

**Symposium on “Freedom and the University”  
Columbia University October 30, 2007  
John Mearsheimer’s Comments**

**“ISRAEL AND AMERICAN ACADEMIA”**

**I would like to thank Akeel Bilgrami for organizing this event and inviting me to speak.**

**In recent years, individuals and groups from outside of academia have tried to influence American academic life in ways that violate well-established norms and threaten open discourse, which lies at the heart of the academic enterprise.**

**This interference is actually not widespread. It largely involves Middle East studies, especially as they relate to Israel. Universities are the one place in the United States where Israel tends to get treated like a normal country. Although Israel has many defenders on college campuses, it also gets criticized there for its past and present behavior in ways that rarely happen in the mainstream media or among politicians and policymakers inside the Beltway. Many hard-line supporters of Israel find this situation intolerable, which causes them to work very hard to stifle criticism of Israel and American support for Israel, and instead to promote a positive image of Israel on campuses. To achieve this end, they seek to limit the number of critics of Israel in the academy, and marginalize – or even better, silence – existing critics.**

**I would like to talk in more depth about this phenomenon by describing the various strategies that pro-Israel forces employ to achieve their aims. I would then like to explain why I think Israel’s supporters are so deeply committed to making sure that Israel – and America’s special relationship with Israel – are portrayed in a positive light.**

**Before I delve into these matters, however, I want to emphasize that it is perfectly acceptable in principle for the Israel lobby to try to influence discourse about the**

Jewish state on college campuses. The key proviso, of course, is that it be done in legitimate ways. For example, pro-Israel donors can give money to establish a chair in Israel studies, or even establish an Israel studies program. Moreover, a donor can give money to set up a speaker series that brings pro-Israel speakers to campus or set up a college magazine that aims to be Israel-friendly. Individuals and groups outside the academy can also write articles and books that are critical of particular professors as well as universities, as Martin Kramer did in *Ivory Towers on Sand*. My concern, however, is not with these kinds of activities, which are legitimate and consistent with the way we do business at colleges and universities across the United States. Instead, my focus is on the illegitimate strategies that the lobby employs to create a one-sided discourse about Israel.

To limit the number of critics, pro-Israel forces have become increasingly involved in trying to influence the hiring and promotion process in academia. Probably the most prominent example of this strategy involves DePaul University's recent decision to deny tenure to Norman Finkelstein, who is an outspoken critic of many of Israel's actions and also of the present U.S.-Israeli relationship. Nobody that I know of, including DePaul's leaders, disputes the fact that pro-Israel groups and individuals put significant pressure on DePaul to fire Finkelstein, which it did, despite the fact that his department voted overwhelmingly to give him tenure and a college-level tenure committee voted unanimously to tenure him as well.

Another prominent example of this behavior is the case of Nadia Abu El-Haj here at Barnard. A 1982 Barnard graduate, who is also a settler on the West Bank, has organized a campaign to pressure the Columbia administration, which will ultimately decide Abu El-Haj's fate, to deny her tenure. The opposition to Abu El-Haj stems mainly from her criticism of efforts by Israeli archaeologists to find evidence of an ancient Jewish presence in Palestine. Critics say that her book, *Facts on the Ground*, is a political polemic against the state of Israel itself. The campaign against the professor has been aided by newspapers like the New York Sun, which

watches Columbia like a hawk and vehemently criticizes it whenever someone there says or does something that it sees as hostile to Israel.

Some pro-Israel forces also interfere in the hiring process at universities. For example, consider what happened when Columbia began recruiting Rashid Khalidi, who was then teaching at the University of Chicago. According to Professor Cole, who was the Columbia provost at the time, “the complaints started flowing in from people who disagreed with the content of his political views.” Princeton faced much the same problem a few years later when it tried to woo Khalidi away from Columbia. Nevertheless, both Columbia and Princeton did make offers to Khalidi, which shows that the lobby does not win every fight.

But not every case has a happy ending. Consider what happened in 2006, when the Departments of History and Sociology at Yale voted an appointment for Professor Juan Cole, a distinguished historian at the University of Michigan, who has been critical of a number of Israeli policies in recent years. Pro-Israel columnists in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Times* attacked Cole’s appointment, and the newspaper *Jewish Week* reported that several prominent Jewish donors had called Yale officials to protest the decision, which was subsequently overturned by the Yale’s appointments committee. The actual impact of donor pressure is unknown, but the incident underscores the importance that some of Israel’s supporters place on shaping discourse on campus.

In addition to interfering in hiring and promotion decisions, a number of pro-Israel academics and groups have tried to suppress publication of scholarly works that challenged their particular views. In 1998, for example, the Anti-Defamation League called on the publisher of Norman Finkelstein and Ruth Bettina Birn’s *A Nation on Trial* to halt its release. *A Nation on Trial* is a sharply-worded critique of Daniel Goldhagen’s controversial best-seller *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, a book which argues that the Holocaust was not simply the product of Nazi beliefs and Hitler’s own madness, but also rooted in a pervasive “eliminationist ideology” in

German society that predated the Nazi period. Like the Goldhagen book, *A Nation on Trial* elicited both praise and criticism from respected scholars. Yet ADL head Abraham Foxman said *A Nation on Trial* should not have been published, saying that the issue was not “whether Goldhagen’s thesis is right or wrong but what is ‘legitimate criticism’ and what goes beyond the pale.”

