religious identities

43 For this crucial discussion, see Nadia Abu El-Haj, *Facts on the Ground: Archeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society* (University of Chicago Press, 2001) and Nur Masalha, *Palestine: A Four Thousand Year History* (Zed Books Ltd., 2018).

44 Ella Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims," *Social Text* 19/20 (1988): 1–35; Shohat, "Taboo Memories, Diasporic Visions: Columbus, Palestine, and Arab-Jews," in *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*, ed. Caren Kaplan and Robyn Wiegman (Duke University Press, 2006). See also, for other interventions, Smadar Lavie, "Mizrahi Feminism and the Question of Palestine," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 7, no. 2 (2011): 56–88 and Yehuda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Stanford University Press, 2006).

45 For an exposition of the assimilation of Jews into whiteness and an Islamophobic "civilizational" discourse, see Santiago Slabodsky, *Decolonial Judaism: Triumphal Failures of Barbaric Thinking* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

along with films such as *Forget Baghdad* portraying the central involvement of Baghdadi Jews in Arab nationalism before it was disrupted by Zionism and broader colonial meddling through divide and conquer methodologies to the story of radical Mizrahi mobilization including of the Israeli Black Panthers in the 1970s and later feminist mobilization such as Shovrot Kirot and Ahoti help us to cover a massive pedagogical terrain through a process of unlearning the discursive framing that seeks to binarize "Arabs"/"Muslims" and "Jews."[46] Such scrutiny and unearthing constitute a decolonial approach to "interfaith" studies, by situating the production of "faith" (Jews versus Muslims, for example) in its context of colonial erasures and divisions.

Therefore, naming things for what they are and retrieving counter-archives (including counter-Jewish archives) to disrupt the various negations Zionism has imposed both epistemologically and materially has become an essential teaching method, focused on real understanding rather than coloring within the lines or reinforcing people's preset narratives. Such a syllabus challenges Zionist negations of interpretations and Jewish histories (including those in the MENA region), and it also unsettles Zionist teleology and historiography that emphasize biblical conquest traditions and antiquity by rejecting the notion of diasporas. This provides students with tools to study how Zionism and Israel are constructed as historical phenomena rather than solely biblical ones (without dismissing the importance of how biblical narratives and tropes are felt and selectively used and understood). Such a syllabus faiclitates learning how Jewish Zionism was rooted in Christian Zionism and influenced by imperial and colonial agendas.[47] Undoing these negations inherent in the Zionist frame that constrains pedagogy in the classroom (now with a threat of litigation as IHRA is adopted widely) finally creates the Palestine/Israel classroom as a site of learning rather than reproduction of mythologies and *hasbara* talking points. Only when the classroom is thusly subversive can actual pedagogy happen. The subversive aspect of this pedagogy is the simple empirical and analytic move to naming things what they are without a spin.

A syllabus that names things as they are, letting the evidence speak without an ahistoric gaslighting spin, amounts to an epistemology from the

46 See Avi Shlaim, *Three Worlds: Memoirs of an Arab-Jew* (Oneworld Publications, 2023); Samir Jamal al Din, *Forget Baghdad: Jews and Arabs- The Iraqi Connection* (Arab Film Distribution, 2002), and Asaf Elia-Shalev, *Israel's Black Panthers: The Radicals who Punctures a Nation's Founding Myth* (University of California Press, 2024).

47 See also Atalia Omer, Diane L. Moore, and Hilary Rantisi, "Touring Absences, Erasures, and Futures in the Unholy Land: A Religiously Literate Diasporic Reading of Palestine/Israel," *Palestine/Israel Review* 1, no. 2 (2024): 313–342.

margins, centering Palestinians. Relatedly, centering radical Mizrahi scholarship and other nonnormative Jewish voices moves the analysis from the ahistorical to the structural and empirical, and into the realm of the hermeneutical and constructive unlearning of Zionist dogma. This unlearning involves reclaiming alternative histories and Jewish traditions of interpretation, negated by the reduction of Jewishness to the biblical text and by the Zionist reading of Jewish history and redemption through biblical land entitlements. Hermeneutical religious literacy, retrieval, and reconstitution of alternative Jewish traditions need to be integrated into analytic frames that de-exceptionalize Palestine/Israel by deploying comparative analytic categories such as settler colonialism and racism. My Palestine/Israel pedagogy, therefore, is decolonial in terms of the deployment of religion and faith, thereby unsettling the ahistorical and depoliticizing use of "interfaith" in reference to Palestine/Israel as a "religious" topic.

My pedagogical prioritizing of an epistemology from the margins leads me to the second key pedagogical question. If the first concerns naming "it" for what it is, using a settler colonial perspective and the language of genocide, apartheid, and military occupation, then the second related question is: When did "it" begin? Mainstream pedagogies tend to start the timeline in 1948 with the "War of Independence" or the Nakba and the Shoah in Europe, or even later in 1967, when "Proper Israel" was officially normalized following the occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, Sinai, the Golan Heights, and East Jerusalem. As a result, "the conflict" becomes increasingly confined and fragmented territorially and normatively, with shrinking accountability for the Nakba or Palestinian depopulation that took place *before* the mass depopulation from 1947–9.[48] Starting the story there is also ripe with opportunities to redeem Zionists from their accountability to the Nakba by also foregrounding the Jewish trauma of the Holocaust, thereby risking conceptual traps of equivocation and absolving them from responsibility for the atrocities committed against Palestinians. This is the case despite the critical pre-October 7th interventions such as Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg, who sought to think about the Holocaust and the Nakba multi-directionally and concurrently rather than through a zero-sum game to articulate an alternative political ethics accountable to historical crimes.[49]

48 See Sabbagh-Khoury, *Colonizing Palestine* and Patrick Wolfe, "Purchase by Other Means."

49 Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg, eds., *The Holocaust and the Nakba: A New Grammar of Trauma and History* (Columbia University Press, 2018). See also Michael

Notably Palestinians scholars have challenged the Bashir-Goldberg premise as a form of Nakba "recognition within a settler reconciliation framework," as Rana Barakat discusses the museumification of Lifta, one of the villages near Jerusalem, depopulated during the Nakba.[50] Relatedly, other critics such as legal scholar Sonia Boulos challenge the "liberal mode of genocide denialism" for failing to "link between the current genocidal violence in Gaza and the foundational violence of the Nakba and for subsequently positioning "genocide as an aberration rather than as the logical outcome of a political order premised on permanent security for the settler population at the expense of the Indigenous."[51] Even the Jewish Israeli human rights organizations, B'tselem and Physicians for Human Rights, finally (almost two years into it) called what Israel has been doing in Gaza genocide, along with prominent Jewish and Israeli figures who publicly wrote and spoke about their painful recognition that, yes, Israel, after all and despite their strong sense of tragic irony, has been committing genocide.[52] Rhetorically, these public reflections involve a reluctant disengagement from a conception of Jews as ontological victims (victims as a matter of their essence and identity). The long genocidal aftermath of October 7th has therefore made the discussion of an alternative political ethics delusional without an actual acknowledgment and reckoning with the genocide against Gaza and how it connects to the Nakba as an ongoing process and structures of depopulation, domination, denial, and destruction. This issue presses the need for the syllabi to explicitly name the realities (and the crimes) using their appropriate names: apartheid, illegal military occupation, settler colonialism, and genocide.

The traps of equivocating through the discussion of "trauma" also myopically conceal a much earlier starting point. The settler colonial perspective requires us to begin the story of "the conflict" at the latest in 1917 with the Balfour Declaration and to highlight the significant roles of both imperialism and Christian Zionism that existed before Jewish Zionism. The settler-colonial comparative framework repositions interpretive tools within the materiality of land accumulation and the influence of Christian European modernity and its racialized accounts of religion. It further de-

Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford University Press, 2009).

50 Rana Barakat, "Lifta, the Nakba, and the Museumification of Palestine's History" *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 5, no. 2 (2018): 1–15, 5.

51 Sonia Boulos, "The 'G Word,' Liberal Israeli Elites, and the Prospect of Decolonization." *Journal of Genocide Research* 28, no. 3 (2026): 553–73.

52 B'tselem, "Our Genocide," July 2025, https://www.btselem.org/sites/default/files/publications/202507_our_genocide_eng.pdf.

exceptionalizes Palestine/Israel, allowing for a more precise analysis rather than reproducing nationalist narratives about themselves as if they were empirical facts beyond questioning and historical context. What is "it"? When did "it" start?—these are the fundamental questions for analyzing every conflict because how we periodize and label "it" can significantly influence the pedagogical upshot.

Indeed, the main pedagogical challenge in teaching Palestine/Israel involves our ability to apply analytic frameworks that we typically use to examine other cases of settler colonial nationalism, apartheid, military occupation, and genocide. Because much of the teaching about Palestine/Israel tends to avoid disrupting the concept of methodological nationalism on one hand, and the biblicalist Zionist narrative of "return" to land rooted in settler colonialism and European imperialism on the other, the pedagogy often disregards accuracy and ends up reproducing Zionist nationalist discourses. Studying and teaching all forms of nationalism can include analyzing sociological facts and what nationalists say about themselves and their origins. However, the analytical work must also extend beyond the nationalist perspective to interpret when, for example, the nationalist discourse is embedded in racist exclusionary policies or to question who is pushed out of the frame.

Multifocal Pedagogy: Literally!

Methodologically, in introductory courses on Palestine/Israel, I use films to tell the story from multiple lenses, literally. The students are instructed to think carefully throughout the syllabus about who is and who is not within the frame and why. We begin with the film *1913: Seeds of Conflict*, zooming in on a particular moment that highlights the choice of what to include in the frame and what to exclude.[53] The film is based on an actual recruitment/promotional film done by the development (fundraising) organs of the Zionist Congress. The rediscovery of the old footage allowed historians to reflect on the critical moment in the transition from Ottoman Palestine to the British Mandate. The moment in the film that students always identify as pivotal is when the camera angle shows empty, "uncultivated" dunes, but if the cameraperson turns a bit to one side, a flourishing Palestinian neighborhood comes into view, which the film omitted. The camera's angle, in other words, was intended to convey a *terra nullius* ("a land without people

53 *1913: Seeds of Conflict*, directed by Ben Loeterman (PBS, 2015), https://www.pbs.org/show/1913-seeds-conflict/.

for a people without a land"). But this slogan immediately contradicted the reality of the land in between the two world wars as also noted explicitly by many Zionist thinkers of the Yishuv, such as Labor Zionist Yosef Weitz who wrote in his diary about the inevitability of "transfer" of the natives to accomplish the goal of creating a Jewish majoritarian state and Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky who wrote with honesty in his "Iron Wall" (1923) that force against the natives is the name of the game because their resistance to Zionist colonization is inevitable.[54] Indeed, early Zionist texts incriminate the movement precisely in the terms that IHRA seeks to censor from our pedagogies: settler colonialism, racist discourse about blood and soil, Eurocentric narratives about bringing "civilization" to the east, "transfer" to "Judaize" the land, and so forth.

Other key clarifying films that pertain to particular watershed moments, such as the Nakba, include *Farha* by the Palestinian filmmaker Darin J. Sallam (2021), which takes the viewer through the experience of the Nakba from the perspective of an adolescent girl stuck in her house's pantry, waiting for her father to come back and get her.[55] He never comes back because he and many others in the village were killed. Farha witnesses through a narrow opening the killing of an entire family by the Jewish militias, turned into the Israeli military. The film begins on the eve of the British departure. Farha resists her father's resolve to marry her off and insists on going to the city to complete her education. Moments before the Nakba begins in her village, she tells her best friend she wants to return and dedicate herself to girls' education. This potential path into social transformation in rural Palestine ends abruptly with the Nakba. At the moment the assault on the village begins, the dialogue in the film ends, and the viewer, in almost total silence, experiences, together with Farha, the long hours in the pantry. The film ends with her emerging into the long journey of exile and refugeehood, alone without her father.

Another film that foregrounds the Nakba as an ongoing experience of longing to return is *Salt of this Sea* by the Palestinian filmmaker Annemarie Jacir (2008), which tells the fictionalized story of Soraya, who grew up in Brooklyn but has imprinted in her brain the map of Yaffa of her grandparents, who were chased out from their home to a refugee camp in

54 Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky, "The Iron Wall (*Rasswjet*)," originally published in *Deutsches Heft*, November 4, 1925 [1923], https://en.jabotinsky.org/archive/search-archive/item/?itemId=158379. We reflect on Weitz's "transfer" realism through Said's exposition of it in his "Zionism from the Standpoint."

55 *Farha*, directed by Darin J. Sallam (Picture Tree International, 2021).

Lebanon.[56] Soraya manages to come to Palestine, and with friends she meets in Ramallah, she ends up going to her family's home. They are welcomed in by the peace activist Irit, who lives there, and despite her niceness and hospitality, refuses to acknowledge that Soraya's family did not just "leave" Yaffa and that this is no "ancient history" but as Soraya screams at her in the film's pivotal moment, the experience of uprooting is her every day, not a closed off historical chapter (unfortunate but necessary for creating a "Jewish home" as the central early Israeli motif of "shooting and crying" connotes). Soraya demands acknowledgment, which Irit refuses to grant, and Irit calls the police to have Soraya kicked out. The apparatus of state violence is literally at Irit's fingertips. The film captures the entrenchment of liberal settler colonialism along with the narrative of Palestinian return and demand for acknowledgment of their experience of forceful depopulation and mass expulsion, also known as "ethnic cleansing." We view this film in class alongside Hagar Kotef's reading, which argues that violence is constitutive of the settler's consciousness, including in its liberal variety, such as that embodied by the fictionalized Irit.[57]

Other films that offer glimpses into the anatomy of structural violence include *The Law in These Parts* (Directed by Ra'anan Alexandrowicz, 2011) and *The Gatekeepers* (Directed by Dror Moreh, 2012), which, respectively, take the viewers into the consolidation of different sets of laws for the territories occupied in 1967 and "Israel proper" within the Green Line and the role of the security/intelligence infrastructure in maintaining and entrenching the military occupation.[58] Yet other films introduce the students to how the military occupation invades even the most intimate spaces and moments in Palestinian lives (e.g., *Omar,* directed by Hany Abu-Assad in 2013, and *Out in the Dark* by Michael Mayer in 2013).[59] Yet others go in-depth into the theo-politics of the settlers in the 1967 territories (*The Settler,* directed by Shimon Dotan, released in 2016), while others convey the role of Christian Zionists

56 *Salt of the Sea* (*Milh Hadha al-Bahr*), directed by Annemari Jacir (Lorber Films, 2008).

57 Hagar Kotef, *The Colonizing Self: Or, Home and Homelessness in Israel/Palestine* (Duke University Press, 2020), 137–184. We also engage with other scholarship on liberal settler colonialism, such as Lana Tatour, "Citizenship as Domination: Settler Colonialism and the Making of Palestinian Citizenship in Israel," *The Arab Studies Journal* 27, no. 2 (2019): 8–39 and Shira Robinson, *Citizens Strangers: Palestinians and the Birth of Israel's Liberal State* (Stanford University Press, 2013).

58 *These Parts,* directed by Ra'anan Alexandrowicz (Roco Films International, 2011) and *The Gatekeepers*, directed by Dror Moreh (Cinephil; Sony Pictures Classics, 2012).

59 *Omar*, directed by Hany Abu-Assad (Adopt Films, 2013) and *Out in the Dark*, directed by Michael Mayer (Transfax Fil Productions, 2013).

(*Till Kingdom Come,* directed by Maya Zinshtein, released in 2020).[60] Yet, others engage in radical imagination through science fiction (*Lyd,* co-directed by Rami Younis and Sarah Ema Firedland, released in 2024).[61]

The use of such films, in a context dominated by a large industry of Palestine/Israel "conflict" films and a wealth of Palestinian cinema that also refuses to define Palestinians solely by their oppression, effectively conveys a multifaceted perspective within a relatively short timeframe of a syllabus. This includes the chronology of modern Palestine/Israel complexity and sharpens students' ability to interpret editorial choices, while prompting them to ask who is marginalized or omitted from the frame/lens and what functions these omissions serve. Moreover, the more than two-year Gaza genocide has added to the list of films—shorts and features—that document people's daily struggles and their fight for survival. Films such as *From Ground Zero* (curated by Palestinian filmmaker Rashid Masharawi, based on shorts by Gazans, released in 2024) and *Put Your Soul on Your Hand and Walk* (a documentary on genocide by the slain filmmaker Fatma Hassona and Sepideh Farsi, released in 2025) as well as the Oscar nominated *The Voice of Hind Rajab* (2025) by Kaouther Ben Hania, centering the actual disembodied voice of a little 6 year old girl pleading with the grownups at the Red Crescent to come save her from a car riddled with bullets that murdered her relatives (alas the grownups struggle to get the green lights from the Israeli authorities to move their ambulance through an 8 minute drive)—all these films should be incorporated into the curriculum, alongside discussions of the heroism of Gaza's journalists and media workers, nearly 300 of whom were killed by Israel during the genocide.[62] Students need to grapple with why reporting from Gaza and the West Bank (and Lebanon) is so threatening to Israel and why Israel has forbidden foreign journalists and independent Israeli journalists from covering these areas without the filter of the military's propaganda apparatus. What is the connection between killing journalists and controlling narratives in our classrooms in the US? Pedagogies related to Palestine/Israel, especially after the escalation of genocide from October

60 *The Settler*, directed by Shimon Dotan (Talisma Prouctions and Filmoption International, 2016) and *Till Kingdom Come*, directed by Maya Zinshtein (Abramorama and MetFilm Sales, 2020).

61 *Lyd*, directed by Rami Younis and Sarah Ema Firedland (Icarus Films and Mad Films, 2024).

62 *From Ground Zero*, curated by Rashid Masharawi and the Masharaw Film Fund (2024), https://www.masharawifilms.org/from-ground-zero/; *Put Your Soul on Your Hand and Walk*, directed by Fatma Hassona and Sepideh Farsi (24Images Production, 2025); and *The Voice of Hind Rajab*, directed by Kaouther Ben Hania (Jour2Fête, 2025).

2023 to October 2025, cannot simply isolate the genocide and analytically return to October 6th, 2023, as if it never happened. One cannot simply return now to deploying the IHRA's definition to continue denying apartheid and an illegal occupation, along with Nakba and genocide denialism.

The multifocal approach and a syllabus of epistemology from the margins that challenge Zionism's multiple negations provide students with tools to interpret Palestine/Israel through comparative explanatory frameworks that promote unlearning methodological nationalism. The comparative analytic framework does not amount to an unreconstructed embrace of liberal accounts of human rights norms but rather is embedded in a decolonial counter-hegemonic approach to human rights, such as articulated in critical legal studies.[63] The challenge in teaching Palestine/Israel is that such an analytical step—namely, calling things as they are by allowing the evidence to speak—often gets wrongly labeled as antisemitic because the weaponization of antisemitism is used to restrict honest and critical teaching. Professors are disciplined and dismissed (professionally assassinated) for including words and concepts like apartheid, settler colonialism, and genocide in their syllabi, as if these analytical categories threaten Jewish safety and comfort. However, what such censorship truly undermines is our academic integrity.[64]

Beyond "Interfaith": A Conclusion?

This essay reflects on teaching Palestine/Israel at a time when, for more than two years, the world has been watching on livestream the utter destruction of Gaza and its people (extended into south Lebanon), along with a massive escalation of government-sanctioned settlers' violence in the West Bank and occupied East Jerusalem. The dominant policy in the American academy diverted attention from genocide and also refused to name it as such, despite overwhelming evidence and expert analyses. Underlying this form of intellectual dishonesty is the broad adoption of the IHRA's definition as one culmination of a long history of weaponization of

63 E.g. Balakrishna Rajagopal, "Counter-hegemonic International Law: Rethinking Human Rights and Development as a Third world Strategy," *Third World Quarterly* 27 (2006), 767–783.

64 For one prominent case involving a Jewish anti-Zionist professor activist in Palestine solidarity, see Sarah Viren, "A Professor Was Fired for Her Politics. Is That the Future of Academia?" *New York Times*, June, 6, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/06/magazine/academic-freedom-politics.html.

antisemitism for the purpose of shutting down criticism of Israeli policies and Zionism. On the other side of silencing and policing critics is the denial of Palestinian narratives, humanity, political claims, and truth. This denial is predicated on anti-Muslim racism and orientalism. Indeed, rather than think of the venue of a journal dedicated to "interfaith" in terms that simplistically extract "religion" from the structures of racialization and other forms of domination, an analysis that is "interfaith" has to demystify and historicize the construction of Israel as "Jewish" or an embodiment of a collective Jew or a part of a "Judeo-Christian civilization." This decolonial pedagogy exposes the Islamophobic and orientalist scaffolding of such a construction and highlights how a move to critique, in effect, opens up pathways for a constructive reimagining of the future otherwise, disrupting the colonial logic of deploying racialized "religion" to divide and rule.

However, a decolonial approach to teaching Palestine/Israel is threatening. It has been threatening for decades. Rather than inventing it, the post-October 7th period saw an increased weaponization of antisemitism to attack protests against Israeli genocidal policies and student movements demanding that their universities disclose and divest from their financial, intellectual, and military ties and collaborations with Israeli institutions and companies invested in the occupation, apartheid, and genocide (such as Boeing and Lockheed Martin). The students also resented being lied to and being treated in the classroom with intellectual dishonesty in terms of teaching on Palestine/Israel. What does this mean? It means, as noted, that teachers and students are fearful of calling genocide, apartheid, and settler colonialism by their comparative analytic names. The IHRA's definition and earlier variation on this type of censorship are at the heart of an intellectual dishonesty in the classroom and programming on Palestine/Israel. Hence, the students organized teach-ins to educate students and other community members. The challenges of anti-intellectualism, along with disingenuous and simplistic accounts of Jewish meanings, are often reduced into the agendas of a political project in the MENA region. This issue is compounded by orientalism and Islamophobia that sustain such reductive accounts, which conflate Jews with Israel. These challenges will persist in the aftermath of the Gaza genocide. While the fire will finally cease, the destruction and genocide will forever remain etched in Jewish and Palestinian histories, albeit differently.

The embeddedness in a narrative of Jewish victimhood and a Zionist storyline about redemption from the ashes of the *Shoah* (though Zionism as a settler colonial movement from Europe predated the *Shoah*) allows public regrets to express shock and disgust at how the political and military

leadership of Israel led it astray. Regardless of how sharp the critique is, it diverts attention from the foundational settler colonial processes and ideology (Zionism) of dispossessing and replacing Palestinians and the need to interrogate the racialization and reduction of Jews to a political project. In the same way, Palestinians' humanity and dignity do not and should not be indexed to their "faiths," and framing their freedom as an outcome of an interfaith deliberation is flawed and depoliticizing, even if liberatory theological and religious texts and praxis play generative roles in Palestinian resistance to occupation, apartheid, and empire.[65] "Faith" and "interfaith", therefore, cannot simply be analyzed as self-evident categories in Palestine/Israel pedagogies. Here comes once again the pedagogical imperative to name things what they are, puncturing the pull of faith-washing.

Indeed, many experts and observers have for months called the utter destruction and starvation of the narrow strip genocidal.[66] The latter group often suffered professional and other consequences for their intellectual and ethical integrity as experts in international law or the comparative study of genocide. Meanwhile, the apologists did not. The Jewish and Jewish-Israeli latecomers rhetorically displayed the same familiar pattern. First, they explain why they denied genocide till an extremely late stage. Second, they explain how their willful refusal to name things as they are connected to their Jewish Holocaust education and how their admission is emotionally painful (once again centering "Jewish feelings" in a time of genocide against Palestinians). The public acknowledgment of genocide is framed as the upshot of a careful process and is linked to a storyline about antisemitism on campuses.[67] This rhetorical maneuvering and rationalization anticipate that "One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This," as the title of Omar El Akkad's book provokes.[68] Hence, such maneuvering with its focus on Jewish emotions persistently centers Jewish fragility, still discussing "our"

65 See, for example, Munther Isaac, *Christ in the Rubble: Faith, the Bible, and the Genocide in Gaza* (Eerdmans, 2025); Mitri Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, The People, The Bible* (Orbis Books, 2023); and John S. Munayer and Samuel S. Munayer, *The Cross and the Olive Tree: Cultivating Palestinian Theology amid Gaza* (Orbis Books, 2025).

66 See Raz Segal, "A Textbook Case of Genocide," *Jewish Currents*, October 13, 2023, https://jewishcurrents.org/a-textbook-case-of-genocide; Sonia Boulos, "The 'G Word.'"

67 E.g., Lihi Ben Shitrit, "As an Israeli Political Scientist, I Resisted Thinking this War was a Genocide. Here's What Changed My Mind," *Forward,* August 2, 2025, https://forward.com/opinion/759877/israeli-genocide-gaza-liberal-jews/; Dov Waxman, "Why I Changed My Mind on the Genocide Charge Against Israel," *Medium*, August 1, 2025, https://medium.com/@dov.waxman/why-i-changed-my-mind-on-the-genocide-charge-against-israel-897c9e043b9e.

68 Omar El Akkad, *One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This* (Knopf, 2025).

genocide through the language of Jewish safety, security, and self-defense. Filtering the irrefutable genocide through a particular Jewish-Zionist narrative frame ultimately refuses to discuss Zionism as a racist ideology that has colonized the meaning of what it means to be Jewish.

I conclude with this discussion of "our genocidal" moment because, although it was not inevitable, there may have been off-ramps. The genocide and attempt to depopulate Gaza are consistent and part of a continuum with the Nakba. Teaching students about the long processes and different methods of displacement and replacement of native Palestinians would mean explaining how a principle of supremacy—where "from the river to the sea," Jews have more rights than non-Jews—has been put into action. You cannot discuss Jews and Judaism without also analyzing the logic of racialization, which necessarily requires including critical Mizrahi scholarship in the educational scope. This scholarship has long highlighted that the stories of Palestinian displacement are intertwined with the uprooting of Jews from Islamic and Arab countries, *including* Palestine, and their incorporation into the euro-Zionist agenda that homogenizes Jewish history and identity. However, the discursive space in American academia and other parts of the West often prevents honest pedagogies. The horrific events of October 7, 2023, and the weaponization of antisemitism to divert attention from the U.S.-Israeli genocidal response to the Hamas-led attack have undermined the possibility of maintaining academic integrity in teaching spaces. Those who uphold intellectual honesty are often policed, marginalized, or silenced. Many professors—especially vulnerable ones—face students who could (and know they could) destroy their careers. If the IHRA parameters restrict our teaching, then what we do is not true teaching but merely coloring inside a pre-set frame that excludes words and ideas such as apartheid, settler colonialism, and genocide. Instead, it perpetuates a form of methodological nationalism that constrains and polices the pedagogical landscape. The only form of teaching, therefore, has to be subversive.

Atalia Omer *is a Professor of Religion, Conflict, and Peace Studies at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at Notre Dame University.*

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ARTICLE

Teaching The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict Through Graphic Narrative: Identity, History, Violence

Brian Hillman

Abstract

This article argues for the pedagogical utility of graphic narratives for teaching the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the discipline of Religious Studies. Graphic narratives articulate the perspective of an author. These texts present the perspectives as dynamic, shaped by an author's identity and life experience, but not bound by it. They also provide important historical background about the conflict while encouraging student engagement through the affective experience of studying a visual and textual medium. This article explores three themes of graphic narratives that facilitate the study of the conflict in a religious studies framework: (1) the role of religious education in shaping political identity; (2) the narration of history; (3) the depiction of violence. It focuses on works by American (Sarah Glidden, Amy Kurzweil, Harvey Pekar, and Joe Sacco), Palestinian (Leila Abdelrazaq and Mohammad Sabaaneh) and Israeli (Boaz Yakin, Ari Folman with David Polonsky and Tohar Sherman-Friedman) authors.

Keywords

graphic memoir, Religious Studies pedagogy, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Jewish identity, Palestinian history

Introduction: Religious Studies and Identity

Religious Studies scholars conceptualize religion as a source of meaning, community, and identity. These aspects of human culture also inform people's political commitments. Rather than merely a reflection of discrete views or principles, people's political commitments are entangled with other parts of their identity, including their religious identity. Thus, how people come to hold certain political beliefs, as well as how they express them, is within the purview of religious studies. Moreover, as this article contends, analyzing political commitments using the methods of religious studies can illuminate aspects of political identity that may be missed if one ignores or misunderstands religious identity. Religious identity is not merely the acceptance of what one has been taught, without questioning or changing one's views, but is constructed and maintained.

Religious studies classes often discuss political issues from the partition of India and Pakistan to the rise of the Islamic State to Christian Nationalism in America. Another conflict, often explored in introductory courses on Judaism, is the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Given the politically contentious and emotionally charged nature of this issue, teaching the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is inherently risky.[1] Being perceived as supporting a particular side of the conflict risks both alienating students who may hold different views, as well as instilling the perception that one's teaching is biased.

A strategy for both emphasizing the different views and perspectives actors hold, as well as how those are informed by one's broader life experience or religious upbringing, is to use graphic narratives, specifically non-fiction graphic memoirs, graphic biography, and comics journalism. Although not a novel strategy, its relevance for teaching the conflict by foregrounding questions of religious studies merits exploration as it isolates how political identity is informed by religion, history, and memory.[2]

1 On teaching the conflict, Janice Fenheimer comments, "As an educator offering an introduction to a complicated topic, I feel deeply responsible for how that introduction is shaped and how it in turn shapes how students think about the region and its peoples" (Janice W. Fernheimer, "Comics and Conflict: Using the Graphic Narrative to Wrestle with the Complexities of Israel/Palestine" in *Teaching the Arabi-Israeli Conflict*, ed. Rachel S. Harris [Wayne State University Press, 2019], 28–42, 30).

2 This essay does not engage with one-page political cartoons as they generally do not narrate change over time and are not necessarily autobiographical.

Thomas Juneau and Mira Sucharov argue for the utility of using graphic narrative in international relations pedagogy, particularly in attending to how individual actors inhabit their political identity. They write:

> A narrative approach— meaning one that focuses on the experience of political actors in understanding and framing their actions— helps unpack the sometimes elusive concept of identity.[3]

Their emphasis is on identity which, they note, is also a central part of "most, if not all, ethnic conflicts."[4] Thus, understanding the experiences of an actor in a conflict helps one to understand how political perspectives form and change but also emphasizes that an actor's perspective is just that: a perspective. The pedagogical dividends of focusing on individual narratives "can help students set aside questions of right and wrong—debates that can easily create a brittle classroom atmosphere—and instead focus on the explanatory questions essential to understanding how world politics unfold."[5] Juneau and Sucharov argue that teaching the conflict through individual comics narratives, rather than through historiography, encourages students to analyze how people understand the conflict as comics foregrounds the subjectivity of a given author. This is an important distinction, particularly for a religious studies class. Historical scholarship is not irrelevant, but this approach focuses on how actors come to understand the conflict and how that intersects with other aspects of their identity, upbringing, and experience.

Juneau and Sucharov claim that teaching graphic narratives facilitates the consideration of different perspectives on the conflict, rather than centering one narrative. They write:

> Working with the assumption that each collective actor under analysis has a certain "version" of events—stories that that group tells about itself and about the Other—reminds students that they too might enter the classroom with particular frames, biases, or assumptions.[6]

Graphic narratives offer distinct advantages over prose narrative texts insofar as they constantly remind the reader that all accounts of history have

3 Thomas Juneau and Mira Sucharov, "Narratives in Pencil: Using Graphic Novels to Teach Israeli-Palestinian Relations," *International Studies Perspectives* 11, no. 2 (2010): 172–183, 173.

4 Juneau and Sucharov, "Narratives in Pencil," 173.

5 Juneau and Sucharov, "Narratives in Pencil," 173.

6 Juneau and Sucharov, "Narratives in Pencil," 173.

subjective elements. They foreground the author's inherently subjective perspective concerning both how to narrate history and how to depict it visually. In other words, there is more material to analyze in texts that combine words and images on every page rather than through words alone. As Hilary Chute explains, the "basic hand-drawn grammar" of graphic narratives that includes frames, gutters, lines and borders" permits them to presents aspects of temporality and perspective textually in ways prose cannot.[7] This is a structural feature of graphic narratives (multimodal texts combining words and images) as well as a contingent feature of the autobiographical narratives that have appeared to date.

Janice W. Fernheimer, in her reflections on using graphic narratives to teach the conflict, states that the "strategic juxtaposition of graphic narratives helps students to focus on multiple perspectives simultaneously." Through juxtaposition, the course uses graphic narratives to "offer a way for incommensurable narratives to be present simultaneously."[8] Many of the comics narrate the history of the conflict, each with a different starting point and key events. This allows for comparison between different narratives with each reflecting an author's understanding of the conflict, and how their family and personal life history are depicted in the narrative.

As authors and characters are drawn into graphic narratives, readers are reminded that a perspective being represented is just that—an individual perspective that is shaped by someone's life experience. Even when they are not drawn into the comic, the author is (or the author and illustrator are) in control of how events and characters are visually portrayed. Some of these texts contain reflections on the author's process of identity formation and, often, how their views have changed.

My discussion is bound by comics narratives published to date. The work of Maltese-American Joe Sacco, work he characterizes as "comics journalism" (discussed in more depth below) has been foundational in comics discussions of Palestine. Sacco's *Palestine*, as well as his 2024 short comic *War on Gaza* are published by Fantagraphics, a prominent comics publisher with wide distribution.[9] Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza* and *Journalism*

7 Hillary L. Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Harvard University Press, 2016), 33.

8 Fernheimer, "Comics and Conflict," 28.

9 *Palestine* appeared as single-issue comics which, admittedly, had a smaller distribution than the book version which collects all the issues. *Palestine* was republished in a new edition in 2024 with a new afterword by Amira Hass. It includes Palestinian academic and activist Edward W. Said's introduction from the 2001 Fantagraphics edition. A new co-authored work of comics journalism by

are published by Metropolitan Books, an imprint of Henry Holt & Co., a major publisher.

Indeed, many of the long-form graphic narratives published in English to date on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are authored by Jewish Americans and distributed by prominent publishers. Harvey Pekar's *Note the Israel My Parents Promised Me* (2012) is published by Hill and Wong (distributed by MacMillian), Sarah Glidden's *How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less*, after being released by Vertigo in 2010 is now distributed by major Canadian publisher Drawn and Quarterly, and Amy Kurzweil's *Flying Couch* (2016), is published by Catapult, a prominent literary press. Narratives by non-Palestinian thus are more readily available and have received more attention than those by Palestinians themselves.[10] The discussion would be enriched if there were more graphic narratives by Palestinian Christian or Muslim authors. The paucity of perspectives on the conflict by non-Jewish actors results from a multitude of economic, artistic, and cultural factors. Pekar himself pioneered autobiographical comics in America and Glidden and Kurzweil builds upon this tradition pioneered by Pekar, Art Spiegelman (author of *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*) and others.[11] Political cartoons, most prominently the work of Naji al-Ali (1938–1987) have been important components of Palestinian political life and media. As this study focuses on longer narrative texts, they have not been included.[12]

Two narrative texts written from Muslim Palestinian perspectives are Leila Abdelrazaq's *Baddawi* and Mohammad Sabaaneh's *Power Born of Dreams: My Story is Palestine*, both published by Just World Books, an independent

Sacco and journalist Chris Hedges titled *Requiem for Gaza* which is based on interviews with Gazans who fled to Cairo is scheduled to published by Fantagraphics in October 2026.

10 Even as nearly every book is available for purchase from an online bookstore, publishers like Henry Holt and Fantagraphics have larger marketing budgets than smaller presses like Just World Books. Moreover, books published by the former than the latter are more likely to be stocked in bookstores, making them more discoverable by consumers.

11 On Pekar see Brian Doherty, *Dirty Pictures: How an Underground Network of Nerds, Feminists, Misfits, Geniuses, Bikers, Potheads, Printers, Intellectuals, and Art School Rebels Revolutionized Art and Invented Comix* (Abrams, 2022), 254–257.

12 The English translation of a collection of al-Ali's comics is published with an introduction by Joe Sacco. See Naji al-Ali, *A Child in Palestine: Cartoons of Naji al-Ali* (Verso, 2024 [2009]). Verso is currently distributed by Penguin, a major publisher. On al-Ali see Sune Haugbolle, "Naji Al-Ali and the Iconography of Arab Secularism," in *Visual Culture in the Modern Middle East: Rhetoric of the Image*, ed. Sune Haugbolle and Christianne Gruber (Indiana University Press, 2013), 231–258.

publishing house committed to social activism.[13] It also published a collection of Sabaaneh's political cartoons.

Three of the limited number of comics available in English that showcase Israeli perspectives complement this analysis.[14] Boaz Yakin, an American filmmaker born to Israeli parents, collaborated with Nick Bertozzi on *Jerusalem: A Family Portrait* (2013). Based on stories told by Yakin's father, the comic explores how Jews in Mandate Palestine sought to resist British rule through the story of internecine family conflict. Ari Folman (another filmmaker) and David Polonsky's *Waltz with Bashir: A Lebanon War Story* (2009) is a comics version of their film about the search for the truth of Folman's involvement in the 1982 Lebanon War.[15] Tohar Sherman-Friedman's *Good Girls Go to Hell* (2024) explores her coming-of-age in the occupied West Bank.

In this article, I argue for why comics, rather than merely prose narrative, accomplish the pedagogical goals of showing how the acquisition of political views is part of a broader process of identity formation and life history, as well as the pedagogical utility of including graphic narratives in college courses. I follow Scott McCloud and Hillary Chute's analysis of comics as a visual-verbal medium in which time is spatialized on the comics page.[16] I also consider how using graphic novels facilitates student learning motivation and supports the perception that visual-verbal texts are more accessible to students than prose texts are.

13 Sabaaneh also illustrated Khaled Beydoun's *Eyes on Gaza: Witnessing Annihilation* (Street Noise Books, 2025). On their website, Street Noise Books under the heading "Who We Are" write: "Our books have a radical, intersectional feminist, queer and inclusive vision, and seek to provide a platform for the voices of marginalized people" (Street Noise Books website, https://www.streetnoisebooks.com/#whoweare). In August 2025 Sabaaneh's *30 Seconds from Gaza Diary of Genocide* was published by Interlink Books. Interlink is a "Palestinian-owned, Massachusetts-based independent publishing house that offers a global perspective to readers" (Interlink Books website, https://interlinkbooks.com/about/). Although Interlink is an independent press, it is distributed by Simon & Schuster, known as one of the "big five" American publishers. Street Noise Books is expected to publish Sabaaneh's *Welcome to Hell: From the West Bank to Gaza* in 2026.

14 Rutu Modan is the one most prominent Israeli comics artists working today. Several of her books have been translated into English and are published by Drawn and Quarterly. Juneau and Sucharov discuss Modan's *Exit Wounds*, trans. Noah Stollman (Drawn and Quarterly, 2007).

15 *Jerusalem: A Family Portrait* (2013) was published by First Second, now an imprint of Macmillan Publishers (one of the "big five").

16 Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 4.

I then examine how American Jewish comics artists connect their understanding of Israel to their Jewish education.[17] The attention to the intersection of religious education (and how authors internalize, reject, and nuance their education) and political perspective is a unique focus of studying the conflict using the perspective of religious studies. Non-Orthodox American Jews often receive religious instruction only during their youth until they participate in the Bar or Bat Mitzvah confirmation ceremony around age thirteen. Some may receive additional formal Jewish education through their synagogue or Jewish day school, but for many American Jews formal education ends after their Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Some participate in a program called Birthright which provides free ten-day trips to Israel for Jewish adults aged 18–26. Informal education from Jewish parents and grandparents also shapes their identity.[18] This section concludes by contrasting these American narratives with one from an Israeli West Bank settlement.

Next, I compare how graphic narratives by American, Israeli, and Palestinian writers narrate the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The nuances of each historical account, including narrative tone, the depiction of individual actors, and which events are narrated (or not), reflect the author's view. For texts by American Jews, we can consider how their perspective on the conflict shapes how they narrate its history. For Palestinians and Israelis, their narrative more directly reflects their lived experience. Comparing histories, rather than presenting a singular narrative shifts the focus from mere history (i.e., what happened) to how individuals *understand* history and, concomitantly, how it informs and reflects their identity. The focus, then, is on individual perception (and its entanglement with Jewish identity) rather than a historiographical narrative that seeks to meet the academic standards of historiography.

In the following section, I examine how these comics, as visual-verbal documents, function as witnesses to violence and trauma. I focus on the different strategies artists employ for depicting violence. We will see that artists employ a range of forms, from the abstract to the hyper-realistic.

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17 As Fernheimer notes, the order in which students are introduced to texts can influence their understanding of the conflict. Anchoring students in a perspective can create bias. This article is open to the same critique. Foregrounding American perspectives in this essay reflects my own context as an instructor, having been educated at and taught at American universities, but it is not imperative to center them in any course using the texts and methods described in this essay.

18 It would have been ideal to compare the religious education of Muslim and Christian Palestinians to these Jewish narratives, but long-form narrative comics are not extant.

Depicting violence is one aspect of how to talk about victimization, how to bear witness to suffering, and how that process of bearing witness is coupled, in some cases, with one's own victimization.

The article triangulates among American, Palestinian, and Israeli texts and perspectives (and, by extension, Jewish and Islamic perspectives) to understand how people come to hold beliefs and how they narrate personal aspects of the conflict. It troubles the notion that there is a monolithic perspective or experience by personalizing the conflict through graphic narratives that views the life-histories of actors, victims, and witnesses.

Before turning to my analysis, I note that I have taught two classes devoted to graphic narratives at two different large public universities. I draw upon these experiences by detailing the aspects of these texts with which students engaged at length and generated the most discussion.

Comics and the Visual Language of Perspective

Comics scholars from Scott McCloud's landmark study *Understanding Comics* have sought to explain how comics function.[19] McCloud defines comics as a medium of communication of images in sequence. He attends to the essential role of the reader in the creation of meaning in the comic by emphasizing the transitions between panels as "aided and abetted by" the reader's imagination. Comics require reader involvement to provide logical connections between panels.[20] As the panels are "in sequence," time passes on the comics page. "In learning to read comics," McCloud writes, "we all learned to perceive time spatially, for in the world of comics, time and space are one and the same."[21]

The spatialization of time helps to explain why the graphic narrative is a powerful medium for understanding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In her study of autobiographical comics by Jewish women, Tahneer Oksman observes that, in mapping time as space, graphic memoir "emphasizes the importance of both time and location as the key to the unique brand of autobiographical storytelling." Autobiographical narrators are "focused on 'finding' themselves, on affirming their presences, by drawing themselves and their worlds both in present and over time."[22] Autobiographical graphic

19 McCloud builds on Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (Poorhouse Press, 1990 [1985]) in developing his conception of how comics function.

20 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Harper Collins, 1993), 68–72.

21 McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 100.

22 Tahneer Oksman, *"How Come Boys Get to Keep Their Noses?": Women and Jewish*

narratives are strong pedagogical tools, as their authors are often drawn into the story. The author's perspective is always foregrounded, shaping what material appears in a comic and how it is presented.[23]

Hillary Chute explores how the comics form provides unique advantages for the depiction of violent conflicts. She argues that comics, with its "unique spatial grammar of gutters, grids, and panels … offers opportunities to place pressure on traditional notions of chronology, linearity, and causality—as well as on the idea that 'history' can ever be a closed discourse, or a simply progressive one."[24] For Chute, war comics grapple with how to "picture trauma and suffering." Against conception of trauma as disappearance (i.e., the loss of life, of the absence of something) and against a world saturated with photographic and filmic images of suffering, comics offer alternative possibilities for depicting the effects and aftermath of trauma. Chute calls this the practice of "drawing to tell"—a unique form of witnessing in which the comics artist participates.[25] The comics page is neither the mere photography of suffering or its aftermath, but a slow, active process in which the author makes decisions about depicting reality. Chute's analysis motivates the comparison between different historical narratives and the depiction of violent conflict in the comics form.

There is some evidence that students are more motivated to engage with graphic novels than with more traditional texts.[26] Although some have suggested that graphic novels are easier to read than prose-only texts, Kristy Brugar and her collaborators suggest a different approach. Graphic novels are not necessarily cognitively easier to comprehend due to the relatively low number of words on a given page. Rather, they require both verbal and visual literacy to comprehend.[27] On this view, graphic narratives require more complex reading processes to understand them than prose does.[28] The

American Identity in Contemporary Graphic Memoirs (Columbia University Press, 2016), 8.

23 *Not the Israel* is a collaboration between an artist and a writer (was Pekar's method). Although Pekar died before it was published, there is no reason to think that he would have objected to the final version

24 Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 4. Note: The gutter is the space between panels (McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 66).

25 Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 4–6.

26 See the sources cited by Kristy Bruger et al., "More Than Mere Motivation: Learning Specific Content Through Multimodal Narratives," *Literary Research and Instruction* 57, no. 2 (2018): 183–208, 186.

