

Palestine/Israel: Old and New Histories of a Contested Geography

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Abstract: This is a revised version of a talk presented at the International Relations Research Center (NUPRI), University of São Paulo, on March 16, 2026. I would like to thank my hosts, Rafael Duarte Villa and Isabella Soma de Castro, who moderated the talk and the lively discussion that followed. I would also like to thank Christina de Queiroz and Javier Amadeo of the Edward Said Chair at the Federal University of São Paulo (Unifesp), who encouraged me to submit this paper.

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Part 1: Palestine or Not Palestine?

I recall a conversation from a few years ago, in the Fall of 2024, approximately one year following the Hamas-led incursion into Israel and the current war on Gaza, with a colleague who, like me, teaches the history of the Modern Middle East. My friend is a scholar of modern Iraq. I am primarily a scholar of modern Egypt. Talk turned toward our upcoming classes, and we each raised the same problematic: how much time should we devote to Palestine/Israel?

We each concurred that in the past we had downplayed — or at best, not over-taught — this particular place. Not because we were more personally rooted in other places, certainly not because we felt it was unimportant, but because we each felt that for too many of our potential students, the Modern Middle East is the conflict over Palestine. And, frankly, prior to the shock of October 2023, it was one that seemed destined to drag on without any prospect of forward momentum. There was no ‘peace process’ to speak of. Talk of a ‘two-state solution’ was meaningless, given both the situation on the ground and the momentum, especially in the Arabian Peninsula, to formally ‘normalize’ relations with Israel.

Now, a year into the Genocide, my colleague and I were both planning to highlight Palestine (and Israel) in our upcoming survey courses. For my *History of the Middle East since 1914*, an upper-level undergraduate survey, all of the primary readings focused on one place. With all else to cover — and cover it I did — it somehow seemed wrong not to devote special attention to the matter at hand: the unfinished colonial-era question of

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Palestinian nationalist aspirations (never monolithic, but then neither were those of the successful Zionist movement).²

A semester later, my upper-level *Social and Cultural History of the Middle East* focused on Palestine until 1948. We looked at all the fascinating, historically complex particularities of life in a place called Palestine (and officially designated as such after World War I) — in which local populations were exploring ethnic-national rather than religious-focused identities, not merely because of European Jewish nationalist immigration, but certainly within the context of Zionism, a colonial venture (one that openly proclaimed itself as such) that both worked with and later superseded (and made war upon) the British imperial venture.

Part 2: Palestine and Other Lands

This takes us right to the primary question: How was Palestine like and unlike other Ottoman Arab majority territories and post-Ottoman colonial constructions?

First, the similarities with other Arab-majority Ottoman territories. What became Palestine officially in the early 1920s was the result of the League of Nations Mandate system. Former Ottoman territories with Ottoman administrative designations had first been designated as either French or British spheres of influence according to the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. Drawn up in the middle of World War I, Sykes-Picot created zones of direct (Blue and Red) and indirect (A and B) rule.³ During the war these territories were then occupied by French or British forces. They were finally designated as Mandates, bounded territories that were supposed to be guided toward independent nationhood under League of Nations auspices. Iraq and Palestine to the British, Syria and Lebanon to the French. The French kept drawing and redrawing the boundaries of states and substates until the 1940s. The British quickly divided Palestine into Palestine and Transjordan. Consequently, Palestine was only one of what became five mandates.

These were lands in which Arabic was the primary language and in which the Arab Nahda — the intellectual celebration of Arab roots and the Arabic language — had been underway since the late 19th century. Lands where ‘ethnic’ nationalism had begun to take hold — a shift towards identification with Arab and Arabic as a primary identity that superseded (although it did not replace) religious identification and set Arab provinces off from the Ottoman Anatolian heartland (where Turkish identity formation was underway — along with other ethnic-national loyalties). Palestine was one of many such territories that were multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-sectarian within religions, and which now had borders imposed from the outside which rarely conformed with realities on the ground. The vision was based upon European geo-political and economic interests, competitive within and amongst European powers, that produced geographies that needed to be imposed by force and deceit.