A similar episode took place in 2003, when lawyers representing Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz sent threatening letters to the University of California Press in an attempt to halt publication of Finkelstein’s book *Beyond Chutzpah*, an extended critique of Dershowitz’s own *The Case for Israel*. Dershowitz subsequently claimed that he was not trying to suppress publication, but that is certainly not how officials at UC Press interpreted his actions. They resisted these pressures and issued Finkelstein’s book anyway.

More recently, pro-Israel forces put significant pressure on the University of Michigan Press not to distribute *Overcoming Zionism* by Joel Kovel. Not only did the press initially cave into the lobby’s pressure, it also decided to end its longstanding arrangement to distribute Pluto Press books, which originally published the Kovel book. Once these decisions, which are antithetical to the way we are supposed to do business in the United States, became public knowledge, there was an outcry and the University of Michigan Press reversed itself and said it would distribute Kovel’s book.

Another strategy for silencing voices critical of Israel is to prevent them from speaking on campuses. A good case in point is the recent decision by the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota to cancel a speech by Bishop Desmond Tutu. The move was prompted by pressure from some members of the local Jewish community, who were offended by the bishop’s criticism of Israel’s brutal treatment of the Palestinians and his comparison of Israeli behavior in the Occupied Territories with the apartheid policies of white-dominated South Africa. The mainstream media, of course, said little about Bishop Tutu being disinvited from St. Thomas. However,

the story was posted on “Muzzle Watch,” a website run by Jewish Voice for Peace that tracks efforts by the lobby to stifle debate about Israel. The ensuing publicity, which included an e-mail campaign encouraged by JVP, forced St. Thomas to reverse field again and re-invite Bishop Tutu to speak.

I want to say a few words about the experiences that Steve Walt and I have had with cancellations. We were scheduled to talk about our book on the Israel lobby at CUNY on September 24, but that event was cancelled. We later spoke about our book at another university, but the night before the event, the president of that school contacted the person who had invited us to speak, and asked that our talk be cancelled. Fortunately, the organizer of the event had the courage to say no to the president. For the record, we have also been disinvited from speaking engagements at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and Google headquarters in Silicon Valley. These two cases, however, do not involve the academic world.

The lobby also seeks to marginalize critics within academia by smearing them. This strategy was at play here at Columbia in 2004 when the “David Project” produced a propaganda film alleging that faculty in the Middle East studies program were anti-Semitic and were intimidating Jewish students who defended Israel. Columbia was raked over the coals in pro-Israel publications like the *New York Sun*, but a faculty committee assigned to investigate the charges found no evidence of anti-Semitism and the only incident worth noting was the possibility that one professor had “responded heatedly” to a student’s question, something none of us professors on the panel – or any other faculty member – would ever do.

Norman Finkelstein has also been smeared over the years by pro-Israel individuals and groups. Not only is he routinely called an anti-Semite or a self-hating Jew, but he is said to be a Holocaust denier, which is a truly remarkable assertion in light of the fact that both of his parents were Holocaust survivors. His mother was in Majdanek, while his father was in Auschwitz.

**Finally, the lobby attempts to shape the discourse on campuses by monitoring what professors say and threatening to curtail federal funding to Middle East programs that are receptive to voices that criticize Israel. In September 2002, for example, Daniel Pipes established Campus Watch, a website that posted dossiers on suspect academics and encouraged students to report comments or behavior that might be considered hostile to Israel. This transparent attempt to blacklist and intimidate scholars prompted a harsh reaction and Pipes later removed the dossiers, but the website still invites students to report alleged anti-Israel behavior at U.S. colleges. Turning students into snitches is hardly consistent with core academic values.**

**Pipes' campaign to stamp out criticism of Israel on college campuses did not stop there. Together with Martin Kramer, an Israeli-American scholar who has appointments both at WINEP and Israel's Shalem Center, Pipes began encouraging Congress to curtail or at least closely monitor Title VI money that the federal government gives to Middle East and other area studies programs at major universities. The aim is to silence critics of Israel and hopefully force universities to hire scholars whose views are more in line with those of Kramer and Pipes.**

**In sum, pro-Israel individuals and groups have been especially active on campuses in recent years, working hard to silence criticism of Israel and promote a positive image of the Jewish state. Unfortunately, they have often employed strategies that are clearly illegitimate and threaten open discourse in the academy.**

**Let me now attempt to explain why the lobby thinks that criticism of Israel is so dangerous, and thus works so hard to police academia**

**There are two closely related reasons. First, the case for the special relationship that now exists between the United States and Israel is weak. Second, contrary to the claims of Israel's strongest backers, support for that relationship among the American people is not wide and not deep. Americans do have a generally favorable image of Israel, but most Americans do not think we should be backing it**