27 Brugar, et al., "More Than Mere Motivation," 186–187.

28 The multimodality of comics may both make students more motivated to read them because they are more engaging without thereby being easier to understand; they may be more engaging because of their complexity, not despite it.

complexity of the language of comics is a key insight into their utility as pedagogical tools. They allow for the articulation of content through words, images, and, crucially, the complex interaction between words and images. The tools of visual language open ways for authors to "show" rather than to "tell,"[29] while also providing authors with tools to convey background information subtly and parsimoniously.[30]

Jewish Education and Identity

This section examines how American Jewish comics artists develop their understanding of Israel. They learn about the conflict in a mediated way through their private, extracurricular Jewish education, their own independent reading, and through conversations with members of their family, rather than by talking directly to Israelis or Palestinians or by visiting Israel/Palestine for extended periods. Even as Glidden and Kurzweil travel to Israel for brief periods on the curated Birthright tour, they acknowledge their ignorance of Palestinian lived reality. Pekar (1939–2010) remembers the exuberance of the founding of the state of Israel, a feeling shared by his parents. Amy Kurzweil (b. 1986) and Sarah Glidden (b. 1980) were born roughly a generation and a half after Pekar. Comparing these three accounts showcases different perspectives and the different ways Jewish Americans develop their attitude toward the conflict through formal education, travel, and reading.

Ned Curthoys discusses Pekar and Glidden's texts using the lens of the *Bildungsroman*, although his analysis could easily apply to Kurzweil's memoir. Curthroys comments that the conflict "is an abiding personal preoccupation that shapes their sense of self, thus requiring an immersive exploration of their changing relationship to the Jewish state."[31] Let us examine this "immersive exploration."

Amy Kurzweil's *Flying Couch* integrates the biography of her idiosyncratic grandmother Lily Fenster, a woman who escaped from the Warsaw Ghetto and survived the Holocaust, with Amy's own coming-of-age. Amy graphically depicts Fenster's oral history from 1994 using block font

29 Hillary L. Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (Columbia University Press, 2010), 3.

30 Junea and Sucharov, "Narratives in Pencil," 174.

31 Ned Curthoys, "Coming of Age in Graphic Novels Representing the Palestine/Israel Conflict" in *Literary Representations of the Palestine/Israel Conflict after the Second Intifada*, ed. Ned Curthoys and Isabelle Hesse (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 165–183, 165.

reminiscent of the typewriter print of the testimony. Victoria Aarons writes that, for Kurzweil, the "act of telling both her own and her grandmother's stories increases her understanding of her grandmother's past but also of her own fraught maturation."[32] *Flying Couch* is both the graphic narrative of how Amy's grandmother's survived the Holocaust as well as the story of how Amy produced a graphic narrative based upon it. Amy's identity as a third-generation Holocaust survivor shapes her Jewish identity and her perception of Jewish history.

Chapter three, "Home Schooling," opens with an adolescent Amy walking into Sunday school at her local synagogue. She writes that "whatever Jewish Education I required was doled out at Temple Shalom," a place where "the young adults of my suburb came to fulfill their respective quotas of Jewish learning" before their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs.[33] Amy's Jewish education focused on the State of Israel and antisemitism. Kurzweil depicts this with images lining the walls that lead to her classroom. She writes that "the only lessons I remember were about Israel. Jacob and Leah were mythic figures but Herzl and Golda Meir were still rolling in their graves." Below this text box, Amy looks at portraits of Meir, Herzl, and Ben-Gurion. The next three images are of the gates to Auschwitz with the slogan "never again" fixed above it, following by an Israeli "pioneer" (*chalutz*) with the phrase "The Zionist Dream" and, lastly, the Israeli flag. Kurzweil describes this as "Israel: A refuge where our people, broken and demoralized by rampant oppression, could come and build their lives anew in peace and prosperity."[34] Her classroom experience reinforces these themes.

In one scene, the teacher writes "ANTI-SEMITISM" on the board and asks students to define it. The students eagerly offer anecdotes attesting to it: why there has never been a Jewish president and why they have school on Rosh Hashanah.[35] Amy offers that this is "why the Holocaust happened and some people made Israel."[36] The teacher praises Amy for her response and begins a detailed and energetic discussion of the Israeli history. She asks her students if they think antisemitism decreased after the founding of the state of Israel. They emphatically respond, "no." As the instructor continues, Amy

32 Victoria Aarons, "Mapping Transgenerational Memory of the Shoah in Third-Generation Graphic Narratives: On Amy Kurzweil's *Flying Couch*" in *Holocaust Graphic Narratives: Generation, Trauma, and Memory* (Rutgers University Press, 2019), 125–150, 126.

33 Amy Kurzweil, *Flying Couch: A Graphic Memoir* (Catapult, 2016), 73.

34 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 76.

35 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 77.

36 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 78.

sits cross-legged, looking troubled and cautiously asks who killed Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, for Amy had heard that he was killed by an Israeli. Amy crosses her legs, appearing increasingly uncomfortable. Her teacher stammers, saying "umm …", then pausing, and finally declaring they will discuss it next week. The scene ends with Amy appearing visibly annoyed, unsatisfied with her teacher's response.[37]

Kurzweil's unresolved feelings about Israel leads to a crisis of identity when she enrolls at Stanford University as an undergraduate. One page, laid out in 3 by 3 style, is titled "Great Game of Jewish Practice: College Edition." She attends both Hillel and Chabad. At one dinner, the attendees discuss Israeli military aggression, intermarriage, and their personal connection to the Holocaust. When Amy leaves, she faces two paths: avoidance, and confusion. She takes the former, a heavenly voice shouts" WAR IS REAL! GO LEARN SOMETHING!" which sends Amy running to the "confusion" path.[38] This scene is depicted on the same page, starting from the top to bottom. This is an excellent example of how time is spatialized in comics and how the graphic form facilitates the playful visualization of ideas.

The path leads to a (satirical) "university-wide identity fair." She walks past such identity categories as "politically active Black people" and "stoners for the environment" before entering the section for "Jews (various)." She is brusquely welcomed by a woman with curly hair reading Kafka who gestures behind her. Welcome to the Real World," she says. "Go choose your Jewish identity."[39] Amy stands in front of several large boards with a hole for her face, each detailing the pros and cons of different Jewish identities. The first "Ardent Pro-Israel Jew" boasts "comfort and uncomplicated loyalties" but is "inoffensive to parents." Amy rejects this option as well as "Radical Anti-Zionist Jew" and "Politically and Culturally Apathetic Jew," instead reluctantly opting for "Expert Educated Jew." The only pro it offers is a "wealth of knowledge" while cons include being overwhelmed by inconclusiveness, alienation, and an inevitable existential crisis.[40] She inhabits

37 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 82–83.

38 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 101–103. In an interview, Kurzweil states she initially did not see a "conflict between Holocaust narratives and narratives of Israeli history." Yet she came to understand that this narrative, reinforced by her mother and grandmother, is just one narrative of the conflict (Sandra Chiritescu, "'Where Their Feelings Begin and Mine End': Transgenerational Holocaust Witnessing in Amy Kurzweil's *Flying Couch*" in *Jewish Women in Comics: Bodies and Borders*, ed. Heike Bauer, et al. (Syracuse University Press, 2023), 79–87, 83.

39 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 105.

40 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 106–107.

this identity for the rest of the comic. Amy is handed a towering stack of books that she lugs back to her apartment. They include novels by Jewish authors, traditional religious texts, comics, histories of Israel, and works by Sigmund Freud. These books end up challenging Amy in ways she depicts through the medium of comics.

Amy plops on her couch as the first book opens, out of which emerges the biblical Patriarch Jacob. Jacob informs Amy that, now that she has resolved to become a Jewish intellectual, she must "do your part to honor your proud ancestors" by "wrestling with the demons of the past" just as he had to wrestle with an angel (Genesis 32:22–32). Jacob falters when he attempts to articulate the end goal of this wrestling before walking away.[41] This unresolved goal of wrestling reemerges at the end of the comic. Next, Sigmund Freud appears to Amy to "ensure that you've properly analyzed the details of your familial life in the context of your American identity."[42] Finally, Theodore Herzl appears to emphasize the importance of Jewish cultural unity so the Jews "remain safe and thriving."[43] Looking frazzled, Amy declares that she "just wants to draw pictures before fleeing the room as Freud, Herzl, and Jacob, as well as Jewish comics artists Art Spiegelman, Will Eisner, and Harvey Pekar look on. As a budding Jewish intellectual, Amy is challenged by her cultural inheritance and feels compelled to grapple with it.

As part of her identity crisis, she attends Birthright. Even though she had "never been around this many Jews before," Amy "resolved to shun any forced comradery … to be sold an identity or a family."[44] Amy begins by enjoying herself in Israel: admiring Israeli men, riding a camel, and visiting the Western Wall in Jerusalem. She is challenged when the tour visits the Syrian border. Noam, the Israeli tour guide, explains that this is the site of two Israeli wars, one that claimed the life of her brother.[45] Another speaker introduces himself as an American Jew from Cleveland who has lived through many wars in Israel. He laments that "Every day, I look out and see the flags of my enemy. Every day I realize that my life is threatened. Every day I am afraid."[46] Someone hesitantly asks the speaker about his perspective on the Palestinians. "What Palestinians?" he retorts. As the questioner stutters through an explanation, the speaker's face contorts in paroxysms of anger. Being from Cleveland, he dons a baseball hat of the local team, then

41 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 110–112.
42 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 112.
43 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 113.
44 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 122.
45 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 129.
46 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 133.

known as the Cleveland Indians, with their culturally-insensitive former logo, a Native American character named "Chief Wahoo." He explodes into a profane denunciation of Palestinians who, he claims, are trying to kill them.[47] That night, Amy drifts to sleep reading Alan Dershowitz's *The Case for Israel*, *A History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, and Joe Sacco's *Palestine*.[48] The day's images intermingle as she sees an anguished Noam, Chief Wahoo, and the speaker from Cleveland, now wearing a hat with the logo of the Lebanese paramilitary group Hezbollah. Chief Wahoo may suggest a link between Israel and colonialism. Amy's subconscious remains torn between empathy for Noam and disdain at anti-Palestinian aggression.

The narrative structurally links Amy's experience with the Holocaust as, in the next scene she visits *Yad Vashem*, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. She draws herself looking intently at the exhibits, with a mix of troubled expressions on her face as she bears witness to tragedy.[49] But her trip ends on a note of life as she visits her extant family in Israel, receiving a warm welcome.[50]

Amy graduates from college toward the end of *Flying Couch*. After the parallel narrative of her grandmother concludes (which was Amy's senior thesis project), she is again confronted by Jacob, Freud, and Herzl, now joined by her mother and grandmother. "That's it?" they ask, "you graduate and the story is over?" Amy starts to run as Freud shouts "aren't you leaving complications unresolved?" Amy's Jewish forebearers follow her in a line until she marches off the page which leads into the memoir's final chapter.[51] At the end, Amy has sought to balance the narrative she was taught about Israel as a necessary salve against antisemitism, and her positive experience with her family in Israel, with her complicated feelings about the conflict, including treatment of Palestinians.

Sarah Glidden's *How to Understand*, which records her Birthright trip from 2007, shares some similarities with Kurzweil's telling. Glidden discloses little about her upbringing in *How to Understand* (and has few Jewish friends) but maintains a Jewish identity. After she persuades her friend Melissa to join her on Birthright, Glidden spends the weeks before the trip reading about Israel. Glidden desires to visit Israel to see the "reality of the other side of

47 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 132–136.
48 Alan Dershowitz, *The Case for Israel: A History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (John Wiley & Sons, 2003).
49 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 142–149.
50 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 150–152.
51 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 232–233.

the Green Line," meaning the West Bank, a trip that will require her to stay several days after Birthright.[52] As she prepares to leave for the trip, she acknowledges to her non-Jewish partner Jamil that she has been fixated on the trip as she "prepared to discover the truth behind this whole mess once and for all."[53] Once in Israel, her skeptical boldness wanes as the experience bucks her expectations. Sarah's bus tour visits the Golan Heights and is shown a video about it. The video highlights the region's recreational offerings and emphasizes its military significance. The narrator explains that:

> [I]ts geographic position makes it indispensable to the nation's security. Before the war, Syria sent rocket attacks into Israeli villages below. And now … Syria wants it back. Israel has tried to compromise with the Syrian government, but Syria won't budge at all![54]

The video ends with the ghostly apparition of Yitzhak Rabin who says "withdrawal from the Golan Heights is unthinkable." Sarah exclaims "I knew it! This whole trip is going to be a regional propaganda tour!"[55] She confronts the tour guide Gil with her assessment who, against expectations, agrees it is propaganda. Sarah looks sheepish as her "gotcha" moment, evidence that the entire trip is mere propaganda, is thwarted.[56] On the bus, Gil contextualizes the film. Acknowledging the sentiment that it felt like propaganda, he explains that it was made in 1992 when returning the Golan Heights was a realistic possibility. The experience challenges Sarah's assumption that Israelis are uncritical proponents of Israel.

The trip exposes Sarah to moments in Israeli history during which she empathizes with the actors involved, as described in the next section. As Sarah begins to enjoy the trip and identify with Israel, her crisis of identity emerges. She says to a fellow Birthright participant that she feels that she ought, as a Jew "to support Israel no matter what" but as a leftist progressive, any support for Israel is seen as a betrayal of the Palestinians.[57] Her identification with Israel comes to a head when the trip visits Independence Hall in Tel Aviv, where the Jewish state was declared in 1948. The Hall's tour guide narrates the founding of the state of Israel as a necessary measure to

52 Sarah Glidden, *How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2016 [2010]), 17.
53 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 6.
54 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 39–40.
55 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 40.
56 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 40, 45.
57 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 76–77.

ensure safety for Jewish people given the threats of unwelcoming Arab forces in the region and the Holocaust. Today, the speaker explains Israelis' primary desire is peace as they face treats of terrorism and send their children to the army at age 18.[58] As she listens, Sarah becomes increasingly pensive and emotional, resting her head on her hands. She sees some Israeli soldiers standing by the door and thinks: "Are these our soldiers? My God they're so young!" Sarah rushes out of Independence Hall, now in tears. Reflecting her racing thought, the panels depict scenes of violence both against Jews (a Nazi solider stomping a man wearing a Jewish star) and by Jews (an Israeli soldier pointing a gun at an older Palestinian woman).[59]

An Israeli tour guide finds Sarah crying. Sarah explains that she's lost confidence in her perception of Israel. "I know the Palestinians are wrong sometimes. But … I always thought Israel was **more** wrong because it has all the power." Now Sarah feels challenged by the notion that Israel is also her home as Jew.[60] Blotting her tears with a roll of toilet paper, Sarah shouts: "So you guys win! I feel a connection, okay? I hope you're happy." But, she adds, "how can I feel a connection to a place that causes so much suffering?"[61]

Before Birthright, Sarah had rejected the notion that she had any intrinsic connection to Israel. She acknowledges that Israel plays some role in her identity as Jew while never abandoning her concern for Palestinians. After Birthright she arranges for a car to take her to Ramallah, finally to see the Palestinian perspective. Unfortunately, the car does not arrive at the arranged meeting place. Thus, Palestinian concerns remain abstract to her in contrast to Israeli issues which she experienced firsthand. Sarah has developed a connection to Israel based on her identity as a Jew, moving from settled notions about Israel to a more complicated perspective.

Not the Israel My Parents Promised Me has three interlocking narrative lines: (1) Early 2000s Cleveland in which Pekar and Waldmann traipse around bookstores and libraries; (2) Pekar's youth and gradual disillusionment with his family's commitment to the state of Israel; (3) Jewish history from antiquity to the present. Pekar introduces himself to the reader as collaborating with Waldmann on a book about Israel while also explaining how his attitude towards Israel changes; more specifically, how he "lost faith

58 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 97–99.

59 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 99–100.

60 Tahneer Oksman observes that Glidden's perspective evolves as she moves from "abstract and indirect" knowledge of the conflict gained through books to one gathered from people (Oksman, "*How Come Boys*," 174).

61 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 103–105.

in Israel" after moving away from his parents who strongly influenced his view of the conflict.[62]

Despite his mother's atheism, Pekar's parents were committed Zionists and enrolled him in a Zionist school. His mother believed that Jewish people would not be safe until they had "their own country."[63] This sentiment is reinforced by his father and his parents' friends. Any nuance or debate about Israel's actions was beyond the pale.

Pekar's disillusionment with Israel starts in the 1960s when he becomes aware of Jewish ethnic prejudice. "Back then" he says "I was big on semitic brotherhood. I thought all semites could get along." But when he accepts that even Ashkenazi-Sephardic prejudice exists, he starts the process of abandoning his conception of Jewish moral superiority.[64] More importantly, he begins to critique Israel when it acts in ways that undermine peace. Following his parents' perspective, Pekar accepts that a Jewish state is needed for Jewish safety. When it acts in ways anathema to peace, it is open to censure.

In one scene set in the 1970s, Pekar, while reading a newspaper, reflects on Menachem Begin's promotion of Israeli settlements of the Occupied Territories. Pekar thinks "this is a really stupid thing to do! It's sabotaging their best chance for lasting peace!"[65] He professed this sentiment publicly by publishing an op-ed in his local Cleveland paper the *Plain Dealer* in 1978 titled "A Jewish Dissident Asks: Must Israel Forever Live Under Siege?." Pekar is playfully drawn standing on top of the page of newspaper displaying the piece.[66] In the article, Pekar introduces himself as a Jew, the son of Zionists. He acknowledges that his criticism of Israel leads some to consider him "naïve or disloyal to the Jewish cause." However, he critiques the recent Israeli invasion of Lebanon "obviously morally reprehensible and politically ill-advised" for it was motivated by the "attempt to quell PLO terrorists" which jeopardizes peace negotiations. He adds that West Bank settlements are anathema to peace.[67]

62 Harvey Pekar and JT Waldman, *Not the Israel My Parents Promised Me* (Hill & Wang, 2012), 4.
63 Pekar and Waldman, *Not the Israel*, 10–11.
64 Pekar and Waldman, *Not the Israel*, 47–49.
65 Pekar and Waldman, *Not the Israel*, 138.
66 Harvey Pekar, "A Jewish Dissident Asks: Must Israel Forever Live Under Siege?" *Plain Dealer*, March 30, 1978, 27a.
67 Pekar and Waldman, *Not the Israel*, 145–146.

One of the final scenes of the comic shows Pekar and Waldman discussing the possibility of a two-state solution. An intricate maze fills the space between them, suggesting the labyrinthine attempt to find a solution to the conflict.[68] Pekar, like Kurzweil and Glidden, remains unsure of the proper path forward but, for our purposes, has moved away from the uncritical Zionism of his parents.

These texts depict the process of identity formation, both personal identity and the community with which one identifies. As Glidden, Pekar, and Kurzweil show, one's perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is informed by one's religious identity while also being malleable, changing as one acquires new information and has new experiences. The perspective of all three shifted as they learned more about the history of the state of Israel, discussed next.

Before turning to history, it is instructive to compare these conceptions of Israel with a narrative by a Jewish Israeli. Tohar Sherman-Friedman's *Good Girls Go to Hell* chronicles her coming-of-age in an observant Jewish family in the settlement of Kedumim in the occupied West Bank. Because she lives in an almost exclusively Jewish environment in a settlement, her Jewish education is intertwined with politics. In 2004, a young Tohar is brought to protest the impending Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip. Her family uneventfully drives through an Arab village and a military checkpoint to reach the Gaza strip. Tohar's parents tensely discuss the political situation, speculating about a civil war.[69] The Sherman-Friedman family is clad in orange to protest the disengagement.

The young Tohar is uncomfortable, sweating and standing still among the protesters once they arrive. The scene ends on a note of ambivalence. Tohar comments that she didn't understand the significance of the protest at the time although, on the way home the "air felt heavy" and she felt "like a warrior." The chapter concludes with Tohar suggesting she should have stayed home.[70] The scene locates Sherman-Friedman as a Jewish Israeli settler, protesting the disengagement from the Jewish settlements in Gaza.

Although Sherman-Friedman's father is a rabbi, her relationship to normative religious belief and practice is complex. Tohar contends with existential questions of religion, such as the existence of God, as well as frustrations with the restrictions on female dress. On one Yom Kippur, an

68 Pekar and Waldman, *Not the Israel*, 158–159.

69 Tohar Sherman-Friedman, *Good Girls Go to Hell*, trans. Margaret Morrison (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024), 10–11.

70 Sherman-Friedman, *Good Girls*, 12–15.

adolescent Tohar asks her friend Atara if she "has doubts" about this, meaning Judaism. Atara demurs, saying that she doesn't agonize about her Orthodox clothing and that she feels secure in the reality of the Jewish sabbath. Tohar replies that she feels guilty, wondering if part of her is broken. She asks if the dietary laws are logical, feeling unable to believe in their veracity.[71] Tohar's doubts become known to her teachers. Consequently, she gets summoned to the principal's office of her all-girl's school. The principal asks if she believes in God. Tohar says she does not. The principal suggests that her emotional disconnection could be mitigated by more prayer, Tohar demurs, arguing that prayer won't address her intellectual reservations. Although Tohar continues to dress modestly and perform Jewish practices, her reservations grow.[72]

In another scene, Tohar wakes up late for high school and, after trudging to school in the heat, is turned away by the male security guard because her outfit that shows her knees is "indecent." Enraged, Tohar returns home, shouting that those who follow Jewish law are "just primitives" and that Jews "hide behind the laws so you don't have to think." She returns to school modestly dressed but, disgruntled, takes a vow of silence for several days lest her ranting put her socially at odds with her peers in Kedumim.[73]

Even when Tohar informs her father that she no longer desires to be observant, her father tells her that he loves her although he, perhaps patronizingly, says "when you're older you'll understand."[74] Despite this change of practice (which manifest visually in Tohar's increasingly immodest dress (by Orthodox Jewish standards), she continues to live with and remains on good terms with her parents throughout the book.

The early scene of attending the protest, as well as her dissatisfaction with religious practice strictures and tenets, alienates Tohar from normative Judaism but not from her family or community. Unlike Pekar and Kurzweil, Tohar's rejection of her parents' religiosity results not in alienation, but in a negotiation of her own religious identity. Living in a Jewish settlement affords Tohar the freedom to negotiate her identity although, as discussed below, her story is just as important for what it does not explore: The treatment of Palestinians in the West Bank or the violent history that led to the creation of a settlement like *Kedumim*.

71 Sherman Friedman, *Good Girls*, 25.
72 Sherman-Friedman, *Good Girls*, 30–31.
73 Sherman-Friedman, *Good Girls*, 38–41.
74 Sherman-Friedman, *Good Girls*, 91.

Historical Narrative and Strategic Juxtaposition

Many of the texts that engage with the Palestinian-Israel conflict also depict historical scenes that reflect the author's perspective, showcasing how they perceive historical actors. They also show how characters (often younger versions of the author) absorb and contest certain aspects of what they have been taught, as well as the circumstances under which they learned about history. Sometimes characters empathize with specific actors, a process that is often depicted through a character's body language even if it is not acknowledged with words. Other times they contest the narrative they have received, or question what they were taught. Historical narratives may also serve a rhetorical function, reminding the reader of what has happened rather than informing them.[75]

This section will first discuss the historical narratives presented in the previously discussed American Jewish texts before comparing them to Israeli and Palestinian framings of important historical events and actors. Even though the extant graphic narratives do not cover all the same events, they are similar enough to deploy Fernheimer's strategy of strategic juxtaposition: introducing students to multiple accounts of events.

As described above, Amy Kurzweil's understanding of Jewish history is informed by her Sunday School education and by her grandmother. She is taught that the state of Israel is a necessary response to antisemitism. Her Sunday school instructor teaches that Israel has endured many wars because of "persistent anti-semitism the Middle East" writing the years 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973 on the board. She also says that many "heroes" have devoted their lives to the pursuit of peace writing the names of Ben-Gurion, Meir, and Rabin. Kurzweil challenges this view by asking who killed Rabin. A critical stance toward Israeli-centric narratives becomes part of Kurzweil's education as an "expert educated Jew." It is noteworthy Kurzweil does not consider the Palestinian perspective on this history, even as she shows the absurdity of the denial of the reality of Palestinians.

Glidden engages with historical actors and events dialogically. Using the visual language of comics, she presents herself as talking to and being challenged by historical actors. This is an opportunity for empathy, an emotional experience through which she moves from settled notions about Israel to critical skepticism.

75 This may be the case with the depiction of extremely well-known events such as the Holocaust and the founding of the modern State of Israel.

At the Kinneret cemetery, Sarah's tour guide recounts the immigration of Jews to Palestine from Eastern Europe. The comic cuts back in time to scene where a *chalutz* reads Hayim Nachman Bialik's Zionist poem "In the City of Slaughter."[76] He tries to persuade his female companion that moving to Palestine is their only path for avoiding antisemitic violence. Sarah appears and implores them to consider the people already living in Palestine. The *chalutz* naively says "they will welcome us."[77] The *chalutz* begins agricultural work in Palestine. Sarah again appears, flapping her arms and shouting "none of you are thinking of the consequences of your actions! What you're a part of will escalate into a war in which thousands will **lose their homes!**"[78] The *chaultzim* reply that they need to take care of themselves and that they are not hostile towards the Arabs, only fighting in self-defense.[79] The scene continues, but *How to Understand's* method of engaging with history is evident: Sarah imagines herself as in dialogue with historical actors that challenge her perspective. Dialoguing with Jews of the past is part of her coming to identify with the state of Israel.

At Independence Hall, Sarah's tour guide explains that immigration to Palestine increased after World War I. Sarah, still critical of Israel, whispers to her friend that those Jews wouldn't employ any Arab laborers. She passes a painting of an artist working at an easel. The artist, now animated, tells Sarah that she would have immigrated too. Sarah waves her hand dismissively, claiming she would have left Eastern Europe for America. The artist reminds her that America had quotas for Jews, suggesting that Palestine would have been her best option.[80] In these two examples, Glidden portrays herself being challenged by the choices of historical actors, recognizing their lived reality in ways she didn't before.

Harvey Pekar's recounting of Jewish history is a parallel narrative to his own Zionist upbringing and subsequent disillusionment. Pekar and Waldman are drawn perambulating the stacks of bookstore and library shelves, reaching for familiar, scholarly-looking titles. Although Pekar never visited Israel, he believes that his extensive reading has helped him to understand the conflict. The prominence of books gives their narrative an air of authority. Traipsing from used bookstore to library gives the impression that Pekar and Waldman must know what they're talking about. Moreover,

76 Hayim Nachman Bialik, "In the City of Slaughter," University of Maryland website, https://faculty.history.umd.edu/BCooperman/NewCity/Slaughter.html.
77 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 60.
78 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 61, bold used in text for emphasis.
79 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 62.
80 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 96.

Waldman draws Pekar's face into the historical narrative to emphasize the fact that he's relaying the information. In one example, Pekar's large head overlooks the hills of Palestine as he commences explaining how Zionists purchased land from Ottoman landholders.[81] The presence of his head emphasizes that the reader is being presented with Pekar's narrative.

Pekar's narrative generally adheres to the "Lachrymose" conception of Jewish history.[82] On this view, Jewish history is almost exclusively the account of Jewish suffering and victimization. Mocking the idea of Jews as the "chosen people," Pekar rhetorically asks: "Chosen for what? To be murdered and hounded around the globe for thousands of years?"[83] The entire scope of Jewish history is thus relevant to Pekar's views on the state of Israel as it grounds his critique of it. As perennial victims, Jews, of all people, should not oppress others and should be committed to peace and security, something they have never had. Pekar rehears anti-Jewish violence from antiquity to the present. Justifying the significance of the entire narrative of Jewish history in his book about Israel, Pekar comments that "if you don't understand what's going on in the background, how are you gonna understand the main event?"[84] In other words, one cannot understand contemporary Israel without understanding Jewish history.[85]

Pekar does not engage at length with the issue of Palestinian displacement by the Zionist enterprise. In describing World War II, he says "while the war raged in Europe, the Arabs claimed Jews were pushing them out of their homes in Palestine." The accompanying image shows not the Jews displacing the Arabs (as the Palestinian comics discussed below do), but Waldmann and Pekar in a car. [86] Pekar acknowledges the conflicting accounts of the Israeli War of Independence and the "Nakba," accompanied by lines of indistinct soldiers facing each other. He also mentions that the 1948 Deir Yassin Massacre challenged his perception of Jews as virtuous.[87] Still, these scenes take up about 1/3 of a page together. Without engaging the perspective of Palestinians, his narrative is almost

81 Pekar, *Not the Israel*, 102.

82 This term was coined by Salo W. Baron in his 1963 essay "Newer Emphases in Jewish History," *Jewish Social Studies* 25, no. 4 (1963): 245–258.

83 Pekar and Waldman, *Not the Israel*, 5.

84 Pekar and Waldman, *Not the Israel*, 71.

85 Pekar's lengthy Jewish history adopts the styles of each historical period he discusses. For example, the rabbinic period appears using a mosaic-like style, while the history of the medieval period is reminiscent of the illuminated manuscripts composed in that period.

86 Pekar and Waldman, *Not the Israel*, 112.

87 Pekar and Waldman, *Not the Israel*, 43.

exclusively focused against Jewish actors. Pekar critiques Israel for squandering the opportunity to provide a safe haven for the Jewish people rather than for the displacement and suffering inflicted on Palestinians, even as it challenges his conception of Jewish moral superiority and perennial victimhood.

Palestinian narratives present alternative narratives to the ones discussed. Mohammad Sabaaneh begins his collection of short (usually consisting of one large panel) political cartoons, *White and Black*, with "The Story of Palestine: Some Highlights."[88] In his introduction, Sabaaneh writes that the timelines "provide a framework" for the one-panel comics.[89] The final part of the book collects comics written during his time in Israeli military detention in 2013, an experience that forms the basis of his *Power Born of Dreams*.[90]

"The Story of Palestine" is a timeline, carried across several pages, that begins in 1922 and ends in 2016, the year before the book was published. Above the timeline are densely packed scenes of violence and suffering. Sabaaneh's densely packed and cubist- landscape-oriented drawings, are reminiscent of Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). In another text, Sabaaneh explains that he sees "a correlation between cubism and destruction." He chose cubism "to display what is left behind, homes demolished, a city turned to rubble" acknowledging the influence of Picasso's *Guernica*.[91]

In the panel describing the period from 1922 to 1965, gigantic Israeli soldiers herd smaller Palestinians into a temporary tent structure, reflecting their expulsion from their homes. Barbed wire wraps along their path. As bombs are dropped by war planes, Palestinian resistance fighters aim much smaller weapons at the Israelis. The text at the bottom of the page begins with 1922 when the League of Nations gave Britian a "Mandate" to govern Palestine. The next period is 1947–48 when "Zionist militias" expelled 750,000 Palestinians from their homes. Palestinians remained hopeful for a UN-backed process that would allow them to return to those homes (symbolized by the keys in Sabaaneh's drawing). When that did not materialize, Palestinian liberation groups formed.[92] The absence of any

88 Mohammad Sabaaneh, *White and Black: Political Cartoons from Palestine* (Just World Books, 2017), 6–13.

89 Sabaaneh, *White and Black*, 2.

90 Mohammad Sabaaneh, *Power Born of Dreams: My Story is Palestine* (Street Noise Books, 2021)

91 Mohammad Sabaaneh, *30 Seconds from Gaza; Diary of a Genocide* (Interlink, 2025), 15.

92 Sabaaneh, *White and Black*, 8.

mention of the Holocaust serves as a stark contrast between Jewish and Palestinian narratives. From the Palestinian perspective, the causes of Jewish immigration to mandate Palestine, or the declaration of the state of Israel, are irrelevant when compared to the loss of life and home.

The following panel jumps to 1982 when Israel invaded Lebanon in hopes of destroying the Palestinian Liberation Organization. In the process, Israel "orchestrated the entry of sharply anti-Palestinian militants into the Sabra and Shatila camps, where they slaughtered at least 1,500 residents." This event is central to *Waltz with Bashir* but absent from American-Jewish narratives.

Sabaaneh's next panels depict the first two intifadas, the stalled peace process of the Oslo Accords (during which the "separation wall" was built and Israeli settlements in the West Bank proliferated), and (in the last panel covering 2015–2016) "renewed attention to Jerusalem and the right of return."[93]

Leila Abdelrazaq's *Baddawi* graphically narrates the coming-of-age of her father Ahmad in the refugee camp Baddawi in Lebanon. The comic begins with the founding of the state of Israel, described as the *Nakba*. It opens with a map showing the village of Safsaf, home to 1,000 people, near the Palestinian/Lebanese border.[94] On October 29, 1948, "the Irgun storms and ethnically cleanses Safsaf."[95] Abdelrazaq's language is charged, unambiguously emphasizing Israeli violence. The image shows seven men tied together being watched by solider brandishing guns and grinning with teeth that appear crocodilian. The text elaborates that men were shot and killed, their bodes dumped in a pit, and three girls were raped. These bodily violations aren't depicted visually. Instead, Abdelrazaq's family is shown fleeing. The next panel shows the outline of an Israeli soldier pointing a gun at the white outline of a family, showing their absence in Palestine. The text explains that "Zionist gangs were ethnically cleansing villages all over Palestine, committing widespread massacres. After Israel was established, they barred Palestinians from returning home, in direct violation of UN Resolution #194, the Right of Return."[96] This is how Ahmad, the Palestinian child born in 1959, came to be born in a refugee camp.

Ahmad is raised with a strong commitment to Palestinian culture and identity. This strongly rejects Golda Meir's claim that there was no Palestine

93 Sabaaneh, *White and Black*, 9–13.
94 Leila Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi* (Just World Books, 2015), 14, 16.
95 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 17.
96 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 18.

or Palestinian identity before 1948.[97] Violence and displacement continue to shape Ahmad's life in Lebanon, but he nonetheless has something of a regular childhood. He goes to school, forms friendships, and is cared for by his elders. When Ahmad expresses the desire for money to buy soccer shoes, his mother offers to pay him for collecting thyme. The narrative explains that thyme is an essential ingredient in za'atar, "a staple ingredient in every Palestinian household."[98] Several pages depict Ahmad peacefully gathering herbs and then preparing the spice blend. When Ahmad returns home, his mother optimistically claims that the next time Ahmad gathers herbs, it will be in Palestine. She tells him that "the Arab armies are going to fight the Israelis. It looks like we are going to win! This means that we can leave the camp and go back to Safsaf."[99] This example shows how Ahmad develops attachment to Palestine even in exile as well as the broader Palestinian commitment to their homeland.

Ahmad's mother's prediction of an imminent return to Safsaf was wrong. The next page introduces "al-Naksa" (the setback), a term for the 1967 military conflict. The text explains that the Israeli military victory resulted in the displacement of 300,000 Palestinians, an "ethnic cleansing" of the region that resulted in the "most brutal military occupation of modern times in the West Bank and Gaza." *Al-Naksa* is, for Palestinians, a "second *Nakba*."[100] A Palestinian boy, perhaps Ahmad, reaches a path leading to an outline of the state of Israel (with a sign pointing toward it reading "Palestine" in Arabic) that is now cracked. This graphically shows the perception that a return to Palestine will be more difficult after 1967.

Tensions flare in 1969 when the Israeli military enters Baddawi, killing Palestinian resistance leaders as well as any witnesses.[101] Later, when Israeli forces bomb the camp, Ahmad's family decides to move to the large city of Beirut.[102] But violent conflict, including the 1973 "Spring of Youth"[103] incident in which Israeli troops killed three Palestinian leaders in Beirut, and the 1975 "Bus Massacre" that fomented the Lebanese Civil War, made it difficult for Ahmad to continue his education.[104] He asks to return to Baddawi to focus on his studies. The panel depicting their deliberation shows

97 Sacco discusses this as well in *Palestine* (Fantagraphics, 2024), 42.
98 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 31.
99 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 34.
100 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 35.
101 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 40–41.
102 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 62–66.
103 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 73.
104 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 80.

Ahmad's parents caught between soldiers on one side and a tank on the other, reflecting both the tensions in the region and their concerns about letting their son go. From Baddawi, Ahmad applies to and is accepted into the University of Houston. Although his parents encourage him to marry a woman with whom he has become close, and attend American University in Beirut, he reasons that the job prospects for a Palestinian in Beirut would be limited. *Baddawi* uses the visual language of comics to display decision as the alternative of two paths, one to America and the other to Lebanon, both leading to Palestine. Either way, the text suggests, Ahmad's true home is in Palestine.[105] He leaves for America, not knowing that he won't return for a decade.[106] In *Baddawi*, the political and military events dictate the opportunities for the life of a Palestinian refugee family while neither consigning it to a life of complete suffering or severing its connection to Palestine.

Joe Sacco characterizes his work as "comics journalism."[107] Comics journalism reject the norm of objectivity. Rather than trying to present a perfectly accurate account of "what happened" from a "viewerless position,"[108] Sacco, by drawing himself in the narrative, acknowledges that his reporting is inherently subjective and, more to the point, interpretive.[109] Sacco explicitly distinguishes between journalistic accuracy and objectivity. Although he endeavors to present things accurately, his artistic work requires some amount of imagination. A drawing necessarily "reflects the vision of an individual cartoonist." Sacco emphatically rejects the journalistic pretention to complete objectivity or a "slavish adherence to 'balance.'" By drawing himself into comics, Sacco signals to the reader that journalism is "a process with seams and imperfections, practiced by a human being."[110] Sacco consistently wears glasses, obscuring his eyes and, hence, making his facial expressions more challenging to discern.[111] Even when Sacco isn't visible in a

105 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 113.

106 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 116.

107 Sacco's oeuvre has received considerable scholarly attention. See the essays in Daniel Worden, ed., *The Comics of Joe Sacco: Journalism" in a Visual World* (University Press of Mississippi, 2015) and Chute, *Disaster Drawn*. Sacco's other works of comics journalism are highly influential but beyond the purview of this article.

108 Marc Singer, "Views from Nowhere: Journalistic Detachment in *Palestine*," in *The Comics of Joe Sacco*, ed. Worden, 67–81, 69–71.

109 Isabel Macdoland, Drawing on the Facts: Comics Journalism and the Critique of Objectivity" in *The Comics of Joe Sacco*, ed. Worden, 54–68, 57.

110 Joe Sacco, *Journalism* (Metropolitan Books, 2012), xiii.

111 Wendy Kozol argues that the glasses call attention to Sacco's status as a voyeur with a privileged position in the story. See, Wendy Kozol, "Complicities of Witnessing in Joe Sacco's *Palestine*" in *Theoretical Perspectives on Human Rights and*

frame, his interlocutors are regularly drawn as speaking to the reader who inhabits Sacco's position. It is not uncommon for a page to include a speaker relaying memories and their memory depicted visually on the same page. This temporal layering, licensed by the visual language of comics, is a unique component of comics journalism.

Sacco's views are far from opaque, as he bears witness to the lived experience of Palestinians and to their mistreatment. Even as Sacco bears witnesses to suffering, he is cognizant of what Hilary Chute terms "the instability of knowing." Comics, she explains, is "always already self-consciously … an interpretive, and never purely mimetic, medium."[112] Throughout his Palestinian comics, Sacco draws upon eyewitness accounts of Palestinians and Israelis while acknowledging his own role in shaping the narrative. Even when he uses the visual language of comics, he aims to be authentic to his sources.[113]

Sacco completed several journalistic tours of the West Bank and Gaza in the early 1990s and 2000s (resulting in *Palestine* and *Footnotes in Gaza*, respectively). *Footnotes in Gaza* narrates the attempt to record memories of the 1956 Khan Younis Massacre. The official record of the episode in which 275 Palestinians were killed reports that "there is some conflict in the accounts given as to the causes of the casualties." The report claims that Palestinians engaged in armed resistance of Israeli soldiers even as it acknowledges that "the refugees state that all resistance had ceased at the time of the incident" and that the civilians were unarmed." [114]

Footnotes in Gaza largely refutes the notion of Palestinian resistance. Throughout the comic, Sacco surveys elderly witnesses to the conflict, recording both their reports of events and the process of interviewing them. Depicting the memories in comics visualizes different possible versions of history. Sacco's interlocutors present conflicting memories, a problem he addresses in a chapter titled "memory and the essential truth."[115] To give one example, witnesses disagree on whether Israeli soldiers lined up the men of

Literature, ed. Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg and Alexandra Schultheis Moore, 165–179 (Routledge, 2012), 167.

112 Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 198.

113 Marc Singer argues that, in *Palestine*, Sacco's rejection of objectivity is "highly selective" in "effac[ing] himself at the moments that most disturb his own liberalism humanist views "such as when Palestinians support attacking civilians or expresses antisemitic views (Singer, "Views from Nowhere," 78–79).

114 Joe Sacco, *Footnotes in Gaza* (Metropolitan Books, 2009), 117. The full report is included as an appendix.

115 Sacco, *Footnotes in Gaza*, 112.

one family in front of their home in Khan Younis and shot them together, or if they shot them as they came out of the house, or if some escaped.[116] Despite these incongruous memories, none of his interlocutors disagree about the violence or the brutality of the attack, even if the full truth is lost to history.

Early in *Palestine*, Sacco relates the development of the state of Israel in comics in a mocking tone. Herzl is depicted in the hills of Israel with several behatted Europeans behind him giving his famous quotation: "[A] land without a people for a people without a land!"[117] In some ways, *Palestine*, by showing the lives of Palestinians, is a refutation of Herzl's proclamation specifically and the notion that Israel is exclusively for Jewish people.

A rare instance in *Palestine* when Sacco departs from the comics form and opts for prose is a section entitled "Remind Me." The chapter opens with a horde of children on a busy muddy dirt road looking out at the reader asking, "What is your name?" They are from the Balata refugee camp, the largest in the West Bank. Some Palestinians living in Balata "fled or were forced out of what is now Israel in 1948." Sacco somewhat rhetorically asks, "Do we need to talk about 1948? It's hardly a secret how the Zionists used rumors, threats, and massacres to expel the Arabs and create new demographics that guaranteed the Jewish nature of Israel."[118] Over the next page full of prose, the only images are the portraits of former Israeli Prime Ministers David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir. Sacco quotes Meir's claim that there was no Palestinian identity prior to 1948, a claim Sacco emphatically rejects. He writes, underlining words for emphasis: "But they did exist, and they do, and here they are … and their children's children … and still they are refugees."[119] Sacco's stilted prose, with three-dot pauses used for dramatic effect, slowly reject Meir's proclamations. Balata's residents are suspended between history and the present. They are refugees, but their homes were likely among those razed in 1948 or taken by Israeli settlers. In Balata they have a "shabby permanence," as do many other places in which Palestinians live in Gaza and the West Bank.[120] By showing the present condition of Palestinians in his comics, Sacco gives the lie to Meir's narrative while bearing witness to Palestinian suffering, past and present.

116 Sacco, *Footnotes in Gaza*, 103–116 covers the entire incident.
117 Sacco, *Palestine*, 12.
118 Sacco, *Palestine*, 41–42.
119 Sacco, *Palestine*, 42.
120 Sacco, *Palestine*, 42.

Why did Sacco use prose? It could be that portraying the well-known history was deemed unnecessary. Or, as *Palestine* is motivated by a desire to bear witness to Palestinian life, illustrating Israeli political heroes risked dignifying them. Sacco thus deemphasizes the well-known narrative of the founding of Israel in favor of the lived reality of Palestinians.

Boaz Yakin's *Jerusalem: A Family Portrait*, created in collaboration with artist Nick Bertozzi, presents the dynamics of a Jewish family in Palestine in the period just before and after the founding of the state of Israel. Two brothers, born in Jerusalem at the end of the nineteenth century, Izak and Yakov Halaby, can barely stand each other. Three of Izak's sons are politically engaged: one serves in the Jewish Brigade of the British forces, another joins the Palmach, and a third works with the communist underground which includes Arabs as well as Jews.

Jerusalem troubles any easy narrative of the founding of the state of Israel. Jews in Mandate Palestine were subject to abuse from French and British powers. In an early scene, a French Catholic teacher hits a student for speaking the forbidden language of Hebrew. As he resists and is dragged out of the room, he sings "Down with the white paper" and "*David melech Israel, Chai, chai, vekayam*!"[121] The former references the 1939 White Paper issued by the British as part of their colonial governance. The latter is a popular Hebrew song lauding the biblical King David, in this context promoting Jewish sovereignty.

British soldiers are ubiquitous in Jerusalem, often coming into conflict with Jews. In one scene, British soldiers enter Izak's house in search of anti-British leaflets. They gratuitously destroy the kitchen, breaking plates and leaving it in disarray before coercing Izak to sign a document attesting that the search was orderly and nothing was "unduly appropriated by the present officers."[122] Izak is later stopped in the street and hit with the butt of a British soldier's gun before being forced to present his papers.[123] Given these circumstances, the euphoria surrounding Israel's declared independence is understandable. In an extended scene, both free and imprisoned Jews huddle around radios as the votes are tallied before exploding into the streets in celebration.[124]

Jerusalem also shows one of the Halaby brothers participating in the Deir Yassin Massacre of 1948. Although both Palestinian villagers and Israeli

121 Boaz Yakin and Nick Bertozzi, *Jerusalem: A Family Portrait* (First Second, 2013), 10.
122 Yakin and Bertozzi, *Jerusalem*, 59–63.
123 Yakin and Bertozzi, *Jerusalem*, 98–99.
124 Yakin and Bertozzi, *Jerusalem*, 216–245.

soldiers of the Hagana engage in conflict, the villagers are largely unarmed. Graphic scenes of bloodied Palestinian bodies, as well as women and children fleeing, now showcase Jews as aggressors rather than victims. *Jerusalem* provides a different perspective from those discussed earlier. For Jews living in Mandate Palestine, the British and French are their main foes. But the fighters of the nascent Jewish state are not mere innocent victims as they participate in the military sieges of Deir Yassin and, later, Latrun.

