

Interrogating Israel Studies in the Academy

A Call for Action

In May 2012, the British Committee for the Universities of Palestine (BRICUP) issued a briefing document, “Universities rebranding Israel’s image: Hasbara posts in Israel Studies threaten academic integrity.”¹ This important activist tool provides information and suggestions for how to mobilize against Israel Studies chairs and posts in the UK, especially in view of the promotion of Israel studies by supporters of Israel to counter Israel’s increasingly tarnished reputation and in light of the growing global BDS movement.

“Interrogating Israel Studies in the Academy” is a call to action by the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI). This call builds upon the BRICUP briefing document and provides brief information about Israel Studies in other parts of the world. We also outline for conscientious academics and students other components of Israel studies such as academic programs, centers, activities and opportunities in Israel studies.²

Background

For several years now, universities in Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere have been establishing academic programs and centers, faculty chairs, fellowships and scholarships, study abroad programs, journals, and other activities and schemes in Israel Studies. There is no doubt that the proliferation of Israel Studies is linked to the increasing prominence of academic activism on university campuses around the world inspired by the Palestinian call for the academic and cultural Boycott of Israel and the impressive spread of the wider boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement.

As the BRICUP document makes clear, pro-Israel *Hasbara* (“public explaining,” or propaganda) initiatives have been well funded by the Israeli government and Zionist foundations, with strategic advice from organizations such as the Reut Institute, an influential Zionist think-tank. A recent investigation into Israel studies shows that while it is not an entirely new academic field, it has been particularly in the last decade that Israel’s deteriorating international image has prompted the establishment of new initiatives.³

As BRICUP has shown, in the UK a key propaganda initiative is the Britain-Israel Research and Academic Exchange (BIRAX). It was jointly established by the UK and Israeli governments, with support from the Pears Foundation and United Jewish Israel Appeal (UJIA).⁴ BIRAX has been facilitated by Lord Weidenfeld, a former Chef de Cabinet of Israel. BIRAX aims to strengthen research cooperation between Israeli and British academics and academic institutions, especially as a way to counter boycott calls against Israeli universities.⁵

In the United States, there is a robust effort to institute Israel studies through a multi-faceted array of academic programs, centers, endowed chairs, fellowships and scholarships, faculty

¹ BRICUP, “Universities rebranding Israel’s image: Hasbara posts in Israel Studies threaten academic integrity.” <http://bricup.org.uk/documents/HasbaraStudiesBriefing.pdf>

² PACBI has adapted the BRICUP briefing for global use in coordination with and with the permission of BRICUP.

³ Ben White, “The Case for Israel (Studies): It’s not Hasbara. Honest.” Mondoweiss, June 21, 2012. <http://mondoweiss.net/2012/06/the-case-for-israel-studies-its-not-hasbara-honest.html>. White provides a useful chronology of academic hasbara efforts, mainly in the United States.

⁴ <http://www.biraxrmi.org> and <http://www.britishcouncil.org/israel-education-birax.htm>

⁵ See PACBI’s analysis of the BIRAX role in the anti-boycott campaign: <http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=1177&key=birax>

training, and visiting lectureships.⁶ The Nazarian Center for Israel Studies at UCLA, for example, has a fellowship program for academics and graduate students; training programs for teachers and university professors; an artist-in-residence scheme; and a publications series, among other activities.⁷ Other examples of Israel Studies programs and centers in the US and Canada are those at Brandeis University⁸, Concordia University⁹, and the University of Calgary.¹⁰

In Europe at large, the European Association of Israel Studies was established in 2011 with funding from the Pears Foundation, based at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London for the first four years.¹¹ Other programs are found at Manchester University, Leeds University (all funded by the Pears Foundation) and at Oxford University (Stanley and Zea Lewis Family Foundation).¹² At SOAS the posts are named Israel Studies. At the other universities the names link Israel with Middle Eastern or Mediterranean Studies. There are efforts to create more posts. At Sussex University in particular, the Yossi Harel Chair in Modern Israel Studies is named after a Mossad spy-provocateur who sought to escalate conflict with Egypt during the 1954 Suez crisis; he also fought in the Haganah. The Chair's name indicates the pro-Zionist political objectives of the sponsors: the R and S Cohen Foundation, the Blavatnik Family Foundation, the Atkin Foundation, the Gerald Ronson Foundation (see the Annexes in the BRICUP briefing document). Lord Weidenfeld welcomed the Yossi Harel Chair as 'vital in the fight against anti-Zionism'. Indeed, Israel Studies 'is very important to have in some key universities, particularly those with an anti-Israel presence', he told the *Jewish Chronicle* (01.03.12).¹³

A Call for Action: Countering Israel-centered Academic Propaganda

It is important to have a well-studied strategy for countering the various manifestations of Israel Studies. It is important to show that Israel studies is driven by glaring political agendas that undermine academic integrity and stems from pro-Israel considerations and motivations in the face of the increasing international condemnation and isolation of Israel as a racist, colonial and apartheid state. It is equally important to show that Israel studies often conflicts with the more or less universal values of the academy. As the BRICUP briefing document states,

[the] hasbara agenda profoundly contradicts the mission and basic values of universities. They are committed to excellence, integrity and rigour in both research and teaching. This aim distinguishes universities from PR companies, advertising agencies, policy-based think-thanks, in-house research units, commercial R&D units and the like. It forms the core value of universities to the wider society. Research and teaching therefore must be carried out in ways that are not, nor seen to be, captured by special interests of any kind. Universities have a fundamental responsibility to students, tax-payers, donors, and the wider public in this regard. Their intrinsic value and wider reputation would suffer to the extent that they disregard this responsibility...Israeli PR has goals fundamentally at odds with the university's mission. Such funding also generates a conflict with the ethical codes and standards that some universities are attempting to formalize. Academic integrity and freedom

⁶ Ben White, op. cit.