One such example was the new proto-nation of Iraq, consisting of three Ottoman provinces now linked by a north-south vision rooted in the flow of the Tigris-Euphrates rivers, linking them to the Shatt al-Arab, the entry to the Persian Gulf, the route to and

² My primary texts were *The hundred years' war on Palestine: A history of settler colonialism and resistance, 1917–2017* (Khalidi, 2021), *Three worlds: memoirs of an Arab-Jew* (Shlaim, 2024), and *A day in the life of Abed Salama* (Thrall, 2024).

³ A separate Jerusalem region was designated Brown, for international control.

protector of India, while ignoring the natural links of trade, kinship, and the flow of people and goods that tended to flow east-west from each province (this was not the only flow of course) toward the Mediterranean.

Iraq, like other Arab provinces, now under mandates, saw an outsider imposed — a British-anointed client king from Arabia — and a system of government that was approved by fixed elections and supported by British arms. The Shi'a elites of Basra were sidelined, and the rebellious tribes were bombed and gassed from the air. King Faisal I, son of Husain bin Ali, the Sharif of Mecca, was installed to the tune of *God Save the King*, and his dynasty survived only through British force and funds, until 1958, when it was finally overthrown in a bloody revolution that flirted with Communism during the Cold War until the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, soon after led by CIA client Saddam Hussein, exerted full power a decade later, in the aftermath of the Six Day War, the June 1967 Arab defeat at the hands of Israel.

North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula were different in terms of formal imperial designation only: colonies, protectorates, 'veiled' protectorates, and independent states with imperial reservations, later treaties that demanded loyalty in times of war and the retention of vast military bases even in times of peace. All that applied in North Africa, while the Persian Gulf states were rooted in treaties and petroleum consortiums. In the post-World War II period the only Arab oil state with which the United States really aimed to designate a special relationship was Saudi Arabia. That included British Palestine, until the part designated by UN resolution in November 1948 as a future Jewish state became Israel, although that special relationship did not happen overnight.

But Palestine — loosely defined in terms of a Holy Land (Zion for some), then specifically bordered as a Mandate — always held a special status. To whatever extent we focus on Palestine in our surveys of the modern Middle East, we need to impress upon our students that Mandatory Palestine was one of three initial mandates that turned quickly into five. Its social and cultural history was linked to the others. Its thinkers and fervent nationalists thought about Ottoman Empire decentralization, growing autonomy, and eventual separation. Mass-mediated culture was becoming regional, hybrid, and increasingly rooted in urban centers of publication, recording and filmmaking.⁴

But Mandatory Palestine is more complex, more complicated. First and foremost, in the Western mindset — first that of Christendom, later the new idea of Western Civilization — Palestine was Western cultural property. More sacred than Mesopotamia or the Nile Valley, the origin sites of Western Civilization. European imperialism was bound to meddle in these lands, however the Ottomans hoped to administer them. There was, from the mid-19th century, a special Sanjak of Jerusalem in which European officials, speaking on behalf of particular churches and national interests, weighed heavily. To avoid complications and settle other troublesome borders, Mark Sykes and François George-Picot envisioned an internationalized zone in Jerusalem. It never came to be. The United Kingdom wanted to protect its vast Suez Canal base in Egypt and to ship oil across the Iraqi and Jordanian deserts to the Mediterranean Sea. Some in the

⁴ The old saying, 'Cairo writes, Beirut publishes, Baghdad reads,' of course refers only to print culture! Cairo has also been a center for film production and broadcast media throughout much of the 20th and early 21st centuries.

British government also wanted to advance a Christian Zionist agenda by supporting Jewish Zionism.

Second, there was the growing interest of European Jewish settlers — they proudly called themselves colonizers — who sought to build a Jewish nation state. The Zionists represented different political orientations and had differing ambitions, but amidst that — and with British cooperation — they established under British Mandatory authority, the structures that evolved, by blood, fire, and the power of capital (however socialist some important state founders proclaimed themselves) into the foundations of a nation-state. That, of course, was fueled by the rise of Nazi Germany and European fascism, the Holocaust and genocide, decolonization and national liberation struggles throughout the region.