Ari Folman and David Polonsky's *Waltz with Bashir*, like *Footnotes in Gaza*, seeks to excavate the truth from the realm of memory and forgetting. It chronicles Folman's quest to discover what happened during his time serving in the Israeli army in 1982 when its actions facilitated the Sabra and Shatila Massacre. Folman suffers from amnesia, likely a product of PTSD. He interviews fellow soldiers, friends, military leaders, and even an academic. Folman's traumatic amnesia slowly fades as he learns about others' experiences.

The comic shows how the Israeli military facilitated the massacre of over 1500 Palestinians by Christian Phalangists in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camp. Israeli soldiers are witnesses to the conflict and, only once it is discovered, understand their role in allowing it. For example, Folman comes to understand that he set off flares that alighted the camps, allowing the Palestinians to be murdered. Drawing on historical memory, Ari's friend Ori surmises that Ari felt himself "cast in the role of [a] Nazi," a cog in the machine of mass murder.[125]

Waltz With Bashir challenges Sabanneh's historical narrative of Israeli soldiers as flat aggressors as well as the "heroic" narrative promoted by Kurzweil's teacher and some Birthright tour guides.

Trauma, Violence, and Witnessing

Scholarship on many of the texts explored here emphasizes its role as witnesses to the conflict.[126] The notion of witnessing is used by scholars to denote the process of "bearing witness," attesting to the reality of what happened with a (*pace* Chute) "desire to understand." It is an activity that foregrounds the humanity of the victim rather than making the violence

125 Ari Folman and David Polonsky, *Waltz with Bashir: A Lebanon War Story* (Metropolitan Book, 2009), 106–107.

126 C.f. Amy Mazowita, "Privileged Witnessing and the Graphic Self in Sarah Glidden's *How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less*," *Inks: The Journal of the Comics Studies Society*, 6, no. 1 (2022): 26–44; Chute, *Disaster Drawn*.

against them a spectacle.[127] This section explores the different ways authors function as witnesses to the conflict by focusing on how they depict violence.

Sacco's work is often the most graphic in terms of its depiction of violence and serves as a useful contrast with other comics, especially Palestinian narratives. Sacco, the "comics journalist," takes great pains to present Palestinian people and perspectives in his texts. Sacco realistically depicts Palestinian bodies (displaying the full range of human emotions), homes, and cities. As a journalist, he is a witness: an observer of rather than an actor in the conflict. But as a comics journalist, Sacco draws himself into his comics, depicting himself as an "on the ground" witness to the conflict.

Illustrating the violence inflicted by Israeli soldiers is essential to Sacco's project. As he receives conflicting reports of the Massacre, he sketches conflicting memories to contest the official document that suggests Palestinian violence against soldiers. In a concluding scene that considers different accounts of the murder of the brothers of a Palestinian man Khamis, Sacco writes: "But all this should not let us forget the essential truth: Khamis's three brothers were shot dead by Israeli soldiers." These words hang about a scene of three men and an infant splayed on each other, all with stomach wounds. As Sacco accepts "the problems that go along with relying on eyewitness testimony in telling our story," the incontrovertible fact of violence remains.[128] The realistic portrayal of dead and wounded bodies risks undermining the dignity of victims by making the violence against them, rather than their humanity, the spectacle. This risk may explain the difference between how Sacco and the Palestinian authors portray violence against Palestinians.

The Palestinians develop their perspectives through direct encounters with the Israelis, almost exclusively Israeli military personnel. But this does not always manifest as dehumanizing hatred of the enemy. Discussing his political cartoons, Sabaaneh writes that he attempted to "spot the humanity of the occupier." However, he adds, "this effort proved difficult to sustain when an Israeli soldier placed handcuffs around my wrists or dragged me from an interrogation room or prevented me from moving from one part of my homeland to another."[129]

Born in Kuwait in 1979, Sabaaneh moved to Palestine in 2000, just before the Second Intifada. Like Abdelrazaq's father Ahmad, Sabaaneh had been raised on images of the "Palestinian hero who struggled for freedom

127 Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 29–33.
128 Sacco, *Footnotes in Gaza*, 116.
129 Sabaaneh, *White and Black*, 2.

and justice in an idealized Palestine."[130] He had been drawing political cartoons for years when he was arrested in 2013 and spent five months in prison, part of it in solitary confinement. In the introduction to his 2017 collection *White and Black*, Sabaaneh writes that in prison he questions his lionization of the Palestinian political prisoner. Imprisoned himself, Sabaaneh is unable to consider himself a hero due to his "weaknesses" of fear and pain. "Was everything I drew a lie?" Sabaaneh wonders. He suggests that the myth of the heroic prisoner was a "coping mechanism" necessary to survive the "dehumanizing" conditions of imprisonment while safeguarding their ability to resist the occupation.[131]

Sabaaneh narrates his grueling ordeal in Israeli military detention in *Power Born of Dreams* in his trademark cubist, wood-cut style. Adding a dark tinge to the comic, the pages are black and the words and images are colored white, perhaps reflecting the darkness of prison life. In one scene, an Israeli soldier leads a blindfolded Sabaaneh to an interrogation room via a winding path of stairs reminiscent of the work of M.C. Escher, thereby reflecting the surreal experience of being in prison.[132] Soldiers shout at an uncomprehending Sabaaneh before he bears the tedium of solitary confinement.[133] In prison, Sabaaneh is visited by a bird, a symbol of freedom (as the free bird contrasts with Sabaaneh's state). He first relates his story of imprisonment to the bird beginning with an Israeli soldier mocking the idea that Sabaaneh is a hero now that he is in prison. Rather, he is among "criminals and thugs."[134] Sabaaneh is taken to Naqab Prison where, living now in barracks among prisoners experiencing obvious distress, he learns that "no matter where you are, life needs hope."[135] The bird suggests helping Sabaaneh's artistic pursuits: The bird will bring stories of Palestinians from the outside and Sabaaneh will draw them.

In one story, a couple (Amir and the pregnant Manal) living in the "chaotic" area of Kafr Aqab (in East Jerusalem in the West Bank) brave considerable traffic to get to an Israeli checkpoint in hopes of entering Jerusalem so Manal, now in labor, can give birth. The guard refuses to let them through, shouting at the parents. "But the child refused to obey" and is born in spite of the refusal. They are depicted frowning with their hands on their temples as the mother's umbilical cord is still attached. In the next

130 Sabaaneh, *White and Black*, 1.
131 Sabaaneh, *White and Black*, 1–2.
132 Sabaaneh, *Power Born of Dreams*, 5–6.
133 Sabaaneh, *Power Born of Dreams*, 6–11.
134 Sabaaneh, *Power Born of Dreams*, 22.
135 Sabaaneh, *Power Born of Dreams*, 24.

panel, Amir triumphantly holds up the smiling child, birth their first act of defiance of the Israeli occupation.[136]

Another tells the story of Ziad, an older teacher in Palestine. His job exposes him to the excruciating pain of his young students coming to class with bullet wounds and broken bones.[137] One student's mother comes to his classroom and announces between sobs: "I am the mother of the void that sits between you."[138] The scene ends with Ziad gesturing towards the sky. The accompanying text reads: "One day you realize you have acquired your share of your country's suffering. It is the price we pay, so cry a little. Then smile for the hope of historic justice that may come."[139] Witnessing this amount of pain is not a cause for despair but, instead, for resilience and hope. The bird laments that he cannot bring Sabaaneh all the stories of Palestinian suffering as "there are too many to be told." Israeli military personnel are depicted as aggressors, often shouting at Sabaaneh or keeping him in chains. But the focus of his time in prison is bearing witness to Palestinian suffering as well as Palestinian resilience.

Baddawi depicts violence less graphically than Sacco. The death of "the butcher" Abu Muhammad is a case in point. A teenaged Ahmad regularly visits Abu Muhammed, the butcher, who serves Ahmad a Kafta sandwich. The panel zooms in on Muhammad's hands as he explains that he is making Ahmad's Kafta "special today — fresh!" He adds "only the best for my family!" explaining that as Ahmad's sister Afaf is marrying his son, they are related. Muhammed consequently refuses to accept any money from Ahmad. Kafta is associated with Palestinian culture. Even in the refugee camp Ahmad is cared for by his Palestinian elders with Palestinian food.

Several pages later, Ahmad visits Abu Mohammed after being cheated out of a day's pay for his manual labor musing that "on days like this" only Abu Muhammed can make him feel better. The butcher gives Ahmad a Kafta sandwich and pats him on the shoulder. In the next scene an explosion occurs. The word "Boom!" takes up the center of the page. Ahmad rushes to the scene as woman shouts "they shelled the butcher's! A man holds the black shadow of a figure and says "Abu Muhammad! He's Dead![140] In depicting the death of a figure beloved by the protagonist, Abdelrazaq uses the language of comics to show that he was killed rather than showing his

136 Sabaaneh, *Power Born of Dreams*, 34–35.
137 Sabaaneh, *Power Born of Dreams*, 46–47.
138 Sabaaneh, *Power Born of Dreams*, 47.
139 Sabaaneh, *Power Born of Dreams*, 47.
140 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 98–99.

death in graphic detail. The reader connects the "Boom" with the butcher's death. Bearing witness Abu Muhmmad's death is accomplished not by focusing on how he died or the spectacle of his body; rather, the comic emphasizes his kindness and humanity.

Even when the political and moral implications of Palestine are acknowledged, Palestinians as people are largely absent from American Jewish narratives and Sherman-Friedman's memoir. Consequently, graphic depictions of violence are rare in their texts. Kurzweil acknowledges the military aspects of the conflict. But they remain abstract to her. Pekar operates in a documentary mode in his account of Jewish history, often with small panels that require the reader to get close to the page to see their details. Two salient exceptions are the 1937 murder of the British district commissioner Lewis Yelland Andrews by anti-British Arab militants. Three men are depicted with blood gushing from their heads as four Arab fighters with shot guns stand behind them.[141] This contrasts with the depiction of the Deir Yassin massacre. This incident in which "militant Zionists killed 200 or more Arabs in cold blood" helped Pekar to challenge the idea that Jewish people were inherently virtuous.[142] The panel shows the aftermath of the massacre with indistinct bodies arranged in two rows and a non-descript figure standing around them. It is noteworthy that the comic depicts Arab-on-British violence graphically while showing only the aftermath of the Israeli attack on Palestinians.

How to Understand bears witness to the victims of terrorist attacks in Israel by depicting the presence of absence. In an emotional scene, the relatives of victims of terrorist attacks tell their stories to the Birthright group. A Jewish Israeli man, Amit tells the story of his sister who died in a suicide bombing. As he recounts his grief and anger, and how he was exempt from mandatory military service due to being a bereaved family member, his sister appears as a white ghost, listening to him and reacting emotionally to the story. The brother of a Palestinian woman who was killed also speaks. Rather than depicting the violence that ended their lives, Glidden conjures their likeness to show what they meant to their family members. Glidden foregrounds the humanity of the victims and the tragedy of their death (through depicting them as a ghost), rather than the spectacle of their death.[143] The acknowledgement of Israeli and Palestinian casualties and trauma foments Sarah's shifting perspective.

141 Pekar and Walman, *Not The Israel*, 111.
142 Pekar and Walman, *Not The Israel*, 43.
143 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 150–153.

Sherman-Friedman rarely experiences violence despite living in the West Bank. In a chapter titled "Living in Peace" she comments that life in Kedumim "goes along at a slower pace than the rest of the world."[144] The relatively calm setting of Kedumim contrasts sharply with the experience of Palestinians, such as Abdelrazaq's father Ahmed, living under military occupation. Sherman-Friedman briefly contends with violence when her sister Tiferrett, after trying to persuade Tohar to leave her friends and come for a drive, had stones thrown at her when she drove through the Palestinian village of al-Funduq. Tiferett is uninjured as the stones only damaged the passenger seat where Tohar could have been sitting had she gone for a drive with Tiferett. As Tiferett, in tears, sits on the couch being consoled by her parents, Sherman-Friedman's juxtaposes two visualizations of the attack. In one, Tohar sits in the passenger seat gazing out the window, unaware of the impending attack. In the other, it shows a large object having crashed through the passenger seat window with Tiferett in the driver's seat.[145]

Tohar's other sisters understand this as a case of divine protection. They encourage Tohar to understand the near-miss as a case of divine protection which casts doubt on Toahr's rejection of the existence of God. She draws herself in the modest clothing of Orthodoxy, a contrast to the tank top she wore upon learning of the attack. The panel depicting Tohar contemplating that she was ungrateful to God in her hasty rejection of divine existence shows her splayed on her bed alongside her modest clothes.[146] However, her faith is short-lived as she hears on the radio about a fatal attack on the 12 bus that left six dead and 40 injured. Although the violence is not depicted visually, and Tohar learns about the attack on the radio, it elicits a dramatic response. She muses on the theodicy problem: How could a good God allow so much death? The next two panels show Tohar slipping her copy of the Hebrew Bible into a drawer, symbolically showing she has abandoned her faith. Tohar writes: "I was mad at myself for having lost my identity, my way. How could I, on a whim, almost have joined the millions of people mutter psalm eyes closed, deep in religious texts, looking for signs?" The panel shows mourners, interspersed with typical portents of bad luck: a ladder, a black cat, a broken mirror. The juxtaposition suggests that Jewish belief and practice are no more defensible than superstition.[147]

Folman and Polonsky's project of memory recovery includes some scenes of violence, but they come towards the end of the comic, once

144 Sherman-Friedman, *Good Girls*, 80.
145 Sherman-Friedman, *Good Girls*, 107.
146 Sherman-Friedman, *Good Girls*, 107.
147 Sherman-Friedman, *Good Girls*, 108.

Folman has begun to regain his memory. In the book's climax, a young Folman walks through the Lebanese refugee camp and, witnessing piles of dead bodies, he has the epiphany that he later represses— he was "looking at a massacre."[148]

The range of approaches to depicting violence, from the realistic to the implied, using the gutter of the comics page, reflects the different roles violent conflict plays in each narrative. American narratives rarely depict violence directly, given their focus on negotiating their own identity. Given their goals of preserving and promoting historical memory, Folman, Yakin, and Sacco depict the violence that occurred both by and against Israelis and Palestinians. Perhaps surprisingly, Palestinians depict violence less graphically. The Palestinian narratives function as connection witnesses by collecting and recounting stories of victimization while emphasizing a resilient to Palestinian freedom. They acquire this sentiment through their lived experience in Palestine, solidarity with other Palestinian victims, and their familial stories. For them, Palestinian victimhood does not need to be demonstrated; it is the recognition of Palestinian humanity that is lacking.

Conclusion

This article has examined how graphic narratives can be used to teach three aspects of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: its relevance to questions of Jewish identity, how different actors narrate its history, and the different approaches taken to bearing witness to violent conflict. It builds on extant scholarship that shows the utility of graphic narratives in disciplines such as political science and rhetoric.

Other graphic narratives can be added to this discussion to nuance other aspects of the conflict. For example, Miriam Libicki's *jobnik*! (2008) details her time as an American serving in the Israeli army during the First Intifada.[149] Guy Delisle's *Jerusalem: Chronicles of the Holy City* (2013) is a travelogue of his year in Jerusalem accompanying his wife who works for Médecins Sans Frontières.[150] Works depicting the events of October 7, 2023 are already being published, including works by Sabaaneh and the French collection *Au Coeur du 7 Octobre*, edited by Uri Fink and published by Delcourt

148 Folman and Polonsky, *Waltz with Bashir*, 113.

149 Miriam Libicki, *jobnik!: An American Girl's Adventures in the Israeli Army* (Real Gone Girl Studios, 2008).

150 Guy Delisle's, *Jerusalem: Chronicles of the Holy City* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2013).

in 2024.[151] As the conflict continues, graphic narratives can help us to understand the range of perspectives people have toward the conflict

Brian Hillman *(he/him) is an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Towson University in Towson, MD. His research focuses on modern Jewish thought, mysticism, religion and literature, and religion and popular culture. His work has appeared in the* Journal of Jewish Identities, Jewish Studies Quarterly, *and* Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal, *among other venues.*

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151 Uri Fink, ed., *Au Coeur du 7 Octobre* (Delcourt, 2024).

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ARTICLE

Harmonizing Narratives: Teaching Palestine/Israel through Music in the Post-October 7 Classroom

Oren Kroll-Zeldin

Abstract

This article argues that using Palestinian and Israeli music in the classroom fosters deeper, more personal engagement with Israeli and Palestinian societies. By listening to and analyzing music, students explore cultural and political complexities embedded in popular music while encountering Palestinian and Israeli societies as robust groups existing far beyond the boundaries of conflict, each with their own unique and flourishing modes of cultural production. This pedagogical approach uses music to examine how music reflects and challenges political identities, including the students' own ways of being in the world. It humanizes the conflict, connecting students to course material in relatable ways and highlighting emotional and cultural dimensions often overlooked in traditional texts. Ultimately, this pedagogy provides educators with tools to facilitate multi-narrative learning and critical thinking in an engaging, fun, and accessible way.

Keywords

music education; Palestine; Israel; popular culture and conflict

Introduction

I often imagine what it is like to be a university student today, walking down the corridor on the first day of the semester heading to the classroom. My sense from conversations with my students is that they generally have mixed feelings of anticipation and uncertainty. But I also wonder how might that feeling be different if the course they were headed to was focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a topic so rife with a polarizing campus discourse that the mixed feelings might be significantly enhanced?[1] I imagine that many students might be filled with apprehension in stepping into class where the weight of such a complex and deeply contested topic could be potentially overwhelming. Would their opinions be welcomed or challenged by their classmates or professor? Will they feel confident speaking in class, particularly in a moment of heightened scrutiny and uncertainty over what is acceptable speech in a classroom or a university campus?[2] University students today are surrounded by friends, family, and classmates talking about Palestine/Israel, with most conversations focused on Gaza. When students open TikTok or Instagram they are often overwhelmed by new posts about Palestine/Israel that they are trying to make sense of but often don't have enough background knowledge to really understand everything that they are hearing and seeing.[3]

Imagining myself as that student and thinking about what would excite me, I utilize a pedagogical tool to teaching Palestine/Israel that begins before the student even enters the classroom, using music as an inviting and educational medium to approach a challenging course topic.[4] As my students approach the classroom, they encounter the sound of music floating into the hallways. The music is unfamiliar to most students, layered with rhythms and melodies that hopefully feel simultaneously distant and inviting. I hope that the sounds beckon them closer, stirring a curiosity that might overpower their apprehension. By the time students reach the doorway and enter the

1 Kenneth S. Stern, *The Conflict Over the Conflict: The Israel/Palestine Campus Debate* (University of Toronto Press, 2020).

2 Joel Swanson, "The White House is Declaring War on Campus DEI—Except for Jews," *Forward*, last modified September 3, 2025, https://forward.com/opinion/766378/donald-trump-antisemitism-campus/.

3 Tamara Abu Laban, "The Role of TikTok in Disseminating the Palestinian Narrative During the War on Gaza from the Perspective of Palestinian University Students," *Advances in Journalism and Communication* 12, no. 3 (2024): 394–408.

4 Anthony M. Pellegrino and Christopher Dean Lee, *Let the Music Play!: Harnessing the Power of Music for the History and Social Studies Classrooms* (Information Age Publishing, 2012).

classroom I hope that their trepidation transforms into the spark of possibility, the hope of encountering not just facts and history, but the human stories behind them.

Now inside the classroom with the music fully audible, the sounds fill the usually awkward silence of the first day of class. Students are listening to music that carries stories of joy, loss, resilience, and connection. I welcome students and begin the session by asking the class to share their initial impressions of what they heard: What emotions did the music evoke? What might it reveal about the people and cultures from which it emerged? This moment is not just a first day icebreaker but is an entry point into my pedagogical approach that is repeated every single day of the semester when my class meets.[5]

In my teaching about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I draw on music as a tool to humanize and contextualize the complexities of the region.[6] I begin every single class session with either Palestinian or Israeli music playing on the classroom speakers as students enter the room. When class begins, I introduce the artists, discuss song lyrics, and explore their cultural significance, prompting students to consider questions about identity, narrative, power, and the everyday lived realities in Palestine/Israel. On some days we watch music videos, which adds a visual element to the exercise. These videos, which usually include English language subtitles, enable students to see the geographic and cultural landscape of the region and to help them recognize that behind the difficult subjects we address in class are ordinary human beings who have similar aspirations as we do.

This activity has numerous pedagogical goals. First, it sets a fun mood for our learning and encourages students to pay attention from the outset of class (and even before class starts!). Second, it encourages students to come to class on time because they do not want to miss the music or the discussion at the beginning of each class about the musicians and the musical genre, which students often reflect is one of their favorite parts of the class. Third, it gets students excited and interested in the course material by exposing them to elements of everyday life and popular culture specifically in regards to the

5 Jeffrey A. Mangram and Rachel L. Weber, "Incorporating Music into the Social Studies Classroom: A Qualitative Study of Secondary Social Studies Teachers," *The Journal of Social Studies Research* 36, no. 1 (2012): 3–21.

6 Kathleen M. Higgins, "Connecting Music to Ethics," in *Music, Business, and Peacebuilding*, ed. Constance Cook Glenn and Timothy L. Fort (Routledge, 2021), 44–64.

topic of the course, which inevitably helps students relate more personally to the course material.

By starting class with music, the students learn more than what is on the syllabus and are excited and motivated for the day's learning, thereby fulfilling some of my primary goals for my classes. Using music in the classroom increases both student motivation and achievement, thereby making it a valuable educational tool.[7] As I incorporate music into the classroom, students are invited to engage with the popular culture and lived experiences of Palestinian and Jewish Israeli communities, fostering an ethnographic understanding that transcends political rhetoric and leaves students more open to understanding the complexities inherent in human conflicts.[8] By engaging with both Palestinian and Israeli music, students begin to connect with the narratives of those living amid the conflict, not as abstract political figures but as individuals with rich cultural identities.[9] Music therefore serves as a bridge, helping students navigate difficult conversations while fostering empathy and a deeper understanding of the multi-narrative realities of the region, all while engaging students and building a more inclusive classroom community.

Teaching with Music

Teaching with music can be a powerful pedagogical tool, offering unique cognitive, emotional, and cultural benefits that engage students in deep and transformative learning experiences. Scholars across various disciplines have explored why music is an effective learning tool, providing educators with numerous reasons as to why teaching with music can enhance learning, increase retention, and make the classroom a more fun and engaging space for students. First, using music in the classroom engages multiple learning modalities, which is essential to increase the success of students with diverse learning needs.[10] By engaging auditory and emotional learning music can be a way of making learning accessible to students who might not be as successful in retaining or learning information presented by more traditional

7 Susannah Cane, "Collaboration with Music: A Noteworthy Endeavor," *Music Educators Journal* 96, no. 1 (2009): 33–39.

8 Olivier Urbain, ed., *Music and Conflict Transformation: Harmonies and Dissonance in Geopolitics* (I.B. Tauris, 2008).

9 Benjamin Brinner, *Playing Across a Divide: Israeli-Palestinian Musical Encounters* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

10 Neil D. Fleming and Colleen Mills, "Not Another Inventory, Rather a Catalyst for Reflection," *To Improve the Academy* 11, no. 1 (1992): 137–155.

classroom means. Teaching with music caters to students who learn best from different types of modalities but also enhances overall classroom inclusivity among those who are both visual and auditory learners.[11]

Second, music builds emotional and empathetic connections while facilitating cultural understanding.[12] The emotional resonance that music so often provides fosters empathy and helps students relate to the lived experiences of others in powerful ways.[13] This is particularly central in the context of learning about groups in conflict because music humanizes the subject matter by linking abstract issues to personal stories and emotions in ways not always addressed by more normative academic literature or historical sources. Music can thus become a "dialogic space" that enables multiple viewpoints to emerge in inclusive yet complex ways.[14] One of the central benefits of teaching with music therefore lies in its ability to humanize abstract and contentious issues such as seemingly intractable geopolitical conflicts. Philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum notes that the arts, including music, cultivate emotional intelligence and empathy, which are essential qualities that can help us grapple with conflict and other emotionally charged topics.[15] But music also opens windows into multicultural spaces for students. This is valuable because according to Patricia Shehan Campbell, teaching music from diverse cultures exposes students to global perspectives, which promotes empathy and a nuanced understanding of cultural diversity.[16]

Moreover, music's ability to provoke emotional engagement makes it an effective tool for transformative learning. Noted sociologist Jack Mezirow argues that transformative learning occurs when students are prompted to question their assumptions and engage with new perspectives.[17] Music, with

11 Catharina Gous-Kemp, "The Creative Use of Music in Inclusive Education: Bringing Harmony to the Classroom," *Education as Change* 18, no. 1 (2014): 191–206.

12 Eric Clarke, Tia DeNora, and Jonna Vuoskoski, "Music, Empathy, and Cultural Understanding," *Physics of Life Reviews* 15 (2015): 61–88.

13 Michael Lovorn, "Folk in the History Classroom: Using the Music of the People to Teach Eras and Events," *Social Education* 73, no. 4 (2009): 173–178.

14 Kathryn Marsh, "Music as Dialogic Space in the Promotion of Peace, Empathy, and Social Inclusion," *International Journal of Community Music* 12, no. 3 (2019): 301–316.

15 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

16 Patricia Sheehan Campbell, *Teaching Music Globally: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

17 Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (Jossey-Bass, 1991).

its capacity to evoke deep emotional responses, can serve as a catalyst for this process, particularly in teaching about conflict. In the Israeli-Palestinian context, music provides students with a window into the lived experiences of individuals on many sides of the political and cultural divides, presenting these societies as rich and multifaceted rather than reducible to the political rhetoric of conflict. Music therefore serves as a cultural artifact, reflecting the values, struggles, and identities of its creators, those whose lives are intimately connected to everyday life in Israeli and Palestinian societies.[18]

Finally, music serves as a medium for promoting critical analysis, encouraging students to explore how cultural production reflects and shapes social realities. Analyzing song lyrics, musical styles, artist identities, and the socio-political context of the music challenges students to critically evaluate power, identity, politics, and resistance in alignment with multi-narrative learning, which seeks to present diverse perspectives on contentious issues.[19] As Christopher Small emphasizes in his concept of "musicking," engaging with music is an inherently relational act that situates learners within broader social, cultural, and political networks.[20] In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this relational approach is particularly salient. By analyzing the socio-political contexts of songs, students can critically examine how music functions as both a tool of resistance and a form of identity expression, ideally making it easier to understand the complexities of the material they are studying in the classroom. As Benjamin Brinner highlights in his seminal text on Palestinian and Israeli musicians, collaborative musical projects between these two groups not only bridge divides but also reveal the tensions, complexities, and potential failures inherent in such efforts, offering rich material for classroom discussion.[21]

Ultimately, incorporating music into the study of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict aligns with multi-narrative pedagogy, which seeks to present diverse and often competing perspectives to foster critical thinking and empathy.[22] James A. Banks advocates for an approach that situates students within the pluralistic realities of historical and contemporary issues, enabling them to

18 Brinner, *Playing Across a Divide*.

19 Zvi Bekerman and Michalinos Zembylas, *Teaching Contested Narratives: Identity, Memory and Reconciliation in Peace Education and Beyond* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

20 Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meaning of Performing and Listening* (Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

21 Brinner, *Playing Across a Divide*.

22 Robert I. Rothberg, ed., *Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict: History's Double Helix* (Indiana University Press, 2006).

see beyond singular narratives.[23] Music, as a dynamic form of cultural expression, embodies these pluralities, allowing students to engage with the complexities of identity, power, and resistance. By combining music with reflective discussion and critical analysis, educators can create a classroom environment that not only humanizes the conflict but also equips students with the tools to navigate its complexities with sensitivity and intellectual rigor.

Case Studies: Musical Artists and Their Cultural Significance

As I provide musical examples that I use in the classroom it is important to note that my decision to alternate between Israeli and Palestinian musicians each class session in my pedagogical practice is not an attempt to suggest equality or parity, nor to imply that the power dynamics between the two communities are balanced in any way.[24] Instead, this approach is designed to expose students to a broad range of diverse perspectives and musical expressions from the region. By doing so, I aim to highlight the rich cultural landscapes and lived experiences of the people affected by the conflict, fostering a deeper and more nuanced understanding of its complexities using the musical artists themselves as a platform to discuss and elucidate larger issues of identity, power, narrative, politics, and culture.

While at times the music I play is random and has no real connection to the lesson of the day, other times, and more often than not, the musical selection is thematically connected to the topic of a particular class session. As such, I will give a number of examples, connecting the musical artist or song to the theme or issue that the song or artist illustrates. I will give a few examples in greater detail of how I use the music to connect to the topic of the day. And then in broader strokes I will give examples of what music I play to discuss various other topics. This is just a small sampling and is not an exhaustive list of the music I use during a semester.

Resistance

When the class focuses on various elements of Palestinian resistance movements we listen to DAM, the pioneering Palestinian hip hop group.[25]

23 James A. Banks, *Cultural Diversity and Education: Foundations, Curriculum, and Teaching*, 6th ed. (Routledge, 2016).

24 Nadim N. Rouhana, "Group Identity and Power Asymmetry in Reconciliation Processes: The Israeli-Palestinian Case," *Peace and Conflict* 10, no. 1 (2004): 33–52.

25 Sunaina Maira and Magid Shihade, "Hip Hop from '48 Palestine: Youth, Music,

DAM's cultural and political significance to Palestinian music and society cannot be understated. In addition to being the founders of the genre of Arabic rap more broadly, the intensely and overtly political nature of their music influenced subsequent Palestinian artists to articulate the political condition of their lives through the crafting of musical lyrics. The three original members of DAM were born in Lyd, a "mixed city" in Israel comprised of Palestinians and Jewish Israelis. The fact that DAM are Palestinian citizens of Israel is deeply important to their music, as is discussed at great length in the documentary film they are featured in titled "Slingshot Hip Hop," which we watch in class. In particular we listen to their song "Min Erhabi" and dissect the lyrics, which say: "Who's the terrorist? I'm the terrorist? How am I the terrorist when I'm living in my homeland? Who's the terrorist? You're the terrorist. You've taken everything I own while I'm living in my homeland." Analyzing these lyrics brings us into a conversation about how we understand terrorism, violence, and various strategies of resistance. It also sparks conversations about how the state has a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, thereby complexifying dominant understandings of terrorism and state violence. In order to emphasize the cultural significance of this song and to connect it to something students are most likely familiar with, I note that this song can be considered a Palestinian version of N.W.A.'s "Fuck tha Police." DAM's body of work is extremely rich for class discussions so I often play more of their songs. Sometimes I show the music video to the song "Born Here," which has lyrics in Hebrew and Arabic and I contextualize the song within the broader context of Palestinian hip hop.[26] I tell students that the members of DAM are all Palestinian citizens of Israel, which opens a conversation about the complexity of identity.

Since resistance in Palestinian communities is such a rich and significant topic, there is no shortage of music to bring into the classroom that relates to the issue.[27] For example, we listen to Rim Banna, a Palestinian singer who is known as "the voice of resistance," who released an album with that as the title. We also listen to two contemporary Palestinian artists with vastly different stories but who both reflect on resistance and Palestinian nationalism in powerful ways through music focused on the keffiyeh. First, we listen to Mohammad Assaf, the singer from Gaza who won the Arab Idol

and the Present/Absent," *Social Text* 30, no. 3 (2012): 1–26.

26 David A. McDonald, "Carrying Words Like Weapons: Hip-Hop and the Poetics of Palestinian Identities in Israel," *Israeli Studies in Musicology Online* 7, no. 2 (2009): 116–130.

27 Louis Brehony, *Palestinian Music in Exile: Voices of Resistance* (American University in Cairo Press, 2023).

competition in 2013.[28] In particular we watch the video of his performance of "Ali el Kefiyyeh" from the Arab Idol final. This allows us to discuss not only the significance of the keffiyeh as a nationalist symbol but it also introduces students to the *dabke* musical style in addition to his inspiring personal story, which was dramatized in the film *The Idol* by Palestinian director Hany Abu-Assad.[29] We also listen to Shadia Mansour's song "El Keffiyeh Arabiyah" and discuss the historical context of what led to this song as well as analyze the Arabic lyrics she sings and the English lyrics sung by American rapper M-1 of Dead Prez.[30]

The Diversity of Jewish Identity in Israel

I like to play music from the Idan Raichel Project on the second day of the semester in order to discuss the cultural mosaic of Israel's diverse society. While I do usually play a Hebrew language song or two from the group, I also play multiple songs in Amharic to introduce the Ethiopian Israeli community to students. But playing this band enables students to complexify Jewish Israeli identity by showing them the ethnic, cultural, linguistic, in addition to the political diversity of Jewish Israeli society.[31] This is only the introductory music to the complexity and diversity of Jewish Israeli identity. In addition to playing songs in Amharic by the Idan Raichel Project, we also listen to Cabra Casay and the incredibly fun and funky music of Gili Yallo, which students always love.

We also listen to a lot of music from Mizrahi artists which leads us to many different conversations. On the day when we discuss the Yemenite Babies Affair and other issues of intra-communal strife between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi communities we listen to the music of A-wa. The Yemenite Babies Affair refers to the disappearance and kidnapping of mostly Yemenite babies and children in the early years after the foundation of the State of Israel who were alleged to have then been given to Ashkenazi families.[32] In addition to this controversial and disturbing episode of Israeli history, in class

28 Louis Brehony, "Mohammed Assaf's Victory Five Years on: Arabi Idol and the Zionist Colonization of Palestine," *Arab Media and Society* 26 (2018): 19–29.

29 *The Idol*, directed by Hany Abu-Assad (Adopt Films, 2015).

30 Meghan Drury, "Counterorienting the War on Terror: Arab Hip Hop and Diasporic Resistance," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 29, no. 2 (2017): 1–11.

31 Ilana Webster-Kogen, "Song Style as Strategy: Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism and Citizenship in the Idan Raichel Project's Ethiopian-Influenced Songs," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 23, no. 1 (2014): 27–48.

32 Shoshana Madmoni-Gerber, *Israeli Media and the Framing of Internal Conflict: The Yemenite Babies Affair* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

we discuss the systematic discrimination against Mizrahi communities in Israel, which is exactly what the music of A-Wa analyzes with a critical lens. Mizrahi Jews immigrated to the fledgling State of Israel expecting to be welcomed as part of the Jewish collective only to be treated by the Ashkenazi elite as inferior others undeserving of equal treatment.[33] In particular we watch the music videos for "Habib Galbi" and "Hana Mish Hu al Yeman," which discusses the struggles that Yemenite Jews experienced when immigrating to Israel.[34] The lyrics of the bridge provides the most meaningful substance for conversation, analysis, and reflection: "I came to you fleeing / you saw me as primitive / I saw you as a last resort." Since students love this music so much, I also play them music by Yemen Blues and Bint el Funk, which describes itself as "a pioneering groove band who has founded the genre Yemen Funk. Their style is based on a combination of funk with traditional Jewish Yemenite music."[35]

The Diversity of Palestinian Identity

Just as we listen to music to enhance exposure to the diversity and cultural mosaic of Jewish Israeli society, throughout the semester we listen to music that similarly addresses the vast religious, geographic, and cultural differences inherent in Palestinian society. Early in the semester we list to the band 47Soul, which is a contemporary Palestinian musical collective that blends traditional Arabic *dabke* dance music with modern electronica, hip hop, and reggae. 47Soul was formed by Palestinian musicians in Jordan who self-describe their music as "blending traditional Arabic instruments like the *arghul* and *mijwiz* with hip-hop, electronica, and R&B, and melding these with Dabke and other Shaa'bi roots music … [to create] a unique sound that is both deeply rooted and innovative."[36] Having formed in Jordan but with musicians currently residing in London and Palestine, the music of 47Soul is both in Arabic and English and further reinforces the fragmented nature of Palestinian society for students.

Early in the semester we also listen to the band Sabreen, a pioneering Palestinian musical project based in Jerusalem that expressed the political and social ideas of a new generation of Palestinians and is celebrated for

33 Ella Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism From the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims," *Social Text* 19/20 (1988): 1–35.

34 Oded Erez and Nadeem Karkabi, "Sounding Arabic: Postvernacular Modes of Performing the Arabic Language in Popular Music by Israeli Jews," *Popular Music* 38, no. 2 (2019): 298–316.

35 See Bint al Fink website, last updated 2026, www.bintelfunkmusic.com.

36 See 47Soul website, last updated 2025, www.47soul.com.

modernizing Palestinian music. Additionally, Sabreen created an NGO dedicated to Palestinian music and cultural development, including creating a music studio that became one of the most important recording locations for Palestinian musicians.[37] I often refer back to this recording studio and the Sabreen Association for Artistic Development at other points in the semester when we listen to music that was recorded in the studio. Kamilya Jubran, a Palestinian Christian woman, was the lead singer in Sabreen who has also had an illustrious solo career. Listening to her music is an avenue to discuss the Christian community in Palestine, which usually piques the interest of the students at the Jesuit Catholic university where I teach. One of the musical groups that recorded at Sabreen Studios is Apo and the Apostles, a fun folk-rock group from the Armenian community in Jerusalem. Although the music is intentionally apolitical, it's fun and uplifting sound is a great way to expose students to the Armenian presence in Palestine, which dates back to the fourth century. We also listen to TootArd, a Syrian Druze band from the village of Majdal Shams, that combines a mix of reggae, Toareg blues, and psychedelic rock. In their song "Laissez Passer," they reflect on the political condition of Druze Syrians living in Israel, a community most students know nothing about. Finally, we always listen to the music of Bashar Murad as an avenue to discuss queerness and masculinity in Palestinian society. Murad, the son of Sabreen founder Said Murad, reflects on his queer identity in his music, and students are most intrigued by his song "Ana Zalameh," which they generally find simultaneously inspiring and challenging.

Destruction of the Other

In class we also listen to music that reflects the deep-seated animosities that fuel and perpetuate the ongoing conflict. The two main songs I use to illustrate this point are "Udrub Udrub Tel Aviv" by Palestinian artists Shadi Al-Bourini and Qassem Al-Najjar and "Harbu Darbu" by Jewish Israeli singers Stilla and Ness. Both songs, with their aggressive lyrics and calls for destruction, exemplify how popular music can serve as a vehicle for nationalist fervor, reinforcing a cycle of violence and mutual demonization and destruction. These songs use music as a medium to express deeply entrenched hostility, reflecting the intensity of nationalist sentiment and the desire to see the "enemy" crushed. "Udrub Udrub Tel Aviv" (Arabic for "Strike, Strike Tel Aviv") is a pro armed resistance song that celebrates attacks on Israel, particularly missile strikes on Tel Aviv. The lyrics glorify

37 Sabreen Association for Artistic Development website, https://sabreen.org/.

violence against Jewish Israelis, framing it as a form of justified retaliation against oppression. The song uses intense language to mobilize Palestinian pride in resistance, reinforcing the narrative of armed struggle as a legitimate and necessary response to Israeli policies of occupation, apartheid, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. "Harbu Darbu" (loosely translated as "Fight and Strike") takes a similarly aggressive stance from the Jewish Israeli perspective. The song promotes the idea of Israeli military dominance and power, encouraging genocidal violence against Palestinians. With its violently militaristic tone, the song refers to Palestinians as "a bunch of fucking mice coming out of the tunnels" and "children of Amalek," thus portraying Palestinians as enemies who must be defeated through genocidal force. By referring to Palestinians as mice and by referencing the Biblical directive to commit genocide on Amalekites, Stilla and Ness articulate with venom the ways that Israeli culture dehumanizes Palestinians and justifies the destruction of Palestinian society. Both songs, in their own ways, reflect how cultural expression can be weaponized to sustain cycles of violence. Instead of promoting reconciliation, they reinforce the idea that the only path forward is through destruction of the other side, thus reproducing the notion that this conflict is a zero-sum game where only one group can be victorious, and that victory will only come through violent domination and destruction. This dynamic illustrates how deeply ingrained hostility is in the region, shaping and reinforcing popular political ideologies through music and media.

Collaborative Projects

I am also committed to playing music that serves as a counterpoint to the hyper nationalist antagonism we so often discuss in the class in order to demonstrate how collaborative music-making can bridge divides between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians. Though there are many examples of this, I often focus on the rap duo DUGRI, David Broza's collaborative album *East Jerusalem West Jerusalem*, and the music of the Jerusalem Youth Chorus. DUGRI, a hip-hop duo featuring Palestinian rapper Sameh Zakout and Israeli rapper Ori Shochat, blends Arabic and Hebrew lyrics to promote direct, honest dialogue about life under conflict. Broza's album, recorded in East Jerusalem with Israeli and Palestinian musicians, embraces the power of cross-cultural collaboration to foster understanding. Similarly, the Jerusalem Youth Chorus, made up of Jewish and Palestinian teens, uses choral music to create a shared space for dialogue, proving that artistic expression can be a

force for peace in a deeply fractured society.[38] With the Jerusalem Youth Chorus, I often play the music video for the song "Home" as it is an opportunity to think about Jerusalem as a shared homeland for both national groups. With DUGRI, I like showing them the video to "Munfas: Let's Talk Straight Number 2" because it includes the lyrics "I can't breathe." Students are very quickly and easily able to make the connections between the song and Eric Garner's fateful last words which have become a slogan in the Movement for Black Lives.[39] Making these types of connections illustrate why music is a valuable tool—as students can draw the connections between the conflict they are studying and the social, cultural, and political contexts in which they live.

I want to note that I also use these musical selections to complexify the idea of coexistence and to introduce students to the idea of co-resistance.[40] While these artists exemplify coexistence through music, they can be critiqued for failing to fully acknowledge or challenge the structural imbalance of power between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians. These projects emphasize dialogue and shared artistic expression but often sidestep deeper questions of occupation, dispossession, and asymmetry in political power. By failing to address the dynamics of power inherent to these musical collaborations, they risk ameliorating rather than dismantling oppressive structures, offering feel-good narratives of peace that do not directly confront the realities of systemic violence and Israeli state power. While meaningful in fostering relationships, such initiatives can inadvertently reinforce the status quo by suggesting that mutual understanding alone is sufficient for change, rather than collective struggle against injustice. And yet, they are valuable pedagogical tools to introduce complicated topics to students in the classroom, all of which becomes central to our class conversations as a direct result of the music.

Other Music

I'd like to also highlight a few other pieces of music I use in the classroom that don't fit neatly into these themes but nonetheless serve a valuable pedagogical purpose. In one class students are assigned Mahmoud Darwish's

38 Shoshana Gottesman, "Hear and Be Heard: Learning With and Through Music as a Dialogical Space for Co-Creating Youth Led Conflict Transformation," *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy* 17, no. 1 (2017): https://doi.org/10.15845/voices.v17i1.857.

39 Matt Taibbi, *I Can't Breathe: A Killing on Bay Street* (Random House, 2018).

40 Oren Kroll-Zeldin, "Co-Resistance Activism in Palestine/Israel After October 7," *Peace Review* 37, no. 1 (2025): 13–19.

poem "Passport."[41] On the day when we discuss that poem, we listen to Marcel Khalifa's musical interpretation of that song. When we watch the documentary film *5 Broken Cameras* we listen to the music of Le Trio Joubran, which is the group whose music is on the soundtrack for the film.[42] This also gives us the chance to discuss the fragmentation of Palestinian society since each of the three brothers who play in the trio live in different places—Nazareth (Israel), Ramallah (Palestine), and Paris (diaspora). When we discuss LGBTQIA+ issues, we listen to the music of Sarit Hadad. While we listen to some of her more popular songs of the Mizrahi music genre, we also listen to the song "A Love Like Ours," a song co-written by her partner in which she comes out as queer. Although many Israeli stars have publicly come out as queer, Hadad's revelation broke down barriers in the Mizrahi musical community and opened a pathway for others to come out. We listen to plenty of other Palestinian women such as Sanaa Moussa, Nai Barghouti, Lina Makoul, Dalal Abu Amneh, and Amal Murkus in addition to contemporary Jewish Israeli women singers like Alma Zohar, Efrat Gosh, Noa Kirel, Eden Ben Zaken, and perhaps most interestingly Netta Barzilai. I say this about Netta Barzilai because we listen to her winning song from Eurovision, talk about the competition, address questions like why Israel performs in Eurovision (and also competes in UEFA instead of the Asian Football Federation), and then we also discuss the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement through the conversation about Eurovision.[43]

One final example I think is pedagogically interesting and relevant is that sometimes I go off script from alternating between Israeli and Palestinian musicians if there is other music that illustrates a particular theme we are discussing. The most interesting example of this, in my opinion, is that we listen to Bob Marley's song "War" when we read Frantz Fanon and discuss structural violence, power, and armed resistance. The lyrics of this song were written by former Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie in a speech he delivered to the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1963 that illustrate in similar ways one of the key messages from Fanon's chapter "On Violence" in *Wretched of the Earth*.[44]

41 Mahmoud Darwish, "Passport," Languages of the Middle East, Yale University, April 28, 2024, https://languagesofthemiddleeast.yale.edu/passport-a-poem-by-mahmoud-darwish/.