⁷ <http://www.international.ucla.edu/israel/about/article.asp?parentid=117533>

⁸ <http://www.brandeis.edu/israelcenter/>

⁹ <http://www.concordia.ca/alumni-giving/giving/reasons-to-give/news/2011/06/azrieli-foundation-donates-5-million-to-concordia-university.php>

¹⁰ <http://arts.ucalgary.ca/isst/>

¹¹ BRICUP, op. cit.

¹² BRICUP, op. cit.

¹³ The information on UK universities is taken from the BRICUP briefing document.

are under threat at every stage: in accepting such funds, selecting staff, setting the curriculum, research topics, framing issues, etc. Staff may well feel under pressure to keep quiet about such concerns. Such funds concern all those who wish to uphold basic academic standards in an era of greater austerity and private fund-raising.¹⁴

To defend the basic mission of the university, we have a responsibility to question the aims and conditions of a new program, center, or post in Israel Studies, regardless of whether or not it has already been established. Questions can be flexibly deployed for different purposes or at different stages, for example:

1. pressuring universities to demonstrate that the program or post is *not* Hasbara Studies, or
2. opening up debate about the academic integrity of such an undertaking, or
3. trying to set conditions for improving its integrity, or opposing the program, post, or center.

A campaign can maximize initial unity by posing questions to donors and universities, who may be sensitive about their reputation. Questions could be put more forcefully if sponsored by unions of university staff and students. The list of questions should be widely publicised; see examples below. As a general question: How do the criteria and procedures for the post, center or program compare with other new posts, centers or programs in the university or department?

University staff have already posed such questions about posts in Israel Studies. In some cases, donors' terms have been clarified or improved, or else their offers have been withdrawn.

Depending on responses from the university and donors, a campaign can then decide on further demands or actions. This activity could be called, for example, the 'Campaign Against Hasbara Studies' or the 'Campaign Against Apartheid Apologetics', or the "Campaign for Academic Integrity". Groups to be engaged in a campaign include: academic and other staff; students, student societies and student unions; academic unions and associations; and the local community. Appropriate methods include public meetings, press announcements, cross-university collaboration, etc.

Questioning Israel studies posts, chairs, programs, centers, fellowships, and other schemes

Rationale

What academic need informed the decision to create the program, center, or post? Or did the initiative come from the donors?

What are the aims for establishing the center, program or fellowship? What is the justification within the academic framework and the university's programs?

Is the program or center involved in any academic exchange relations with Israeli universities? If so, is the relationship part of a formal agreement between the institutions? If these Israeli universities/partners are implicated in grave violations of international law and human rights principles, how does that affect the host institution's image and possible liability?

Criteria for candidates for posts, fellowships, and scholarships

What are the criteria and specifications for selecting a candidate?

¹⁴ BRICUP, op. cit.

Is the position or opportunity open to all applicants, regardless of ethnic or religious origin?
Will the donors accept a decision to select a Muslim, Arab or Palestinian?

Role of donors

Will the center, program, or appointment be set up on a basis independent of the donors?
Have they expected or requested a role in the process? Do they have the opportunity to set criteria? If so, what are they?

Have any donors suggested names of candidates for posts or fellowships? Have such suggestions resulted in applications?

Will the financial contribution be an annual renewal and therefore vulnerable to donor interference, or by a long-term guaranteed endowment?

Application and selection process

Where is the post, fellowship, or scholarship to be advertised?

Who are the members of the appointment committee? Will it include a staff-appointed representative?

Has a shortlist been established? What are the shortlisting procedures?

After shortlisting, will candidates give presentations accessible to staff members?

Hasbara Funding: who's who

Below are some examples of Israel Studies programs in the US and Canada. For information on the UK, see the BRICUP document "Universities rebranding Israel's image: Hasbara posts in Israel Studies threaten academic integrity."¹⁵ This list is by no means exhaustive, and we encourage groups around the world to identify programs and posts related to Israeli hasbara and to add to this research related to their particular region. We also encourage communication with us to make this list more comprehensive.

Further resources for researching Israel Studies

1. Chairs in Israel Studies in the USA and Canada:

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/isdf/chairs.html>

2. Israel Studies Centers in the US and Canada:

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/isdf/centers.html>

3. A list compiled by the Association for Israel Studies of "centers, institutes, study programs, endowed chairs, and faculty that focus on the academic study of modern Israel. It includes only institutions whose primary focus is on modern Israel, rather than on Jewish or Middle Eastern studies more broadly" :

<http://www.aisisraelstudies.org/centers.ehtml>

4. Some American and Canadian funders of Israel Studies:

Israel On Campus Coalition (ICC): <http://www.israelcc.org/>

American-Israeli Cooperation Enterprise (AICE):
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/about/index.shtml>

¹⁵ <http://bricup.org.uk/documents/HasbaraStudiesBriefing.pdf>

Hillel, the Foundation for Campus Jewish Life: <http://www.hillel.org/index>

Azrieli Foundation (Canada): <http://www.azrielifoundation.org/>

Younes & Soraya Nazarian Family Foundation (UCLA):
http://nazarianfamilyfoundation.com/about_us_eng.html

Visiting Israel Professors (VIP), a partnership between Schusterman Family Foundation and AICE:
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/isdf/announce12.html>

Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation :
<http://www.thegilbertfoundation.org/gilbert/home.html>

Mirowski Family Foundation (Temple University):
<http://www.cla.temple.edu/submit/submit-events/mirowski/>

Stoll Family (chair at Brandeis):
http://my.brandeis.edu/news/item?news_item_id=100344&show_release_date=1

Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation:
<http://www.schusterman.org/>