What makes Mandatory Palestine special — before it became Israel, founded on the erasure of the UN-designated Arab Palestine and the forced migration, what Israeli scholar Ilan Pappé first termed ‘ethnic cleansing,’ of three-quarters of a million non-Jewish Arab inhabitants — is this extra layer of colonialism.⁵

While Mandatory Palestine existed, however politically volatile, it was a fascinating *mélange* of languages and coexisting cultural traditions, all undergoing massive transformation collectively and individually. The Jewish Israeli scholar Ami Ayalon, in *Reading Palestine: Printing and Literacy, 1900–1948* (Ayalon, 2004), describes a landscape that almost overnight became covered with lettered signage in three languages: native Arabic, colonial English, but also — and this made Mandatory Palestine special — colonial Modern Hebrew. Not the Biblical Hebrew of Jewish liturgy, but the new language that was to fuel what many Zionists called the new Hebrew nation.

The relationship between European Jewish arrivals and the local or regional Jewish Arabs (who we now call Mizrahi Jews, or Easterners) has been ever complex. Local non-Ashkenazi Jews — Arabic speakers, with a French-speaking (sometimes Ladino-speaking) elite — found little in common with their East and Central European counterparts, including in much religious practice. For them, a return to Zion meant next to nothing — they were already there. They watched in dismay as Jewish vs Arab identity became paramount. And they would find themselves looked down upon in the new Israeli state, no less those who migrated, often under increasing duress back home, from the Arab and Persian world.

These migrants quickly constituted a second tier of citizenship — below the Ashkenazi Jews, the European state builders, but above the indigenous non-Jewish Arab population — a community, especially in the urban setting, with which they felt far more at home culturally: shared language, shared music, shared cuisine, and a shared sense of modesty, respect, and fashion.

Part 3: Studying/Teaching Palestine

It is difficult to teach the history of Mandatory Palestine prior to 1948 because we are staring down the guns of the Nakba, what Palestinians call the Catastrophe. And yet there is so much to explore from the late 19th through the mid-20th century: efforts by

⁵ Pappé (2007) appropriated the term, which was first widely utilized in relation to Bosnian War and the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

Jewish immigrant and native Arab laborers to organize along class, rather than ethnic lines to insure better, if not always equal, working conditions; and the uneasy collaboration between Jewish and Arab radio pioneers to share time on a new Palestine Broadcasting Service, founded and supervised by the British, who had their own ideas about what would be appropriate for Hebrew- and Arabic-speaking listeners.⁶

Thriving cultural spheres — cafes, movie houses, and cabarets, where Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Arabs performed side by side in a variety of popular Arabic dialects. Festivals, like the month-long feast of Nebi Rubin Festival, perhaps rooted in particular traditions, but which by the early 20th century attracted audiences from all communities (Tamari, 2008). The Zionist construction of a new Hebrew identity, new national symbols, songs and slogans, and the promotion of a new, healthy diet rooted in local produce (olive oil, not chicken fat, and sesame/tahini paste) were equally fascinating, even — or perhaps because — they trend so closely to European colonial concerns throughout empire.⁷

At the same time, as relations between locals and immigrants became increasingly strained, Mandatory Palestine became a laboratory for other new ideas: population transfer, partition, and the refinement of modern terrorism. Among the great ironies of the history of Palestine is that in 1939, after suppressing the 1936-39 Arab Revolt, the British formally announced their intent to relinquish their mandate and cede authority within five years to a political entity that would retain an Arab non-Jewish majority.

World War II upset this equation, as did the Zionist revolt against their British allies in the immediate aftermath of that war. Faced with unrelenting assaults on their military forces, American pressure to open the doors to Jews fleeing Europe, and growing concerns about retaining their air base in the Suez Canal (now, with India no longer a primary concern, the focus had shifted to the Soviet Union), the British fulfilled their earlier promise to leave. Only the problem would now be dumped in the lap of the new United Nations.

It is still daunting to realize that in the aftermath of the 1948 Palestine War that secured Israel's independence but led to the total dismemberment of the partitioned Palestinian state (thereafter occupied by Israel, Jordan, and Egypt, at least until 1967, when it all became occupied by Israel), few would have anticipated that the problem of Palestinian statehood would remain with us.