42 *5 Broken Cameras*, directed by Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi (Kino Lorber 2011).

43 Galia Press-Barnathan and Naama Lutz, "The Multilevel Identity Politics of the 2019 Eurovision Song Contest," *International Affairs* 96, no. 3 (2020): 729–748.

44 Haile Selasse, "Address to the United Nations (1963)," delivered to the United Nations General Assembly, October, 4, 1963; Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (Grove Press, 1963).

Impact on Students: Transformative Learning

Integrating music into the classroom has been a powerful tool for me to facilitate transformative learning among my students. In reading course evaluations, students frequently cite listening to music and learning through the musical artists as one of their favorite and most impactful parts of the course. By introducing music from Jewish Israeli and Palestinian artists, I intentionally create opportunities for students to not only learn about the political and cultural dimensions of the conflict but also to reflect on their own identities and preconceptions through a medium they are already most likely predisposed to enjoy.

Student verbal and written reflections often illustrate how music personalizes abstract ideas and makes them more tangible and easier to comprehend. For example, after listening to DAM's "Who's the Terrorist?," one student expressed a newfound awareness of how narratives of power and resistance are constructed and contested in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This student had never previously considered the idea that Palestinians might consider the actions of the Israeli military to be an example of terrorism, thus challenging their understanding of the violence inherent in this conflict. When we discussed in class that this song was influenced by hip hop artists reflecting on police violence in Black communities in the U.S. this student expressed a shift in the way they approached violence perpetrated by state actors—whether or not that was police officers in the United States or Israeli soldiers. Similarly, exploring Mohammed Assaf's music and watching his winning performance of "Ali el Keffiyeh" on Arab Idol prompted a student in class discussions to connect the broader historical and political struggles to the lived realities of individuals within these communities. This student expressed shock at how difficult it is for people in Gaza to leave the territory under the Israeli siege and blockade but also noted how Assaf's persistence and success were signals of hope for the Palestinian people in Gaza amid constant bombardment. Connecting a song to the particular lesson or theme we are discussing in the classroom is thus a valuable pedagogy for learning about Palestine/Israel because it enhances engagement, deepens understanding, and fosters emotional connection to the material. Music is a powerful pedagogical tool that can contextualize historical, cultural, or political themes, making abstract concepts more concrete and relatable to students.

This approach also challenges students to critically examine their own positionalities and assumptions. For instance, some students may initially struggle with understanding how music can serve as a form of resistance or

as a political tool. By encouraging them to analyze song lyrics, explore cultural contexts, and reflect on their emotional reactions, the classroom becomes a space for open dialogue alongside personal political growth. For example, one student who came into my classroom last semester as an ardent supporter of Israel, noted at the end of the semester that listening to DAM's music and analyzing their song lyrics helped him understand the power and significance of music as a tool of cultural expression and nonviolent resistance for some Palestinian artists, which altered much of his understanding of Palestinian identity. Before the class he had mostly been exposed to Palestinians as terrorists, but the things he learned in class, and the music of DAM in particular, challenged him to see that Palestinians also use methods of nonviolent resistance, such as music, to challenge and contest Israeli power. Similarly, one Palestinian student said that she appreciated listening to and learning about Jewish Israeli artists such as the hip hop group Hadag Nahash and anarchist punk band Katzon Latevach because it exposed her to the fact that there are Israeli Jews whose anti-apartheid politics align with her own and they even sometimes express these politics in their music. As one student noted in an assignment after analyzing David Broza's collaborative album *East Jerusalem/West Jerusalem*, "I realized how music can simultaneously highlight the divisions in society and offer a way to bridge them." These moments of realization exemplify the transformative potential of using music as a pedagogical tool.

Despite its successes, this approach is not without challenges. Some students have resisted engaging with music that contrasts sharply with their existing beliefs or worldviews, particularly in the emotionally charged context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, these moments of discomfort can also be opportunities for growth. These "disorienting dilemmas," situations where students encounter perspectives that challenge their assumptions, are essential for transformative learning.[45] By guiding students through these moments with care and open-ended questioning, we as educators can foster critical reflection, encourage empathy, and develop the capacity for critical thought in the classroom.

Ultimately, using music in the classroom not only enriches students' understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but also cultivates their ability to connect emotionally and critically with the material we cover in class. It transforms the classroom into a dynamic space where students explore complex topics in a fun and engaging way, leaving them with tools to navigate and analyze conflicts beyond the academic setting. This pedagogy

45 Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*.

underscores the potential of music to humanize narratives and foster critical thinking, aligning with bell hooks' call for a transformative education that connects the personal with the academic and political.[46] It connects students to course material in a relatable way, which not only humanizes the narratives but also enables students to explore the emotional and cultural dimensions that traditional academic texts often overlook. This music-centered approach both enriches students' understanding of the conflict and offers a humanizing perspective, showcasing societies beyond the conflict's boundaries. Overall, music provides educators with tools to facilitate multi-narrative dialogue and critical thinking in the classroom in a fun and engaging way that stays with students long after the semester ends.

Oren Kroll-Zeldin *is the Anne and Nick Germanacos Associate Professor in Contemporary Jewish Studies at the University of San Francisco where is also the Assistant Director of the Swig Program in Jewish Studies and Social Justice. He is the author of* Unsettled: American Jews and the Movement for Justice in Palestine.

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46 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge, 1994).

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INVITED SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

Israel/Palestine and Campus-Wide Teaching-Learning Events: The Challenges of Affect, The Role of Intellectual Empathy

Laurence Roth and Nicholas Clark

Abstract

Drawing on their experience in organizing a panel on the Israel-Hamas conflict in February of 2024 for a campus-wide teaching-learning event, the authors analyze that event as an artifact for understanding the tensions between neutral-aspiring and affect-laden language. They then consider the challenges of affect for discursive forums and the role that a mindful form of affect, intellectual empathy, can play in addressing it. They conclude with observations about the effects of different types of venues on the efficacy of that role and with a renewed commitment to campus-wide teaching-learning events that address Israel/Palestine and similarly difficult topics at their university so that students can incorporate and understand how affect is part of the different approaches they will need to interpret, internalize, and struggle to understand political tragedies as they unfold.

Keywords

Israel/Palestine, Israel-Hamas conflict, campus-wide events, teaching-learning, affect, *The Netanyahus*, intellectual empathy

In considering how to achieve the most effective types of discourse and dialogue about the recent events in Israel and Palestine, the learning context that surrounds campus discussions matters a great deal. More specifically, campus-wide events designed to facilitate conversations within the larger community are more politically charged and create different types of obstacles than classroom discussions. The attempts to adopt neutral language or to provide wider context around the conflict, which may generate opposition and concern in any environment, are more likely to stimulate conflict in campus-wide discussions. The test here lies in navigating between those academics who seek to provide only the historical, sociological, and cultural details necessary to understand the context of the conflict and those activists and activist-scholars deploying an affect-laden discourse who, in addition, seek to motivate change in relation to the conflict. The latter are likely to take issue with the former in any context (as, in the worst case, enablers and, in the best case, tone deaf). However, this test takes on greater urgency if the discussion in question is happening in a larger venue; one that can be more easily politicized and imbued with a greater significance than in a classroom setting.

The authors of this short essay experienced such issues in organizing a panel on the Israel-Hamas conflict in February of 2024. In what follows, we analyze that event as an artifact for understanding the tensions between neutral-aspiring and affect-laden language, before considering the challenges of affect for discursive forums, reading a scene from Joshua Cohen's novel *The Netanyahus* to illustrate these, and explaining the role that a mindful form of affect, intellectual empathy, can play in addressing them.[1] We then conclude with observations about the effects of different types of venues on the efficacy of that role.

Organizing a Panel on the Israel-Hamas Conflict

On February 19, 2024, Susquehanna University (SU), where we teach, sponsored a panel aimed at all students and faculty, on "Contextualizing the Israel-Hamas Conflict." Susquehanna University is small undergraduate liberal arts college in rural Central Pennsylvania serving 2,206 undergraduates mostly from the northeast. It combines the pedagogy of the liberal arts with a focus on professional enterprise. The students tend to be career-minded and politically centrist, though there are active student groups devoted to both progressive and conservative political perspectives and

1 Joshua Cohen, *The Netanyahus: An Account of a Minor and Ultimately Even Negligible Episode in the History of a Very Famous Family* (New York Review of Books, 2021).

activities. There had not been any prior events seeking to generate dialogue between Muslim and Jewish communities, but there have been efforts to represent different political ideologies. The College Republicans brought Ben Shapiro to campus a few years ago with the support of the College Democrats who in turn invited Ed Rendell with the support of both groups. While there was a great deal of trepidation around Shapiro's visit, there ultimately were no protests or demonstrations. The university itself had organized a number of Black Lives Matter solidarity events, again without any altercations. Like many, and perhaps the majority of smaller colleges and universities across the United States, Susquehanna tends toward a far more moderate campus political climate and a culture of "niceness," which can be both a strength and a weakness.

Unsurprisingly, after October 7, there were no overt political demonstrations on campus in support of any stance in relation to the conflict. The Director of our Hillel House organized a Zoom discussion with the Parents Family Circle Forum, a grassroots reconciliation group of Palestinians and Israelis who lost loved ones in the conflict, and a talk by a representative of Project Shema, which offers training and support in addressing antisemitism. Both drew less than a dozen students, almost all Jewish, and hardly any faculty. Unlike the turmoil experienced on the campuses of many elite and large public universities, most students on the SU campus were either inactive or communicated to faculty, staff, and administrators a desire to simply learn more about the situation and have an opportunity to ask questions of experts on the region.

For us, the pressing questions in organizing a response concerned what type of event was most appropriate in response to campus-wide requests for more information and who were the best voices to deliver on these requests in that context. One of the glaring drawbacks of the institution is the absence of a Middle East Studies program or any local experts on the conflict who are of Arab descent. SU does have a Jewish & Israel Studies program, although it has not been able to offer many courses in that program in recent years. There were faculty with expertise in Middle East Studies, but they left for positions with larger institutions. In other words, SU lacked precisely the type of expertise that was called for in such an event and there were few, if any, alternatives at other institutions in the area. The few Middle East scholars in the area were reluctant to participate in any public-facing events for fear of backlash on campus or in the broader area.

We also struggled with the content of such an event. How could we fill this void in central Pennsylvania in a way that enabled students to understand the difficult nuances and issues roiling any discussion of the

history and dynamics of the conflict? And should we focus on explaining the histories behind the conflict, unraveling the politics of the region, or presenting the binary narratives that unhelpfully tend to elide the complexity of the groups involved and the perspectives of the political actors caught up in the conflict? Our concerns were less a matter of so-called "even-handedness" (giving airtime to different sides) than it was providing a broad range of information that would help students approach the conflict with sufficient sensitivity and with an appreciation for the political nuances and humanist implications that scholarship requires when analyzing socio-cultural phenomena and engaging highly volatile issues of social and political justice.

Given the relatively slow development of partisan political consciousness about the Israel-Hamas conflict on the SU campus, we had time to view what other institutions were doing. At many institutions, town halls were increasingly devolving into competitive shouting matches with affinity groups often focusing on their distinctive grievances. We noted that Q&A and information sessions had been relatively successful at some colleges and universities and believed this might be the best avenue for students with largely factual questions about the history between Israel and Palestine. However, likely due to the same issues we experienced in finding the right voices, many of these information sessions featured professors from Political Science, History, or Religion speaking to their general knowledges about the conflict and the region rather than speakers with a specific background in Middle East or Islamic Studies (much less expertise in Palestinian history, culture, or politics). The original panel we developed then brought together these types of scholars with a local Imam, one with extensive training in sociology, political science, and religion, who was willing to offer their perspective on the conflict.

As we proceeded in the organization of this event, we found ourselves in a situation the opposite of, but also, on a number of levels, analogous to that of colleagues elsewhere, who struggled with pressures from pro-Zionist groups to temper or "balance" Palestinian voices with Israeli or Zionist ones. We were contacted by a faculty member of Palestinian heritage who had significant concerns about a panel featuring Jewish voices (as some of the faculty panelists were) but none of Arab or Palestinian descent. Moreover, this faculty member wanted to vet and approve all panelists and to forbid any panelists from using certain language, such as calling the situation a conflict (which the faculty member felt incorrectly recognizes Israel as having a legitimate side).

The initial event was postponed as we carried on discussions with the concerned faculty member in hopes of reaching a compromise. Such a

compromise was not reached; partly because we were unwilling effectively to censor some voices on the panel and partly because they did not accept as legitimate the outside expert on Middle East politics who eventually agreed to come to campus (as that individual identified as Muslim and as coming from the Middle East, but not as Arab). In the meantime, the local Imam backed out of the event for fear that they would similarly be accused of falsely representing the Palestinian experience.

Ultimately, the concerned faculty member reflected a hardline viewpoint that has been articulated by partisans of both the Israeli and the Palestinian perspectives: that such discussions have potential triggering effects or that even acknowledging a position serves to legitimize a side that should not be recognized. This delegitimization of discourse has bedeviled campuses such as the University of California-Los Angeles, the University of Florida, San Jose State, and of course Harvard and Columbia.[2] To some hardliners, for example, shouting or shutting down "bad speech" with "good speech" reflects a defense of "free speech," as a professor at San Jose State asserted in an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.[3]

In the end, we held the panel with three voices: a moderator, an expert on Jewish Studies, and an expert on Middle East Politics. The discussion was strictly limited to an hour and largely covered the history of the conflict; the current political factors shaping the conflict; and the prejudices it has inspired around the world against both Jews and Arabs. The panel acknowledged, in a limited way, the opposition to it by the establishment of "ground rules" that made clear what the panel would and could do (provide some historical and political context), and what it would be unable to do (take an explicit position on the violence on either side). We also restricted attendance to just students and faculty; the public was not invited, no

2 Declan Bradley, "UCLA Is Caught in the Middle of Competing Israeli-Palestinian Grievances," The Chronicle of Higher Education, October 22, 2024, https://www.chronicle.com/article/ucla-is-caught-in-the-middle-of-competing-israeli-palestinian-grievances; Megan Zahneis, "Why Did the U. of Florida Back Away From a Symposium on the War in Gaza at the Last Minute?" The Chronicle of Higher Education, November 1, 2024, https://www.chronicle.com/article/why-did-the-u-of-florida-back-away-from-a-seminar-on-the-war-in-gaza-at-the-last-minute; Kate Hidalgo Bellows, "How 3 Campus Conflicts Over Pro-Israel Speech Spiraled Out of Control." The Chronicle of Higher Education, February 29, 2024, https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-3-campus-conflicts-over-pro-israel-speech-spiraled-out-of-control; Ryan D. Enos, "How Free Speech Failed at Harvard—and How to Rescue It." The Chronicle of Higher Education, September 27, 2024, https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-free-speech-failed-at-harvard-and-how-to-rescue-it.

3 Hidalgo Bellows, "How 3 Campus Conflicts."

publicity was generated or distributed for the event, and no photographs or recordings of the event were allowed. Students were invited to submit questions ahead of the event, which were incorporated into the discussion. The panel attracted around 100 faculty, students, and staff on campus. The panel received largely positive feedback with a few critiques indicating that those writing us felt the event and the panelists were tone-deaf to events happening on the ground.

Clearly, there are a number of objections one could make to how we handled this event. We should have engaged the wider community earlier in the process of organizing the event to discover if there were any voices that wanted to be involved in the process. We should have known better that the event would generate the concerns that came about and, indeed, had the potential to trigger students and faculty. And we should have cast a wider net, earlier in the process, to find experts that could more credibly speak to both sides of the conflict.

Nevertheless, our goal of helping students grapple with the complexities of the Israel-Hamas conflict was, at least in part, realized, if only because we incorporated our awareness of the program's shortcomings and limitations into the event. More importantly, though, we did not dismiss the affective aspects of the conflict and of trying to discuss it with the students.

The Role of Affect in Discussions about Israel and Palestine

An important aspect of the resulting panel was for the panelists to recognize both their intellectual *and* emotional relationships with the issue, a discussion intentionally incorporated into the opening remarks about each panelist's knowledge of and prior experience with Israel and Palestine. One goal was to help students see how to approach the conflict with what Bernard Avishai calls "a sense of tragedy."[4] Writing in *The New Yorker* about co-teaching a course on Israel-Palestine with Ezzedine Fishere, his colleague in the Middle East Studies program at Dartmouth University, Avishai's pedagogical goal of presenting "the acolytes of national narratives as inevitably tragic figures, limited by perception, experience, idiosyncrasy, fear, ambition, narcissism—hubris" helpfully illustrates what we feel is a merit to the sort of teaching-learning event we envisioned and, admittedly, only partially pulled off.[5]

4 Bernard Avishai, "Co-Teaching a Class on Israel and Palestine," The New Yorker, February 2, 2024, https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/co-teaching-a-class-on-israel-and-palestine

5 Avishai, "Co-Teaching a Class on Israel and Palestine."

Rather than dismissing or denying any such connection, recognizing, attending to, and, if possible, incorporating the role of affect is vital to helping students understand the context in which the discussion is taking place.

During this same period, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported on a couple of courses about Israel and Palestine at Johns Hopkins and Emory University that employed scholarly debate and conflict mediation to bracket or temper student emotions and foreground civil discourse.[6] But affect, as the scholarly study of it points out, always informs supposedly objective critical productions and explanations. Our students inevitably bring their own socially constructed and personally mediated affective lives into classrooms and auditoriums, which the instructors of these courses would no doubt acknowledge. Attending to the role of affect, however, means taking seriously the social import of emotions in enabling the articulation and recognition of political situations and arrangements. It means allowing affect a place in the discourse as a prod toward greater student self-examination and self-awareness.

We would both agree and disagree with Benjamin Schreier about the role of affect in fomenting how we talk about October 7 and the Israel-Palestine conflict. In his article, "On Identification: Theses on Liberal Discourses about Zionism and Israel Since October 7," Schreier writes in Thesis Three that "a de-politicized retreat into affect is toxic to intelligent analysis," and that "when we allow affective responses to set the terms for responding to history we risk engaging in a deceptive nihilism …. Once we decide to perform a scene of encounter on the stage of identity, it becomes intractable."[7] These strike us as unassailable points and a perceptive way of understanding how *unexamined and unacknowledged* affect can and did make the act of engaging in discourse itself a target of opposition on our campus and on others.

But if we commit to examining affect as part of a teaching-learning event then, as Sianne Ngai argues in her book, *Ugly Feelings*, emotions can be approached "as unusually knotted or condensed 'interpretations of

6 Beth McMurtrie, "Debating Israel's Future, One Week at a Time," The Chronicle of Higher Education, April 30, 2024, https://www.chronicle.com/article/debating-israels-future-one-week-at-a-time; "Letters: How One Course Is Trying to Foster Civil Discourse," The Chronicle of Higher Education, April 3, 2024, https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/letters/how-one-course-is-trying-to-foster-civil-discourse.

7 Benjamin Schreier, "On Identification: Theses on Liberal Discourses about Zionism and Israel Since October 7," Jadaliyya, January 11, 2024, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/45691.

predicaments'—that is, signs that not only render visible different registers of problem (formal, ideological, sociohistorical) but conjoin these problems in a distinctive manner."[8] Affect, in other words, can help reveal, and enable us to work through, our struggle to make sense of and come to terms with the overdetermined meanings of politics, aesthetics, and history.

Our disagreement with Schreier centers on his assertion that the Israel-Palestine conflict "perpetuates itself through heartbreak and the presumption of a sphere of human life invulnerable to politics and critical thinking," and that centering the suffering and grief of one side (for Schreier it's Israeli/Jewish suffering) displaces and devalues the suffering of the other side.[9] His take on a particular way that Palestinian suffering is often decentered and marginalized is unquestionably accurate, but the subjective assembly of suffering and tragedy is and remains deeply imbricated with the political despite presumptions to the contrary. The question for educators is how to activate and make visible for students the political and the socio-historical that are conjoined in such heartbreak. As Avishai points out, suffering and tragedy also have political valence as a mode of solidarity or as a prod to further discussion or to the promotion and valuing of humanistic discourse as essential to the liberal arts and a democratic public sphere.[10]

Affect, Intellectual Empathy, and Joshua Cohen's *The Netanyahus*

What would that sort of teaching-learning have looked like at our campus-wide event? Perhaps a version was evident in the remarks an Egyptian student made when he spoke with us after the event. He told us about the anger he had long felt about the conflict, unremarkable to him given the history he had learned, but that he appreciated our event had acknowledged such anger, and the heartbreak, on both sides, and he went on to engage us in further discussion about some of the points the panelists had raised. Pedagogically, what we believe we heard went something like this: I can trust you with my emotions and so I can trust you with my political perspective. I'm not going to change my mind, but I am going to listen to you. How to build on that affective opening through other campus events and in the classroom, thereby advancing the sort of knowledge building empathy

8 Sianne Ngai, "From *Ugly Feelings*," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 3rd ed., ed. Vincent Leitch, et al. (W.W. Norton & Co., 2018), 2642.

9 Schreier, "On Identification."

10 Avishai, "Co-Teaching a Class on Israel and Palestine."

between speaker and respondent that such an opening connotes, is where we are currently focusing institutional attention.

One avenue through which we plan to pursue this is by creating a professional and civic writing major (funded with a Mellon grant supporting the investigation, designing, and sharing of pedagogical applications that clearly and deliberately foster democratic ethos and culture) to develop courses that help instructors and students manage civic dialogue and difficult conversations.[11] That research has been consequential, and here suggests a helpful prooftext with which to think about next steps. For the hurdles such management may face, especially regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict and discourse about Zionism, is well-illustrated in a scene from Joshua Cohen's *The Netanyahus*.

The novel imagines Ben-Zion (as it is written in the book) Netanyahu—father of Benjamin Netanyahu, (in)famous revisionist historian of the Spanish Inquisition, and Zionist Revisionist who believed in a maximalist Israeli state occupying both sides of the Jordan River—visiting a small liberal arts college in 1959 for a job interview during a period when he was, in real life, in search of an academic home in Israel or the United States. The story is based on an anecdote by the literary critic Harold Bloom about hosting Ben-Zion for a campus visit to Cornell University. In the novel, Cohen's protagonist-host is Ruben Blum, American Jew, the first at the college and an American economic historian, though "*not* an historian of the Jews."[12] Ruben finds himself the middleman between Ben-Zion and his colleagues in the history department and, during the lecture, a target of Ben-Zion's invective against American democracy as ultimately offering no protection for "marginal identities," thus by implication critiquing and denouncing Ruben's embodiment of what is now described, conventionally and stereotypically, as the "mainstreaming" of American Jews and their social, cultural, and economic success story in America.[13]

Tracking the affective registers that Cohen describes throughout the lecture reveals not only the matrix of the political and socio-historical animating the novel's satire. It also dramatizes the difficulty of engaging the process of "intellectual empathy"—a process illustrated by Avishai's and Fishere's course with its spotlight on tragedy—that is necessary for civil and

11 Betsy Verhoeven, project director, "Engaging Democratic Ethos: Innovative Rhetorical Education for a Participatory Society," (Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, 2024 Higher Learning Open Call: Cultures of U.S. Democracy, Susquehanna University, December 2024).

12 Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 2.

13 Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 210.

open-minded construction of knowledge and, by extension, for discussion in the public sphere. As Maureen Linker defines it, intellectual empathy,

> [I]s empathy with an emphasis on the integration of moral, emotive, and cognitive capacities. In the case of intellectual empathy these capacities would be focused on interpretation and judgments regarding a speaker's credibility and reliability. The intellectually empathic hearer would be particularly attuned to rhetorical contexts involving social difference and take a speaker's report in such a context to assess the consistency and coherence of their own beliefs and feelings before making an interpretive judgment.[14]

Of course, the novel's characters do nothing of the sort. Yet this is why the lecture scene functions as a kind of heuristic for readers, particularly apt for a campus novel, on how to read for such empathy.

At the start of the lecture, Ben-Zion "expressed a hint of regret" that the lecture was open to the public, a familiar perspective to us that reflects a common concern in the academy that outside or large audiences may foment misunderstanding of a talk or speech.[15] Ben-Zion continues with what sounds like "an apology twinged with contempt," a warning that what is to follow will be, in many ways, purposefully incendiary and divisive.[16] Cohen has Ruben note that "Ingratiation was a strain on him" as Ben-Zion reviews the history of Jewish expulsions in Medieval Europe and the Inquisitions in Spain and Portugal of conversos, Jewish converts to Christianity.[17] For Ben-Zion in both Cohen's fiction and in his real-world scholarship, these Inquisitions provided the evidence for his theorizing a perennial, trans-historical Western Jew hatred based on an immutable racial categorization whose inevitable result was to be a "history of Holocausts," as he called it.[18] It also called forth a Jewish awareness of the existential need for Jews to take refuge in an ethnostate of their own predicated on defensively exclusionist terms.

14 Maureen Linker, "Do Squirrels Eat Hamburgers? Intellectual Empathy as a Remedy for Residual Prejudice," *Informal Logic* 31, no. 2 (2011): 110–138, 124. For a related analysis of empathy as crucial for reconciliation and conflict resolution, see Björn Krondorfer, Unsettling Empathy*: Working with Groups in Conflict* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2020).

15 Cohen, *The Netanyahus,* 204.

16 Cohen, The Netanyahus, 204.

17 Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 204, 205.

18 Douglas Martin, "Benzion Netanyahu, Hawkish Scholar, Dies at 102," *The New York Times*. April 30, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/01/world/middleeast/benzion-netanyahu-dies-at-102.html.

Ben-Zion's argument about the racialization of the Inquisition, however, soon pivots, as Ruben says, into "the wrath of the veteran propagandist"[19] as he traces the legacy of the Inquisition to "Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and the Arab Ummah" and then, in a "strident" though also, in Ruben's later reflective view, "poignant" pitch to the audience, asserts "that the only way out of gentile history was through Zion."[20] At Ben-Zion's pivot, the "Seminarians and dazed Koreans shifted in their seats," and Ruben's wife Edith starts tearing the lecture program "into strips as if in mourning," and Ben-Zion's wife Tzilla "appeared to drowse."[21] These responses make clear that empathy with Ben-Zion's points is already sorely wanting among the audience, even from his wife. But also, from a teacherly perspective, that readers should take careful note of the affective drama being played out here and perhaps reflect on it too. This is intimated by Ruben's own re-viewing of Ben-Zion's pitch through a more empathetic but still critical lens (intellectual empathy does not require abandoning judgement or the calling out of oppression or hatred), as the product of a devoutly felt, secularized religious revivalism.[22] In contrast, Ben-Zion himself is described as devolving into "fanaticism" as he predicts the devolution of the American post-war empire into its inevitable "tribal constituencies," which would leave the Jews vulnerable to yet the next Inquisition.[23] Ruben feels the weight of Ben-Zion's argument on him, that America "is nothing" and that American Jews like him are doomed, an observation that enables Ruben to recognize, for both comic effect and readerly empathy, the widening gulf between him and Ben-Zion as well as the corrosive political and socio-historical matrix into which he has been thrust.[24]

19 Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 209.

20 Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 210.

21 Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 209.

22 As Ta-Nehisi Coates puts it, in a different context: "Just in terms of bridging gaps and everything, I have a basic level of respect that I accord to everybody. I want to say what I have to say. I don't want to shrink back from it. But I do think on a basic level, there's a respect that has to be had for people with whom I disagree. / At the same time, I recognize that part of my audience—and I would say an important part of my audience—is people who have never enjoyed that respect. People who, in fact, are subjects of the kind of hate that Charlie Kirk was harvesting. / And I can't ever a) contribute to making them feel like they've been abandoned, and b) I can't ever stand by and watch somebody do that and in the name of unity or whatever, act like that's not happening. Because there are real consequences" (Ezra Klein, "Ta-Nehisi Coates on Bridging Gaps vs. Drawing Lines," *The New York Times*, September 28, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/28/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-ta-nehisi-coates.html).

23 Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 210, 211.

24 Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 212.

At the end of the lecture the applause is described as "light, deferential, and relieved."[25] More significantly, in its wake it unleashes a clutch of "ugly" and disturbing feelings among the novel's characters—resentment, anxiety, boredom, disillusionment, envy, and "animatedness" (Ngai's term for an affective ventriloquism that stereotypes Blacks in literature, but here extended as a similar kind of speaking for and stereotyping of Jews).[26] These are the predictable results of Ben-Zion's unempathetic discursive performance and the utter lack of preparedness among the audience who, embedded in the novel's historical moment, view such a discursive assault as bad manners at best, and anti-Christian, or an antisemitic stereotype proved true, at worst.

Readers, however, who encounter this scene prepared to read for intellectual empathy may discover for themselves why the lack of such empathy is both instructive in this particular case and inimical in general to campus-wide events and public debates. The feelings stirred up by Ben-Zion's lecture destabilize not only Ruben's academic and ethnic détente with his colleagues and college, but also the narrative of American Jewish success lampooned in the novel, the Zionist supersessionism of Jewish history that Ben-Zion articulates, and the didactic purpose of the campus novel, teaching how teachers rarely learn anything socially improving from their misadventures in academia. This is the satire employing affect to undermine faith in any too easy history, identity, or learning. It is, as well, a warning about the consequences of not accounting for affect as always already implicated in a college's pedagogical frameworks and educational mission. Not attending to or training students for intellectual empathy, in both small and large group situations, will certainly undermine these frameworks and missions, a key insight and takeaway for educators who hope to manage contentious issues constructively and successfully.

The Implications of the Venue

Briefly, we want to acknowledge that our appeal to intellectual empathy is obviously more complicated in practice than in theory, especially given the implications of the venue and circumstances under which we planned this event. Our emphasis on the possibilities that academia offers for understanding this conflict, and other such events, is perhaps better placed in a traditional classroom environment, as witnessed in Avishai's and Fishere's

25 Cohen, *The Netanyahus*, 211.

26 Ngai, "From *Ugly Feelings*," 2645.

course, where the participants can be more readily expected to engage in affect-laden dialogues from a more theoretical perspective or within the context of a broader learning framework employed in the class. In contrast, a campus-wide panel, open to the entire community, has greater visibility and symbolic importance for communicating the values of the campus. Such an event thus becomes more political, regardless of the intentions of the event's organizers, and invites the possibilities of protest and other types of political engagement that can make intellectual empathy difficult if not impossible to sustain. In other words, such a venue inevitably opens the possibility for affect to take a larger and more uncontrolled role than in a classroom environment.

Indeed, as we progressed in the planning of the event, it became necessary to allocate space for protesters; establish protocol for how to respond if the event was interrupted; and create security protocol to ensure the safety of all present. While the instructor may choose to warn students about triggering discussions in a classroom environment, there are rarely, if ever, any such precautions taken for campus-wide panels, a reflection of the nature of the event.

We advocated from the start for a centered approach to the issue that allowed us to examine the social, political, cultural, and economic realities that have brought Israel and Palestine to this place. While we do not agree the event was tone-deaf in regard to the realities experienced on the ground in Israel and Gaza, we believe our initial expectation that we could stage a classically "academic" discussion did not fit as well with the chosen venue. That realization may be obvious to others, but one that can be lost as organizers seek to develop educational opportunities that respond to student requests for more information about the conflict, balance the concerns of different constituencies on campus, and still incorporate a commitment to intellectual empathy.

Conclusions

Ultimately, we would not advocate for abandoning the larger venue and the organization of an event designed to reach the entire community. Not only were there enough students from across the campus looking for more information, but the event was consistent with the institutional mission to promote broader dialogues and to engage difficult conversations. Nor would we abandon our support for an objective effort to analyze the conditions leading to the conflict, which is to say one that is contextualized by the examined experiences and acknowledged sympathies of the scholarly voices

involved in the panel and sensitive to the emotions that students bring into the discourse. We would simply dedicate more time to, first, our preparation for the event and, second, to finding ways to better accommodate a range of diverse voices on campus, whether by modifying the event to allow for additional scholarly perspectives and/or planning additional events in connection with it that also intersected with current university initiatives to promote a democratic ethos and culture—to inculcate an attentiveness to reciprocity, the practice of intellectual empathy/thoughtful deliberation, and a respect for difference—among students, throughout our campus environment, and into the surrounding community.[27] Both would provide opportunities for students not only to hear from different voices, but also to experience different approaches to how one interprets, internalizes, and struggles to understand political tragedies as they unfold.

Laurence Roth *is the Charles B. Degenstein Professor of English and Director of the Jewish & Israel Studies Program and The Build Collaborative (a project-based center for liberal arts, business, and creativity) at Susquehanna University. He is the author of* Unpacking My Father's Bookstore *(Rutgers UP) and* Inspecting Jews: American Jewish Detective Stories *(Rutgers UP); co-editor, with Nadia Valman, of* The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Jewish Cultures*; and editor of* Modern Language Studies*, the scholarly journal of the Northeast Modern Language Association.*

Nicholas Clark *is Professor of Political Science and Department Head at Susquehanna University in Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania. His research focuses on comparative politics, the European Union, and democratic citizenship, with particular attention to how institutional complexity shapes public knowledge and engagement. He holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from Indiana University, along with master's degrees in European Studies from universities in Germany and the Netherlands. At Susquehanna, he also directs the Innovation Center and teaches courses on public policy, European politics, and theories of democratic citizenship.*

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27 Verhoeven, "Engaging Democratic Ethos."

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ARTICLE

Dialogues on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Baltimore: Interreligious Missteps and Opportunities

Benjamin E. Sax

Abstract

I work at a 501(c)3 non-profit in Baltimore that combats religious bigotry and co-builds resilient interreligious communities. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has always brought challenges to this work. However, Hamas' murderous rampage on October 7, 2023 and what the majority of human rights organizations inside of and outside of the State of Israel see as the IDF's subsequent genocide against Gazans has made our work nearly impossible. There is also the added challenge of the increased weaponization of accusations of antisemitism to silence pro-Palestinian advocacy—especially by the targeted use of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism—as well as the weaponization of U.S. Immigration and Enforcement (ICE) to detain and deport pro-Palestinian advocates. The paper shares and examines a program we have been running for our constituencies since October 7th. It explores the challenges of weaponized accusations of antisemitism and offers a way forward for practitioners of interreligious dialogue who don't always agree about how to interpret this conflict.

Keywords

dialogue, Israel-Palestine, interreligious, Baltimore

As many people already know, the topic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict often prevents any meaningful dialogical encounter. Much of my own work these days is a commentary on this assertion. I work at an institute whose mission is "to dismantle religious bias and bigotry" by building "learning communities where religious difference becomes a powerful force for good."[1] For the past twelve years I have been working with communities in and around Baltimore city to build robust and resilient interreligious networks. I don't have a classroom, nor do I have any power over my students. Everyone who studies with me volunteers their time and energy. I am accountable to my board and our many constituencies. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is always the elephant in the room in our programming, fellowships, and in our courses. As an organization we are unable to advocate for any one political solution to the conflict, since our board, our stakeholders and our constituencies disagree fundamentally on what that should be. We are accountable, for instance, to people who support the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, as well as to those who believe that this movement is antisemitic. One key aspect of our work is to keep these people and communities in relationship with one another.

Almost immediately after October 7th, 2023, all our networks were in danger of collapsing. Some people associated with our work seemed to have giving up in some way on this mission. There are many reasons to why this happened. Since then, though, my colleagues have led well over fifty sessions with around 750–1000 people to find ways to preserve relationships and develop ways to discuss and think about much of this unthinkable violence. We made a commitment to lean into our mission, which meant organizing and leading in-person, face-to-face dialogues about Israel, Gaza, and all other related issues regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We made it clear to our partners, constituents, and supporters, that we sought to preserve our interreligious spaces, remaining committed to continuing challenging

1 I am the Jewish scholar and Head of Scholarship at the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies (ICJS) in Baltimore, MD. We are "an independent, educational nonprofit [that] straddles the academic arena and the public square with programming to advance interreligious dialogue and understanding. Our audiences include the general public, seminarians, higher-ed faculty, congregational leaders, civic leaders, teachers, and chaplains. Through educational programming, public-facing scholarship, and relationship-centered fellowships and workshops, ICJS models a new conversation in the public square that affirms religious diversity in the United States." Here is our mission: "To dismantle religious bias and bigotry, ICJS builds learning communities where religious difference becomes a powerful force for good." Our Vision: "ICJS envisions an interreligious society in which dialogue replaces division, friendship overcomes fear, and education eradicates ignorance." For more information, including learning more about our values, see our website: www.icjs.org.

conversations between communities. All parties agreed that silence neither advances justice, nor peace. Yet, as we know, many people started avoiding friends, colleagues, neighbors or family members who held different views from their own. This created a different type of silence. While we must be encouraged to say difficult truths, we must also be able to hear them.

In what follows here, first, I will describe a simple program that we developed to help people engage in dialogue on this topic by considering how to listen without responding and by learning how to ask clarifying questions. I will share how the program operates and then examine what has been successful and unsuccessful. Second, I want to share an external challenge: I will briefly explore how the politics regarding legal definitions of antisemitism, especially that of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) are impacting our institute's ability to engage effectively in interreligious dialogue.[2] Critiques of Israel and of Zionism are a necessary part of interreligious encounters and the IHRA definition of antisemitism violates people's religious freedom, because for many Palestinians in our communities, their identities and experiences are not only at times invisible, but also their very identities are perceived to be antisemitic. Third, I will share how current U.S. policy makers seek to not only undermine our work in interreligious dialogue but also seek to make the identities of some our participants illegal. Finally, I will share a few thoughts on how to continue our work despite these very real and unsettling challenges.

The Program

This program is not meant for complete strangers. It is designed for people who know one another, whether in a work environment, school, or a third space community. We also use it for a week-long retreat for Jewish, Christian, and Muslim seminarians called "the Emerging Religious Leaders Intensive (ERLI)."[3] When my colleagues are invited to lead a conversation about the conflict, we use the following approach. We send out a questionnaire before the meeting comprising of three questions: (1) Name one thing you know about the conflict with certainty; (2) Name one thing you understand about the conflict but might be wrong about; and (3) Name one thing you don't know about the conflict. This exercise produces three documents: one

2 International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), "Working Definition of Antisemitism," IHRA website, https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definition-antisemitism.

3 "Emerging Leaders in Training," Instituted for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies, https://icjs.org/emerging-religious-leaders/.

document with statements of (1) what we know, (2) don't know, (3) and are uncertain of, regarding the conflict. All the statements are anonymous and grouped accordingly. We sit in a circle and hand out one document. We start with document (3), statements of uncertainty, and move backward. Each of us takes a turn reading a statement from the sheet out loud. Sometimes we are forced to read something we disagree with. This is where we find opportunities to engage dialogically and respectfully. It's important to know the views in the room. It's important to know that each of us draws from different narratives and sources of information. It's important to know that each person's intention is genuine and motivated by ethical sensibilities. The goal is to create a space where people can learn from one another and to investigate their own intuitions and orientations to the world while also feeling supported and affirmed. The statements remain anonymous. It doesn't mean we all will agree. That never happens. However, the goal is for us to be more introspective.

Even before we started running this program, how people oriented to the Israel-Palestinian conflict was always the elephant in the room. People seemed more comfortable allowing for deep irreconcilable theological differences than they were listening to an opposing view of the conflict. For interreligious dialogue to be meaningful and transformational, we need to be able to discuss this conflict. Otherwise, all other conversations seem aesthetic, or worse, complicit in some form of violence. This remains a problem. If we must recognize pain everywhere, then how do we enter into dialogue with a sense of justice, truth, and reconciliation? How do we recognize the truth in all experiences? Where is the place for recognition, contrition, and truth if you and your people also feel hurt and pain? How do we share our vulnerability, when we're uncertain whether our vulnerability will be weaponized against us? How do we create a space to say the wrong thing? Very often in these conversations, participants experience what the Jewish philosopher of dialogue Martin Buber called a "mismeeting" (*Vergegnung*): A moment when people are unable to communicate fully.[4] It happens when a person hears something in a way that wasn't intended by the speaker. There are so many ways in which we speak past one another, that very often mismeetings create a sense of loneliness and even despair. In these meetings, someone inevitably says the wrong thing.

In most interpersonal encounters, dialogue is not purposeful: It happens. Dialogue is not always empathetic. Sometimes the other's feelings and experiences are beyond what we can imagine or have experienced ourselves.

4 Martin Buber, "Autobiographical Fragments," in *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, ed. Paul Arthur Schlipp and Maurice Friedman (Open Court Publishers, 1967), 4.

To be empathic is, in many ways, to project meaning on to others that may at times disaffirm the integrity of another's experience or way of being in the world. To be dialogical requires listening to another unfiltered and without interpretation, as if this voice was emerging from within one's own self. In dialogue, we should be able to listen to the other as a shared experience: I should be able to listen to the other in a dialogical encounter—participate in their experience and way of being in the world—without disaffirming or abandoning my own experience or lived realities.

Our First Challenge: Heresy

One major challenge in these settings is heresy. A heresy changes the way you perceive and encounter a person. Once the heresy is spoken or written, the heretic's behaviors, ideas, and opinions will always be interpreted as in service of that heresy. A heresy is an anathema to your own existence. It is not only an affront to your worldview, but to your values and ethical disposition. You will interpret the entirety of the heretic's life—past, present, and future—through this heresy. The person changes ontologically. Their heresy changes your orientation and relationship to that person. The heresy is discovered.

Compounding the problem, as Marianne Moyaert has recently argued, heresy is one form of religio-racial identity. Through a process called "religionization" in Europe, Moyaert has shown historically how Christians engaged in "co-dependent processes of 'selfing' and 'othering' that are predicated on religious difference."[5] This process is "akin to and intersects with notions like ethnicization, gendering, as racialization." Religionization allowed Christians to name, rename and classify their "others" though state and imperial power. In fact, since the second century the accusation of heresy, according to Moyaert, has been an important, and later violent, tool for many European Christians.[6]

Heresy is not simply a theological or interreligious issue, it is also ethical, political, and even cultural. "To complicate matters," according to John Inazu, "we also disagree over the nature of our disagreements."[7] I travel in progressive religious and political social and professional circles. There are

5 Marianne Moyaert, *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other: A History of Religionization* (John Wiley and Sons Ltd., 2024.), 1.

6 Moyaert, *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other*, 38–43.

7 John D. Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 1–13; See also Moyaert, *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other*, 297–330.

heresies in my groups. If someone in my orbit said something overtly racist or homophobic, they would have committed a heresy. The statement itself becomes an extension of that person's identity. They are now racist, or homophobic. However, the heresy itself belies a deeper truth: This is a person with whom we cannot dialogue, because we cannot trust their intentions. They are committed to this heresy. "What makes heresy all the more problematic," Moyaert writes, "is that it presents itself under the pretense of truth."[8] Thus, there is no impetus to dialogue with heretics.

Most argue, however, the fact of difference is essential to healthy and productive dialogue.[9] Heresy is inevitable. Universalism is helpful, but it is only part of the work. In my experience, people are far more tolerant and even comfortable with differences in theologies and worldviews than they are with opinions or ideologies about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, abortion access, or LGBTQ+ rights. But does difference always imply heresy? Possibly. We learn in these settings that people build boundaries around their views and identity. Belief and heresy operate entirely in a world within these boundaries. In some cases, dialogue disrupts those boundaries, in others it helps people see why the boundaries are there, and even important to those who preserve them. The question I often ask people during this program is to consider one's own boundaries: How do you preserve boundaries in your religious and political life? What am I willing to compromise to allow someone to inhabit my life? At this moment, are there certain issues or ideas that are completely untouchable in my relationship with others? What makes them untouchable? Can you remember changing your mind on an issue or an idea? Have there been experiences or encounters that have influenced you to see or live in the world differently?

We often remind our participants that they are courageous. This is incredibly difficult work. For example, do all boundaries get in the way of dialogue and genuine mutuality? Most of them understand that tolerance is a virtue in interreligious spaces, yet should we also be tolerant of intolerance? How does that work? The concept of tolerance in philosophy is

8 Moyaert, *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other*, 41.

9 Inazu, *Confident Pluralism*, xiii. He writes: "we need to acknowledge the fact of our differences, or what philosophers sometimes call the fact of pluralism. Recognizing the fact of pluralism does not mean that we think all differences are good. Pluralism is not relativism, and most of us are not relativists. Most of us believe that at least some of our differences matter. We hold some beliefs strongly enough to orient our lives around them. Because we believe the answers to some questions matter, and that they ultimately matter for everyone, we do not think that all differences are a good thing."

often elusive and, at times, replete with paradoxes and antinomies.[10] Dialogue around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in our program illustrates these problems: How does our dialogical obligation to the Other reconcile our civic responsibility to oppose what we perceive to be unethical and irresponsible beliefs, behaviors, or policies? In many cases, there is simply no middle path. Many of us are unable to tolerate bigotry, hatred, and violence. And while this is obviously not a problem in general, of course, it is *the* problem in conversations about this conflict. What happens when people start accusing each other of bigotry? What happens when there are examples of this bigotry in cases regarding people from a variety or religious and national backgrounds? What happens when each of us is guilty of some heresy? What happens when all heresy is perceived as bigotry?

