

Politics of Apprehension: Teaching about the Middle East in Uncertain Times

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ABSTRACT: This paper engages with the complex ways in which current uncertain political conditions brought on by the politics of war and terror have produced new sets of fears, anxieties and obstacles for Middle Eastern anthropologists and scholars teaching about the Middle East in U.S. academia. Elaborating on issues pertaining to the democratic rights of academics, censorship, self-censorship, and the general parameters of academic freedom, the author hopes to raise questions on the current state of academic freedom in U.S. higher education.

Key words: Middle East; Academic Freedom; Practicing Democracy

Introduction

My paper engages with the complex ways in which current uncertain political conditions induced by the politics of war and terror have produced new sets of fears, anxieties and intellectual and political hurdles for Middle Eastern anthropologists and scholars teaching about the Middle East in U.S. academia. Using examples from my own experience of teaching about the Middle East and Iran, as well as pinpointing the current controversies involving other Middle Eastern Studies scholars, I will elaborate on issues pertaining to the democratic rights of academics, censorship, self-censorship, and the general parameters of academic freedom.

By way of introduction and to clarify my personal and intellectual trajectory and connection to the

topic of this essay, I should note that I am an Iranian-American political exile. I am also an educator and a cultural anthropologist by training and for my dissertation research I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork with Iranian exiles in Berlin, Germany. Thus my scholarly interests are in a cross-disciplinary dialogue with the field of Middle Eastern Studies.

The purpose of my paper is to raise questions which contribute to a broader conversation on the current state of academic freedom in U.S. higher education. Initially I was emboldened by my project which aimed to highlight the current restrictions faced by Middle Eastern Studies scholars and wanted to seek practical solutions to overcome the current state of apprehension. However, at this point, in

light of new anxieties, brought on by the fear of an impending war against Iran¹ and my research into the history of contemporary purging and intimidation of academics in U.S. academe, I am not really sure if I have any solutions as to how to deal with the existing predicament faced by Middle Eastern Studies scholars other than simply to suggest to resist the stifling effects of the climate of fear and stand in solidarity with those affected.

Attacks on Middle East Studies Scholars

The tragic events of September 11th 2001, which allegedly put in motion the Bush administration's militaristic policies in the Middle East, have led to an exaggerated state of surveillance and silencing of dissent across the college campuses in the United States.² The Bush administration's staunch adherence to the cultural superiority of the "West" in order to advance its "civilizing mission" in the form of war and conquest and its appropriation of the discourse of human rights and democracy as a pretext for its permanent military aggression and empire building, jeopardizes the academic integrity, autonomy and even personal welfare of those scholars who do not support these expansionist and neo-colonial policies in the region. President Bush's post 9/11 "you are either with us or against us" stance in his declaration of permanent war against a ubiquitous enemy, that is, TERROR, did not grant any legitimacy for

1 This essay was initially written during George Bush's second term, thus it is permeated with the effects of his rhetoric of War on Terror and the ensuing politics of fear. It is too early to gauge the effect of Obama's rhetoric of hope and change on real practical shifts in the U.S. policy towards the Middle East. Although Obama's foreign policy is articulated in terms of diplomacy rather than war, the continuation of war in Afghanistan and its extension to Pakistan, as well as the current administration's uncritical stance on Israel's recent attack on Gaza do not herald peace and prosperity in the region. With respect to Obama's policy towards Iran, the jury is still out and the forthcoming presidential elections in Iran will probably play a decisive role in shaping Obama's policy towards Iran.

2 The author is cognizant of the fact that along with the state of fear, there have been heroic efforts by many scholars and students to resist stifling of academic freedoms and act in solidarity with those affected.

dissenting views on U.S. policies in the Middle East and helped foster a climate of suspicion implicating those deemed unpatriotic. Therefore, those academics who deal with issues pertaining to U.S. policies and interventions in the Middle East, the history of colonialism or neocolonialism in the region and most significantly the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are forced to be in a constant state of vigilance lest their statements and writings be misconstrued, and read out of context and they be labelled as unpatriotic or suspected of lending support to terrorists or "rogue states," or better yet, their dossier end up in the websites such as Campus Watch catering to the right wing policy of silencing dissenters and censoring Middle Eastern Studies scholars.

In the following section, I will draw attention to some of the events that have had deleterious effects on the academic freedom of those engaged in the process of scholarship and teaching about the Middle East. These events highlight current attacks on the academic right to dissent and as with red-baiting during the 1950s, point to the ways in which those behind these attacks exploit the fear and anxiety the American public feels about faceless enemies abroad and their lack of historical and political knowledge in order to pursue their right wing expansionist agenda of creating a New American Century!