That is the story of the Cold War, the rise of unstable, then rooted, authoritarian Arab states, the crushing spiritual and military defeat of 1967, the rise of messianic and expansionist Zionism, the crushed, false hopes of Oslo Accords, an upsurge of nihilistic terrorism arising in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, the emergence of the oil kingdoms as global entrepôts more interested in expanding commercial empires via growing economic ties with Israel, and Israel's complacency towards the ongoing unrest forever germinating in the Palestinian territories, and its conviction that the West Bank could be slowly annexed and Gaza Strip contained. Thus, the October 2023 attack.

The historiography of Mandatory Palestine, Zionism, and the origins of Israel has undergone extensive revision since the late 1980s. The best of it has been written by

⁶ For workers, see Lockman (1996); for the radio, see Stanton (2014).

⁷ For diet, see *Nutrition Science, Palestinian Food, and Jewish Settlers' Acclimatization: The Work of Moshe Wilsbushewich* (Hirsch, 2025).

Israeli and Palestinian scholars, the latter including Palestinian Israeli citizens. The research is archival based, starting with the Zionist state archives in Israel, a site that a number of key Palestinian scholars from the diaspora have visited, at times under great personal and emotional stress, and not always welcomed by the host state. The capture and relocation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization archives in Beirut following the Israeli invasion in 1982 made Israel the key site to visit to understand organized resistance to Israeli statehood from the 1960s onward. And there are other important collections in Israel for understanding Palestinian society, such as the Khalidi Library in Jerusalem, containing one of the largest private collections of Arabic texts in the region prior to 1948.⁸

The first wave of what became known as the ‘new’ history, produced by a group of Israeli scholars who came to be called the ‘new historians,’ challenged the long-held official Zionist narrative myths about the Nakba: that the ethnic cleansing was, at worst, a necessary accident and/or the outcome of what we now call ‘the fog of war’; that Palestinians left at the urging of their local leaders and the promises of outside Arab armies that would quickly conquer the new Jewish state, expel the Jews, and return Palestine to its rightful owners. Inside the archives, Israeli scholars uncovered a series of plans — A, B, C and finally D — that charted the deliberate de-population of the territory designated for Jewish sovereignty, the extension of conflict to acquire further territory, and the deliberate demolition of conquered neighborhoods and villages so that there could be no ‘return.’⁹

Scholars read deep into the diaries of Zionist officials. Avi Shlaim uncovered documentary proof of a known secret — the ‘collusion’ between Zionist officials, especially future Prime Minister Golda Meir, and the Jordanian King Abdullah I of Jordan, to engage in symbolic battles while Arab Legion, by far the best Arab fighting force in the region, occupied the West Bank of the Jordan River and consolidated control of the Old City of Jerusalem and the surrounding hills to the east (Shlaim, 1988).

With 1948 as the pivot point, scholars have looked both forward and backward. Palestinian elders like Walid al-Khalidi, who wrote the first essay challenging the myth of national broadcasts urging Arabs to leave, spent much of their career charting the existence of the 400-500 villages demolished and either resettled by Jewish settlers, left to be swallowed by the environment, or covered over by vast reforestation projects — the unnatural and environmentally unfriendly pine trees that cover an extensive national forest and park system, one in which, off-trail, you might stumble upon the foundations of houses, wells, cemeteries, and shrines (Khalidi, 2006).

Salim Tamari, a historical sociologist by training, based at Bir Zeit University in Ramallah, and editor of the *Jerusalem Quarterly*, has read deeply into the Arabic-language memoirs of the literate classes from Muslim-Christian-Jewish communities and painted a rich picture of a modernizing multi-cultural society, albeit one under increasing tension and threat. He gives us, for example, the writings of Wasif Jawahiriyya, the musician; the love letters of Khalil al-Sakakini who had left his sweetheart behind and temporarily settled in New York; the travelogue of Najati Sidqi, a Jewish Bolshevik who fought in Spain for the Republic and traveled to the Soviet Union;

⁸ The Khalidi Library remains steadfastly open despite suffering conflict-related damage and, at times, closure by state authorities.