Our Second Challenge: The Politics of Defining Antisemitism

While we have the tools to help people navigate these complicated and uncomfortable conversations, we run into the problem that the perception of heresy has taken a legal form with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) definition of antisemitism.[11]

Talking about the relationship between Zionism and antisemitism is complicated. For example, many people interpret Zionism differently, so we have a difficult time deciphering what people intend to say because we tend to interpret their use of the word according to our definition of it. A concrete definition of Zionism remains elusive, which allows those invested in the political future of Israel to provide procrustean solutions to wide-ranging political problems. For example, those who defend the application and actualization of Zionism in the current State of Israel argue that Zionism, broadly, is a national liberation movement for a historically diverse, dispersed, and persecuted ethnic-religious group returning home after millennia to their homeland. Critics of this movement view Zionism as a classic example of colonialism, which is a nationalist, racist ideology that encouraged widespread denial of rights and the expulsion of an indigenous population.

When it comes to criticizing Israel or Zionism, accusations of antisemitism abound. The academic and political rhetoric regarding these accusations can be vitriolic, confusing, and intimidating. Can one

10 David Heyd, "Introduction," *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 3.

11 IHRA, "Working Definition of Antisemitism."

simultaneously be committed to combating antisemitism while also believing Israel's policies in the West Bank, for example, are akin to apartheid, or believe the political ideology of Zionism today is racist? What about accusations of genocide in Gaza?[12] What if your critique of Israel is informed by theological points of view? Are all theological critiques supersessionist? The term "supersessionism" is standard fare in scholarly discourse regarding Jewish-Christian relations. It is an easy and not-so easy word to define.[13] It is sometimes referred to as "replacement theology."[14] More recently, it has also been associated with colonialism and White Supremacy.[15] The word itself denotes a particular theological move away

12 As early as October 13,2023, genocide studies scholars warned of the risk genocide in Gaza. See Raz Segal, "A Textbook case of Genocide," *Jewish Currents*, Oct 13, 2025 and A. Dirk Moses, "More than Genocide," *Boston Review*, Nov. 14, 2023. Since January, 2024, the *Journal of Genocide Research* has hosted a forum on Gaza, with over seventy scholars worldwide reflecting on the question of genocide. Today, there are scholars who are unequivocal. See, for example, Omer Bartov, "I'm a Genocide Scholar: I Know It When I See It," *New York Times*, July 15, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/15/opinion/israel-gaza-holocaust-genocide-palestinians.html.

13 See Moyaert, *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other*, 30–43; Amy-Jill Levine, "Supersessionism: Admit and Address Rather than Debate and Deny," *Religions* 13, no. 2 (2022): https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020155; Jesper Svartvik, "'I Have Come Not to Abolish, but to Fulfil': Reflections on Understanding Christianity as Fulfillment without Presupposing Supersessionism," *Religions* 13, no. 1 (2022): https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020149; David M. Neuhaus, "Where to from Here? Continuing Challenges in Jewish-Catholic Conversation," *Religions* 12, no. 11 (2022): https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12110929; David Novak, "Supersessionism Hard and Soft," *First Things*, February 1, 2019, https://firstthings.com/supersessionism-hard-and-soft/; R. Kendall Soulen, "Supersessionism," *Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. Edward Kessler and Neil Wenborn (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 413–14.

14 Eva Fleischner, "The Shoah and Jewish-Christian Relations," in *The Memory of Goodness: Eva Fleischner and her Contributions to Holocausts* Studies, ed. Carol Rittner and John K. Roth (Seton Hill University Press, 2022), 136.

15 See Colin Kidd, *The Forging of the Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000* (Cambridge University Press, 2006); J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford University Press, 2008); Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy: Christianity, Racism, and Religious Diversity in America* (Orbis, 2017); Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (Yale University Press, 2010); Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in* Belonging (William B. Eerdmans, 2020); Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (Simon & Schuster, 2020); Santiago Slabodsky, "It's the Theology Stupid! Coloniality, Anti-Blackness, and the Bounds of 'Humanity,'" in *Anti-Blackness and Christian Ethics*, ed. Vincent W. Lloyd and Andrew Prevot (Orbis, 2017), 19–40; M. Shawn Copeland, "White Supremacy and Anti-Black Logics in the Making of U.S. Catholicism," in *Anti-Blackness and Christian Ethics*, 19–40; Terence Keel, *Divine Variations: How Christian Thought Became*

from the Hebrew Bible (what Christians refer to as the "Old Testament") and the divine covenant with Jews toward a new divine covenant sealed with the messiahship of Jesus Christ. This new covenant superseded the old one. It also meant that the church superseded—indeed replaced—Judaism as God's favored people.[16] For some scholars, critiques of the state of Israel follow the same theological trajectory, that some critique is supersessionist, and thus antisemitic.[17] Michael G. Azar recently challenged this view and argued these accusations of supersessionism may have emerged as a polemical political device in debates about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and that the term itself was a neologism coined by the American Methodist theologian A. Roy Eckardt as a way to suggest that Christian critique of Israel was grounded in ancient anti-Judaism, rather than in a sense of justice or other political concerns.[18] It allowed supporters of the state of Israel to argue that Christian critique of Israel was supersessionist at best, and antisemitic at worst. Indeed, many efforts to define antisemitism consider what we can and cannot say about Israel. And, sadly, often fear of saying the wrong thing renders many people silent.

Kenneth S. Stern poignantly captures the predicament of this in the academy. In discussing the political ramifications of "The Antisemitism Awareness Act of 2016," Stern worried that the legislation would suppress free speech and academic freedom on campuses. "If the legislation passed,"

Racial Science (Stanford University Press, 2018); Khyati Y. Joshi, *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America* (New York University Press, 2020); Mark A. Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History* (Princeton University Press, 2008).

16 Eva Fleischner, "The Teaching of Contempt: The Origins of Christian Anti-Judaism," in *The Memory of Goodness*, 66–67. She writes: "In trying to find its identity, the church saw itself as the 'new' Israel, as the new people of God, which had inherited all the promises and privileges of the first people of God, the Jews. The church believed that the Jewish people had failed in its mission—namely, recognizing and welcoming the Messiah—and had therefore lost its claim to be the people of God. The church had taken their place . . . . This argument would have been more convincing if the Jewish people had disappeared, had ceased to exist, as was the case with so many peoples in the ancient world. But they did not disappear, despite the catastrophic destruction of the Roman wars. They not only continued to exist, but regained strength—the first Roman war was followed by the flowering of rabbinic Judaism—and the Jews continued to make converts."

17 See Adam Gregerman, "Old Wine in New Bottles, Liberation Theology and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 41, no. 2 (June 2004): 313–340. See also Adam Gregerman, "How the State of Israel Became 'the Jew' writ large," *Fathom*, Oct. 2024, https://fathomjournal.org/opinion-how-the-state-of-israel-became-the-jew-writ-large/.

18 See Michael G. Azar, "'Supersessionism': The Political Origins of a Theological Neologism," *Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations* 16, no.1 (2021): 1–25.

Stern wrote, "Jewish studies professors would be worried that they could not teach effectively. They knew that outside groups, including the ones that had brought the failed Title VI cases, would be looking over their shoulders, hunting for statements and assignments and programs and classroom room texts and invited speakers that they believed transgressed the definition [of antisemitism]. If your PhD is in nineteenth-century Jewish *shtetl* life, and you're going to get beat up for teaching about modern Israel, you'll likely choose to teach about older, less controversial, Jewish history instead."[19]

The problem is that the term "antisemitism" covers a wide range of views.[20] It could convey a simple, personal animus or prejudice against Jews or Judaism or be used as a justification for mass violence or genocide.[21] Do prejudice and advocating for genocide come from the same impulse? Does each person who assumes Jews are cheap or good with money also believe Jews should be eradicated? What about Israel? Is advocating for one state with equal rights for Jewish Israelis and Palestinians the same as advocating for violence or even genocide against Jews? Is advocating for Palestinian rights through slogans like "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" the same as advocating violence against Jews? There is not a simple answer to these questions, yet they inform how scholars work to provide a more nuanced, conceptual framework to address the problem of antisemitism.

Definitions are important. Most scholars of antisemitism recognize that the history and the politics of this phenomenon simply cannot be portrayed or understood by a single definition. Yet, legally, to prosecute hate crimes, we need concrete definitions. In a review of a recent book entitled *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism*,[22] Joshua Shanes outlined the salient issues of the debate over defining antisemitism.[23] The "real debate," he argues, is "not about the nature of antisemitism nor even about clearly conspiratorial anti-

19 Kenneth S. Stern, *The Conflict over the Conflict: The Israel/Palestine Campus Debate*, 165–66.

20 See Mark Mazower, *On Antisemitism: A Word in History* (Penguin Press, 2025).

21 See Ben Halpern, "What is Antisemitism?," *Modern Judaism* 1, no. 3 (1981): 251–62; David Berger, "Anti-Semitism: An Overview," in *History of Hate: The Dimensions of Antisemitism* (The Jewish Publication Society, 1986), 3–14; Wistrich, *The Longest Hatred*, xv–xxvi; Albert Lindemann, *Anti-Semitism Before the Holocaust* (Routledge, 2000), 8–12; Dina Porat and Kenneth S. Stern, "Defining Antisemitism," *Antisemitism Worldwide* (2003/4): 5–28.

22 Sol Goldberg, Scott Ury, Kalman Weiser (eds.), *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave-Macmillian, 2021).

23 Sol Goldberg, Scott Ury, Kalman Weiser, eds., *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism* (Palgrave-Macmillian, 2021); Joshua Shanes, "The Politics of Defining Antisemitism," *Shofar* 40, no. 3 (2022): 188–198.

Zionist rhetoric." Rather, "it is about anti-Zionist rhetoric that is *not* connected to antisemitic mythology."[24] Indeed, as Scott Ury points out in the book, most debates about defining antisemitism today in fact are about its relationship to Zionism and Israel.[25] People seem to agree on everything else. At the center of the debate is the implementation of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism into policy and law. Even more specifically, it regards several examples of antisemitism in this definition that equate anti-Zionism with antisemitism, as we will examine below.

In 2016, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) released a "working definition" of antisemitism. Here's the definition:

> Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.[26]

Those who researched and drafted the definition at the IHRA did not intend for it to be used to develop legislation or even to be implemented as a template to determine hate speech. Kenneth S. Stern, the "definition's lead drafter," wrote that the IHRA definition was "written in 2004 for European data collectors," and was wary of efforts to "abuse" this definition in ways it was not intended.[27] Stern stressed that this definition was not meant to be used as a political device to silence critics of the State of Israel, nor to intimidate them. "Despite the fact that some of the contemporary anti-Israel rhetoric is antisemitic," he wrote, "adoption of this definition would paint with much too broad a brush."[28] Despite Stern's reservations and concerns about the adoption of this definition as policy, and in some cases as law, the United States is moving closer to doing both. In 2019, Stern advocated against the proposed "Antisemitism Awareness Act" and then-President

24 Shanes, "The Politics of Defining Antisemitism," 189–190.
25 Scott Ury, "Zionism," in *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism*, ed. Goldberg, et al., 288–92.
26 IHRA, "Working Definition of Antisemitism."
27 Kenneth S. Stern, *The Conflict Over the Conflict: The Israel/Palestine Debate*, 11.
28 Stern, *The Conflict Over the Conflict*, 170.

Trump's executive order adopting the IHRA definition to prosecute Title VI offenses.[29] Stern wrote:

> Title VI does not, and should not, prohibit antisemitic expression. Campuses should make sure that none of their students—Jews and non-Jews, pro-Israel and anti-Israel—is the victim of pervasive intimidation or harassment. That's quite different from protecting them from hearing unpleasant, and even bigoted ideas.[30]

This is an important criterion even in interreligious contexts. When do unreasonable critiques or assertions become bigoted statements or hate speech? Definitions should be a way to clarify these matters.

Interestingly, the definition itself was not initially controversial, although several scholars found it cumbersome. In one report, the director of the London Birkbeck Institute for the Study of Antisemitism, David Feldman, found it "bewilderingly imprecise."[31] The immediate problem had to do with language in the first part: what is the word "perception" doing in this definition? Is the "perception" what is "expressed as hatred toward Jews"? As many scholars have already pointed out, this emphasis on perception places most of the attention on the perceived antisemitic caricatures and stereotypes of Jews: In other words, how a Jew is perceived. The focus here is on intention. Yet proving intention is complicated. It always requires context. This is the problem that Stern is alluding to here. While the second part of the definition is a littler clearer—"Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities"—it still requires readers to figure out the "perception," especially since the language includes non-Jews and their property, in order for the second part to make sense. However, what makes the definition controversial is the examples that best conveyed and characterized this definition. Of the eleven examples provided, seven focused on Israel. Of the seven, three have been singled out as highly problematic:

29 "Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964" sets the standard for nondiscrimination in federally assisted programs. See Civil Rights Division, US Department of Justice website, last updated March 24, 2025, https://www.justice.gov/crt/fcs/TitleVI#1.

30 Kenneth S. Stern, *The Conflict Over the Conflict*, 170.

31 David Feldman, "Will Britain's New Definition of Antisemitism Help Jewish People? I'm Skeptical," *The Guardian*, December 28, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/28/britain-definition-antisemitism-british-jews-jewish-people.

1. "Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is racist endeavor."
2. "Applying double standards by requiring of [Israel] a behaviour not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation."
3. "Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis."

The first two examples here—the claim against Israel as a racist state and the application of Natan Sharansky's rule on double standards— are very difficult to adjudicate.[32] Both require more context. The third, however, is simply confusing. Both Israelis and Palestinians accuse one another of Nazism. Israelis accuse other Israelis of being Nazis. Israelis often argue the policies of their political opponents are akin to Nazism. In early 2005, for example, when the Knesset approved the Disengagement Plan Implementation Law to relocate eight thousand Jewish-Israeli settlers out of Gaza, opponents to this law in Gush Katif protested by wearing yellow stars of David. They even claimed that Gaza was *Judenfrei.* Recently, Israeli delegates at the UN wore those stars to protest the UN's criticism of Israel's military action in Gaza. At the same time, Riyad al-Maliki, the Foreign Affairs Minister of the Palestinian National Authority, argued that it was in fact the Israelis who are killing and forcibly displacing Palestinians. The basic problem with Nazi comparisons is that *reductio ad Hitlerum* can go on *ad infinitum*. This is a problem worldwide. Famously, the American attorney Michael Godwin suggested that such comparisons often lead to absurd observations or conclusions. Using a probability model, Godwin observed that "as an online discussion continues, the probability of a comparison to

32 On Sharansky see "Foreword," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 16, nos. 3-4 (Fall 2004): 5–6. In 2004, in the foreword to an issue of *Jewish Political Studies Review* exploring antisemitism, Sharansky, the famed Soviet dissident and Israeli politician, argued that the "new anti-Semitism"—where Israel becomes the collective Jew—"can hide behind the veneer of legitimate criticism of Israel." His three Ds—demonization, double standards, delegitimization—were tests designed to expose the antisemitic animus behind certain critiques of Israel. When "Israel's actions are blown out of all sensible proportion," such as in comparisons of its policies to that of Nazism, or "when Israel is singled out by the United Nations for human rights abuses while the behavior of known major abusers, such as China, Iran, Cuba, and Syria, is ignored, or "when Israel's fundamental right to exist is denied," then the critique of Israel, according to Sharansky, is antisemitic. Also see David N. Myers, "Yes. Palestinians Have the Right to Speak About Antisemitism," *Forward*, Dec. 4, 2020: https://forward.com/opinion/459654/yes-palestinians-have-the-right-to-speak-about -antisemitism/

Hitler or to Nazis approaches one." [33] Because of our polarized environment, it is almost inevitable one side will accuse the other of Nazism. This happens online. It also happens in parliaments and governments. It happens in local and national politics. Sadly, these comparisons are simply common in most public and private discourse. While Godwin's Law "still serves us as a tool to recognize specious comparisons to Nazism," Godwin wrote, he did not assert that all comparisons to Nazism are *prima facie* wrong, but rather "by contrast, to recognize comparisons that aren't."[34] Such comparisons in certain cases can be useful. Regardless, given the ubiquity of such comparisons in so many political contexts, how can a definition of antisemitism assert unequivocally that all comparisons of Nazism to Israel's policies are *a priori* antisemitic? This is why critics of the IHRA working definition of antisemitism argue that it is ambiguous, inconsistent, and even incoherent.

This takes us back to the problem of the word "perception." So, when a journalist writes that Itamar Ben-Gvir, Israel's Minister of National Security, might be the "Jewish Hitler," is this suggestion antisemitic?[35] Ben-Gvir is famous for calling Baruch Goldstein, a Jewish-Israeli terrorist who murdered 29 Muslim worshippers in 1994, "a hero."[36] He is also famous for distributing manipulated images of then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin wearing an SS uniform. These images appeared and were celebrated a month before the prime minister was assassinated. Ben-Gvir was protesting Israel's policies. He called the sitting Prime Minister a Nazi. The journalist asserted that Ben-Gvir's rhetoric played a role in Rabin's assassination, and whose current policies are deemed discriminatory and inflammatory, which makes him a Jewish Hitler. Who is antisemitic here? To answer by using the IHRA definition, we need to discern the intentions of the accused, not the actual statements, or even the actions related to those statements. In the case of Ben-Gvir, many have seen a connection to his political speech—comparing Rabin to Nazism—and the political rhetoric and violence that may have inspired his murder.[37] Again, is it appropriate to assert that Ben-

33 Mike Godwin, "Do We Need to Update Godwin's Law About the Probability Of Comparison to Nazis?" *The Los Angeles Times*, June 24, 2018, https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-godwin-godwins-law-20180624-story.html.

34 Godwin, "Do We Need to Update Godwin's Law."

35 Uriel Abulof, "Have I Just Met the Jewish Hitler?" *Washington Monthly*, November 25, 2022, https://washingtonmonthly.com/2022/11/25/have-i-just-met-the-jewish-hitler/.

36 Abulof, "Have I Just Met the Jewish Hilter?"

37 Doron Weber, "They Incited Rabin's Murder. Now They're Murdering Israel's Democracy," Op-ed, *Haaretz*, July 9, 2023, https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/

Gvir engaged in antisemitic critique that inspired the murder of a prominent Jewish leader? And, what about the journalist? Is calling a Jewish-Israeli who supports violence and ethnic cleansing a Nazi antisemitic?

And, what about accusations of genocide? If comparisons to Nazism are antisemitic, then what does that do about such accusations against the state of Israel. In December of 2023, the country of South Africa brought up charges of genocide against Israel in the International Court of Justice. Early in 2024, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Michael Fakhri also accused Israel of committing genocide against the Palestinian people in Gaza.[38] For many critics of Israel, the accusation itself seems to be enough to merit the conviction. Even though it could take years to convict Israel, or any country for that matter, of committing genocide, often you see and hear slogans to stop Israel's genocide against Palestinians. Activists have even called former President Joe Biden "Genocide Joe" for continuing to send to Israel US weapons and technologies designed to kill civilians. Support for Israel through this practice, for many activists, is akin to supporting genocide. We can debate the merits of these accusations. Yet many are suggesting, using the IHRA definition, that these rhetorical moves and strategies are antisemitic.[39] However, we run into the same problem with Ben-Gvir above: How can we determine a critic's "perception" of Jews and the intention of critique? What if many well-intended, well-informed people see evidence of genocide in Gaza?[40]

Again, intention and context matters. Scholars, judges, and lawyers from all sides of the debate are arguing the merits of the accusations of genocide. Many agree, some do not. There are several Jewish-Israeli genocide scholars who are arguing that the accusation is legitimate. There are many ways to offer the same accusation, yet can they all be *a priori* antisemitic? These

2023-07-09/ty-article-opinion/.premium/they-incited-rabins-murder-now-theyre-murdering-israels-democracy/00000189-3a5f-da0e-a59b-bb7f1fc30000

38 Nina Lakhani, " Israel is Deliberately Starving Palestinians, UN Rights Experts Say," *The Guardian*, February 27, 2024, https://web.archive.org/web/20240228041844/https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/27/un-israel-food-starvation-palestinians-war-crime-genocide.

39 Frida Ghitis, "The Antisemitic Lie at the Heart of Too Many Campus Protests," *CNN*, May 7, 2024, https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/07/opinions/columbia-university-israel-campus-protests-antisemitism-ghitis/index.html.

40 Omer Bartov, "As a Former IDF Soldier and Historian of Genocide, I Was Deeply Disturbed By My Recent Visit to Israel," *The Guardian*, August 13, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/13/israel-gaza-historian-omer-bartov; Omer Bartov, "I'm a Genocide Scholar: I Know It When I See It," *New York Times*, July 15, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/15/opinion/israel-gaza-holocaust-genocide-palestinians.html.

debates, in addition, are having a direct and significant impact on people's lives: They are part of a deliberate attempt to suppress critique. Raz Segal, for example, a Jewish-Israeli scholar of the Holocaust and Genocide studies, had his job offer rescinded at the University of Minnesota for suggesting that Israel was committing genocide in Gaza.[41]

Many trainings in anti-racism seek to separate statements from individuals. When someone says something racist, a trained anti-racist responds by focusing on the statement, not on a person's being. You are not attacking the person, but rather criticizing the idea. To call a statement racist is very different from calling a person racist. Ideas can change and people have a right to not always be conflated with their ideas. People who desire not to be racist need to account for how racism in the United States informed their worldviews and ideas. Many of us need to "own" our racism if we are to be liberated from it.[42] We need to know what is shackling us ideologically. The problem with the IHRA definition of antisemitism is that it reverses the process. Before we can identify a statement or activity that is antisemitic, we need to discern intention, i.e., a certain "perception" the person has about Jews.

And, we run into another important problem. According to the IHRA definition of antisemitism, what recourse is there for Palestinians and their advocates? Some are arguing that the IHRA definition of antisemitism is being weaponized to quell pro-Palestinian positions. Why should those who support the state of Israel and its policies determine what is an acceptable and unacceptable critique of it? This is unusual and may even be an unprecedented double standard, since it would be difficult to imagine people crafting policies and laws that determine what is and is not acceptable criticisms of Iran or Saudi Arabia within the confines of Islamophobia. There is now a growing fear among scholars, lawyers, and activists that if the IHRA definition of antisemitism becomes law, then advocacy for Palestinian rights and liberation, whether through the BDS movement or any run-of-the-mill activism, would be regulated and legally sanctioned.[43] Indeed, as more and more states and municipalities incorporate the IHRA's definition of antisemitism, the more likely it's becoming a reality that advocacy for

41 Maggie Hicks, "A Holocaust Scholar Called Israel's Actions in Gaza 'Genocide.' It Cost Him a Job Offer," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 17, 2024, https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-holocaust-scholar-called-israels-actions-in-palestine-genocide-it-cost-him-a-job-offer.

42 Robin Diangelo, White Fragility: Why It's so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism (Beacon Press, 2018), 145.

43 Atalia Omer, "A Subversive Pedagogy for Teaching Palestine/Israel," *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 49 (2026): 38–70.

Palestinians will be prosecuted as a hate crime. For example, in Arizona, when "antisemitism as defined by the IHRA" becomes law, "a pro-Palestinian protester" in the state could be "swept up and arrested by police, eligible for hate crimes for carrying a Palestinian flag."[44] And, we run into another unfortunate irony: This was not the intention of those who drafted the definition. Yet it is impacting what people can and cannot say about Israel.[45] This makes the work of interreligious dialogue even more difficult.

Our Third Challenge: Project Esther

People are not just using the IHRA Definition of Antisemitism to silence dissent. Published on October 7, 2024 within the conservative Heritage Foundations *Project 2025*, which seeks to reshape the American Federal government to be more amenable to a right-winged agenda, is *Project Esther: A National Strategy to Combat Antisemitism*.[46] According to the *New York Times*, as of May 2025, the Trump Administration has acted on more the half the proposals.[47] The strategy is clear and simple: It seeks to link antisemitism to anti-Zionism, anti-Americanism, and solidarity with Palestinian liberation.[48] The executive summary of the document states:

> America's virulently anti-Israel, anti-Zionist, and anti-American "pro-Palestinian movement" is part of a global Hamas Support Network (HSN) that is trying to compel the U.S. government to abandon its long-standing support for Israel. Supported by activists and funders dedicated to the destruction of capitalism and democracy, the HSN benefits from the support and training of

44 Isaac Scher, "Three States Push to Curb Palestinian Activism," *Jewish Currents*, April 26, 2022.

45 For a helpful guide on navigating this issue, see Rabbi Jill Jacobs, "Criticism of Israel and Antisemitism: How to Tell Where One Ends and the Other Begins," *T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights* website, published 2024, https://truah.org/resources/criticism-of-israel-and-antisemitism-how-to-tell-where-one-ends-and-the-other-begins/.

46 The Heritage Foundation, "Project Esther: A National Strategy to Combat Antisemitism," published October 7, 2024, https://www.heritage.org/progressivism/report/project-esther-national-strategy-combat-antisemitism.

47 See Katie J.M. Baker, "The Group Behind Project 2025 Has a Plan to Crush the Pro-Palestinian Movement," *The New York Times*, May 18, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/18/us/project-esther-heritage-foundation-palestine.html.

48 The name Esther evokes the Jewish heroine of the book of Esther in the Hebrew Bible who defeats the ancient Persians. One goal of the Esther project is to defeat the modern Persians in Iran.

> America's overseas enemies and seeks to achieve its goals by taking advantage of our open society, corrupting our education system, leveraging the American media, coopting the federal government, and relying on the American Jewish community's complacency. The National Task Force to Combat Antisemitism intends to enlist all willing and able partners in a coordinated effort to combat the scourge of antisemitism in the United States.[49]

Assumed in this strategy is that fighting antisemitism is part of a larger fight against a global Hamas support network (HSN) which works with progressives to dismantle both the United States and the State of Israel. To be antisemitic, then, is to be part of a civilizational battle against democracy and an open free society. The goal is to make antisemitism akin to terrorism, which is a national security threat. If supporting Palestinian liberation is understood as antisemitic, then it is also understood as supporting terrorism. This is how the administration is trying to deport academics like Mahmoud Khalil, Mohsen Mahdawi, Yunseo Chung, Rumeysa Izturk, and Badar Khan Suri.[50] It has been successful in deporting others.[51] *Project Esther* is weaponizing antisemitism to deport people who support Palestinian liberation.

In addition to the troubling policies associated with this strategy, when compared to common antisemitic conspiracy theories the strategy itself sounds antisemitic. In fact, the strategy is to employ antisemitic tropes and stereotypes in how it weaponizes accusations of antisemitism. It is insidious. It was written by three Chrisian Zionists and included a Jewish author later.[52] Re-reading the executive summary of the document, considering the comparison, the strategy to combat antisemitism itself sounds antisemitic. For example, if we replaced HSN with the word "Jew," imagine how this document would sound: Jews seeking to destroy our society and economy by running universities and corrupting our education system, by controlling the

49 Heritage Foundation, "Project Esther."

50 Josh Gerstein and Kyle Cheney, "Trump's Effort to Deport Pro-Palestinian Activists Goes to Trial," *Politico*, July 6, 2025, https://www.politico.com/news/2025/07/06/trump-effort-deport-pro-palestinian-activists-trial-00439997.

51 Max Matza, "US Arrests Second Pro-Palestinian Columbia University Protester," *BBC News,* March 14, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c3rnzp4ye5zo.

52 Katie J.M. Baker, "The Group Behind Project 2025 Has a Plan to Crush the Pro-Palestinian Movement," *The New York Times*, May 18, 2025. The Christian Zionist movement has deep roots in American Christian culture, which includes a complicated, and at times, troubling mythologizing or even stereotyping of Jews. See Robert O. Smith, *More Desired than Our Owne Salvation: The Roots of Christian Zionism* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

media, entertainment, and through a global network intent on destroying our civilizational values. What is more disturbing, though, is that the document itself blames Jews for the HSN! Firstly, it blames "American Jewish communities' complacency." Secondly, this nefarious network is funded by eight masterminds, including three prominent Jews, such as George Soros, Alex Soros, and JB Pritzker. Jews are part of this HSN ecosystem like Senator Bernie Sanders. These conspiracy theories have always inspired violence and have a common source.[53] Using antisemitic tropes to combat antisemitism in the service of silencing pro-Palestinian advocacy is antithetical to all interreligious work.

Parting Thoughts

Here is our current existential situation. Our interreligious spaces must be open to the above conversations to be honest and effective. However, we run into two major problems. The first is if the IHRA definition becomes federal law, then the above commentary becomes "illegal." The second is just as dire. Rep. David Kustoff of Tennessee introduced Bill H.R. 6408 "To

53 A hoax and a forgery detailing an insidious Jewish plot for world domination, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is unquestionably the modern world's most influential work of antisemitism. First produced in Russia in 1903, the work itself has been translated into numerous languages and distributed globally. Despite being exposed as a fraud by British and German newspapers in the early 1920s, German teachers assigned the work to their students, and it was widely read and studied throughout Nazi Germany (See Binjamin W. Segel, *Lie and a Libel: The History of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, trans. Richard S. Levy [University of Nebraska Press, 1995]). Stephen Eric Bronner offers a poignant summary of this text in the introduction to his study of it: "*The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* is probably the most influential work of antisemitism ever written. It consists of the supposed minutes from 24 sessions of a congress held by representatives from the 'twelve tribes of Israel' and led by a Grand Rabbi, whose purpose was to plan the conquest of the world. This congress never took place. The pamphlet is actually a crude forgery created by the Okhrana, or secret police, of Imperial Russia. It first appeared in 1903 and incorporates many of the most vicious myths about the Jews handed down over the centuries. Used initially to blame Jews and their supposedly servile allies, the Freemasons, for the 1905 revolution in Russia, the *Protocols* would be a welcome export around the world. If not simple hatred, then pogroms, and if not pogroms, then even worse, followed in its wake. It was applauded by royalty, it was embraced by counterrevolutionaries, and the Nazis made it required reading. It still serves as a staple for numerous fundamentalist, conservative, neofascist, and antisemitic groups in the United States and throughout the world." "Indeed," he continued, "what the *Communist Manifesto* is for Marxism, the fictitious *Protocols* is for antisemitism" (Stephen Eric Bronner, *A Rumor About the Jews: Conspiracy, Anti-Semitism, and the Protocols of the Zion*, 2nd ed. [Palgrave Macmillan, 2019], 1).

Amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to Terminate the Tax-Exempt Status of Terrorist Supporting Organizations" which allows the Secretary of the Treasury to strip 501(c)(3) status of organizations without due process. While it did not pass in the Senate in the Spring of 2025, it remains a threat. If the law is used to claim interreligious programs promote antisemitism, then the Secretary of the Treasury can end interreligious organizations with the stroke of a pen. As I mentioned above, we cannot do our work honestly or effectively without creating a space for people to be critical of Israel and of Zionism, or to see what has happened in Gaza as a genocide. In this way, the US may become more like contemporary Germany. Eyal Weizman, a Jewish-Israeli architect living in Germany, reports of the strange situation of being lectured "by the children and grandchildren of the perpetrators who murdered our families and who now dare to tell us that we are antisemitic."[54] So, to return to our program mentioned in the first part of the paper, we thought that keeping comments anonymous serves a pedagogical value in our dialogical settings, but now we recognize it is essential for the safety of us and our participants.

Building a culture of dialogue is based not on the sophistical skill of making one's opinion or worldview prevail over others, but rather on the dialectical skill of engaging in a joint search for truth. It should provide a language/discourse with which people can communicate even if they do not accept each other's religious commitments. Dialogue is not a means to an end. It does not have an objective. A dialogical encounter considers conventions in language, as well as the moral virtues informing each individual. Thus, it is difficult to teach dialogue transactionally since one does not become an expert in it.[55] We are not imparting knowledge in an objective manner. Those who are open to dialogical encounters do their best to address their own prejudices and worldviews in conversation. They also do their best to share their orientation to the world while listening patiently to the views of others. Disagreements are part of the dialogical experience. However, they should serve for more honest self-reflection. The dialogical space is not where you go to win an argument. Ideally a dialogical encounter provides us with an opportunity to glimpse into a realm that transcends personal ambition or ideological conviction, but rather can meet the needs of my interreligious other. Such efforts help people not only become cognizant of the values and commitments informing their identities, but also

54 George Prochnik, Eyal Weizman, and Emily Dische-Becker, "Once Again, Germany Defines Who is a Jew: Part I," *Granta* 165, November 23, 2023, https://granta.com/once-again-germany-defines-who-is-a-jew-part-i/.

55 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (The Seabury Press, 1968), 57–74.

those of their interlocutors. They also help people realize that their values and commitments are more fluid and dynamic, always moving, which helps them appreciate, and even at times, empathize with others.

To conclude: "Genuine dialogue," wrote the Catholic theologian Eva Fleischner, "implies a dialectical relationship which is characterized by mutual respect, partnership and equality, freedom, willingness to listen to hear others, see them as they are, challenge them and be challenged in turn with whatever risk this may entail."[56] Risk here always implies danger. For Fleischner, this danger should play more of an active role in our dialogue. We can be fearful, but let us not be afraid. Dialogue may be able to still offer hope, but as she reminds us, it should not come at the expense of this danger. Hate is real. Our participants must find a dialogical way to live in between conflicting emotions, forever oscillating between hope and fear. Our participants need to be deeply attuned to this reality, a world replete with divergent passions. Commenting on the Enlightenment German-Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, the German-Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig wrote that these passions represent "a danger we embrace with love," one "we would not wish to miss."[57] Love, like the feeling of danger, can be unpredictable and impossible to control. Both dialogue and love can be dangerous, yet who would want to live in a world without them? In conclusion, to be in dialogue at this very moment in our programs is to live a spiritual life precisely in that liminal space between fear and hope—the space in-between people, in-between worldviews, and in-between experiences—so that one may, in the words of the Psalmist, "be strong and of good courage" (Psalm 27:14).

In sum, you might be asking: Has any of this actually happened? I'm not sure. Also, I know there is no metric to measure this type of growth. However, people still attend our programs, join our fellowships, and donate to our work. I continue to remind them that they are courageous, that their feelings of fear are genuine and well founded, and that I admire their determination to remain with others whose views are fundamentally at odds with their own. And, as turns out, such a dialogical orientation to the world is now a conscious act of political resistance.

56 Eva Fleischner, *Judaism in German Christian Theology Since 1945: Christianity and Israel Considered in Terms of Mission* (Scarecrow Press, 1975), 105.

57 Franz Rosenzweig, "Vorspruch zu einer Mendelssohnfeier," *Zweistromland: Kleinere Schriften zu Glauben und Denken*, ed. Reinhold und Annemarie Meyer (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1984), 457.

Benjamin E. Sax *is the Head of Scholarship and the Jewish Scholar at the Institute for Islamic, Christian, Jewish Studies in Baltimore. He is the author of the forthcoming book* Encounters: Dialogue, Antisemitism, and the Israeli-Palestinian Divide (Bloomsbury, 2026).

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INVITED SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

Teaching Israel/Palestine When the Stakes are Highest

Liora R. Halperin

Abstract
This article explores the challenges of teaching Israel/Palestine in a moment of extreme violence, political polarization, and constraints on academic freedom. Drawing on a family history that traverses both Palestinian and Israeli narratives, it argues that pedagogy must foreground the coexistence of multiple, entangled histories while confronting deep asymmetries of power, sovereignty, and historical erasure. The author advocates teaching Israel/Palestine as a connected field shaped by competing narratives rather than isolated national histories. Through classroom practices—contrasting historical starting points, role-playing diverse actors, and analyzing activist organizations—students learn to represent multiple perspectives and assess their stakes. The article ultimately calls for a pedagogy that is transparent about its choices, attentive to marginalized histories, especially Palestinian experiences, and committed to intellectual rigor, ethical awareness, and critical engagement.

Keywords
Israel, Palestine, pedagogy, historiography, Jewish Studies

My great grandfather Moshe Yaakovzon was born in Ottoman Palestine in 1889. His father, Yehoshua, was also born in Palestine, and his grandfather, Yaakov, arrived there as a child in the 1810s and was buried in Hebron in 1874. His family appeared in both Ottoman and European Jewish census documents, held Ottoman citizenship, and were proficient in spoken Arabic. My great-grandfather and his sister left Palestine before World War I and resettled in the Northeastern US, arriving there with Ottoman nationality

documents. Their father and four other siblings stayed and were buried in Jerusalem, most on the Mount of Olives. By any measure, they were among Palestine's native Jews, present in the land nearly a century before the Zionist movement. They were also Ashkenazi, spoke Yiddish at home, and wore clothing that would have clearly distinguished their European origins and religious practice. They would have never claimed to have been "Arab Jews." Like Jews from Hungary, Iraq, Syria, and the Caucasus, they would have identified themselves by their families' places of origin outside of Palestine and simultaneously regarded the Land of Israel as the holiest place they could live. My family story is, nonetheless, Palestinian. Palestine has always been a multiethnic place, and my great-grandfather's Ottoman Ashkenazi family was part of that fabric.

With time, however, my family story became an Israeli one, and not only in the sense that those who remained became Israeli citizens. My great-grandfather came to consider himself a Zionist and strong Israel supporter. He remained in touch with the siblings who stayed in Israel, some of whom had moved to agricultural colonies that became part of the structures of Zionist settlement. In a letter to his oldest grandchild, he later wrote that he had included a provision in his will for the education of his grandchildren which would be increased for "anyone willing to study in Israel," whose "truly Jewish atmosphere" provides unparalleled opportunity "to learn about and continue in Jewish lore." These were not only religious commitments but political stances. In an April 1944 letter to US Secretary of War Henry L. Stimpson, he wrote, "Being a native of Palestine, and having lived and worked with Arabs, I believe that I have had ample opportunity to learn of their mentality and manners"—and he used the credibility of his nativeness to discount Arab concerns and subjectivity: "They have enjoyed and fully appreciated the coming of the Jews into Palestine," he asserted, and "decisive and arbitrary treatment has often proved to be the best method in dealing with the Arabs."[1] If he was part of the history of Palestine, he became—through his biography and his commitments—part of the story of an Israel constituted in part through "decisive and arbitrary treatment" towards Palestinians.

I can share different parts of this story, the Palestinian-coded and the Israeli-coded, the pre/non-Zionist and the Zionist, depending on what sort of political commitments I want to stress and how I want to position myself biographically in a field where personal stories so often provide the linchpin for claims-making. What is true of my great grandfather in miniature has

1 Letter from M.E. Jacobson to Henry L. Stimpson, April 10, 1944, family archive.

also been true of much of the pedagogy of Israel/Palestine. There are multiple intersecting stories, some of them surprising in their complexity. We who design syllabi must do so in full awareness of the stakes of our choices—and make students aware of those stakes.

I am writing in deeply perilous times, when a genocide continues to unfold, despite a nominal ceasefire in a bisected and blockaded Gaza, the Middle East is gripped by a regional war with global implications, and institutions of higher education in the US are under multiple threats, as are many of their most vulnerable students and staff.

What does it mean to teach Israel/Palestine when certain academic content may be officially forbidden and when those calling attention to the Palestinian experience may be harassed disciplined or even deported, sometimes aided by Zionist organizations who want to turn names over to ICE in the name of "protecting Jewish safety"?[2] At the same time, how do we refuse the demonization of all Israelis amidst pro-justice and anti-genocide activism? How, moreover, do we insist on maintaining interest in the layers of Jewish experiences as part of our commitment to justice?

Questions at the core of Israel/Palestine studies tap into some of our most probing and longstanding debates in the humanities and social sciences. Over the course of modern Western history, the figure of "the Jew" so often became the axis around which questions of citizenship, inclusion, colonial violence, and capitalism were negotiated: not only when Jews were excluded and subjected to violence, but also when the Jew was included and held up as proof of liberal values or aided as a humanitarian cause.[3] Today, the "Jew" as a figure has taken on ever further layers of signification, both by admirers and antisemites. Israel, as the self-proclaimed representative of the Jewish people, can oscillate between the figure of the Jew with power (in antisemitic discourse) and the eternal Jewish victim attacked by the nations (in some Jewish communal discourse).

But over decades of global interest in the region, the "Palestinian" has become as multivalent a cypher. In parts of the political Right, the

2 Anna Betts, "Pro-Israel Group Says It has 'Deportation List' and has Sent 'Thousands' of Names to Trump Officials," *The Guardian,* March 14, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/14/israel-betar-deportation-list-trump.

3 Maurice Samuels, *The Right to Difference: French Universalism and the Jews* (The University of Chicago Press, 2016); David Jan Sorkin, *Jewish Emancipation: A History across Five Centuries* (Princeton University Press, 2019); Jonathan Karp, *The Politics of Jewish Commerce: Economic Thought and Emancipation in Europe, 1638–1848* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Palestinian (or Arab, or Muslim) is posited as the force that will bring down Western civilization if it or its supporters are not kept in check, expelled, or murdered "if necessary." In some liberal circles, the Palestinian functions as an object of pity, humanitarian intervention, and the target of white savior ethos. For anti-imperialist leftists, Palestinians are the symbols of *sumud*, Palestinian steadfastness on the land, those who, like Jews in a different era, are persecuted from all sides but nonetheless survive and hold fast. "The Arab and the Jewish Question," write Bashir Bashir and Leila Farsakh in their edited volume of the same name, "are not only entangled, but also belong to the same history."[4] And it's a history that also stretches to the histories of Arab and Muslim communities in Europe, Jews in the Middle East, and both communities as minorities in the West. The Israel/Palestine question is wrapped up in all these dynamics.

Some of us were trained to teach about Israel/Palestine. Perhaps we came to the subject because we already had one of the relevant languages. For some of us this field is on the periphery of what we were trained to do but we have built up our competencies over the years because of clear interest on the part of our colleagues and students. Insofar as we teach Israel/Palestine (as opposed to "Israel" or "Palestine"), however, we have accepted that there are two intertwined objects of analysis, whether we or our students like it or not.

Using an Israel/Palestine framing in our teaching communicates, on its face, that our subject encompasses two ethnonational projects, two different nationalist conceptions of the land, two sets of claims, in other words, "both sides." We also know that there is something unstable in that slash, something beyond the object of study being "double" or "dual." And that something is profound asymmetry along multiple axes. For their supporters, Palestinians have become transnational symbols of hope amidst dispossession. Zionism, too, was premised on hope—*Hatikva*, "the hope," is its anthem. But it became, to great celebration, hope-made-sovereignty through settlement and dispossession. Thus, overtime, a hope not to gain something transformed into a hope not to lose something already gained.

The shock and brutality of October 7 only supercharged a preexisting Israeli fear of loss, rooted in generations of experience of political violence on a smaller scale. Palestine, meanwhile, is in an ever-lengthening non-/pre-statehood era marked by ever greater precarity in the face of settler attacks, travel restrictions, and blockade. If the most widespread Israeli

4 Bashir Bashir and Leila Farsakh, eds., *The Arab and Jewish Questions: Geographies of Engagement in Palestine and Beyond* (Columbia University Press, 2020), 2.

counterfactual is "safety," "quiet" and "back to normal," the Palestinian counterfactual is a totally transformed reality. These are intertwined stories—but they are asymmetrically intertwined.

The asymmetry also lies in the potential for erasure of the other: most Palestinian narratives about who is a Palestinian include historical Jews as part of a multiethnic society. Some might emphasize the "nativeness" of Jews like my great-grandfather in order to separate "these Jews" from "those other" (Zionist) Jews, thus insisting on a Jewish history (and thus future) beyond Zionism but not beyond Jews. Like other historical Arab nationalisms that conceived of a multireligious society united by culture and territorial cohabitation, Palestinian nationalism has secular multireligious and pluralistic strains that, while submerged, are available to be rehabilitated.[5]

Palestinians do not and structurally cannot play an analogous role in Israeli narrative. Their presence as a minority may be acknowledged or even accommodated in some Zionist visions, but while (some) Jews are part of the Palestinian historical imaginary, the Jewish concept of the Land of Israel, rooted in biblical text, does not include non-Jews except as outside aggressors or ethnic Others. Though Zionists always assumed that some Palestinians, usually conceptualized solely as "Arabs," would be present as a separate national group or minority, no Zionist vision, including non-statist or bi-nationalist ones, saw non-Jews as full members of the ethno-nation itself

When Palestine was under British mandate rule between 1923 and 1948, Jews, including Zionists, referred to the land as Palestine when speaking in English or European languages and even called for Palestine to be free, in those words. But, viewed in retrospect, these mandate-era Zionist calls for a "Free Palestine" were calls for a "Palestine-free Palestine," a Palestine that would become free by becoming no longer Palestine.

The displacement of Palestinians, conceptually, demographically, and symbolically, has been a long physical and structural undertaking. The Zionist movement and private Jewish purchasers acquired land and removed Palestinians from it through purchase, legal tools and exclusionary hiring policies and then, from 1948, through conquest and confiscation of land.[6]

5 On the history of multireligious and multi-sectarian national visions in the Arab world see: Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Stanford University Press, 2012); Ussama Samir Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (University of California Press, 2019).