The report released by the National Research Council (NRC) on federal subsidies to programs of Middle East Studies (and other area studies programs) known as Title VI,³ asking for accountability on the part of these programs, overrules academic independence from Department of Defense or intelligence agencies.⁴ This report insists on greater coordination between the Department of Education, the State

3 Title VI was initially introduced in 1958 to train experts who could meet the Cold War national defense needs of the United States. Therefore, from its inception it was a form of the U.S. government's intervention in scholarship on international and area studies programs. What is different now is the degree of direct involvement by defense and intelligence agencies and change in the areas of scholarship which align with the current national security needs.

4 See *Anthropology News*, May 2007, p. 39. The NRC report may be accessed here: <http://books.nap.edu/html/11841>

Department, the Department of Defense and the Office of National Intelligence in allocating subsidies. In light of this report, in 2005 the U.S. House of Representatives passed a higher education reform bill that would establish an independent advisory board to make recommendations that “will reflect diverse perspectives and the full range of views on world regions, foreign language, and international affairs.”⁵

The House bill passed on 2005 states that “the events and aftermath of September 11, 2001, have underscored the need for the Nation to strengthen and enhance American knowledge of international relations, world regions, and foreign languages. Homeland security and effective United States engagement abroad depend upon an increased number of Americans who have received such training and are willing to serve their Nation.” Therefore, this bill makes it obvious that it is the homeland security needs of the United States which directs the process of knowledge production about international relations.

According to this bill the education secretary can monitor how Middle East Studies departments use Federal funding and if they are producing suitable graduates for the U.S. diplomatic, intelligence and defense corps. That is, this bill requires the education secretary to allocate funds according to “the degree to which activities of centers, programs, and fellowships at institutions of higher education address national interests, generate and disseminate information, and foster debate on international issues from diverse perspectives.” However, detractors of the bill, especially Middle East studies scholars, argue that this bill is not meant to foster diversity of scholarship and produce more well-rounded diplomats but merely to stifle dissent among the ranks of academics in Middle East and other area studies programs. While this bill directly affects scholars in Middle East and area studies programs, ultimately it has dire consequences for the academic freedom of anthropologists who research and teach about the Middle East.

Another example of a concerted effort to suppress independent research and dissenting views

in US academe is the report by Senator Joseph Lieberman and Lynne Cheney’s American Council of Trustees and Alumni, made public on November 2001, “Defending Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America and What Can Be Done About It.”⁶ While this document claims to promote academic freedom and dissent, it argues for suppressing the views of academics who do not support US foreign policy. The Council of Trustees and Alumni went further to lay the foundation for the conservative Middle East Forum’s McCarthyite blacklisting project, Campus Watch, a website that lists the names of “unpatriotic” professors—that is, those scholars who criticize US foreign policy and Israeli occupation. The website, the brainchild of Daniel Pipes, a right-wing medieval historian, encourages students to inform on their professors and calls the victims of its smear campaign “apologists for suicide bombings and militant Islam.” Although opposition to Campus Watch and similar efforts to blacklist scholars and silence dissenting views in the academy is growing, some argue that it is more than merely the academic career of individuals that is at stake here, for blacklisting projects such as Campus Watch render their blacklisted targets susceptible to being charged with crimes punishable under the USA Patriot Act.

Nicholas De Genova, who was an assistant professor of Cultural Anthropology at Columbia University, provides a telling example. He received death threats and almost lost his job after he made statements in opposition against the impending Iraq war during a faculty teach-in in March 2003. Similarly, the 2008 tenure battle by Margo Ramlal-Nankoe and 2007 controversies revolving around the politicization of a teaching job offer for Wadie Said and tenure decisions on Nadja Abu El-Haj,

5 To read the complete text of H.R. 509: International Studies in Higher Education Act of 2005 refer to <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=h109-509>

6 The American Council of Trustees and Alumnae (ACTA) was founded by Lynne Chaney, Joseph Lieberman and others in 1995. This organization was mainly launched in order to establish a conservative agenda in college campuses under the guise of supporting open-minded liberal arts education which mainly meant to counteract the post-60s relatively progressive political climate in many liberal arts college campuses in the aftermath of the pervasive student anti-Vietnam War movement and the support for the Civil Rights movement which had resulted in a demand for a multicultural education.

Joseph Massad, and Norman Finkelstein, scholars known for their critical stance on Israel's policies or the U.S./Israeli relations point to the many difficulties faced by the scholars whose personal views or scholarly work on the Middle East and Israeli/Palestinian issues deviate from the dominant orthodoxy.⁷ The most recent example of this phenomenon is the right wing smear campaign on then presidential candidate Obama due to his acquaintance with Rashid Khalidi, a distinguished Palestinian scholar of Middle East and Palestinian history and of American foreign policy in the region. That is, the McCain campaign and right wing media insinuated that since Obama "knew" Khalidi, he was "anti-Israeli," and had "terrorist" connections, which by implication incriminated Khalidi, for his critical stance on Israel and U.S. Middle East policies.