**unconditionally. All of that means that if there was an open and free-wheeling discussion of Israeli history, Israeli policy in the Occupied Territories, and the US relationship with Israel, it would probably lead many Americans to pressure their leaders in Washington to abandon the special relationship and treat Israel like a normal country, much the way it treats other democracies like Britain, France, and India. The lobby naturally wants to make sure that this does not happen, and thus it works 24/7 to shape the discourse about Israel in ways that portray it in a favorable light.**

**Let me explore these matters in a bit more detail. Regarding our special relationship with Israel, it is often said that it is based on the fact that Israel is a vital strategic asset and shares our values. Viewed objectively, however, these arguments cannot explain why US gives Israel so much help, and with so few strings.**

**Israel may have been a strategic asset during the Cold War, but the Cold War is now over. Today, giving Israel nearly unconditional support is one of the reasons we have a terrorism problem, and it makes it harder to address a range of other problems in the Middle East. Support for Israel is not the only source of anti-Americanism, of course, and our problems in the Middle East would not disappear if the US had a more normal relationship with Israel. And the US does benefit from some forms of strategic cooperation with Israel. But it is hard to argue that giving it nearly unconditional backing is making the US more popular around the world or making American citizens more secure. On balance, it is now a strategic liability.**

**As for the claim that Israel is a democracy that shares our values, yes, Israel a democracy, but so are many other states and none gets anywhere near as much support. Plus, Israel's treatment of its Arab citizens and especially its Palestinian subjects are sharply at odds with US values. I want to emphasize that there is a strong moral case for Israel's existence—based on the long history of anti-**

**Semitism—but its existence is fortunately not in jeopardy, and past crimes against the Jewish people do not justify giving Israel a blank check today.**

**Turning to the second factor, some say US backs Israel because there is broad public support—politicians are just doing what the public wants. This argument isn't persuasive, for several reasons. Americans do have a generally favorable image of Israel—in part because media coverage tends to be favorable – but they do not think the US should give unconditional or one-sided aid. A survey conducted for the ADL in 2005 found that 78% of Americans think the US should favor neither side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and another survey conducted by the University of Maryland in 2003 found that over 70% of “politically active” Americans favored cutting aid to Israel if it refused to settle that conflict.**

**Furthermore, most Americans recognize that the United States pays a price for its unyielding support of Israel. For example, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press has been asking Americans for many years whether they sympathize more with Israel or the Palestinians. There has always been much more sympathy for Israel, but from 1993 through 2006, the number sympathetic to Israel only went above 50 percent once – it was 52 percent during the second Lebanon war in 2006 – and was as low as 37 percent in July 2005.**

**Regarding the consequences of U.S. support for Israel, a Pew Survey conducted in November 2005, found that 39 percent of the American public said that it was “a major cause of global discontent.” Among opinion leaders, the numbers were substantially higher. Indeed, 78 percent of members of the news media, 72 percent of military leaders, 72 percent of security experts, and 69 percent of foreign affairs specialists believe that backing Israel seriously damages America's image around the world.**

**So while Americans have a generally favorable image of Israel and want it to exist and be secure, they are not insisting that we back it no matter what. But that is**



pretty much what our policy is, and this gap is due mostly due to the political influence of pro-Israel groups in the United States.

In sum, the case for America's special relationship with Israel is weak and support for it among the people is neither wide nor deep. Given that the Israel lobby is deeply committed to maintaining that special relationship, it has had to work especially hard to shape the discourse about Israel, and it has had the most difficult time doing so in the halls of academia – where free speech and open discourse are core values. Yet as the Finkelstein tenure decision shows, it has had its share of successes, and his fate is bound to have a chilling effect on others.

Let me conclude with a few words about where I think this problem is headed. To put it bluntly, I think the situation is going to get worse not better in the next few years. Of course, I hope that I am wrong, but I do not think so. There is little reason to think that Israel will abandon the West Bank and allow for the creation of a viable Palestinian state. Instead, Israel is likely to continue colonizing large portions of the West Bank while keeping the Palestinians trapped in enclaves on the West Bank and Gaza. In other words, Israel is going to stay in the Occupied Territories and continue to deny the Palestinians basic human rights. And this situation will inevitably force the Israelis to deal harshly with its Palestinian subjects.

At the same time, increasing numbers of scholars and students are almost certain to become aware of what Israel is doing to the Palestinians, and some of them will be motivated to speak out on the matter. Why? Because it is difficult to disagree with Leon Wieseltier's description of Israel's policies in the Occupied Territories as a "moral and strategic blunder of historic proportions."

Of course, the threat of even more criticism of Israel's policy, not to mention America's support for those policies, will motivate the lobby to work even harder to intervene in the affairs of academia and do everything possible to silence Israel's

**critics. The lobby has no choice if it wants to maintain unconditional American support for Israel as it colonizes the Occupied Territories. It simply cannot afford to allow an open discourse in the United States about Israel without putting the present relationship at risk. So the outside intervention will continue and possibly worsen. And if it does, it is likely to do serious harm to the academy, and to the core principle of academic freedom. Thank you.**