6 Areej Sabbagh-Khoury, *Colonizing Palestine: The Zionist Left and the Making of the Palestinian Nakba* (Stanford University Press, 2023); Michael R. Fischbach, *Records of Dispossession: Palestinian Refugee Property and the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Columbia University Press, 2003); Yossi Katz, *The Land Shall Not Be Sold in Perpetuity: The*

They imagined Palestinian spaces as backwards and desolate and Jewish ones as fruitful, productive, and revived. They have read the topography of the land through the Hebrew Bible, renamed spaces to reflect a land that was not Palestine with its multiethnic make up, but the Land of Israel, the Jewish national home.[7] As a result, Jews, who became a majority only through conquest and displacement, were able to imagine and feel viscerally that Jews had been a majority all along and should rightfully remain so. These sweeping transformations of land and landscape make it possible for some to claim that Israel exists separately from, and thus can be studied separately from, Palestine.

Given these asymmetric possibilities of erasure, the idea of teaching Israel/Palestine as a dual subject joined by a slash is not exactly a provocation to scholars primarily committed to Palestine Studies. As Honaida Ghanim and Tamir Sorek have discussed in the inaugural issue of the *Palestine/Israel Review,* Palestinian Studies scholars have been teaching Israel/Palestine (or Palestine/Israel) all along and indeed may seek to reclaim Palestine from underneath the epistemological control of Israel.[8] Israel, after all, has sovereignty, more and better resourced institutions of higher learning, and control over archives, including Palestinian archives. At a time of scholasticide in Gaza, the real provocation may be to put only the word "Palestine" in a course title.

Israel/Palestine is more of a provocation to Israel Studies and the branches of Jewish Studies who emphasize "Israel" per se. My own location, as an American Jewish historian of Jews who learned to speak fluent Hebrew before I learned Arabic, does research in Israel, and engages deeply with both Israeli and Palestinian colleagues, leads me to offer my most substantial provocations in this direction. I've been arguing for the past ten years that we can't teach about Israel without teaching about Palestine: not just "Arabs" and not just "Palestinians" or British mandate Palestine but Palestine as a historical and ongoing place that overlaps with the Land and State of Israel. I've argued that studying the depth and diversity of Jewish experience in Israel requires studying Palestine as a multiform place and Palestinian

Jewish National Fund and the History of State Ownership of Land in Israel (Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2016).

7 Meron Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape the Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948* (University of California Press, 2000); Noga Kadman, *Erased from Space and Consciousness: Israel and the Depopulated Palestinian Villages of 1948*, with Dimi Reider (Indiana University Press, 2015).

8 Tamir Sorek and Honaida Ghanim, "Palestine/Israel Review: Carving Out a New Intellectual Space," *Palestine/Israel Review* 1, no. 1 (2024): 1–20.

identity as marked by cultural contact, ideological diversity, and deep ties to village, city, and land.

I can imagine a different provocation directed to Palestine pedagogy, but it would not be based in a demand to grant excessive credence to the national narrative of an occupying force. It would come from a more oblique direction, from a more expansive Jewish Studies that understands both Palestine in particular, and comparison in general, as already central to its analysis. Here, the provocation would be that we can't understand Palestine and Israel without understanding Jews—but not as a group whose settler solutions to Jewish problems must be honored or under whose exclusionary system Palestinians must indefinitely live. Rather,as a group of people who have had shifting and complex relationships to multiple potential homelands around the world, including the Land of Israel; as victims turned perpetrators or implicated subjects, to use Michael Rothberg's term; and as co-actors in a twentieth century play of empires. Jews historically lingered on the boundaries of "the West," "whiteness," and "modernity." They were alternately recruited in and pushed out and their dispersion and maintenance of identity provide comparison points for (though not precise analogues to) the Palestinian experience. I don't expect those invested in the Palestinian experience to take interest in Jews in a context of genocidal violence—but I do think that over the longer term this sort of curiosity and expansive view, coupled with a clear awareness of asymmetry and power, provides a promising academic path forward.

The Classroom as the Space for Connected Scholarship

Precisely because I understand the challenges and stakes for scholarly fields in this extreme moment, I want to suggest that the classroom, not the conference hall, may be the prime place for a connected and comparative scholarship, one more connected and comparative that we may be in our specific scholarly fields. In the classroom, I want my students to be able to accurately and faithfully represent the worldviews of a wide range of historical and contemporary actors across multiple (not two) perspectives or "sides" in a way that would be deemed accurate by the holders of those views themselves, including in cases where we consider those perceptions to be wrong, bigoted, or dangerous. I want students to understand that just as I have had to make choices of what I think is the most representative array of topics and sources, any other person who teaches this class will also make choices, and all of us will omit things no less part of the story.

I want to discuss three assignments or exercises that introduce students to the multiplicity of historical perspectives and the stakes of our narrative choices.

First, I devote an early session of the course to the topic "Where should we begin?" I assign them brief excerpts from the introductions or first chapters of 4–5 different survey history books that represent dramatically different starting points: the Jews of the late nineteenth century Russian Empire; nineteenth century Palestinian peasants; Palestine as part of the 20th century Arab world, and ancient Israel.[9] Each of these beginnings implies particular perspectives about historical methodology and causality, and reflects overall narrative and political commitments. Each could be the "right" beginning for someone. Whose story, really, are we after?

Second, at various points in my course, I do a version of role play in which I assign students different potentially real (but composite) personalities. During the 1950s, for example, diverse groups of Jews in and outside Israel, Palestinians in and outside of Palestine, international observers, and Arab state actors experienced lives in parallel that sometimes intersected and often passed like ships in the night. These might include Palestinians who left a Jerusalem home anJews who moved into that home; Jewish immigrants and the Israeli state officials who shaped the policy that determined where they would live; Arab state bureaucrats and Palestinian would-be immigrants to those countries; Jews of Arab lands who migrated to Israel and Palestinians displaced to those lands of origin. I ask students to think, based on our readings, about what recent experiences may have shaped a given person's worldviews and what opinions that person is likely to have. I then ask them to walk around the room and pair up, introducing themselves to each other, and talking about what experiences they share and where their experiences diverge. I also ask them to consider whether the particular pair would be likely to meet during this era and, if so, in what circumstances. We switch multiple times so that they get to have this conversation with several different people. I encourage them to think about both obvious and non-obvious comparisons and connections. This is not a formal "simulation" and we are not interested in "solutions" or plans, whether real or counterfactual. Our goal is to understand and embody the broad multiplicity of experiences in

9 My selections have changed over time. Recent texts have included: Anita Shapira, *Israel: A History* (Brandeis University Press, 2012); Martin Gilbert, *Israel: A History* (Rosetta Books, 2014); James L. Gelvin, *The Israel-Palestine Conflict: A History*, 4th ed. (University Press, 2021); Samih K. Farsoun, *Palestine and the Palestinians: A Social and Political History*, 2nd ed., (Westview Press, 2006); Ilan Pappé, *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

each historical moment and understand power relations that structured encounters.

Third, for the last few years, I've ended the course with individual projects in which students choose from a long list of non-profits and NGOs doing work in/on the Israel/Palestine space, including in the Jewish, Israel, and Palestinian diasporas. , Each student presents a project on the goals and work of the organization, the organization's own sense of the region's past, and aspects of the history we learned about in the class that are not part of that organization's self-presentation (and why). Out of the belief that every and any organizing working in this space is part of the landscape, I offer as broad as list of organizations as conceivably possible, including religious settler organizations, the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement, Palestinian advocacy organizations, the Jewish National Fund (JNF), the American Jewish Committee, the Palestine Museum in Ramallah, an organization promoting the military recruitment of Haredi Jews, an organization doing outreach migrant African workers in Israel, and human rights organizations. This exercise helps them understand how activists with explicit goals and hopes for change narrate the past that led them to their commitments.

In short, I want my students to come out of my course able to correctly articulate the positions that they intend to support or platform and also the positions that they want to take down, criticize, condemn, and decry. Concrete engagement with the work and narratives of politically motivated organizations help them reflect on their own commitments, identify relationships of power, and understand the experiences of trauma and loss that drive people to devote their lives to particular visions for the future. As students see how historical and contemporary actors connect the dots to tell a coherent historical narrative they gain the tools to construct their own telling of events grounded in historical evidence.

My pedagogy would surely be criticized by Israel's staunchest defenders and, for entirely different reasons, by those who want to decenter the history of Zionism. But I detest the idea that "if I am being criticized from both sides, then I must be right." We are right in our teaching if we are true to our values. And my values are these: I'm a scholar of Jewish history, descended from an Ashkenazi Ottoman Jerusalemite, deeply committed to conveying the history of Zionism, accurately and sensitively, while continually striving to both center Palestinian history and acknowledge explicitly how this history has been sidelined, understudied, and misunderstood. Others of us will make other choices, and I think we should be honest with ourselves and with our students about what our choices were.

Just as the territory of Israel/Palestine is and has always been a land bridge between continents, a strategic global asset, and a meeting point between cultures, religions, and empires and Indigenous people, so too is it, pedagogically, the land bridge and meeting point of curricula across the university. Most courses about Israel and Palestine are not taught by people who hold positions in "Israel Studies" or "Palestine Studies," or who consider those to be their main fields.

In fact, the people teaching related courses might not be listed on the same program pages as one another, but our conceptual connections, the fact that we draw from the same larger and linked bodies of scholarship, anchors our conversations and connects to one another.

Israel and Palestine have become not just objects of study but symbolic axes of discussions about a much broader range of pressing political issues. We are engaged in the study of empires and migrants. We consider international law and the system of international institutions that emerged in the 20th century. We teach the cold war, US foreign policy, Soviet foreign policy. We assign texts from Hebrew and Arabic literature, perhaps also French, English, Yiddish, any number of post-colonial literatures. As growing numbers of scholars in these fields become interested in and begin to teach about Israel/Palestine, those of us who specialize in Israel/Palestine too can draw from those fields. As practitioners in adjacent academic fields conclude that they "can't talk about X without talking about Palestine and Israel," we will find ourselves and our teaching increasingly relevant and increasingly invoked. This position brings with it great responsibility, and we can best rise to the occasion in pedagogical and scholarly community with our peer educators.

Liora R. Halperin *is Professor of International Studies and History, and Distinguished Endowed Chair in Jewish Studies, at the University of Washington.*

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INVITED SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

Teaching Israel/Palestine as Jews: Negotiating Identity, Power, and Politics in the Classroom

Hilary Kalisman
Michal Raucher
Emily Schneider

Abstract
In this conversation, three Jewish faculty members who teach about Palestine/Israel at university campuses in the United States discuss the practical and political components of their pedagogy and their role on campus. Hilary Kalisman of the University of Colorado, Boulder, Michal Raucher of Rutgers University, and Emily Schneider of Northern Arizona University share their approaches to teaching about Palestine/Israel, the tensions they struggle with, their concerns about students and faculty, and how they are dealing with the politics surrounding Palestine/Israel on campuses in the aftermath of October 7, 2023.

Keywords
Israel/Palestine, pedagogy, antisemitism, activism, identity, academic freedom

1. What is the institutional context in which you teach Israel/Palestine? How do you teach this topic, and how do you engage with and balance multiple narratives?

Michal: I am an Associate Professor of Jewish Studies at Rutgers University, a large public university in New Jersey. Rutgers has one of the largest populations of Jewish students at any public university in the US (approximately 7,000) and one of the largest populations of Arab/Muslim students as well (also approximately 7,000). My Israeli-Palestinian Conflict course is cross-listed with History, Jewish Studies, and Middle Eastern Studies. I've taught the class at Rutgers since 2018, and the population since 2020 has pretty consistently been about ⅓ Palestinian/Arab and ⅓ Jewish/Israeli.

When I first started teaching the class in 2014 at the University of Cincinnati, I used a dual-narrative approach, but within a couple years I realized that this approach is problematic. I wasn't sure if students ever actually learned the history, and I found students were confused about the power imbalance because the dual narrative approach presents Israelis and Palestinians as possessing equal power. I shifted away from a dual narrative approach, but I preserved the importance of understanding how different individuals and groups have reacted to historical events. Therefore, since then, there are three units in my Israeli-Palestinian Conflict class: Nationalism and colonialism in Palestine, which starts at the end of the 19th century and proceeds through the British mandate; The Holocaust, partitioning of Palestine, and the War of 1947–1949; and the 1967 War through today. For each of those units, we start with a historical overview so that students have a firm grounding in facts and the historical record. Then, we turn to Palestinian and Jewish/Israeli reactions, reflections, and memories of these events. This part becomes more like a social history class with the intent on helping students understand how Palestinians and Jews/Israelis understood these events at the time, and how they understand them today.

This approach helps students see that the historical events never stand alone. People have been creating meaning from plans and treaties, and they still do today. We have narratives that shape our identities and our place within groups. These are the stories we tell about ourselves and about others, and these stories affect how we read history. I find that most students know that, and they want to appreciate why their understanding of history is so different from someone else's. Sometimes that's because they are operating from falsehoods about the past, and in my course I do a lot of work to correct their misunderstandings, but often it's because students' own narratives have selected facts that cohere with their worldview. Despite its

potential pitfalls, I find that demonstrating that many of us operate within a narrative framework helps the students reflect on their own understanding of history and pushes them towards a different one.

Hilary: I am an Associate Professor of History, and the Endowed Professor of Israel/Palestine Studies in the Program in Jewish Studies at the University of Colorado Boulder. It is a large public university but it is not particularly diverse. The bulk of my classes are cross-listed between History and Jewish Studies. Usually about ⅓ of the students in each of my classes are Jewish. Very few students are Muslim, and even fewer are Palestinian. I have also had very few Israeli students. Each semester I teach at least one class devoted to Israel/Palestine: Most frequently I teach the history of Modern Israel/Palestine, but I have also taught "Modern Childhood in Israel/Palestine," and a course with a study abroad component, "History Today: Nationalism & Collective Memory in Israel/Palestine."

In my courses, I do not teach using a dual or multiple-narrative approach. I think that these approaches tend to do two things. First, these approaches make it seem as if different groups are equal in terms of power and their ability to speak. Second, I think it undermines the idea that one can actually learn about the past. Whether or not an event affected different groups of people differently doesn't mean that event didn't happen. For example, when teaching about 1948, I go over the history of the war itself, and its consequences, how it affected different groups of people across the region, as well as how the war is remembered, rather than only juxtaposing narratives about Palestinians' *Nakba* and Israel's *Milhemet Ha'atzmaut*. Part of my position as a professor of Israel/Palestine Studies, at least to me, is a commitment to the assumption that you can't tell the stories of people in the region in isolation from one another, and that it is important to take their perspectives and past decisions seriously, whether or not we today, in 21st century Boulder Colorado, agree with them or even relate to them. In terms of balance, I try to include perspectives from different types of historical actors, from different religions, ethnic groups, classes, professions, and political beliefs, without trying to balance each voice with one that exactly opposes it.

Michal: Hilary, I'd love to learn more about the course with the study abroad component. Have you taught that recently? Do you ever have Palestinian students in the course who can't travel to Israel/Palestine? I've wanted to teach a course with a study abroad component, but I'd be fearful

of excluding students who are not permitted to the region or putting them in a position where they might be detained.

Hilary: I haven't taught the global intensive course since 2022. The biggest issue then was the COVID pandemic, and the associated restrictions concerning international travel at the time. There was a lot of arranging testing, helping students pay for the testing, and supporting a student who ended up quarantined in Israel proper. Due to the way University of Colorado, Boulder (CU Boulder) funds study abroad, I found it difficult to find enough students to make the course run, which means I wasn't really worried about the course excluding anyone at the time. Now I would be more concerned about including Palestinian students and indeed international students who couldn't go to Israel, or whose visa status in the US might now be jeopardized if they went on the program.

One thing I did experience was that several of the students in the course were gender nonconforming. I explained to them that whatever they chose to wear I would support them and would work to protect them, but that if they wore gender nonconforming clothes they were more likely to be subjected to prejudice, and even violence. My goal there was to support whatever decision they made, but to make sure it was an informed decision. In the end, people were more confused by the religious diversity of our group than the gender diversity, but I think that is to some degree the approach I would take with Palestinian American students, i.e. I will support you no matter what but prejudice, searches, and even detainment are things you might encounter.

Emily: I am an Associate Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Northern Arizona University (NAU), and I previously taught in the Sociology Department at Colorado College. NAU is a large public university with many Latino/a, Native, and first-generation students. Colorado College, on the other hand, is a private liberal arts college whose students come from some of the wealthiest families in the country. When I was at Colorado College, I taught a course called Peace, Conflict, and Social Justice in Israel/Palestine, which attracted many of our college's Jewish students. I have since adapted this course into a graduate level seminar for our masters students at NAU. Both courses are designed to ground students' understandings of the region in a historically-situated analysis of power. As a critical criminologist, I spend a lot of time focusing on the capabilities and limitations of international law, the ways that identity becomes tied to legal,

political, and economic structures, as well as how certain types of violence become normalized and even legalized in our societies.

While I believe that exposing students to multiple narratives is important, I agree with both Michal and Hilary around the limits of a dual-narrative approach rooted in the myth of balance. In addition to obscuring power dynamics and creating a false sense of equality between Israelis and Palestinians, this approach often leads students to blame everyday people instead of powerful structures for the ongoing violence in the region. I instead push students to engage with the moral complexity surrounding various stakeholders' positions, and I teach in ways that allow them to understand how particular forms of socialization lead us to hold political positions that others may find abhorrent. To accomplish this, I have readings and assignments that critically engage with identity, I include poetry and music in my courses, and I feature numerous guest speakers from a range of political and identitarian positions such as Palestinians refugees, former IDF soldiers/refuseniks, queer Palestinians living inside Israel, activists from groups like Youth Against Settlements, Sudanese asylum seekers living in South Tel Aviv, and representatives from peacebuilding NGOs. I then combine exposure to these diverse individuals with rigorous scholarship that prioritizes material outcomes over (purported) intentions. For example, I've had great success assigning authors such as Jasbir Puar, Mahmood Mamdani, Eyal Weizman, Areej Sabbagh-Khoury, Lana Tatour, Saree Makdisi, Neve Gordon, Laleh Khalili, and Tareq Baconi.[1] Centering this type of scholarship, which identifies the structural determinants of violence without resorting to individualistic moralizing, enables students to engage personal stories in ways that move beyond unproductive blame and judgment, and toward an understanding of the economic, political, and social forces that incentivize violent behaviors and policies.

In addition, through collectively studying social movements and advocacy groups as a class, we learn how moralizing tactics rooted in guilt and shame often fail to change material conditions on the ground. For example, I have each student choose an organization, political group, or ideological framework that they believe is most likely to bring about peace and justice in Palestine/Israel. They then conduct an analysis on why they

1 Some books that I would recommend by these authors include: Jasbir Puar's *The Right to Maim*; Mahmood Mamdani's *Neither Settler Nor Native*; Eyal Weizman's *The Least of All Possible Evils*; Areej Sabbagh-Khoury's Colonizing Palestine; Saree Makdisi's Palestine Inside Out; Neve Gordon's Israel's Occupation; Laleh Khalili's Time in the Shadows; Tareq Baconi's Hamas Contained; and Lana Tatour's article, "Citizenship as Domination."

believe their chosen group or framework will lead to positive social change, and they present their analysis to the class for debate. Through activities such as this, I facilitate students' exposure to diverse positions and political actors, and I encourage students to think deeply about the roots of oppression and violence so that they have the intellectual tools to effectively address them.

Hilary, could you elaborate on your decision to not "balance each voice with one that exactly opposes it." I'd love to hear more from either you or Michal about whether there is even such a thing as an "opposite voice," as well as any problems you two may see with a binary approach to platforming different perspectives in the classroom.

Hilary: That's a good question. I think it's more that, sometimes one group isn't really concerned with the intricacies of the other groups' perspective, or sometimes one view isn't relevant to the story and adding it seems false. For example, when I'm teaching about different types of Zionisms I don't get into an equal number of Arab Palestinian reactions because whether someone is a Labor or Revisionist Zionist isn't very important to the Arab Palestinian community. Similarly, when I talk about different types of Palestinian and pan-Arab nationalism in the 1950s/60s I don't really talk about Jewish Israeli perspectives, because the construction of the ideologies was less important to Jewish Israelis than their security risks. Also, I think the approach of balancing each voice with one in direct opposition makes it seem like the opposing voice was the most prevalent or important view, when sometimes most people were focused on something else at the time. That said, I do include views I don't personally agree with or relate to (essentially all the time).

Michal: Over the course of the semester, students are getting a variety of Israeli, Palestinian, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Arab perspectives. At any given moment or when we're looking at a particular time, students are not getting the "opposite" or the "complementary" perspectives. My choice of sources has a lot to do with the accessibility of the source and whether they will learn something new from that source. My hope is that by the end of the semester they learn that there were (and still are) multiple voices that play a role in history and how history has been understood. Some are stronger today, others were louder decades ago.

2. How does your identity as a Jewish American play a role in your teaching on Israel/Palestine?

Emily: My Jewish identity is the reason that I am a scholar of Palestine/Israel today. I grew up attending synagogue, spending my summers at Jewish summer camp, and participating in Jewish youth groups throughout my teens. It was at these places that I developed a deep emotional connection to Zionism that ultimately led me to move to Palestine/Israel in my early 20s. I have also always seen myself as someone who seeks to stand against oppression. While at first these two components of my identity seemed to complement each other, as I got older and began to learn more about Israel's occupation, the myths that sustained my connection to Zionism began to shatter. I have since been on a lifelong journey to understand the ideological pillars of Jewish-American support for Israel and what allows our community to continue to endorse mass violence against the Palestinian people.

Accordingly, my Jewish identity certainly plays a role in my teaching on Israel/Palestine. When I was at Colorado College, I had a large number of Jewish students in my courses who were being exposed to alternative narratives about Palestine/Israel for the first time. They would come to my office hours and grieve with me about family tensions, they would debate me, and they would express shock and sorrow over much of the material we covered throughout the course. My Jewish identity and my memories of being in a similar place as my students often colored how I approached topics like 1948, the Holocaust, and the right of return. I had deep empathy for them, and I found personal value in ushering them along a journey towards a more thoughtful and historically-informed relationship to Palestine/Israel.

Today, however, I have fewer Jewish students and most of my students are deeply engaging with this issue for the first time in their lives. I remember on the first day of my graduate course at NAU being asked whether the Israelis or the Palestinians were the Jewish ones, and feeling both nostalgic for my time at Colorado College and grateful for the opportunity to teach a group of students who could approach the material with such openness and unburdened curiosity. The contrast of these experiences has raised important questions for me about how we allow our own identities to dictate who is prioritized in our classrooms, which narratives are given emotional weight and validity, and what compromises we make out of fear of upsetting our own communities.

Today, I primarily treat my Jewish identity as an obligation to take pedagogical risks and to share historical and present-day truths that others cannot. While I will always understand what it feels like to be a Jewish student in a class on Palestine/Israel better than I can understand what it feels like to be a Palestinian student, a Muslim student, or a student with no connection to this topic, I remain empathetic to all of my students. Yet I recognize now more than ever that my Jewish upbringing has led me to take certain paradigms for granted, to grieve more deeply for lives that remind me of my own, and to fear political outcomes that jeopardize my own people's immediate safety. In this way, my Jewish identity is a reminder to myself as an educator that I have an obligation to all people's wellbeing and safety, and that the need to teach uncomfortable truths and to speak out against the violence of genocide and settler colonialism must always come before anyone's comfort.

Michal: My answer to this question is similar to Emily's. I grew up in a Conservative Jewish home in North America where support for Israel and connection to Israel as a place that secured Jewish safety was accepted, though we were very firmly American Jews. I studied at a Jewish Day School for many years, and I was active in a Jewish youth movement, and Zionism was an integral part of those experiences. I went to college in New York City in the early 2000s at the Jewish Theological Seminary and Columbia University. While there I took academic courses on modern Israel and began learning about Israeli history from an academic perspective. I was at Columbia for the "Columbia Unbecoming" controversy wherein Zionist students accused Professor Joseph Massad, a Palestinian professor, of antisemitism. I was not politically active at the time, but I knew I didn't agree with my Jewish peers. Something about it didn't feel right, though I didn't have the language to explain why.

In graduate school, I turned my attention to the anthropological study of reproductive ethics with a focus on reproduction among Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jews in Jerusalem. Living in Jerusalem for two years brought me face to face with the occupation and injustice for Palestinians. Informed by the ethical theories of many Jewish philosophers of the 20th century who I had studied for my comprehensive exams—including those of Hannah Arendt, Martin Buber, and Emanuel Levinas—I began engaging in conversations with Jewish American and Israeli peers in Israel about the ethics of the occupation and about justice in Israel/Palestine. (Yes, I know Levinas' record on this isn't great, but his theoretical work informed my ethical orientation in a different way.) Although I discovered that many

people were not on the same page as me, it was a formative experience for my Jewish identity.

As a professor today, much like for Emily at Colorado College, I find my Jewish identity plays a huge part in my teaching. Many Jewish students enroll in my class assuming that I'll be sympathetic to Zionism due to my Jewish identity. Others have struggled with how to relate to me when I teach them things that conflict with what they learned from their synagogues or day schools. They are relieved to see that I cancel classes for Jewish holidays, but are also sometimes antagonistic to the way I teach the class. And still others have spent hours in my office debating with me or sharing their own political and personal evolution on Israel/Palestine.

Meanwhile, many of my Arab/Palestinian/Muslim students told me that they were initially nervous about taking a class with a Jewish professor. They were afraid of either being discriminated against or being singled out to share "the Palestinian experience." I'm grateful that students discover that I am not going to do either of those things. At Rutgers, as at other universities, students rely heavily on peer recommendations when choosing courses. At this point, enough students have taken my class that it has developed a reputation for being academically rigorous, respectful, and empathetic. Students who enroll in the class want to learn about Israel/Palestine from multiple perspectives, and they know that's what they're going to get.

I am so grateful for all the students who have trusted me with their education, and perhaps especially for those who have taken what they perceive to be significant risks in walking into my classroom. I do hope that as a Jewish professor I'm pushing students to see politics and religious identity beyond the stereotypes.

Hilary: One thing I have heard about, including at the Elon University symposium at which we first discussed these topics, was the idea that doing "me-search," i.e. researching one's own family history or group-history was seen as less rigorous or valuable than not. I have always had the other issue, namely if you're NOT researching your own history, or that of the group you belong to, you're not an authority to speak on a topic. My own family's history is boring, not particularly representative, and privileged as well. This means I am usually researching and teaching about, groups to which I don't belong. I make sure that my students understand this, and that I, and even the guest speakers I bring in who are from the region, aren't representative (in part because we're all scholars of both Israel and Palestine/Palestinians which doesn't make us the most representative group, intellectually and

certainly not politically). I am very up front that I am American, Jewish, not Israeli and not Palestinian, and that my own personal experiences aren't the focus of the classes I teach.

That said, I found a certain freedom in my current job, because my previous job was focused on Islamic history. Being able to teach about different types of history, i.e. Jewish, Middle Eastern, Islamic, Arab, etc. at the same time means I can take different perspectives seriously and talk about them in more detail. For example, when teaching about Israel/Palestine, and particularly when teaching my "Introduction to Modern Jewish History" course, I emphasize the differences between American Jewish experiences, status, Judaism and those in Israel. It's crucial that my students understand in the United States, Judaism isn't a legal status. If you decide to convert to or from Judaism, it doesn't change your citizenship or your rights. That is not at all true in Israel. In Israel, the definition of being Jewish is quite different if you are a Jew planning to immigrate to the country, versus if you are trying to get married. I don't think many American Jews know that only state-sanctioned Orthodox Rabbis can perform Jewish marriages in Israel; their Reform or Conservative Rabbis at home could be imprisoned for attempting to perform a marriage. For American Jews, denominations are extremely important: In Israel the bigger dividing line is between religious and secular.

3. How do you see your politics entering the classroom? Does it ever feel appropriate to take certain stances when you are teaching?

Hilary: For me, as a historian I feel an obligation to teach the past in a way that takes seriously why historical actors made the decisions they did, whether or not I personally think those decisions were right. I also tend to give students the benefit of the doubt. I think if I present information in a way that includes different perspectives students are more likely to make an informed, and moral decision about their own politics, even if that decision isn't the one I have made. I don't want to tell them what to think, I want to show them how people have thought in the past. I also think much of the way I approach teaching history is because of the discipline itself. As a historian you try to get as many perspectives and information on events as possible, to evaluate their consequences and their causality. This doesn't make my teaching balanced, as I also know I focus on particular areas because of my expertise and interests. For example, my students learn more

about education than they do about weapons and battles, but I also don't think I could teach in a different way.

Emily, in our conversations, you've referred to yourself before as a scholar-activist. Can you say more about your approach to teaching as an activist? I think framing the problems of the region as an issue of structures rather than people is fascinating, but I wonder about whether likening those structures to others across the world can lose the particularities of the current situation?

Emily: With the situation in Gaza becoming more dire every day, I find myself struggling with the tensions between my roles as both an activist and an educator. For me, teaching is unavoidably political. I don't believe that we as faculty hold the ultimate truth or that we can escape our own subjectivity (since, in my mind, no one can). Because of this, I see the types of ideologies, stories, and frameworks we teach as political decisions because they will inform the ways that our students go on to engage with the world. How we construct our syllabus reinforces particular worldviews, and we constantly make decisions about which authors to read, which time periods to focus on, and what types of limits we hold around acceptable and unacceptable speech and content in our classrooms. It is undeniable that teaching Palestine/Israel from scholarship that primarily comes out of Israeli universities and sees questions of anti-Zionism as a matter of antisemitism, for example, will cultivate a different political relationship to Palestine/Israel among students, than a class that teaches it from anticolonial perspectives that draw primarily on Arab and Palestinian scholarship. Because of this, I try to be cognizant of my ethical obligation to teach in ways that are most likely to bring about justice, equality, and peace and that equally value all people's lives and rights. Of course, we all have different moral compasses, but I don't think anyone can claim that there are not some ethical obligations that underlie the ways we teach and conduct research (even though I am open to being convinced otherwise!). With this starting point of teaching inevitably being political, I think it's best to make our goals and sympathies explicit so that students have the autonomy to support, challenge, or question us as their professors. In contrast to the widespread idea that we must rid ourselves of biases when we teach, I think that true academic freedom also requires us to be upfront about our own positionalities, our material interests, and how we subjectively relate to course material. Otherwise, I worry that portraying ourselves as fully objective authorities transmits our own biases as truths, which not only suppresses open debate, but can also reinforce hegemonic paradigms of knowledge that ultimately sustain the status quo.

Michal: I agree that teaching is unavoidably political. Many of the choices I make on the syllabus reveal my politics, to an extent. My goal is to humanize all actors and to encourage my students to have empathy for all people in Palestine/Israel. That doesn't mean I justify every action or think that every decision is in the best interest of all of those people. It means that my political goal is to get the students in my class to learn about each other and about the topic at hand with compassion and critical analysis.

I was teaching a class of 100 students in the Fall of 2023, and although I had always been attuned to the needs of my particular students, something changed that semester. There was no assumption of goodwill between students. As much as they were nervous about what I would do, they were also nervous about their fellow students. So I began thinking of my classroom as a proxy—in an idyllic way—for how they could relate to each other outside the classroom, and how they could relate to Israel/Palestine outside the classroom. After consulting with a friend whose pedagogy I admire greatly, I decided to ask the students to read poetry several times during the semester. Their responses revealed how close the conflict is for them. They read Yehuda Amichai's "The Diameter of the Bomb," and one responded "We are all in the diameter of the bomb."https://allpoetry.com/The-Diameter-Of-The-Bomb[2] They also read Taha Muhammad Ali's "Revenge," and one wrote, "As a student, these poems empower me to challenge the prevailing narratives and stereotypes surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.https://lithub.com/revenge-a-poem-by-taha-muhammad-ali/[3] They remind me of the importance of fostering an environment where respectful dialogue and empathy can thrive, allowing for a more nuanced and compassionate understanding of the human experiences on both sides of the conflict. In a world where political tensions often overshadow the human element, these poems serve as a powerful call for empathy." My political goal is for students to be able to feel compassion and read critically all the sources at their disposal. This shouldn't be a political message, but it is.

This doesn't mean I'm ignoring the structural elements. I'm regularly naming and teaching the students to identify colonialism, nationalism, religion, racism, antisemitism, and more structures of power and politics that shape individuals and their capacity for action. Recognizing those elements can, I find, help students have more compassion because they see that individuals are acting within structures largely outside of their control. I just

2 Yehuda Amichai, "The Diameter of the Bomb," All Poetry, .

3 Taha Muhammad Ali, "Revenge," *Literary Hub*, December 14, 2023, .

always have to remember that my students are bringing a lot of themselves into the classroom, and they are bringing a lot of preconceived notions about who else is in the classroom. I'm not just teaching history or structures for many of these students. I'm teaching about their lives and the lives of their families. This makes me a different type of educator in that space.

4. What is our responsibility to our diverse students in terms of religious, ethnic, and other forms of identity? Do you have assignments or ways you approach topics that have successfully engaged students' identities?

Michal: As I mentioned, the students who show up in my class reflect the diversity of the student body at Rutgers, with approximately ⅔ of the students who have direct, personal connections to Israel/Palestine. Our campus has also repeatedly been the site of active political engagement around Israel/Palestine, and while some students think the classroom should be the place to advocate for their cause, many other students fear that the classroom will become uncomfortable, or that some might feel "unsafe." While I want to create a classroom environment where each student's religious, ethnic, national, and racial identities are welcome, in order to do that, I have to acknowledge that they are coming into the classroom with different forms of identity that shape their understanding and their reactions to the material while also keeping the classroom as a space that does not privilege any of those experiences. I don't want the ⅓ of students who have no personal connection to Israel/Palestine to feel like they can't speak. Therefore, in the classroom, we prioritize scholarship and scholarly analysis. Elsewhere, I invite students to reflect personally and bring themselves to the material.

One of the primary ways I do that is through journals. Once a week, students are invited to submit a journal through our course management software. I'm the only one who can view their journals. They can submit either 400 words in writing or a short video journal. I count five of these for credit to incentivize them, but most of them welcome the opportunity and complete more than five. These journals ask them to reflect on the material in a personal and informal way. Many of the Jewish students who enroll in my class grew up with a Jewish education that was expressly Zionist. Many of the Palestinian students in my class grew up as children or grandchildren of refugees from the Nakba. And among the other students I hear from immigrants, or members of another minoritized population who find that something within the course material resonates with their lives. These

journals give students a chance to reflect on the material, which has been shown to be helpful to their learning process, and it also provides me insight into how they are feeling and thinking throughout the course. I comment briefly to demonstrate that I appreciate that they shared something personal with me, and I'll check in on students who are having a particularly hard time with the material.

Hilary: Michal, I think that sounds like a really great assignment. Do you ever get complaints that personal responses are shaping how students are graded?

Michal: Hilary, great question. The students are just graded on whether they submitted the journal or not. I'm not assessing the content. And though many students use the space to talk about their family or their friends' reaction to the material, many also just use it to reflect on the material for the week. It's a really low stakes exercise that forces students to pause and think about the previous week. It's good for cognitively absorbing the material as well as helping me understand what's happening for them in the class.

Hilary: In terms of my own experiences, for me it is crucial that the classroom is welcoming to students, and that everyone knows they belong there. In my "History of Modern Israel/Palestine" course for example, I try to be as welcoming to students as possible, while making it very clear that the course is about both Israelis and Palestinians and that if this isn't the semester students want to talk about these groups of people, I can find them another course. I actually have this phrasing in the syllabus, in the course description.

In the semesters I have taught after October 7, I have also had students ask me, before classes began, if they would be ok taking my courses. I always begin my reply with, you are welcome in this course, I would love to have you attend and whatever your identity is is fine.

That said, I tend to avoid assignments or questions that focus on students' identities in the classroom. I don't stop students from discussing their identity or experiences if they bring it up, but I don't use assignments that focus on students' personal experiences. In part this is because I am teaching history classes. I want students to understand identities, and how we talk about them have changed over time. I don't expect students to relate to everything we are learning about. For example, I discuss the BILU, one of the earliest Zionist groups to immigrate from the Pale of Russia to Mandate Palestine. This group combined Marxism, farming and the Bible, meaning it

isn't usually top of students' lists for relatability. I don't want the course to be a course about personal feelings (which don't tend to require you do the readings), but rather a course where you learn more about the subject, namely how people acted and made decisions in the past, and then you can use that knowledge however you like. I am happy to put students in touch with advocacy groups and identity building groups if they feel that would help them. I believe that students need to have spaces to protest and express themselves, their politics, and their personal feelings, particularly on campus. However, I think that the classroom, at least my classroom, is meant to be a very different space. I have also told students, from different advocacy groups, that learning different perspectives can only help their advocacy, and that I am not here to convince them of any political perspective. This means I don't really make a lot of space to discuss student's identities, or even my own, in the classroom.

Emily: On the one hand, I think it is impossible to teach Israel/Palestine without focusing on identity. Almost every mainstream news source and form of engagement with this issue in the United States is filtered through a Western-centric approach to identity that prioritizes the narratives of Jews, Israelis, white people, Westerners, and others who are aligned with those in power. If we ignore identity, we fall into the trap of treating various forms of inequality, particularly around violence and death, as natural or at least inevitable. On the other hand, I do not believe that identity is the root of the violence in the region. Instead, identity has become a facade to cover up the economic and political interests that sustain Israel's violence against Palestinians.

My teaching reflects this perspective in that I allow identity to flow freely into the classroom, but I ultimately use it as a tool to demonstrate how our identities are not actually what is driving the oppression and violence we study. I aim to humanize every "type" of person we encounter in our course, ultimately to show that Israeli settler colonialism and Palestinian resistance to it, are sustained by structural forces, not individual morality or different groups' cultures. For example, I have students complete an assignment in which they choose one "sub-group" from Palestine/Israel to write a paper about and conduct a presentation for the class. Over the years, students have delivered insightful presentations and papers on groups such as the Druze, queer Palestinians, Bedouins, Palestinian refugees, Holocaust survivors, Mizrahim, and African asylum seekers. After researching the history of their chosen group, I ask students to reflect on how this group's lived experiences reflect underlying dynamics of "the conflict" and how they simultaneously challenge dominant narratives of it—namely the binary between Israelis and

Palestinians. Students are surprised to discover, for example, that Israel's outward representation and discipline of Holocaust survivors, queer Palestinians, and African asylum seekers in Israel are all driven by a performative commitment to liberal values that ultimately prioritizes capitalist interests. Similarly, as the group studying Israel's Bedouin population in the Negev, for example, hears about the civilizing rhetoric used to describe Israel's early Mizrahi immigrants, the whole class begins to understand how white supremacy and Eurocentrism have colored Israel's approach to racialized populations regardless of whether they are Jewish or not. This then challenges fundamental myths about the Israeli state and allows students to move past simplistic understandings of how race and Jewishness operate within Zionism.

I also allow my students, when appropriate, to share aspects of their own identities in class. For example, one of my Jewish-American students whose grandparents were Holocaust survivors did a presentation about her experience on Birthright and March of Living that generated a plethora of questions and intrigue from her classmates. Another student, from Egypt, shared her memories of growing up in a strongly anti-Zionist community, which viscerally exposed my US-born students to popular opinions in neighboring Arab countries. I also had a student in my class who was born in Israel and had decided to refuse military service. She did a powerful presentation on this decision, which allowed the other students to understand the emotional gravity and societal pressure in Israel around military service. Most memorably, I had a student from Gaza audit my class while she taught Arabic on campus as a Fulbright scholar. I devoted one of our class periods to her giving an incredibly powerful albeit painful presentation on her experiences living through Israel's 2008, 2012 and 2014 attacks on Gaza. To me, this first-hand experience was an invaluable addition to the class that no reading, video, or other assignment could have compared to in terms of its educational value.

Rather than fear derailment or conflict in platforming these students' stories and identities, my goal has always been to create a classroom that makes space for the realities of these different lived experiences. My hope is that my students have such sharp and solid analyses of the region that these personal stories do not feel threatening to their understandings of it, but instead add texture, humanize, and clarify the things they have learned in class. If someone's personal experience does not fit into what we have studied, it means we need to work harder to collectively find frameworks and analytical tools that explain these divergent perspectives. In this way, my students' diverse identities and personal experiences operate as a check on

my teaching and on the accuracy and applicability of the tools I am giving them to rigorously engage with the region.

5. How is Jewish identity being used to advance particular political agendas on campus? What has been your experience with outside organizations interfering with your teaching?

Hilary: CU Boulder's campus dynamics, in terms of protests and political agendas, are fairly disengaged. There have been protests, and those advocating for Palestinians have faced worse consequences than those advocating for Israel. However, I have been lucky in that outside organizations have not yet seriously interfered with my teaching. I had one student sponsored by an outside organization where I was concerned that they were not taking my class in good faith (they also failed due to only turning in AI written assignments) but nothing came of it. My classes have been a bit of a refuge; students by and large are there to learn, and to ask questions they are afraid to ask in other contexts, including about things like settler colonialism, genocide, antisemitism, etc. It's something where I can go in, and talk to students about the past, and have discussions about why people advocate for particular positions, where they come from, and what the stakes are, rather than a place to advocate for those positions.

Outside the classroom is another story. In the fall of 2024, I was asked by a pro-Palestinian student group at a different university to speak about the film *Israelism*.[4] I have a policy where I will speak for any student group that asks me, and also thought it was good that I discuss the film, as it is focused on the relationship between American Jews and Israel. It contains certain antisemitic tropes, but also makes a strong case as to why there is a generational divide in the US in terms of support for Israel. The discussion was difficult; there were cagey armed campus police and I had someone screaming at me in the audience that Netanyahu was worse than Hitler. However, I thought I did a good job discussing the film and the history it referenced. Nevertheless, I got on the radar of at least one pro-Israel group that targets professors.

When I was asked to speak to interested teachers and staff about the history of Israel/Palestine at the public school system which my two older children attend, protesters showed up. They allowed me to complete my talk (which they recorded without my permission) but the Q&A period was full of

4 *Israelism*, directed by Erin Axelman and Sam Eilertsen (Tikkun Olan Productions, 2024).

shouting at me that I was perpetuating the blood libel, and was just like the KKK. In one particularly memorable exchange, a protester asked me why I hadn't mentioned that all the Arab countries invaded Israel first in 1967. I replied that well, they didn't—actually Israel destroyed Egypt's air force right in the beginning, which was part of the reason why Israel won the war so quickly—but I was happy to talk about how Egypt's president Nasser's closing of the Straits of Tiran was seen as an act of aggression, and how it related to the Suez Crisis … The protester screamed at me, "Stop using facts! You shouldn't be using facts!" The protesters later complained about me to the school board, and circulated a petition in part describing me as a notorious anti-Israel scholar and as promoting antisemitism. My daughter at the time was the only Jewish kid in her class. I talked about this incident to members of my synagogue, the head of my kids' Hebrew school, the principal of their school, the Chair of History and the Director of Jewish Studies, as well as the Dean of Arts & Humanities (and a lawyer). After I reached out to Jewish advocacy organizations, the public-school petition was altered to remove my name, and no one has targeted me since, that I know of. Yet, I was targeted, even though I am not an activist, I am not a particularly public figure, and I am Jewish, not Israeli or Palestinian. I want to be very clear that I believe free speech means people who are activists, Palestinian, Israeli, etc., should be able to speak too without fear of being targeted. The climate in Boulder has only worsened after the antisemitic attack which took place in June of 2025.[5] I see the public space for having discussions about Israel, Palestine and Palestinians narrowing, along with space for experts and expertise. I feel like I am being asked to lie about the past to conform to particular narratives.

Emily: Seeing how Jewish identity has been used on our campus to suppress free speech and justify Israeli violence against Palestinians has been profoundly disturbing. I am deeply familiar with the ways that Judaism and Jewish identity are conflated with Zionism and pro-Israel politics. It is the subject of my research, and it is something I have grappled with personally throughout my life. Nonetheless, I have been somewhat surprised by the brazenness with which people have promoted this conflation as a tool to silence critics of Israel and to defame those they disagree with.

As the primary person who researches Palestine/Israel on my campus, I frequently give public lectures that critically outline the settler-colonial

5 See, for example, Cindy Von Quednow and TuAnh Dam, "Their Synagogue Taught them to Build Peace. And an Antisemitic Attack is Testing their Resilience," *CNN*, updated June 4, 2025, https://www.cnn.com/2025/06/04/us/colorado-attack-congregation-bonai-shalom.

foundations of the current violence and that advocate for an end to oppression. For the past few years, these efforts to educate about the history of the region and to stand up for human rights have led to various forms of intimidation, censorship, and surveillance. I've received threatening messages from community members, my talks have been aggressively recorded followed by complaints made to my employer, and I have been monitored and harassed by various watchdog groups. I am one of many across the country who has experienced such actions, and I feel strongly that it is our duty as faculty members to organize against this rising repression.