The Fight Against the Myths and Stereotypes of the Middle East

While the threat of a U.S. war with Iran looms on the horizon, and the United States is burdened by the disastrous and deadly consequences of the Bush administration's invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the dominant discourse on the Middle East in general and Iran in particular is mired in a long history of Orientalist misconstrual, racist bigotry, and stereotypical mis-representations. For instance, the 2006 released movie *300*, depicting 300 Spartan soldiers' ostensibly "courageous" fight for "freedom" and "democracy" in the war of Thermopylæ against the "barbarian" Persian army in 480 B.C. is a grotesque example of popularized history lessons the American public is subjected to. Taken from a graphic novel by Frank Miller, this historical epic, with dubious factual basis, feeds into already sedimented popular appre-

hensions about the Middle East, Iran and Iranians and quite ingeniously lends support to the Bush administration's current Middle Eastern policies.

In light of the pervasive climate of surveillance, censorship and apprehension limiting the academic freedom of Middle Eastern Studies scholars, such lopsided portrayals point to other battles in which these very scholars are engaged. I use the previous movie example to highlight what I consider to be one of the major difficulties faced by scholars of Middle Eastern Studies in this country, namely the absolute dearth of unbiased and scholarly popular knowledge about the Middle East and the wide spread popular ignorance about all that has to do with the diverse communities of Muslims and/or assortment of Middle Eastern societies and peoples. Movies such as *300* or *Not Without My Daughter* and fictional narratives and memoirs posited as first-hand, "native informant" knowledge seem to be the staple of popular lore about the Middle East. One might wonder what all of this has to do with a community of diligent students who attempt to take courses about the Middle East and hopefully shed their stereotypical views. Based on my own limited teaching experience, my prognosis is not very positive.

On one hand, there is the task of dispelling the age-old stereotypical imaginary of a trans-historical Middle East in which a large geographical entity with heterogeneous national, ethno-cultural, religious, and linguistic histories is lumped together under the overarching category of "the Middle East" which at times also includes North African nations as well as Turkey and Central Asian nation-states. Many a time, the term Middle Eastern is conflated with being an Arab or a Muslim, disregarding the fact that not all those residing in the geographical region(s) delineated by the term "the Middle East" are Arabs, or even Muslims. That is, there are Christian and Jewish Arabs and also millions of Turkish, Persian, Azerbaijani, Baluchi, Turkoman and Kurdish non-Arabs inhabiting that region. Moreover, at times one has to emphasize that contrary to popular depictions and Hollywood stereotypes, not all Middle Easterners are devoutly or fanatically religious, rural or tribal; that they are not oil sheiks, do not all ride camels, dwell in tents, own harems, and most exasperating,

7 Wadie Said, the son of the late Edward Said, the world renowned Palestinian literary critic, was a candidate for a job as a professor of law at Wayne State University. Norman Finkelstein, who taught political science at DePaul University, lost his tenure case due to outside political pressure. Nadja Abu El-Haj, an anthropologist at Barnard College was granted tenure despite the controversy and the case of tenure for Joseph Massad, a professor of Middle Eastern Studies at Columbia, is pending. An assistant professor of Sociology at Ithaca College, Margo Ramlal-Nankoe's tenure was denied.

that not all Middle Eastern women are veiled or passive weaklings waiting for their Western saviours.

What makes the current attacks on the Middle Eastern Studies scholars most pernicious is that, as noted above, the field itself is already faced with a minefield of hegemonic cultural misunderstandings and downright prejudice against everything Middle Eastern. On one hand, in light of overall US American illiteracy on international politics and history in general and Middle Eastern history and politics in particular, the task of imparting knowledge and dispelling myths about the Middle East is a difficult one. On the other hand, in the current political climate, while the academic freedom of many long-established Middle Eastern Studies scholars has already been imperiled, non-tenured, adjunct and independent scholars are put in an ethical quandary. That is, they are left in a constant state of uncertainty as to whether to soften some of their positions or engage in self-censorship lest their already tenuous position be put at risk, or rather take their chances and state what is unpopular and pay the price for their outspokenness with their job and keep their integrity untarnished. For instance, in 2005 Douglas Giles, an adjunct professor of philosophy and religion at Roosevelt University of Chicago, IL was fired for allowing students in his class to ask questions about Judaism, Islam and Zionism. The chair of the department ordered the adjunct professor to censor his curriculum, restrict his students' questions, and forbade him to respond to controversial questions or comments from students pertaining to Judaism, Islam, the "Palestinian issue," and Zionism.