This type of weaponization of Jewish identity, which is largely being orchestrated by actors outside of the university, is dangerous because it foments support for genocidal violence, represses activism, and prevents access to accurate historical knowledge. Concurrently, it is corroding the moral fabric of our Jewish communities themselves, especially on college campuses. In September of 2024, for example, I received an email from our campus Hillel advisor asking Jewish faculty if they would like to appear on a website entitled, "Jews at NAU" to connect Jewish students with Jewish faculty. I enthusiastically agreed and was excited for the opportunity to further support Jewish students on our campus. After only four days of being featured on the webpage, however, I received a second email stating that the Hillel officers had asked for me to be taken off the page. I was angry and hurt by this decision, and so were many of my fellow Jewish colleagues, who each wrote to Hillel to say that they would refuse to be on the website if I was not also included on it. My colleagues' efforts were not successful, and it felt like my own Jewish identity was being denied to me on account of my politics. While upsetting, I've tried to come to terms with the fact that this may be the price I have to pay for standing up for justice and against genocide during these times as our institutions repeatedly prioritize allegiance to Israel over an inclusive Jewish community.

Our campuses must resist the cynical use of Jewish identity to repress free speech, criminalize our students and promote anti-intellectual politics that ultimately serve the interests of racial capitalism and the state. While groups like the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), and other Zionist organizations claim to be fighting hate, they are actually engaged in an incredibly harmful, ahistorical exceptionalization of antisemitism that associates it with the right-wing politics described above and divorces it from broader solidarity frameworks. Groups like Hillel and Chabad are facilitating these processes, and as a result, they are creating an exclusionary culture of Jewish life on campus that requires students to espouse pro-Israel politics in order to participate in Jewish holidays, rituals, and community. Again, while

the most life-threatening outcome of these measures is how they enable Israel's genocide in Gaza, they are also endangering the future of the Jewish people. From a personal level, it has been hard to watch my own community go down a hateful and egocentric path of unfettered self-interest where the impulse to rally behind a racist, genocidal state overpowers the need for inclusive communities, dissent, and even historical accuracy (as Hilary's case shows). It is clear to me that such approaches are paving the way for increasingly fascist politics in this country that will ultimately fan the flames of antisemitism and fracture the foundation of Jewish life in the United States.

Michal: Wow, Emily, that experience sounds so painful—to be told you are not allowed onto the page listing Jewish faculty because of your political views is so marginalizing.

I've had similar experiences. There is a strong and influential group on campus of Jewish faculty and staff, and at some point in the 2023–2024 academic year, they changed their mission statement to include combatting "antisemitism and anti-Israel bias" without alerting their members to the change, thus marginalizing many Jewish faculty who are critical of Israel or are anti-Zionist.

What's been more painful is watching my Jewish students who say that Hillel and Chabad exclude them because of their anti- or non-Zionist politics. My Jewish community was very important to me in college, and it's sad to see these students struggling so much. I've tried, through informal extra-curricular programming, to create a community for these students. But I can't replace Hillel. I don't have the time or resources to offer the kind of pastoral support and community that institutional Jewish spaces provide, but I try to reach out to students when I can.

I haven't had any outside organizations interfere with my teaching. Recently, a student threatened me with the potential for that kind of interference, but nothing came of it. More so, outside organizations like Canary Mission are threatening my Arab and Palestinian colleagues. They have posted their pictures on websites and doxxed them. The wider Jewish community in my state has also organized letter-writing campaigns to the president of the university requesting that one of my colleagues be fired and her center closed for what they considered to be antisemitic lectures. As a Jewish faculty member on campus, I try to provide protection when I can to these faculty members by partnering with them and speaking up on their behalf when I hear disparaging remarks. There's a much bigger system of

discrimination against Arab faculty in the US, and I know I can't fight that by myself, but I can disrupt patterns and interference on my own campus.

Hilary: Emily, I'm also so sorry that happened to you. Are you able to find a space for your Jewish identity and those of students who agree with you on campus or in your community?

Emily: Luckily, I have several groups of friends and colleagues in my life that are predominantly Jewish. I am part of two Jewish reading groups, I have a group of anti-Zionist Jewish friends who I regularly meet with in Flagstaff, and I am part of several political and academic groups that focus on Jewish solidarity with Palestine. For my students though, it is much harder as they often feel too scared to come forward with their beliefs about Israel/Palestine on campus and even among their own families and friends. As a result, they end up either isolating themselves from the wider Jewish community or hiding their true thoughts about what is happening in Gaza.

6. What role can you as Jewish faculty play in navigating the increasing tensions regarding faculty advocacy on college campuses, especially in the face of claims about antisemitism?

Emily: I believe that we as Jewish faculty have an obligation to speak out against the weaponization of antisemitism. For far too long, false allegations of antisemitism have been used to whitewash Israeli crimes against Palestinians. Today, this strategy of conflating legitimate criticism of Israel with hatred of Jews is rampant on our college campuses. It is being funded and orchestrated by right-wing groups that are interested in amassing political power (not protecting Jews), and it is tearing our Jewish communities and our college campuses apart. Most importantly, this cynical use of antisemitism to silence activists and scholars is helping to enable an ongoing genocide in Gaza. From my perspective, our primary role as Jewish faculty is to disrupt attempts to frame anti-Zionism as a matter of prejudice against Jews. This can look like speaking to our administrators on the differences between anti-Zionism and antisemitism, opposing the presence of groups like the ADL on our campuses, and holding organizations like Hillel accountable for excluding non-Zionist Jewish students and for their role in efforts to justify mass violence. Finally, I believe that our role as Jewish faculty is to support our students, including unequivocally defending their right to protest the Israeli genocide in Gaza. I believe that our duty as educators, no matter our identity, is to stand by our students when they take the lessons we

have taught them about justice, oppression, and equality, and they put them into practice.

Hilary: This is a very interesting question, and I really respect Emily's perspective. I also completely agree that it's our duty to stand by our students.

I think one of the issues in the present is that being Jewish doesn't shield you from accusations of antisemitism. Clearly more Palestinian and Arab scholars are targeted by outside organizations, as are scholars of color more broadly. I have seen an assumption, particularly among pro-Palestinian groups, that Jews can act as protection for Palestinian scholars and activists, if we so choose. One thing I've found is that for pro-Israel organizations, if someone tries to help Palestinian scholars, students or activists, or indeed just isn't pro-Israel enough, pro-Israel groups label them antisemitic, a Maidhof, a Kapo, or a self-hating Jew. According to these groups, if one isn't towing a pro-Israel-without-any-questions line, one is taking advantage of one's Jewishness to undermine Israel and the Jewish people and to increase antisemitism. I wrote an op-ed in June of 2025 on the need to keep talking about Gaza, Israel and Palestinians and almost all of the comments were of that nature.[6] On the other hand, I have worried that the fact I do teach about Israel, and in a Jewish Studies program means I could face mild discrimination the other way, i.e. having Palestinian-supporting colleagues being less willing to engage with me. I haven't seen that yet, though.

In the United States, I think we must emphasize the dangers of weaponizing antisemitism. Defunding research or taking away peoples' rights in the name of antisemitism is not exactly going to make Jewish people popular, or safe. In addition, Jews and Americans are on the hook for Israel's actions, Jews in particular. In Boulder we have seen how, when someone couldn't attack Israelis, he turned to Jews, the closest group possible. In this case I don't think it matters that this particular group of Jews were Zionist, they're still being targeted as Jews for Israel's actions and that's a pattern I don't see stopping in the future.

Michal: I appreciate what Emily and Hilary said, and I agree. I wrote an op-ed in February of 2024 calling out the weaponization of antisemitism on my own campus and arguing that the rhetoric was making it harder for

6 Hilary Kalisman, "I teach Jewish history in Boulder. Is my community taking the wrong lessons from Sunday's attack?" *The Forward* June 3, 2025. https://forward.com/opinion/725191/boulder-colorado-attack-antisemitism/

students to do the work of learning.[7] And one of the initial criticisms I got from a pro-Israel commentator was that I wrote that the reports of violence on campus—against Jews and Palestinians—worry me "as a Jew, as a university professor, and as a human being." This commentator called into question my rights to speak "as a Jew" because I didn't have the right political perspective about antisemitism on campus. These criticisms are always going to be there, but I stand by my message then, and I think it's even more imperative now. We must speak out against the mischaracterization of free speech as antisemitic. We must insist that discomfort is not the same as danger. And we must emphasize the need to treat Jewish students as mature adults in a pluralistic society. As a Jewish faculty member, I think it's important to help our students build resilience and to show them how to be comfortable being uncomfortable.

Because I see my primary role on campus to be one of education, I don't engage in advocacy as much. I don't have the time for it, but I also don't want my advocacy to make people think that they can't approach me or see me as a resource. So, I build connections and networks privately and I'm in touch with those doing the important advocacy work, but I also try to maintain a non-judgmental approach with students so that I can help them grow into intelligent critical thinkers in this complicated political world.

Emily: Michal, I really appreciated what you wrote about the distinction between discomfort and danger. I'm wondering what examples you both have seen of this on your campuses and how you have engaged with them?

Hilary: I haven't had a lot of personal experience talking with students about discomfort vs. danger. I had students question whether or not they would be comfortable in my classes, but I believe that was the phrasing they used, rather than would they be safe. I have also had students come to me because they were experiencing danger. For example, a student was spit on, another student was doxxed, others faced threats of physical violence. In those cases I have made sure the students are getting all the campus resources possible, followed up with them consistently, and I tend to give out extensions like candy because I'm a professor not an administrator or a therapist. I have had several students mention that they're not comfortable talking with their peers or posting on social media about Israel/Palestine because they're worried about losing friends, or sounding uncool. For those

7 Michal Raucher, "Sensationalizing campus antisemitism isn't serving Jewish students like mine." *Jewish Telegraphic Agency,* March 4, 2024. https://www.jta.org/2024/03/04/ideas/sensationalizing-campus-antisemitism-isnt-serving-jewish-students-like-mine

students, as I have described, I try to make the classroom and my office hours into a place where they can talk and ask questions without being afraid of getting canceled by their peers. If they ask questions that I think have the potential to make other students uncomfortable, I both try to talk about that potential if it happens in class while encouraging the students asking those questions to come to me outside the class.

Emily, could you say a bit more about if you have encountered examples of discomfort vs. danger on your campus and how you have handled it?

Emily: I repeatedly heard from students associated with Hillel and Chabad that the Students for Justice in Palestine encampment on our campus made them feel unsafe. I know for a fact that the students leading the encampment did nothing to threaten anyone's safety, while on the contrary, several people made threats and invoked violent speech against them. I also know that there were calls made to the ADL and that complaints were levied against me when I spoke about the genocide in Gaza and about the differences between antisemitism and anti-Zionism on our campus. Any student who has ever worked with me would tell you that I am kind and welcoming to individuals of all beliefs, and so again, I feel certain that those who may have complained about feeling unsafe were not actually in any danger.

At the same time, I have no doubt that it is hard for some students to hear scathing critiques of Israel or that it feels deeply uncomfortable for them to find out that many people understand Zionism to be a form of racism and colonialism. I know this because I remember feeling deeply uncomfortable as an undergraduate myself when I heard these types of comments. Yet, it is absolutely essential that we as a campus are able to distinguish between feeling challenged—politically, ethically, and socially—versus feeling unsafe. The people who are unsafe right now are the Palestinians living in Gaza whose bodies are being dismembered, whose homes are being leveled, and whose family members are being murdered every day. I find any attempt to center one's own discomfort with people calling attention to a genocide over an actual genocide, to be incredibly selfish and harmful. I think it is my duty as a scholar and educator to value all life equally, and so I refuse to allow people's feelings about heated political speech to come before attempts to advocate for people's actual safety. To be clear, I oppose any form of discrimination or violence against anyone, but we must reject the strategic and cynical use of the concept of "safe spaces" to silence those who are bravely speaking out against genocide.

Michal: I heard similar concerns about Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) protests on campus—that Jewish students felt unsafe. I had a Jewish

student in my class in the Fall of 2023 tell me how unsafe she felt and how terrified she was. When I compassionately asked her why, whether someone had made her feel unsafe, whether there was a threat, she told me that nobody had threatened her, that there had not been any violence, but Hillel had increased their security in and around the building. I am not sure whether there was ever a threat to Hillel. It's challenging because for some of these Jewish students, they are surrounded by structures telling them that they are unsafe. So to say to them, "no, you're just uncomfortable" doesn't really help. I think we need to think about this moment in terms of discomfort in a wider context of helicopter parenting and post-Covid lack of resilience among our college students. Many of these Jewish students in particular have been told to be wary of campus protests. They are told that campus is not a safe place for them. And they don't have the skills to face the criticisms of Israel that they are hearing. Many students took classes in high school about how to "defend Israel" from its critics, but that doesn't actually give them tools to know what to do when they hear conflicting information. They hear that information as an attack on them and on Israel, so they become defensive. I think education is the key. I try to give students many different opportunities to learn about Israel/Palestine so that their first reaction to a real history of Zionism isn't defensiveness or fear. But I think we need to start earlier.

All that being said, I did see some reason to warrant concerns about antisemitism at our encampment. As a safety officer patrolling the perimeter, I was on various chat groups about the encampment. Our encampment was located in a central location on campus with a lot of classroom buildings. Many people have to walk through that area. And every time someone dressed in the trappings of an observant Jew (*kippah*, skirt, etc.) passed through the area, someone on the chat commented, "here comes a Zio," or "beware, Zio approaching." Regardless of whether they engaged with the encampment, the assumption from those who were running the encampment was that Jews were Zionists and were a source of concern. I share this because it's part of the underbelly we don't always want to talk about. We had several other incidents on campus that were plainly antisemitic—a Jewish student who was having lunch when students from a Palestine-solidarity protest ran over and knocked his *kippah* off his head, for instance. There have been antisemitic acts and probably more sentiment that we don't hear about on our campuses.

And of course, it's much worse for Palestinians in Gaza. There is no comparing. We've also had Islamophobic acts directed against students and buildings. Those, too, don't compare to the genocide in Gaza. And just

because they are not of the same scale doesn't mean they don't matter. I don't think we should use antisemitism to distract from what's happening in Gaza, but I don't think we should be ignoring antisemitism on our campuses either. I struggle with this balance. Can we responsibly address the antisemitism and Islamophobia in our midst while also remaining focused on Gaza? I'd like to think we can, but we don't have a lot of models for it.

Emily: I agree with Michal and certainly don't think we should ignore antisemitism on our campuses, but I believe that antisemitism must be understood and addressed just like any other form of prejudice or discrimination. It is not exceptional nor is it more common than other forms of racism, and we have excellent sociological tools to understand how prejudice and discrimination operate in our society. Exclusionary thinking and actions come from living within political and economic systems that incentivize competition and exclusion. When we are forced to compete for limited resources along ethnic and racial lines, or when we understand our safety as being tied to the exclusion of certain people from our communities, or even our countries (as is the case in Israel and increasingly in the US)—we end up holding discriminatory beliefs about those who are different than us. The remedy to antisemitism then is not aligning with right-wing forces that further entrench these unequal systems, but to instead work in partnership with all of those who have been oppressed by them.

7. What do you think universities should do in this current political moment with regards to teaching about Palestine and Israel?

Michal: I'd like to see so much more education around Israel/Palestine on our campuses. I'm so glad that students are politically active, because it's better than political apathy, and I wish we could encourage students to pair that activism with education. I'd also like to see our administrators really protect and defend the important work that faculty do on campus. So many of my colleagues of Arab descent are scared—justifiably—to speak on campus or to share their work widely. We need administrators who make it clear that these scholars are precisely who should be teaching all of us right now. Universities are facing attacks right now that are overwhelmingly political in nature, and at the same time, I think we might learn something from them. We (universities writ large) have forgotten that our primary responsibility is to educate. Universities are corporations—some large, some

small—but they are more interested in making money than education. We need to return to this core value and elevate the importance of learning.

Hilary: I agree with Michal. One of the issues undergirding the controversy around discussions of Gaza, Israel, genocide and protests for Palestinians, is an anti-intellectualism that undermines expertise. Universities are places to educate, and to advance knowledge. I have tried to make space in my classroom, and on campus, for scholars, particularly Palestinian scholars, to speak as experts in their field not just as a token Palestinian to balance an Israeli or vice versa. This past spring I had too many guest lectures, in part because as I told my students, I didn't know how much longer they would be able to hear these voices; of Israeli, Palestinian, and American scholars doing cutting edge research on the history of Israel/Palestine, Israelis and Palestinians. Academic freedom has to include the ability to conduct research, to teach students how to research, and to present that research even when it's politically inconvenient.

Emily: As Michal described, universities are placing profits before education. This is because capitalism requires institutions, including institutions of higher education, to make a profit in order to exist. In order to make a profit, you cannot fully undermine the laws and economic dictates of the government that governs you. This is true under liberal governments as well, but it is more overt now under our current administration. This interplay between capitalism and the state explains why nearly every college and university, along with most politicians, corporations, and other institutions, have capitulated so quickly to the current administration's repressive demands. As a result, we are currently living in a McCarthyist period, where those fighting for a better world are being systematically targeted through intimidation, loss of livelihood, and even criminalization. As faculty, and especially as Jewish faculty, I believe we have a responsibility to disrupt this process. Specifically, I believe we must fight against the instrumentalization of Jewish fear, as a scapegoat and cover for right-wing attacks on free speech, anticolonial politics, and solidarity with the oppressed. We must find ways to fight for all people's safety and liberation rather than just our own. Otherwise, I fear we will become (or have already become) pawns in the rise of fascism.

Hilary Kalisman *is an Associate Professor of History and Endowed Professor of Israel/Palestine Studies in the Program in Jewish Studies at the University of Colorado Boulder. Her research focuses on the history of education in Israel/Palestine and the broader Middle East. Her first book*, Teachers as State-builders: Education and

the Making of the Modern Middle East *won the History of Education Society Outstanding Book award in 2023.*

Michal Raucher *is an Associate Professor of Jewish Studies at Rutgers University, where she teaches courses on gender and religion, religious approaches to reproduction, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She is a scholar of women in contemporary Judaism, reproductive ethics, and religious authority. Michal's first book, an ethnography of Israeli ultra-Orthodox Jewish women's reproductive ethics, titled,* Conceiving Agency: Reproductive Authority among Haredi Women *was published by Indiana University Press in 2020. Her second* The New Rabbis: An Ethnography of Orthodox Women Rabbis in Israel/Palestine and America, *will be published by NYU Press.*

Emily Schneider *is an Associate Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Northern Arizona University. She has authored numerous publications on Palestine/Israel, American Jews, and tourism, including a forthcoming book,* American Jews in Palestine: Tourism and the Limits of Liberal Sympathy. *Dr. Schneider's research has been supported by the National Institutes of Health and National Science Foundation, and it has been recognized with awards from the American Sociological Association and the Society for the Study of Social Problems, including the 2025 Joseph B. Gittler Prize for "significant scholarly achievements on the ethical resolution of social problems."*

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Effective Both-Siderism in the Midst of a Genocide: Whiplash Pedagogy on Israel-Palestine

Mahan Mirza

Abstract

This essay examines a unique, high-stakes pedagogical initiative undertaken at the University of Notre Dame following the October 7, 2023 attacks, initiated in response to campus tensions and student protests. The provost of the University, in response to student protests and a commitment made by the University's president, invited a Muslim professor of global affairs sympathetic to the pro-Palestine movement to co-lead a year-long campus-wide Israel/Palestine series in partnership with a Jewish colleague who identifies as a liberal Zionist. Both professors were trained in religious studies, one specializing in Islam and the other in Judaism. The essay shares the dilemmas, challenges, and successes of hosting such a series at a time when constructive public engagement on Israel/Palestine had become next to impossible. The essay is a case-study in what might be called "whiplash pedagogy," where students are invited to go back and forth between contested and perhaps irreconcilable narratives. The essay explains the pedagogical choices made, speakers invited, texts selected, and partners engaged for dialogue/encounter, as well as lessons learned through the overall reception of the series from a diverse campus community and selectively invited public audience.

Keywords

Israel, Palestine, Gaza, genocide, Agonistic Pedagogy, Narrative Empathy, polarization

On the morning of October 7, I was scheduled to have breakfast with Daniel Schwake, the director of Notre Dame Jerusalem, the University's campus located in the Holy Land. He was visiting South Bend to meet with the directors of the University's various global centers. "You don't know what happened," he asked, astonished, as he climbed into the car. He had not slept all night. The Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023 had actually commenced on October 6, 11:30 pm Eastern Time in the United States. I had not checked the news since the night before. The situation was still fluid when we sat down for breakfast. Hamas was active within Israel, moving from settlement to settlement through the borderlands adjacent to the Gaza Strip. Though nobody could predict how things would eventually unfold, people familiar with the region knew that the world had changed forever.

After the weekend on Monday, I discussed the need to issue a statement with my dean and senior colleagues at the Keough School for Global Affairs. As executive director of the Ansari Institute for Global Engagement with Religion, I felt we should say something. With no interest from the leadership to enter the public conversation at such an uncertain moment—a wise move in hindsight—I decided to issue a statement on behalf of the Ansari Institute. Our statement, published on October 11, was brief: "The Ansari Institute grieves the loss of innocent life in Israel and Gaza."[1] Instead of elaborating further, we invited our audience to ponder thoughtful statements made by other credible organizations. Our page became a kind of "statement on statements," with links to leading peacebuilding, human rights, and academic institutions. The first of these was a thoughtful statement issued by Notre Dame's president, Fr. John Jenkins, CSC. I chose carefully.

We also featured statements from Religions for Peace, Jewish Voice for Peace, Churches for Middle East Peace, Amnesty International, and the American Association for Colleges & Universities (AAUP). Each was a thoughtful invitation to pray for the innocents and for seeking better understanding for the causes of the violence. In response, we received three extremely angry comments from respected members of the Jewish community complaining about the inclusion of Jewish Voice for Peace. They argued that the group is a fringe element, non-representative of American Jewry, and that "both-siderism" was not helpful at a moment when Jews were confronting the most heinous assault since the Holocaust. In the four-day

1 "Statements Calling for Peace, Justice and Understanding," Ansari Institute for Global Engagement with Religion, University of Notre Dame, October 11, 2023, https://ansari.nd.edu/news-events/news/statements-calling-for-peace-justice-and-understanding/.

period between October 7–11, Israel had already killed as many Palestinians in Gaza as Hamas had in their attacks, with reports of another 5,000 Palestinians having been injured. These numbers rose dramatically in the weeks and months to follow.

While I was shocked at the one-sided demand for acknowledging harm committed against Israelis with a total lack of concern for Palestinians, I considered it unhelpful at the time to compare. I sat with the pain of my Jewish friends and colleagues, grieving the real losses and the trauma they had endured, on its own terms. After all, if one person loses a loved one, it does not help to simply point to another who has also suffered a similar loss, or a far graver loss. Empathy that is instrumentalized, that seeks reciprocity, cannot be genuine. I sought to be genuine in my solidarity with my Jewish friends and colleagues.

The first Friday after October 7, the Imam of our local mosque, the Islamic Society of Michiana, invited me to lead the Friday prayer. In the sermon, I led with the pain of the Palestinians. That was my community. I acknowledged the horror of seventy years of occupation and displacement, life in Gaza as an "open-air prison," the periodic bombing of Gaza for two decades, which Israeli leaders referred to as "mowing-the-lawn," and the indiscriminate bombing of Gaza that was by then underway, which had already displaced or killed the relatives of many of our own community members.[2] Grown men, strong men, wept in the front row. As I concluded, I invited the congregation to open its heart, to hold the same pain for Israeli children, as we prayed for Israelis to hold the same pain in their hearts for Palestinians. If we couldn't bring ourselves to do that, there was no hope for the future.

That summer, after a contentious year on campus involving protests, op-eds, and arrests, Fr. Bob Dowd, the university's newly appointed president, announced the theme for his first Notre Dame Forum, a campus-wide series sponsored by the president's office, "What do we owe each other?"[3] The series was ideal to constructively engage the situation the Holy Land in the aftermath of October 7:

2 Human Rights Watch, "Gaza: Israel's 'Open-Air Prison' at 15," June 14, 2022, https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/14/gaza-israels-open-air-prison-15; "The history of Israel 'mowing the grass' in Gaza," *Washington Post*, May 14, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/05/14/israel-gaza-history/.

3 "About," *What do We Owe Each Other*, Notre Dame Forum 2024, University of Notre Dame, https://forum2024.nd.edu/about/.

> With a growing and often welcome emphasis on individual rights and freedoms, how should we—individually and collectively—think about our responsibilities to one another? In a world where ideological and cultural divisions seem to have deepened and wars in Ukraine, Israel/Gaza, and elsewhere have caused such terrible suffering, how can we bring people together to face the challenges of our times? How can Catholic social thought help us engage in fruitful dialogue with those whose perspectives are different from our own, bridge social divides, and promote healing in the midst of suffering, division, and injustice?[4]

On July 2, our provost, John McGreevy, invited me to join Tzvi Novick, a professor in the Department of Theology, to co-lead a campus-wide Israel/Palestine series in the coming academic year. Tzvi and I have known each other since our doctoral studies at Yale. We are both primarily trained in what is called "text study," the close reading and interpretation of premodern religious literature, including our sacred scriptures. Although we are literate in the broad history of the Middle East, from ancient times to the present, neither he nor I are experts on the Israel/Palestine conflict. Tzvi is a theologian who sees Israel as the realization of the national aspiration of Jewish people, and a refuge for Jews in the shadow of the history of antisemitism. He is a liberal Zionist. I am a professor of religion and global affairs who identifies with the global Muslim Ummah, aligned with the "free Palestine" movement.

I had every reason to decline: I was not "an expert;" I was not Palestinian; I was afraid to stick my neck out, putting my reputation and career on the line, for what was sure to be a thankless job; was it even a good idea to be in public dialogue with "the other side" in the midst of what an increasing number of observers were calling an active genocide?[5] On the other hand, this was a golden opportunity to center the question of Palestine at the highest forum of the University: the Notre Dame Forum, sponsored by the president's office. The provost extended the invitation to Tzvi and me on Zoom. Tzvi immediately accepted. In the blink of an eye, I followed suit.

Over the next two months, we designed a one-credit undergraduate class, offered in both the fall and the spring, open for audit to the entire Notre Dame community. We conceived six public events to be included in

4 "About," *What do We Owe Each Other*.

5 Raz Segal, "Statement of Scholars in Holocaust and Genocide Studies on Mass Violence in Israel and Palestine since 7 October," *Contending Modernities*, December 9, 2023, https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/global-currents/statement-of-scholars-7-october/.

the public Forum, three in the fall and three in the spring. We hosted private meetings for students and faculty over coffee, breakfast, and dinner around each of the Forums. Our class zoomed with Jewish Israeli settlers and Palestinian students living under occupation in the West Bank. We traveled to the Vatican for dialogue with Jews and Palestinians living in Israel and East Jerusalem. Where do I begin to share the lessons we learned?

The Class

The undergraduate class enrolled thirty-nine students in the fall and thirty-five in the spring. Their backgrounds were diverse. Among them were American and international, Catholic and Muslim, Israeli and Palestinian, hailing from the global North and South. Some had been arrested in the spring campus protests. Others had expressed fear of the protests. Our approach in the class was neither to reach agreement nor to push for disagreement. It was to sit honestly and deeply with perspectives that were in genuine tension.

Discussions in the fall semester revolved around a single text, Sandy Tolan's *The Lemon Tree*.[6] Tolan presents the story of Bashir Khayri, a young boy ethnically cleansed from his home in Ramla in 1948, one moment in an event the Palestinians remember as the Nakba, or Catastrophe. Bashir's home, built stone-by-stone by his father with his own hands, was taken over by the Jewish Eshkenazi family from Bulgaria, one among many such families arriving in droves into the fledgling state of Israel in search of refuge from the horrors of the Holocaust. Their infant girl Dalia Eshkenazi grew up in the Khayri home.

The book opens with a touching scene in 1967. Dalia, now a young woman, must decide whether to let Bashir, who shows up without notice at the door, into their home. Tolan leaves the reader on a cliffhanger after the first chapter, returning to this moment in the narrative nine chapters later. Along the way, he takes the reader on an agonizing journey through the lives of Dalia and Bashir, and the contending histories of their peoples, leading up to this moment. Having read each narrative on its own terms—the dreams of the young Khayri family shattered by the birth of Israel, the life of the young Dalia, nearly extinguished in Europe, saved by that very same event—the reader is incapable of rooting against either Bashir or Dalia. The two end up developing an unlikely yet profound friendship, but they never

6 Sandy Tolan, *The Lemon Tree: An Arab, a Jew, and the Heart of the Middle East* (Bloomsbury, 2006).

reconcile their divergent experiences or perspectives on the past or the future of Israel and Palestine.

During the fall semester, Tzvi and I invited two graduate students into the classroom—one a leader in the campus pro-Palestine movement, another an Israeli international student from Jerusalem enrolled in peace studies—to engage in dialogue with each other and the class. One of the most remarkable moments in the year came in response to this dialogue when one of the undergraduates who was supporting Israel remarked: "When we saw the pro-Palestine activities from afar, we were afraid. But what I'm hearing from you is completely different. I'd like to talk more." Our approach, which could be called agonistic, enabled the transformation of relations without any expectation of arriving at consensus.[7]

In the spring semester, we decided to pick two different books. The first was Amir Tibon's *The Gates of Gaza*, a play-by-play of October 7 from a safe room in Nahal Oz, a kibbutz on the Israeli side of the border with Gaza.[8] Tibon, a journalist with the liberal Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* whose father was a retired officer in the Israeli Defense Forces, stitches together the harrowing Hamas attack. He reconstructs the attacks both from his own experience, from what his father related to him later, and from contemporaneous accounts that emerged in the aftermath. Tibon gives names to victims, depth to lives, and gut-wrenching depictions of the losses experienced on that day.

The second book was Ahed Tamimi's *They Called Me A Lioness*, a memoir of a Palestinian teenager living under Israeli occupation in the West Bank.[9] Tamimi belongs to the village of Nabi Saleh, whose land and resources are being usurped by Israeli settlers. Her story of resilience under Israeli brutality—the loss of close relatives to gratuitous violence, the dilation of time as bullets whiz by, the repeated raiding of her village and her home, the arbitrary arrest of members of her family, and her own imprisonment—make it impossible to avoid empathizing with the plight of Palestinians.

The alternation between the narratives of Tibon and Tamimi is what I call "whiplash pedagogy," empathy swaying from one side to the other, but

7 Emma Murphy and Maria Prada Ramírez, *Guide to Agonistic Pedagogy: A Tool for a Transitional Justice*, version 1, CurateND, University of Notre Dame, published January 29, 2026, https://doi.org/10.7274/31100923.v1.

8 Amir Tibon, *The Gates of Gaza: A Story of Love, Loss, and Faith in Israel's Borderlands* (Little, Brown and Company, 2024).

9 Ahed Tamimi and Dena Takruri, *They Called Me a Lioness: A Palestinian Girl's Fight for Freedom* (One World, 2022).

not entirely at the expense of the other. Even in the charged narratives of Tibon and Tamimi, one glimpses the humanity of the other. Tamimi's account portrays Jewish allies on the front lines with the Palestinian villagers, using their privilege to shield the persecuted, becoming part of their family. Tibon's account, rather, the very title of his book, is based on a speech by an Israeli general, Moshe Dayan, recognizing the humanity of his enemy, in a speech he delivered in 1956: "Why should we question their burning hatred for us? For eight years, they have been sitting in the refugee camps in Gaza, and before their eyes, we have been transforming the lands and the villages, where they and their fathers dwelt, into our estate."[10]

Although each text provided the necessary historical context, it went beyond chronology. We found ourselves immersed in "dynamic narratives," which "offer complex judgement, plot, character, and value assessments of the world thus encouraging more openness to others."[11] Tzvi and I were open to any and all questions; we offered modest framing comments to start each class, followed by a free-flowing discussion about the readings in tandem with the daily headlines of the Israeli annihilation of Gaza in response to the Hamas attacks of October 7.

The Notre Dame Forum

Our philosophy for these public forums was to invite experts aligned with different sides of the conflict who could nonetheless talk to each other. We bookended the series with Hussein Ibish, a Lebanese American and senior resident scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute, and David Myers, a Jewish American and Sady and Ludwig Kahn Chair in Jewish History at UCLA. They began looking backward in time, contextualizing the October 7 attacks within the broader history of the Israel/Palestine conflict. They closed the series looking forward in an event that is best captured through its title, "The Ever-Vanishing Horizon toward a Just Peace in Israel and Palestine." The four programs between these two featured joint Israeli/Palestinian grassroots peacebuilding efforts, a diverse to the point of chaotic Notre Dame faculty panel, Catholic perspectives on Israel-Palestine, and pressing questions on

10 Tibon, *The Gates of Gaza*, 27.

11 Nadya Hajj, "*Shinrin yoku* as a Pedagogy for Peace Amidst Violence: Generating Dynamic Narratives of Palestine-Israel Relations on College Campuses," *Journal of Peace Education* 20, no. 3 (2023): 291–315.

international law. All of these events can be viewed on the Notre Dame Forum website.[12]

In the fall, the speakers we invited were reluctant to use the word genocide, though they freely described Israel's campaign as "genocidal," using terms such as "war crimes," "ethnic cleansing," and "crimes against humanity." In the spring, particularly at the international law event, all three scholars—Jewish, Catholic, and Muslim—said that while they had previously been reluctant to use the term genocide, it had by then become impossible to no longer characterize what was happening in Gaza as a genocide. Sadly, by then, many members of the pro-Palestine movement had boycotted the forum because of their principled objection to the "both-siderism" it represented. I even received emails from students accusing me of being complicit in genocide for having agreed to co-lead the series.

Takeaways

Arguably, the Israel/Palestine series at Notre Dame would not have happened without the student protestors who applied pressure on the administration to address the issue. Although the series fell far short of their expectations and demands, which included divestment from funds that profit from war, not everyone felt that way. The protest-camp was divided; not only did some of them enroll in the one-credit class, many continued to attend the series, and the final event platformed student leaders of the pro-Palestine movement at the University's highest forum, where they read a prepared statement about their stance from the podium.

Parallel to our "both-sides" series that was sponsored by the University administration, whose primary purpose was "literacy," students and faculty who identify as non-Zionist continued to organize events that could be characterized as "advocacy." I'd like to emphasize that literacy and advocacy do not form a neat binary; one bleeds into the other and both can be equally intellectually rigorous. From my side, I promoted and attended all of the events, which included lectures by Peter Beinart, Raz Segal, and Rev. Munther Isaac, as well as the screening of the film "No Other Land," which took place on campus, coincidentally, just two days before it earned an academy award. Although my personal ostracization from these circles was painful, I do not begrudge their principled energy and focus. Perhaps this is how it is meant to be: Without them, the campus-wide series would have

12 "Israel-Palestine Series: Past Events," Notre Dame Forum, University of Notre Dame, https://forum2024.nd.edu/israel-palestine-series/past/.

never come about, and without me, such a series would not have a partner to bring the voices of Palestinians from the margins to the center.

A key ingredient of the series was my partnership with Tzvi. He genuinely did his best to listen to my point of view, as I did his. We did not reach an agreement on the path forward, but we saw each other's humanity, and we sat authentically in public dialogue with the problem. Though we did not know it at the time, our pedagogical experiment has precedence as an "approach to peacebuilding [that] involves a partnership between educators from both sides of a conflict."[13] Tzvi may characterize the year differently from how I have here, so this essay is not meant to speak for him.[14] While the public events were restricted to the campus community, we were at liberty to extend personal invitations to community partners, including members of the Jewish Federation, the Islamic Society of Michiana, and the United Religious Community of St. Joseph County. We were gratified to learn that the few who attended felt their perspectives were well represented, on both sides, for the most part.

A Theological Perspective

Let me close with a personal reflection. While it is possible to justify opposing doctrines in Islam with respect to armed Jihad, resistance, and rebellion, an overwhelming consensus prevails that if, according to rational assessment, the resulting harm is likely to exceed the benefit, then it is better to bear oppression with patience until the circumstances change. Vigilante violence is categorically forbidden in the presence of lawful ruling authorities. This is one reason why many Arab rulers are unable to support Palestinian resistance, because the resistance movements have already qualified the rulers as being illegitimate. Be that as it may, the limiting condition remains: A drastic asymmetry in power renders armed resistance too costly. Moreover, such resistance necessitates the suspension of first-order ethics that forbid the targeting of innocents.

There is a saying of the prophet Muhammad: "Whoever sees a wrong, and is able to put it right with his hand, let him do so; if he can't, then with his tongue; if he can't, then with [or in] his heart, which is the bare

13 "Team-Teaching Conflict,"Center for International Development and Conflict Management (CIDCM), University of Maryland, https://cidcm.umd.edu/research/team-teaching-conflict.

14 See response from Tzvi Novick at end of this article.

minimum of faith" (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 49).[15] Although this saying has spawned a variety of interpretive doctrines—so the position I offer is by no means universal—it has been held that to command right with the hand is the prerogative of the ruler; to command right with the tongue is the obligation of scholars; and to feel badly about the wrong in the heart, suffering silently, is the responsibility of the powerless multitudes, unless they can bring about change without causing more harm than the harm they aspire to alleviate. When the powerless take it upon themselves to command right with the hand, more often than not, neither peace nor justice is achieved. It only causes more harm because it leads to a breakdown of order, no matter how tyrannical. Such a position, which favors suffering in silence until God brings about a better day, follows the political maxim: A day of anarchy is worse than sixty years of tyranny.[16]

Let me take it a step further by invoking the following Quranic verse: "When the angels take the souls of those who have wronged themselves, they ask them, 'What circumstances were you in?' They reply, 'We were oppressed in this land,' and the angels say, 'But was God's earth not spacious enough for you to migrate to some other place?'" (Q. 4:97) The immediate context of the verse is the emigration of the prophet Muhammad and his Companions from Mecca to Medina. Abstracting it from its historic context, we might ask, how does it apply today? If a people can resist oppression only by committing heinous crimes, then are they not wronging themselves? I refuse to accept the proposition that oppressed peoples have no agency. The occupied have the right, under international law, to resist their occupiers militarily. But they do not have the right to target civilians, nor to invite overwhelming force against their own peoples in order to earn widespread sympathy in order to win a war of narratives.

Scriptural guidance is unambiguous: "God's earth is vast." Prophets migrate to other lands, where they make new homes or return to fight another day.

"No justice, no peace" is not, according to this theology, a practical slogan, for, an inability to achieve justice leads only to a world in perpetual violence. Justice and peace, at times, lead to different places. Those in power are the ones holding the gavel of justice, and, with their virtue, they are the ones with the agency to create the conditions for just peace. The oppressed,

15 See Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 33.

16 Noah Feldman, "Luncheon Speech: Better Sixty Years of Tyranny than One Night of Anarchy," *Loyola of Los Angeles International and Comparative Law Review* 31, no. 1 (2009): 143–155.

on the other hand, with their patient perseverance, hold the keys to what is called "negative peace." Negative peace is the absence of direct violence, though the forms of violence, cultural and structural, are still present. Those who are subject to indirect forms of violence may seek ways to shift the balance of power in their favor, but they are not permitted to act "by any means necessary."

The political theology of peacemaking I am expressing was articulated after October 7, 2023 by the Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisal.[17] In his statement, while he affirmed Hamas's right to resist the occupation militarily, he condemned them for the targeting of innocent civilians, thereby giving Israel an excuse to obliterate Gaza. At the same time, Prince Turki condemned Israel for its historic crimes against the Palestinians and for the ongoing campaign of ethnic cleansing since 1948. And he condemned Western politicians for valuing Western and Israeli lives over Arab and Palestinian lives. "There are no heroes in this conflict," he concluded, "only victims."

If a certain kind of religion has brought us to the edge of the abyss, then another kind of religion has the power to turn us around. The way forward requires each side to look inward, to find non-exclusive resources in their traditions that others can affirm, and to hold incommensurable narratives of exile together, without pitting one against another. The story of Israelis, their national aspirations, their history of annihilation and survival, has to be acknowledged alongside the story of ethnic cleansing, occupation, and genocide of the Palestinians, in all its depth and fullness. This class allowed me to grow in ways that would not have been possible in one-sided discourses that make maximalist demands while categorically condemning others by flattening their stories. Absolutism generates binaries: this but not that. To transcend the binary, we must learn to live with both this and that. The first step toward healing and reconciliation—whatever unknown destination that will eventually lead to—will be marked by developing this formidable capacity, which I can only characterize as spiritual.

Tzvi Novick Response

Reading Mahan's essay revived in me the complex mixture of feelings that accompanied me throughout our joint undertaking: the pleasure of working with so generous and incisive an educator as Mahan, the weight of the

17 Frank Gardner, "Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisal Condemns Both Hamas and Israel," *BBC News*, October 20, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67177684.

terrible violence that we were setting before students, and most of all, a sense of constriction or constraint surrounding the act of speech, a sense that every word that I might say, every silence that I might keep, was fraught. To say everything at once was as urgently important as it was impossible.

There are serious drawbacks to a narrative-based pedagogy. No one tells or focalizes her own story objectively; individual stories can be representative in some ways but not in others; a reader can be led to moral judgements that are insufficiently refined for lack of necessary context. Our contributions to class discussion were designed in part to address these drawbacks. Might we have done better to dispense with the narratives and our supplements and instead allow in only the voice of the historian or sociologist, to make objectivity our goal?

I think that what enabled our "whiplash pedagogy," our two-story solution, to work to the degree that it did is that neither Mahan nor I is disinterested, and that our personal allegiance to our respective "side" is rooted in considerations of identity and religion and not, per se, in the justice of our side's cause, even as the allegiance presumes a just foundation, and even as actions undertaken by our side can alienate us from it to the degree that they are unjust. Leveraged by the competing narratives that we assigned, our different allegiances—our prejudices—invited students to acknowledge the simple fact of the existence and persistence of two sides, neither of them remotely unsullied, but both compelling enough to command the attachment, to some degree, of reasonable, reasonably well-informed, and reasonably good people. My conviction is that the current situation—now decades old, and in important ways never worse—will not reach a solution except insofar as we, as an international community and as affiliates of the two sides, keep this fact in the forefront of our minds, and cultivate it as a starting point.

Mahan Mirza *is a Teaching Professor at the University of Notre Dame's Keough School of Global Affairs and Executive Director of its Ansari Institute for Global Engagement with Religion. He recently served as Guest Editor for a special issue of the* Journal of Economics, Management and Religion *on Faith-Based Economic Theories (Vol 6, No 2, Dec 2025).*

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INVITED SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

Teaching Israel/Palestine to Build Community on Campus

Russell C.D. Arnold

Abstract

This article is a scholarly reflection on the experience of teaching a class on Israel/Palestine at Regis University four times over the last decade. Indebted to Parker J. Palmer's "Habits of the Heart that Make Democracy Possible," this author explores some of the skills and experiences that have served to impact the wider campus community toward a more just and humane world. The article begins by discussing welcoming all participants into a more open and honest engagement with such a highly charged and almost universally contentious conversation. We are challenged to speak knowing our understanding is partial, and listen for what the other's perspective can add to our understanding rather than to find their faults. Next, the author recounts experiences of engaging the complexity of the Other within the classroom and in public events on campus. This is accomplished by seeking out a wider range of perspectives and wrestling with the tension between the correctness of our use of language and our effectiveness in deepening our understanding and transforming our conflicts. The article concludes with a call to make plans to make a difference; for each of us to take an active role in transforming ourselves and the communities in which we live, learn, and work toward the world we want.

Keywords

Israel, Palestine, Habits of the Heart, pedagogy, Gaza, October 7

This scholarly reflection draws on my experiences teaching an integrative undergraduate seminar for 20–25 students at Regis University on Israel/Palestine four times over the last decade (2015, 2017, 2022, and 2024). Throughout this period, I was also teaching courses in the skills and practice of dialogue and serving as the primary point person on campus for public conversations related to Israel/Palestine as well as responses to violence and rhetoric targeting Jews and Muslims.

I would like to dedicate this reflection to my Dad, Richard Arnold, *z"l* (may his memory be for a blessing), who died suddenly in January 2026, during the weeks I was writing this reflection. He was a remarkable person, a *mensch*, who modeled for me a commitment to curiosity, fairness, articulating his own positions clearly, and an openness to wrestling with the positions of others. During the year after the October 7 attacks on Israel, and throughout the first year of the war in Gaza that followed, my Dad and I met for breakfast just about every Tuesday morning. While I was teaching the Israel/Palestine class, he and I would talk about the latest news, share things we had read, and challenge each other to complicate our understandings. I knew that he did not agree with me about the possibilities for a future in which Jews and Palestinians might live together, nor the path to get there. However, I also always knew that he earnestly wanted to hear about what I was thinking and what I was doing with my students. His memory continues to be a blessing and an inspiration to me and to many others.

Let me give a bit of context about Regis and about the class. Regis University is a small, Jesuit Catholic liberal arts college in Denver, CO. We have a strong commitment to our mission as a community of scholars and learners engaged with the world around us, accompanying one another as we seek to "build a more just and humane world through transformative education at the frontiers of faith, reason, and culture."[1] As a result, we have a faculty and student body consistently engaged in activism around race, gender, LGBTQ inclusion, immigrant rights, and disability rights. At the same time, it is rare for Israel/Palestine to be the issue at the top of anyone's list. In my thirteen years at Regis, I have met only a handful of students who had deep, direct, or familial ties to either Israel or Palestine, even fewer of which became students in the class. The majority of people who either took the class, or participated in campus events, learning communities, or actions did so as more or less interested outsiders.

1 Regis University, "History and Mission." https://www.regis.edu/about/history-mission/.

I originally designed my Israel/Palestine course in 2014 to broaden our understanding of the land, peoples, histories, diversities, and diasporas, rather than narrowly about "the conflict," with the primary goal that we expand our skills and capacities to foster better conversations on campus. As described in an earlier article published in the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, the course's structure follows the "5 Habits of the Heart that make democracy possible" from Parker J. Palmer's 2014 book, *Healing the Heart of Democracy*.[2] These habits are: 1) An understanding that we're all in this together, 2) An appreciation of the value of otherness, 3) An ability to hold tension in life giving ways, 4) A sense of personal voice and agency, and 5) A capacity to create community.[3]

Focusing on these habits of thought and practice have enabled the students, and me as well, to connect what we are learning about Israel/Palestine with our own ways of being, as well as our families, and our campus communities. My goal has been that the class is not an isolated intellectual exercise, but rather a holistic learning experience that integrates ideas, understandings, and commitments in order to contribute to the transformation of our communities and societies. In other words, I believe that this Israel/Palestine class ought to be responsive to the needs of the present moment, preparing us to support better conversations across campus and our communities: conversations that welcome everyone to deeper engagement, that explore the nuance and complexity of the "other," and those that lead to making plans, making a difference.

Welcoming Everyone to Engagement

At Regis, one of the first issues we face is the widely different levels of knowledge and investment among the students. As a result, my first objective is to welcome everyone into engagement with the central question of the class: [W]hat does justice mean in the context of Israel/Palestine? I try to be clear with the students that I am not teaching this class because I know the answer to this question, but rather because I am wrestling with this question alongside them and I am very grateful to have them as conversation partners. I don't pretend to be done, or even farther along toward an answer. I may

2 Russell C.D. Arnold, "Cultivating Parker Palmer's Habits of the Heart in an Integrative Course on Israel/Palestine," *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 20 (2017): 54–70. This article and the course were subsequently mentioned in Palmer's Introduction to the 2024 edition of *Healing the Heart of Democracy* (see note 3).

3 Parker J. Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* (Jossey-Bass, 2011).

have spent more time reading and thinking about the issues, and have travelled to the land on multiple occasions, but each one of us brings perspectives and commitments that we all need. To solidify this shared project, we read together two poems: "The Place Where We Are Right" by Yehuda Amichai and "Out Beyond Ideas of Wrongdoing" by Rumi. Amichai tells us that "doubts and loves/dig up the world/like a mole, a plow"[4] making the trampled ground once again fertile for growth and healing. Rumi invites us to a field "out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing" where "ideas, language and even the phrase *each other*/doesn't make any sense."[5]

Even with this kind of framing, it is clear that there are many barriers to participating in real conversations about Israel/Palestine, both inside and outside of the classroom. We try to discuss this directly, to learn what keeps us from speaking up or getting involved in the conversation. The most common responses are something like "I don't know enough" or "it's too difficult." Understandably, students want to feel confident that they know what they think about the situation before taking the risk to say something. They interpret their uncertainty as a total lack of relevant information. They think that if they knew more they would know what to say or do. At the same time, they are afraid of saying something "wrong" and/or offending someone. Together we begin to challenge one other to become comfortable with the inevitable fact that whatever we might say is incomplete. Someone will always be able to say, "but you didn't also say this" or "but what about this." If we want to foster a better, deeper, richer set of conversations with each other, we have to be willing to say something that is partial (not encompassing the whole situation from every perspective) and to be willing to listen to each other for what they are saying, not jumping on them for what they did not say, or what perspective they did not take. We need to be reminded of the teaching of Rabbi Tarfon, "He [Rabbi Tarfon] used to say: It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it" (*Mishnah Avot* 2:16, Kulp translation).[6]

4 Yehuda Amichai, "The Place Where We Are Right," in *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, ed. and trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (University of California Press, 1996), 34.

5 Rumi, "Out Beyond Ideas of Wrongdoing," in *The Essential Rumi*, expanded ed., trans. Coleman Banks (HarperOne, 1995), 36.

6 *Mishnah Pirkei Avot* 2:16, translated by Joshua Kulp, Sefaria Library, https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.2.1?lang=bi&with=Translations&lang2=en.

Engaging the Nuance and Complexity of the Other

The next step, a difficult one to be sure, is to take this courage and understanding outside of the classroom and into the wider conversations on campus, in the community, and even online.[7] We have tried to work toward this in both indirect and direct ways. Indirectly, I am consistently drawing on what I have learned from these conversations with my students in organizing interfaith conversations, vigils, panels, events, and learning communities on campus. Since October 7th, 2023, I have hosted a series of public conversations, a faculty/staff learning community, as well as a few gatherings of the Jewish community on campus. In each case, I have prioritized invitation, relationships, and engagement. My hope, which is not always achieved, is to create a space where we can have real disagreement over the real issues while maintaining a sense that we are all in this together.

As a result of this work, I was contacted in Fall 2024 by Regis' newly formed Muslim Student Association (MSA). They wanted one of their first public events to promote more informal, individual conversations on campus about Israel and Palestine and the war in Gaza. The plan was to set up separate tables to invite people to speak and learn about the "Past" "Present" and "Future" of Palestine. To support their presentation of the past, I assigned the students in my class to design and produce posters and brochure style handouts that could invite meaningful conversations related to narratives of the history of the region since 1917. My students drew upon our reading of *Side By Side*, a volume that presents two narratives of each decade of the 20th Century according to Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian schoolteachers on facing pages.[8] The very experience reading this book evokes in us the discomfort and disorientation that makes an easy harmonized story utterly impossible. We might like the way one "side" tells each part of the story, but the voice of the "other" remains ever-present. We learn that "the history" is always held in tension, and that the words we use in telling "the" story matter a great deal. In trying to represent this experience of narrating history for the purpose of this public event, both my students and the MSA students resisted collapsing the tension into a single, simple story, and successfully modeled deepening conversations in public.

7 Online conversations are beyond the scope of this reflection, and extremely difficult. I mention it here only as aspiration.

8 Sāmī 'Abd Al-Razzāq 'Adwān, Dan Bar-On, Eyal J. Naveh, and the Peace Research Institute in the Middle East (PRIME), eds., *Side by Side: Parallel Histories of Israel/Palestine* (New Press, 2012).

The work in the class to interrogate the complexity of our language also impacted a series of private conversations as well. In recent years, we have used the book, *Social Justice and Israel/Palestine* to help us problematize foundational terminology such as settler-colonialism, self-determination, international law, and genocide.[9] This volume includes two or three essays reflecting divergent perspectives on each concept. One of the questions that these essays raise for us is the difference between *correct* use of a term in an academic context and *strategic* use of a term within a conversation. For example, in Fall 2024, one of the students referred, in class, to Israel's war in Gaza as genocide. In response, I raised a question about whether we should use that word to describe the situation. The student was a little taken aback, but the class session moved on. The student stopped by my office the next day and asked me why I pushed back on calling it a genocide. I told the student that my question was not about whether it was "correct"—whether it fit the official definition of genocide according to international law. It was about whether it was "wise" or "helpful" or "necessary" to use that language. What is the effect on the discourse of using that language? Does invoking genocide end the conversation? Is there anything else to say if we have declared genocide? Is there anything else to understand about the situation or the parties or the people we are talking to? Does it automatically make one party a victim and the other party evil? Is there anything left to wonder about? Does it make it impossible to continue talking with anyone who does not see it as genocide? After our meeting, the student indicated that they were glad they came to talk to me because they initially thought my response in class indicated I could not be respected and that they shouldn't listen to me anymore. Thus, illustrating precisely my point.

Later that month, I was leading a learning community series with interested faculty and staff. Over five or six meetings we read and discussed some of the materials I used in class, including the essays from *Social Justice and Israel/Palestine* on genocide. We similarly engaged arguments about the difference between terminology being correct and being helpful. In that context we wrestled directly with the official definition in international law, and the difficulty of proving intent. One of my colleagues, a professor of Politics, challenged us to also consider the context in which the definition was created and adopted, he argued, to shield nations from scrutiny and limit its applicability to other situations. We are left, then, with the danger of specific terminology as a mark of respectability used to determine who should be listened to, on one hand, and interminable debate over semantics on the

9 Aaron J. Hahn Tapper and Mira Sucharov, eds., *Social Justice and Israel/Palestine: Foundational and Contemporary Debates* (University of Toronto Press, 2019).

other. The deeper, nuanced conversation we want to have requires from us the patience and generosity to refuse to use labels and analytical terminology to shortcut and short-circuit the conversations.

One of the most productive and challenging readings I have used in each iteration of the class has been "Returning to Haifa," by Ghassan Kanafani.[10] This novella tells the story of a Palestinian couple who return, in the days after the 1967 war, to the home they were forced to flee in 1948 and their conversation with the Israeli Jewish woman who, after fleeing Europe with her husband, settled in that home raising the son agonizingly left behind as her own son. Each time I read this story, I am taken on a complicated, personal, emotional, and intellectual journey. The first experience I have is my own visceral memories of the semester I studied at the University of Haifa in 1992. While reading about the Palestinian couple approaching Haifa in the car, in my mind I hear the droning hum of paddleballs on the beach, see the layered streets rising up the steep hills of the city, smell the flowers and trees of the Baha'i Gardens, and hear "Bohemian Rhapsody" played on repeat by my Yemeni roommate. These memories are for me (as for Said and Safiyya in the story) a powerful connection to the place as it is in my memory, not necessarily the place as it is today, or as it is for others.

My second experience takes place as I fully enter into the metaphor of the story: the son (Khaldun/Dov) as the land, lost to his parents who are made refugees (Said and Safiyya), raised by his adoptive parents who arrive as refugees (Iphrat and Miriam), and coming of age and coming to terms with his/its shared history and possible futures. At one point, Miriam makes an off handed comment about Dov being like his father, Iphrat, who died in the Sinai 11 years earlier. Said responded to this comment with shock, followed by the question "What is fatherhood?"[11] He invites me to ask, Is it blood? Is it relationship? What makes my father, my father? The parents believe that the son is old enough to choose for himself, however he responds by becoming angry and then slumping in paralysis. If I put myself in the place of the son, and consider the voice of the land itself, would I accept the choice? Should I reject this as either/or thinking? It must be possible to find a both/and way of proceeding, right?

In the end, the story leaves me with a powerful reminder of my own limitations, and the refusal to accept easy answers that seem great but tend to

10 Ghassan Kanafani, *Palestine's Children: Returning to Haifa and Other Stories,* trans. Barbara Harlow and Karen E. Riley (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000).

11 Kanafani, *Palestine's Children*, 171.

collapse the tensions. The conclusion that both Dov and Said reach, which I presume is also the author's conclusion, is "man is a cause."[12] I have read this story more than half a dozen times, and I have read the notes and other commentaries on this story, and I have to tell you, I have no idea what Kanafani means by this. At times, I have felt like I have approached some understanding of it, but it doesn't last and I am left wondering and struggling to understand the limitations in our ability to reconcile with one another. In a way, like Said, who hopes his other son, Khalid, will have left to join the *fidayeen*, my hope is that my students will find their own way into the fight, not on one side against the other, but for the world full of compassion and understanding, justice and life for all. The kind of world worthy of my own father.

Making Plans, Making a Difference

In spring 2025, a flyer was taped to our department bulletin board and in other places on campus, asking students if they opposed their tuition supporting genocide and accelerating climate change. The flyer had a QR code that led to a survey, but neither the flyer nor the survey included any contact information for the group involved. I eventually tracked them down and asked to talk with them. They had gathered some support for a divestment campaign, and had talked with the Provost specifically about divestment from Israel. They were scheduled to meet with the Board of Trustees in a few weeks. On a phone call with the organizers, I listened to their concerns and what they wanted to do. About a year earlier, during the height of encampments at other universities, I had a meeting with our University's President and asked him how he would respond if a group of students demanded divestment from Israel. He said he would welcome student involvement in the conversation. He would want them to come into the process, not just demand from outside; to wrestle with the scope and the complexities of the budget and the other financial and ethical considerations for our investment strategies. Reminded of this conversation, I raised questions to the students that I thought the board might have about the scope of their request: How to determine whom to divest from? Would it include those who supported the occupation of the West Bank, the military, or anything to do with Israel? What about companies in the US who support Israel? Would we refuse donations from anyone who supports Israel? I encouraged students to do more to engage the widest possible support for what they wanted to do. They were convinced that they had the support of

12 Kanafani, *Palestine's Children*, 181.

all the students, based on those they had talked to. It seemed to me they had not gathered the support of the faculty—or really tried to do so. After this one phone conversation I did not hear from them again. My sense was that they saw me as not sufficiently supportive of their efforts. Too many questions, not enough "passion" for the cause.

Experiences like these with students both inside and outside the course, challenged me to think carefully about my own roles and responsibilities. Balancing the need for facilitating a space of dialogue, of welcoming everyone, of elevating the conversation, with the need for action in the face of horrific violence and a worrying level of apathy or paralysis. While the students in the most recent class (2024) were working on a project about developing a sense of voice and agency, I decided to write an open letter to our campus community. I tried to articulate a way of proceeding and a message that I thought our community (including myself) needed to hear. I wanted to declare that advocacy and action did not necessarily mean choosing a side (Israeli or Palestinian) but taking a stand for/towards peace and against violence—toward understanding and against othering—toward a more just and humane world. I shared my draft of this statement with the class and asked for advice that allowed me to revise it. In the end, I did not publish it or send it to the newspaper. I was afraid how it might be received. I want to publish a revised version of this letter here.

Open Letter to the Regis Community, January 2025

Dear Friends,

We have to be brave. We cannot sit this out. We have to do something. Every one of us.
We have to be brave enough to allow ourselves to feel the weight of the tragedy.

And, we have to grieve.

We have to be brave enough to not look away from this devastating violence or become paralyzed because it is too complicated.

And, we have to be brave enough to know that our understanding is incomplete, that there is always more to understand.

We have to be brave enough to take seriously what we do know, and allow it to penetrate our hearts and provoke our care and concern.

And, we have to be brave enough to listen generously to the voices and stories of more people who are closer to it than we are, those we may agree with and those we may not.

We have to be brave enough to listen to our opponents.

And, we have to be brave enough to speak up for our friends.

We have to be brave enough to listen to our own hearts as they break open in compassion.

And, we have to be brave enough to speak out to demand justice for those harmed.

We have to be brave enough to speak out against our own who fail to live up to our ideals.

And, we have to be brave enough to reject the "two sides" narratives (Israelis vs. Palestinians or Jews vs. Muslims) in favor of polyvocal narratives that explore the complex diversities of perspectives and experiences as well as the complex causes and influences on people's behavior.

We have to be brave enough to talk about the difficult and contentious questions.

And, we will have to be brave enough to "get stuck in"—to persist in the conversations with one another, to deepen our understanding so that we might strengthen our ability to act appropriately and effectively.

To our Regis Administration and Staff, I challenge you to be brave enough to encourage rather than fear the activation of our students in response to our commitment to accompanying the marginalized, and to be willing to align every aspect of our university, including our finances and investments, with our deepest commitments and mission.

To our Faculty, I challenge you to be brave enough to journey with our students, challenging them (and ourselves) to deeper understanding, to radically inclusive community building, and to careful discernment leading to just action.

To our Students, I challenge you to fight the algorithm that only feeds you the most sensational sliver of the story, to discover more than the single story, and to fight the despair that tells you there is nothing you can do to make a difference. You have ears, you can listen. You have a voice, you can speak. You have a heart and a soul, you can love—everyone.

To all of us, I challenge us to be brave enough to ask: Who have we not yet tried to love? Who have we not yet tried to hear? Who have we not yet tried to understand? Whose death have we refused to mourn?

As one of my teachers, Valarie Kaur, has taught me, "Listening does not grant the other side legitimacy, it grants them humanity and preserves our

own."[13] Kaur also says, "Only when we know each other can we understand *how* to stand up and fight for each other—and the world we want."[14]

We have to be brave enough to act based on our incomplete understanding AND commit to continuing to broaden and deepen our understanding so that we can adapt our action as we grow in our knowledge of one another.

I know that all that I have said is incomplete. That I have left many things out. And that something I have said will seem wrong-headed to you. So, come talk with me, I want to hear you. I want to continue the conversations.

So, let's go. Let's get involved. Let's love with abandon. Let's be brave.

L'shalom/salaam—In/for/towards peace,

Russ Arnold
Professor and Chair of Dept of Religious Studies and Theology
Regis University
Loyola Hall 32B
rarnold@regis.edu
303 458 4920

***Russell C. D. Arnold**, Ph.D., Professor of Religious Studies and Theology, Regis University, has been living, teaching and learning in interfaith and interreligious spaces on college campuses for more than 35 years. He seeks a deep understanding of the human found in sacred texts (Genesis, Gospels), history (Qumran, Early Jewish/Christian communities), and contemporary society (gender, race, identity) to work towards peace and the transformation of internal, interpersonal, and intergroup conflict. His is a former President of the Association for Interreligious/Interfaith Studies (AIIS).*

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13 Valarie Kaur, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love* (One World, 2020), 157.

14 Kaur, *See No Stranger*, 63.

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From Radical Hospitality to Radical Hope: Higher Education and the Imperative for Justice

Diya Abdo

Abstract
In this piece, Dr. Diya Abdo, Palestinian scholar, writer, and refugee activist, reflects on how building a movement of "resettlement campuses" across the US—colleges and universities that host refugee families on campus grounds and support them in their integration journey while engaging the campus and wider community—is informed by the hope for, and faith in, a free Palestine. Compelled by her Palestinian parents' and grandparents' experiences of displacement and the responsibilities of working at an American college, Dr. Abdo formulates a conceptual journey for higher education, from radical hospitality through radical accountability to radical hope, where the belief in justice for Palestine is indivisible from the hope for a truly democratic America and an equitable world.

Keywords
Palestine, refugees, resettlement campuses, Every Campus A Refuge, radical hope, radical accountability, radical hospitality, refugee resettlement.

When I was 13 years old, I visited the University of Jordan with my mother's cousin, Hiyam. She was a student in the University's Department of English Language and Literature. A humble, kind, and typically shy young woman from a conservative refugee Palestinian family, Hiyam acted differently when she was at the university. The campus was clearly an exciting place for her. Away from the restrictive family home and its eldest-daughter

responsibilities, she flitted like a butterfly between classes and the students' social spaces: the "milk bar," the central quad, and the cypress-lined avenue that ran the length of the campus, flanked by aging but still beautiful stone buildings. In her light blue hijab surrounded by other female students and her friends, she was effervescent.

In Hiyam's nuclear family (my mother's maternal uncle's), she was the first and only one of five children to attend university. My own mother, Afaf, who was older than her cousin and with four children of her own, had truly been a pioneer in her "thigh" (the Arabic word for "branch") of the family tribe, paving the way for Hiyam. Afaf had attended the University of Jordan more than a decade earlier, receiving both a bachelor's and master's degree. My grandmother Sabha, Hiyam's paternal aunt, was illiterate, but she was heavily invested in educating her two children who remained with her after her separation from her husband (my grandfather) and then in her displacement to Jordan from Palestine in 1967. University degrees, let alone postgraduate ones, weren't common on their side of the family, though it was much more common on my father's side who was from the same tribe–the Al-Sawahreh Arabs. This tribe lived on one of the mounts of Jerusalem, Jabal Al-Mukabber, now bisected by the apartheid wall. Parts of that tribe remained, and the rest scattered across the globe after the 1967 Israeli incursion into additional Palestinian land. In Jordan, my parents initially lived as refugees and then became Jordanian citizens. They married, and I was their firstborn, raised in the country of their displacement.

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That day with Hiyam at the University of Jordan was formative for me. It was my first visit to a university campus, and I took it very seriously, wearing a wheat-colored canvas dress with blue and pink roses on it. I loved literature, especially British and American, which I was reading all the time—both at school and at home. And I was especially excited to attend one of her English classes that day to see how they were going to discuss Romantic poetry. As we sat waiting in the lecture hall, in chairs attached to writing desks bolted to the ground, a male professor walked in and got up to the lectern. He lectured the whole time about what he thought a poem by Keats meant, the students furiously taking notes. That experience made me realize two important things: The first was that I wanted to be—*was going to be*—a professor of English. The second was that *this* (the style of teaching I witnessed that day) was NOT how I was going to teach. No, in my classroom, we would unbolt the chairs, sit in a circle, and everybody would contribute to the conversation. Together, we would make meaning.

I am not sure where this desire for what I learned later is called "student-centered" teaching came from, but collaborative life-making was part of my everyday: sitting with my grandmother (my *teita*) in the kitchen, passing her the grape leaves while she filled them, or caring for my three younger siblings while my parents worked. I feel now that my reaction to the lecture—the extreme appeal of being a professor and the extreme distaste for being *that* kind of professor–was fundamentally tied to my identity as a Palestinian. We love to learn, we love to teach, and above all, we love to be free: free to move, to speak up, to be heard—not louder than the others, but together.

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As a professor of English, first in Jordan and then in the US, I was deeply interested in a question I had heard Khnata Bennouna, a Moroccan woman writer, ask in an interview[1]:

"What is the role of literature in a world streaming with rivers of blood"[2]

What struck me was the tension at the heart of the question. It was not dissimilar to the tension in my experience in that lecture hall at the University of Jordan back in 1990: *What* we are doing here is important, essential even, but *how* we do it is even more important, more essential. Her question seemed, on the face of it, simple enough, and to the unfriendly ear, perhaps even rhetorical: "What is the point of writing when people are being massacred?"

If you are Palestinian, then your people are constantly being massacred. In my brief lifetime of 49 years, it has been an interminable cycle of slaughter and silence. In the midst of it all, my people remain filled with love for life and, most importantly, with hope. This is why it was abundantly clear to me that this writer's question was neither pessimistic nor rhetorical. And now, at a time when Palestinians are being massacred by the tens of thousands in Gaza, this question is more important than ever. As a professor, and very importantly as a *Palestinian* professor, I must ask:

What do we do other than watch? How do we take what we read, what we see, and design a better world? *How does literature spur an architecture of hope?*

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1 *A Woman's Word* (*Palabra de Mujer)*, directed by Silvia G. Ponzoda (2004)**,** DVD.
2 *A Woman's Word* (*Palabra de Mujer)*, directed by Silvia G. Ponzoda (2004)**,** DVD.

By 2015, I was a tenured professor at Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina. I was teaching courses like *Arab Women Writers*, *Arab and Islamic Feminisms*, *World Literature*, *American Literature*, and I was asking my students that question about what we do with the things we are reading when the world is running with rivers of blood, especially after the massacres in Gaza of 2014. But in 2015, something else was catching the world's attention–the Syrian refugee crisis. We watched on our screens as thousands of women, men, and children, ravaged by war and looking for safety and security, took whatever way they could out of their current misery into an unknown future world. Then the image of Aylan Kurdi (the little boy who drowned when the boat that was carrying him, his younger brother, his mother, and many others capsized on its way from Turkey to Greece) mobilized the world.

As a teacher, my unrelenting hope is that the work I do with students in the classroom will take root, and that it will slowly grow, reverberating through them and the others they will meet along the way on their life journey. Teaching is an act that is deeply rooted in hope, in a kind of faith in one's impact that requires the patience of years, if not decades. Most educators know, for example, that the end-of-semester evaluations are not very accurate. Students feel the impact of a learning experience much later in life. I have received countless emails and messages from students letting me know how much a book we had read or something we had discussed in class years ago had come to mean to them—much later in their lives.

But I was becoming impatient. Every year, I would walk into the classroom thinking: What am I even *doing*? How is my teaching useful in a world streaming with rivers of blood? And, at that time, I fear, I had truly been feeling helpless and was becoming hopeless. Unable to see or imagine the fruits of my labor—those slow-burn months of co-creation, of collaborative meaning-making—I decided that I needed to do something more "real," more tangible, more immediate.

I would eventually come back to my radical hope inspired by that Moroccan writer's question, to the firm belief that the art of teaching, of reading, of writing, of making meaning—*the work of imagination*—is imperative to the multigenerational work of justice and liberation, a foundational core belief of every Palestinian I have ever known.

But in 2015, as I said, I was impatient. The promise of a years-down-the-line impact was not going to cut it. At the time, I was hearing about Austrian activists. As embodied as anything I could imagine, those activists drove their cars down to Hungary to drive up the Syrian refugees who were trying to make their way to Germany.

Oh, to be in a car driving refugees to where they needed to go!

Luckily, I happened to read that September of 2015 that Pope Francis had called on every parish in Europe to host a refugee family, and another embodied idea came to me: Why not use the college campus where I was teaching—Guilford College—to host refugee families coming to Greensboro, North Carolina, one of the state's, and indeed the nation's refugee resettlement hubs.[3] And the idea made perfect sense to me and to everyone else at this small Quaker institution in the American South that sits at the edge of a woods that was part of the Underground Railroad. For those unfamiliar—as I was at the time—a parish doesn't just mean a church congregation; it means a neighborhood, a small town or village whose inhabitants are bound to each other by faith. And Guilford College was exactly that–a small town (housing, cafeterias, clinics, a farm, a gym, people!)—whose students, faculty, staff, and community members are bound to each other by shared values and a shared mission—a faith in our collective undertaking as a higher education institution. It was even more perfect that the word for campus in Arabic is "haram" which means a place inviolable, a sanctuary.

In response to the Pope's call for *radical hospitality*, we came together as a college to found the flagship chapter of what would become a national movement—Every Campus A Refuge. The word "radical" comes from the Latin word for "root." Radical hospitality means to go beyond ordinary acts of welcome to make people feel *rooted*, to make them feel like they belong, that they matter, that they are genuinely part of our community.

And I had always known that refugees rarely feel welcomed or rooted—even when they are just crossing a river from what they thought would be their forever home to the "alternate homeland"—what Palestinian refugees called Jordan. Because my mother had me when she was a first-year university student, my grandmother raised me. Growing up with her, I learned a lot about Palestine, the things she loved and lost:

3 Binnie, Isla, "Pope calls on every European parish to host one refugee family," *Reuters*, September 6, 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/lifestyle/pope-calls-on-every-european-parish-to-host-one-refugee-family-idUSKCN0R60DY/

What it was like to harvest the olives and sacrifice the sheep for *Eid*, what it was like to prepare for weddings—the henna night and the women's dancing,
what it was like to visit old city of Jerusalem and buy green almonds or sugarcoated chickpeas from the street vendors,
what it was like to wake up early to the call of the rooster and help the household make breakfast,
what it was like to see it all under threat from Israeli occupation,
what it was like to fetch water from the well under the watchful eye of the Israeli soldiers.

And a lot about her displacement in Jordan, her life as a refugee:

What it was like to live in refugee camps with no skills but your knitting so you can get your children an education,
what it was like to have no light at night but the streetlamp so your daughter can do her homework,
what it was like to be attacked by Jordanian military groups and almost killed,
what it was like to feel like you never belonged in the "alternate homeland," wishing every day, until your last breath, that you were back home in Palestine with your family,
what it was like to die with that hope still in your heart, your body washed by your kids in a hospital in Jordan, your body interred in a desert cemetery, miles outside of Amman without your soul
because you left your soul in Palestine.

What I learned from my grandmother was that to be a refugee meant that you never felt like you belonged, even in a country that spoke your language, had your favorite ingredients at the market, and gave you a passport.

This personal knowledge about the refugee experience undergirds everything we do at Every Campus A Refuge—every resource we build to create "resettlement campuses ecosystems" (the term we use to describe this innovative movement that utilizes higher education institutions as sites for resettlement and integration support for newcomer populations) is centered on how we can make refugees feel rooted in their new communities and, very importantly, how the receiving community can learn, grow, and also integrate so that we are all genuinely building a world together.

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At Guilford College, we came together in 2015 to host refugees on our campus and to welcome them into our communities in ways that would make them feel rooted. So many people in our ecosystem contributed to this effort—from the first-year students who empathized deeply with being away from home for the first time to the faculty and staff members who have spent their lives building support systems for other kinds of newcomers into their lives—their students.

As a campus, we grew our ecosystem by founding new partnerships with local resettlement agencies and refugee supporting organizations and deepening existing ones with our local faith communities, businesses, apartment complexes, daycare centers, and neighbors. We spent several months preparing for the arrival of our first hosted refugee guest, a young man from Uganda who was living as a refugee in Kenya; he arrived in Greensboro on a snowy day in January 2016. A few months later we welcomed a Syrian family who had been living as refugees in Jordan, and then another Syrian family, and then a family from the DRC. Now, 10 years later, we have already welcomed and hosted 100 refugees on Guilford College's campus in several campus properties that were available at the time: For single guests we often used the one-bedroom apartment attached to the counseling center or the studio apartment typically used by RAs, and for families, we used available faculty or staff housing—usually these are three-bedroom homes with spacious yards surrounded by tall poplars

Through Every Campus A Refuge, people from all over the world—Burundi, Uganda, Rwanda, Syria, Iraq, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Venezuela, Colombia, Sudan, and Afghanistan—have found community in Greensboro and on our campus.

And of course, it was always there, in the name—*Every* Campus A Refuge. We started at Guilford, but the initiative has now spread to over 20 campuses across the country—big and small, urban and rural, private and public, 4-year and 2-year institutions, from Georgia to Oklahoma to California. These campuses have hosted and supported the integration of hundreds of refugees, forever changing the very cities they are part of.

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When I first conceptualized the purpose of Every Campus A Refuge, it was based firmly on the Pope's call for *radical hospitality*. However, very quickly, I came to see how the resettlement campus movement must also be fundamentally rooted in *radical accountability*. I was always proud of how easy it was to get Every Campus A Refuge going at Guilford. In fact, I have said,

and continue to say and believe, that had I had this idea anywhere else other than Guilford College, it would not have come to be, would never have been born. Guilford College was the perfect place because of its Quaker values, its history of supporting refugees during World War II, and the local community's deep involvement in the abolitionist movement. But another look at Guilford's history reveals that, like many if not most institutions in our nation, we have much to hold ourselves (and our institutions) accountable for. For example, Guilford College did not admit Black students until 1962. And like every other college or university in the US, our campuses are built on stolen lands that belonged to Indigenous tribes. Very importantly, and whether we like it or not, we are part of a nation whose collective wealth is built on the labor of enslaved African people, a forced migration of epic proportions and enduring legacies of pain. For many decades past, and even as we speak, the US government has engaged in political acts that have forced millions of people out of their countries to seek safety, shelter, and sustenance. American college and university campuses are not absolved of this history; as institutions, we stand at the center of our country's future, accountable to our present and past. As stewards of higher education institutions, we ought to do the work of resettlement campuses not only because we *can*, but because we *must*.

Radical accountability means to understand our institutional responsibility in ways that go beyond checking a box (think "land acknowledgements") to performing or acting in ways that are rooted in transformation, in social justice. For me, and for Every Campus A Refuge, at the core of this *institutional* accountability is our understanding of our role in our hyperlocal ecosystems, and how that can translate into action through allocation, reallocation, and sharing of institutional resources in ways that work intentionally to make people feel like they deeply belong in our community no matter where they come from.

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I am currently undergoing another transformation back to the roots of what makes Palestinians who they are—from radical hospitality to radical accountability, I am now returning to radical hope.

I have been reflecting a lot lately on the cyclical nature of life. My institution, Guilford College, like many small liberal arts colleges, has been facing significant financial challenges—not for the first time. Many of us are worried and anxious about the future of Guilford. On a larger scale, we are going through something similar as a nation. Many of us are worried and scared for the future of our country. On a personal level, this reminds me of

my feelings about Palestine. During my lifetime, I have witnessed many genocides against the Palestinian people. Of course, I always feel immense sadness, but something in me simply refuses to give up hope.

The reason dawned on me when I was having a conversation with Guilford's former provost and close friend about how I feel about Guilford College. I described it as a "faith." I am not a religious person, but I am happy to believe in things I don't see and to imagine their existence. By faith, I mean a commitment to an idea. I am committed to and believe in Guilford College as an idea. Even if the administration of the institution fumbles, Guilford is Guilford. My belief in it does not shake or change. It's the same with America. America is an incredible idea. Its promise is awe-inspiring. I believe in America. And Palestine is Palestine. The idea of Palestine, embodied in its people, in justice, will prevail.

But here's the point: Everything happens in a circle, but the circle does not just spin around, it also spins forward. I have faith in that forward motion. Guilford presidents will come and go, American presidents will come and go, and genocides will happen, but America, like Guilford, like Palestine, is too beautiful an idea to kill.

Justice will prevail.

But that might not be in my lifetime—or yours.

And that is okay. I don't need to be here to see it. I work for justice, for freedom, for liberation, for equity always, but I do it for the generations to come, the communities that emerge from the ones I currently inhabit.

I see this legacy in the phone texts and emails I receive randomly, sometimes on a Saturday afternoon. A faculty member or a resettlement agency staff member will send me a picture of the newest family they are hosting. They've just arrived and will be welcomed on campus, they tell me. They thank me for Every Campus A Refuge and the work we have managed to create together, these pockets of love and compassion and hospitality that are changing lives in ways I will never fully see or understand, for generations to come.

How wonderful that this work extends in ways *I cannot always see but in ways I can always imagine.*

So, we come back to that question Bennouna asked—what is the role of literature in a world streaming with rivers of blood?

If radical hospitality is rooted in acts of *welcome* that make people feel like they belong, and radical accountability is rooted in a pursuit of *justice*

that makes people feel like they matter, then radical hope is rooted in an *imagination* that allows us to have faith in worlds that extend beyond us. As a Palestinian, this belief is foundational to my identity and my hope for a free Palestine.

As I write these words in February of 2026, hope and imagination are sorely needed. We are well into the third year of the most recent Israeli genocide against Palestinians. The American government not only feeds this violence; it is also enacting violence against its own people here in the US. In the American classroom, students are experiencing the weight of these realities as insurmountable. They feel hopeless—unable to change or affect the world around them, in Palestine or in America.

In the classroom, therefore, it is imperative to teach in ways that answer the question that matters the most in this moment:

What is the role of higher education, the role of the classroom, when the world is falling apart?

And the answer lies in a classroom pedagogy which fosters an imagination that animates us, that moves us, that empowers us—a pedagogy grounded in the understanding that we teach and we learn because

the world does not begin with us,
it does not end with us,
but it changes because of us.

This hopeful certainty is what makes it easy for me to imagine a free Palestine and to imagine another America, a future America that lives up to our best expectations of it.

Building communities of love, compassion, and welcome and seeing those communities take on a life of their own, outside of me and beyond me, is a legacy that fills me with immense pride, and most importantly, hope. I see it every time I visit a campus hosting refugees, every time I visit a city building its capacity for a bigger embrace, every time a student tells me that Every Campus A Refuge is *their* legacy too.

One day, we will all be free.

An expansive "we" that might not include me. And does not need to.

Diya Abdo *is the Lincoln Financial Professor of English at Guilford College. A second-generation Palestinian refugee born and raised in Jordan, Dr. Abdo's teaching, research, and scholarship focus on Arab women writers, Arab and Islamic feminisms, as well as refugee and immigrant issues. She has also published poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. Her book* American Refuge: True Stories of the Refugee Experience *was selected by the North Carolina Humanities as a North Carolina 2024 Reads Book. In 2015, inspired by Pope Francis' call on every European parish to host one refugee family, Dr. Abdo founded Every Campus A Refuge (ECAR), which advocates for housing refugee families on college and university campus grounds and supporting them in their resettlement. The flagship chapter at Guilford College is now one of many ECAR campuses across the nation which have collectively hosted over 1000 refugees and supported their inclusion in local communities. Dr. Abdo designed the minor Forced Migration and Resettlement Studies at Guilford College where students learn about refugee issues and receive credit for hosting refugees on campus and supporting them in their resettlement. Dr. Abdo is the recipient of an Ashoka Fellowship (2025), an Emerson Collective Fellowship (2024), the J.M. Kaplan Fund's Innovation Prize (2021), and several higher education community engagement awards. In 2018, she was named a finalist in the Arab Hope Makers Award. She has been making presentations about ECAR far and wide, including the White House and the United Nations. Dr. Abdo sits on the Boards of Refugee Council USA and the Community Sponsorship Hub. She lives in Greensboro, N.C. with her two daughters. To learn more, visit the ECAR website or watch Dr. Abdo's TEDtalk.*

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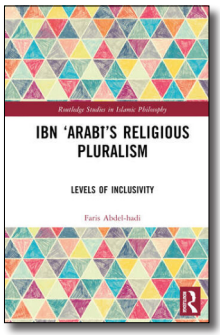
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BOOK REVIEW

Ibn ʿArabī's Religious Pluralism: Levels of Inclusivity
By Faris Abdel-hadi. Routledge, 2025. 266 pp. ISBN 978-1-032-77640-8. $145.00 (hardcover); $45.99 (paperback); $45.99 (e-book).



Ibn ʿArabī (1165–1240) is a towering figure in Sufi tradition. His philosophical framework expands dimensions of Sufism, including the perception of other religions. Faris Abdel-hadi, an independent researcher based in Amman, Jordan, is captivated by Ibn ʿArabī's approach towards this question. Based upon his doctoral study on the inclusivity of Ibn ʿArabī's religious pluralism, Abdel-hadi offers this brilliant book for readers to perceive the sublime stance of the "the Greatest Master" (*al-shaykh al-akbar*).

The wonderful work is divided into five chapters, in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. The structure is organized identically to the original thesis, apart from the sixth chapter dealing with Ḥaydar Āmulī's commentary, which is redacted for this publication. As said in the introduction, Abdel-hadi loosely employs Muhammad Legenhausen's non-reductive religious pluralism, among the varied propositions of Ibn ʿArabī's pluralism, as his underlying framework. Legenhausen's theory proposes that each religion has unique divine qualities through which God may guide people.

Though Ibn ʿArabī's passages on religious pluralism are randomly scattered throughout his works, especially in *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah* and *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, which are the primary texts used by Abdel-hadi, the sun-star metaphor has been the most frequently quoted by scholars and becomes the key point of paradox between exclusivist and inclusivist interpretations. Therefore, the first two chapters deal with constructing Ibn ʿArabī's pluralism based on cosmic abrogation and his related descriptions.

With respect to Ibn ʿArabī's's sun-star metaphor, Abdel-hadi argues, contrary to previous proposals by William Chittick and Nuh Keller, that the

stars are annihilated by the sun's light while at the same time subsisting therein. By this structure, the Muhammadan message replaces previous laws, but the religions remain after Islam's appearance. One specific example discussed by Abdel-hadi is the payment of the *jizyah* tax to allow other religious communities to become incorporated into the Muslim community as an act of mercy.

The two chapters are followed by a dedicated chapter applying his dichotomous theory and to contend with Gregory Lipton's exclusivist arguments regarding Ibn ʿArabī's pluralism. For Abdel-hadi, Lipton's rejection of inclusive interpretations results from his partial reading of Ibn ʿArabī's writings, thereby concluding that other religions are either subsumed or humiliated by the Islamic revelation. Abdel-hadi challenges Lipton's view by arguing that the subsumption is not intended for political subjugation. Ibn ʿArabī's passages of religious pluralism should be understood in the form of good counselling (*naṣīḥah*) for spiritual journey (*sulūk*), thereby warning against ignoring God's manifestations in other systems of belief, or disregarding their capabilities of reaching spiritual heights.

The remainder two chapters focus on Ibn ʿArabī's perception of non-Abrahamic religions, particularly regarding his encounter with the pagan Greek sun-worshippers. Ibn ʿArabī's view is examined by Abdel-hadi in three dimensions, viz., *ijtihād* or the struggle to find the truth, *rahbāniyyah* or the man-made ascetic way, and *nawāmīs* or the non-divine laws. These dimensions clearly reflect the utmost degree to which Ibn ʿArabī accepts other communities to follow their own paths. This framework is regarded by Abdel-hadi as a template to engage with other religions. Abdel-hadi emphasizes, specifically in the fifth chapter, the laws invented by humans. For Ibn ʿArabī, human laws are also divine in nature as they are dictated by the wisdom of sages and philosophers for the benefit of society and to achieve the ultimate goals of the law, i.e., the *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*.

Abdel-hadi concludes this book by highlighting his propositions on Ibn ʿArabī's levels of inclusivity, including the annihilation and the subsistence of the prophetic religions, as well as the inclusion of all other non-prophetic religions. In addition to this, he adds another, more encompassing inclusion: that of all divinities. Abdel-hadi gives two examples of Ibn ʿArabī's remark on this degree. First, Noah's people's belief in their imaginative gods, which in reality are the transformation of God's immanence or *tashbīh*. Second, how humans are permitted to give God any form according to one's belief (*iʿtiqād*) and spiritual capability, without imprisoning Him with the limitations of those human beliefs.

This valuable book deeply illustrates the intricacy and complexity of Ibn ʿArabī's religious pluralism without simply falling into the paradoxical debate within theology of religions. Faris Abdel-hadi offers a dynamic discourse with profound explorations and nuanced perspectives, thus challenging the reader's understanding and previous interpretations.

Yusri Mohamad Ramli
National University of Malaysia

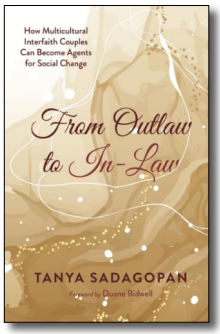
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BOOK REVIEW

From Outlaw to In-Law: How Multicultural Interfaith Couples Can Become Agents for Social Change. By Tanya Sadagopan. Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2024. ix + 174 pp. ISBN: 978-1-6667-7951-6 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-1-6667-7950-9 (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-6667-77952-3 (e-book). $40.00 (hardcover). $25.00 (paperback and e-book).



In the introduction to her book, Tanya Sadagopan names the positionality that shapes her research: She and her husband are a multicultural interfaith couple, giving her an insider's view. She often shares her lived experience through antecdotes throughout the volume. Her goal, however, is not to put forward a memoir, but rather to highlight and investigate couples who are authoring their own theologies of religion from their multicultural interfaith contexts. *From Outlaw to In-Law* is largely based on Sadagopan's dissertation research, which incorporated both quantitative and qualitative research, with a particular emphasis on interviews with a small but diverse number of interfaith couples.

The book is comprised of twenty relatively short chapters, each centering on a theme, with titles including "Disapproval and Conflict," "Intersectionality" and "Remaking Rituals." While each chapter offers salient points regarding the lived experience of interfaith couples, a few are noteworthy in offering fresh insights. In Chapter 8, "Expanding Identities and Double Belonging," Sadagopan identifies a unique characteristic of some multicultural interfaith couples that is emerging in the wider culture: spiritual fluidity and multireligious belonging. She describes how many of the couples she studied developed "braided identities," in which they experience a deep connection to their partner's religious tradition to the point of choosing to celebrate and raise their children in both traditions. This form of "double belonging," a term she borrows from religious thinker Duane Bidwell, gives these individuals a spiritual fluidity that provides insight into two worlds. The fruits of this dual perspective include "gifted leadership, global perspectives, and insightful analytical abilities" (52).

Two other chapters, both of which refer back to themes in the above section, are of particular note. In Chapter 13, "Seeking Justice for Others," Sadagopan examines how these couples often develop social change agency, in which they "challenge norms in a way that invites positive social change moving towards inclusion and welcoming of those who were once thought of as strange" (92). Multicultural interfaith couples have had to cross religious, racial, and even national borders to be together, often facing opposition from both their families and their communities. Because of these difficulties, they develop a thirst for justice for others who experience exclusion or prejudice. In Chapter 14, "Reimagining Faith and God," the author probes how the interfaith dialogue in these relationships changes and expands each partner's understanding of ultimate questions. Whether or not these couples develop double belonging, Sadagopan shows how each member of the couple expands their understanding of faith and God because of their experience of their partner's belief system. She applies the theology of Raimundo Panikkar which is premised on the idea that dialogue across traditions is a form of interreligious fertilization that mutually transforms each dialogue partner, leading to a new form of religious consciousness.

Sadagopan's work is a valuable contribution to understanding the difficulties and gifts of interfaith relationships. The book is strongest when it describes the experiences of particular couples in order to illuminate its themes. The rich diversity of the couples she interviews includes Sikh-Muslim and Hindu-Buddhist couples as well as couples where one partner is Christian and the other is Jewish, Buddhist, or Hindu. She does not center Christianity as the reference point for interfaith relationships, which is too often the paradigm in the Western world. Sadagopan sees her work as having multiple constituencies including interfaith couples themselves, parents and relatives of these couples, academics, and clergy and religious professionals. While there is something here for everyone, I believe that Sadogopan's identity as both a member of an interfaith couple and a clergy person makes this work especially useful for religious professionals. Sharing the experiences of these couples from her vantage point, can help other faith leaders to see the gifts of interfaith relationships and become advocates for them in their own religious communities.

Sadagopan understands the limitations of her work. While it did incorporate some quantitative research, her sample size is small and the results somewhat inconclusive. She also understands that while she has studied couples with complex intersecting identities, she did not interview any couples from the LGBT community. Given the complexity and divergent views of sexuality in religious communities, research about LGBT interfaith

couples would add a great deal to the conversation. Perhaps this will be her next avenue of research.

Matthew Maruggi
Augsburg University

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