While my sketchy teaching experience might not suffice to build a case for the dominance of a climate of apprehension and surveillance, as noted above, there are plenty of other examples to make that very point. Granted, my personal teaching and scholarship experience is limited to my work at UC Santa Cruz, a liberal institution of higher education. However, even my task has not been uncomplicated. I can easily recall some of my own hesitations and anxiety-filled moments when I was vexed by the possibility of misapprehension of some of my statements in my classes by my not-so-supportive and at times antagonistic students. Furthermore, I still have a clear

image of some of my fellow graduate students who in uncharacteristically hushed voices advised me to "be careful!" about publicly announcing my anti-war stance regarding the U.S. war against Afghanistan when the initial post 9/11 climate of fear seemed to be all-pervasive. I also recall a student's e-mail demanding clarification of some outrageous remarks made by the Iranian president Ahmadinejad, the president of the country from which I was exiled, implying that as an Iranian I was somehow responsible for these remarks!

While I was teaching a course on Iranian peoples and cultures a couple of years ago, and after I displayed some recent online photos from Iran, I was stunned by how most of my students were shocked to find Tehran a modern city with a sprawling cityscape. Moreover, not one of my students knew that in 2003, Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian woman, who was a lawyer and human rights activist became the first Iranian and Muslim woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her pioneering work for democracy and human rights in Iran, particularly women and children's rights. Also, I was surprised how easily most of my students expressed compassion and understanding towards Iranian people after reading a journalistic account that discussed middle and upper-middle-class Iranian women's concern with plastic surgery and fashion, and some young men's and women's lax attitudes about sex; as if the only means by which my students could find a common ground with Iranian citizenry was through their shared U.S. American taste and sensibilities! Furthermore, despite my students' general stereotypical perceptions about what "dictatorship" and "lack of democracy" in Iran meant, the extent of the Islamic State's daily terror and its disciplinary power in creating new citizenry was unfamiliar to many of them. I am not sure if my many attempts to contextualize this political state of affairs in the long history of semi-colonial and neo-colonial power relations in the region were useful in assisting them to attain a nuanced view of the history and politics of modern state formation in Iran. Although I highlighted the fact that the democratically elected government of Dr. Mosaddeq, an Iranian nationalist, and the architect of the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry was overthrown in a 1953 coup d'état

orchestrated by the CIA and supported and funded by the U.S. and British governments, I am not convinced if some of my students were able to make any connections with US support for a monarchical tyranny and the revolution of 1979, notwithstanding my efforts to highlight that very connection.

Moreover, most of my students were not aware of the extent of daily resistance and the fight for justice and democratic rights mounted by Iranian students, and they were particularly unaware of the existence of a home-grown, indigenous women's rights movement in Iran. Most of my students were surprised to find out that Iranian women have been active participants in the major historical processes in the contemporary Iranian political landscape. They were astonished to hear that despite all the cultural and political setbacks, Iranian women have been fighting for women's equal rights and the abolition of misogynistic laws and that some of those active in women's rights movement have embarked on a project of reinterpreting Islamic teachings in order to improve Muslim women's lot. This information belied my students' stereotypical perceptions regarding the passivity of Muslim or veiled women. While in hindsight, I could take a breath of relief in realizing that attendance in my course might have helped dispel some of my students' misapprehensions, I am not convinced that taking one course or even a compilation of courses can overcome a long historical process of misconstrual and cultural racism. Notwithstanding the necessity of structural changes and shifts in racial politics and practices locally in U.S. American society and globally in terms of fair trade and global racial and social justice and economic and political power sharing, the process of dispelling the stereotypes and myths surrounding the Middle Eastern peoples and cultures is a slow and steady process. This process requires utmost personal fortitude and intel-

lectual perseverance in the face of provocation and at times simple luck—that is, having students with discerning eyes, curious enough to do some homework on their own. Or better yet, one might hope that a major transformation in U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East would in turn necessitate a shift in dominant cultural representations of “everything Muslim, Middle Eastern or Iranian.” In this paper, however, I do not intend to explore the conditions of possibility for such a drastic change.

As I had warned earlier, this paper merely draws attention to the myriad constraints faced by scholars whose academic research, teaching and writing touched on issues related to the current affairs in the Middle East in General and Israeli/Palestinian issues in particular. Thus the paper does not highlight strategies of resistance and counteraction on the part of scholars who do not support the imperial expansionist policies of the United States government in the Middle East and also stand up to the power of orthodoxy and the climate of fear. The jury on the suppression of dissenting views in the academy, however, is still out and I hope the recent surge in popular dissent will render more improbable the success of such efforts.

Acknowledgements

First of all I want to extend my gratitude to my friend and intellectual interlocutor A.L. Anderson-Lazo for her tireless and concerted effort over a long period to launch this panel and her unflinching support of my contribution. Moreover, I want to thank Ann Kingsolver and the other panelists as well as the organizers of the Society for Applied Anthropology's annual conference for creating this opportunity to exchange ideas, anxieties, fears and hopes.