⁹ The foundational work is Morris (1989). For an overview of the new historians, see Shlaim (1995).

and recollections of a group of counter-cultural 'idlers', who spent long nights at Jerusalem's Vagabond Café (Tamari, 2008).

Sherene Seikaly, a Palestinian-American scholar, has written about Mandate-era 'Men of Capital,' including a great-grandfather who meticulously recorded everything he left behind in 1948 (Seikaly, 2018). All of this has served to engage scholars who might once have been polarized toward greater discussion with each other. Mustafa Kabha, a Palestinian Israeli historian, has teamed with Nahum Karlinsky, a Jewish Israeli scholar, to write the joint history of the indigenous Palestinian and imported Zionist citrus industries (Kabha; Karlinsky, 2021).

In recent years, as I have served as editor of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (2019-2025), we published pieces on the following subjects, all grounded in rigorous, cutting-edge scholarly research: *Nutrition Science, Palestinian Food and Zionist Acclimatization, New Arab Maids: Female Domestic Work, New Arab Women and National Memory in British Mandate Palestine, Rediscovering Palestinian Lives: Qudsiya Khurshid from Mandate Palestine to Postwar Pennsylvania, The Children of Wadi Salib and the 1959 Moroccan Jewish Protest in Haifa, The Construction of 'Native Jews' in Late Mandate Palestine, Changing Capitalist Structures and Settler Colonial Land Purchases in Northern Palestine, Not All Who Ascend: Afro-Asian Jewish Returnees from Israel, and Sacralizing the Nation: The Adoption of Takfir in Mandate Palestine*.¹⁰

Part 4: Can We Teach Palestine?

But this takes us to the next great question on the table: not whether we should, but whether we can talk about or even teach Palestine in ways that highlight both its uniqueness and its complexity.

In the United States, it is becoming increasingly difficult, rooted in a full-scale attack on academic and civic freedom of speech. We are in a very dangerous moment, only made worse now, I fear, by the attack on Iran (and adjacent ventures into Lebanon and Syria). Although, I might note that there is far more open dissent to this war, in which we are directly engaged, than there ever was regarding Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza. Is the tide slowly turning?

The immediate aftermath of the October 2023 Hamas assault reminded me in some ways, of what happened in my country after the attack of September 11, 2001. We had to guard our words. In the aftermath of the al-Qaeda attack, the country was caught up in a frenzy of fear — one that was reduced to the simplistic question: 'Why do they hate us?'

Never mind the complexity of who 'they' are or were. I do remember telling a class of 18-to-20-year-olds shortly afterward: Do not let the media or politicians tell you that this will be the Attack on Pearl Harbor, the 'Day of Infamy,' for your generation. That will be up to you to decide, and it will take time, and your own historical perspective.

Only with time — and care — was it possible to try to explain, using the lens of history — Mohammad Mosaddegh, Salvador Allende, Augusto César Sandino — why so

¹⁰ This is an extract from a wider group of publications and is limited, of course, to one particular journal. Many of these articles are available via Open Access. See <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-journal-of-middle-east-studies>.

many outside United States were at once horrified, but also felt a sense of cruel justice. Or to pose the question as to whether the spectacle of the World Trade Center was perhaps less impactful to many than the brazen and successful attack on The Pentagon. Especially to try to emphasize that history did not start with the September 11 attacks. All historical events have a preface that we must discover — and to decide where to begin our books or lectures.

After October 7, 2023, it was almost as if a gag order went into effect. It was not centralized or focused. But almost immediately, we were expected to add an adjective — ‘horrific’ or ‘brutal’ attack — that positioned us on the side of the immediate victims, whenever we spoke. As if the Gazans who carried out the attack suddenly appeared in the skies as unknown alien invaders in a science fiction *War of the Worlds*.

As we struggle to assess the attack, this seems to be exactly why it was carried out: to insist upon a back story that was being erased. I quickly saw historical precedent in the October 1973 attack on Israel by the Egyptians, who feared that borders established in the aftermath of the June 1967 Six Day War were being frozen in place by US-Soviet détente. In this case, the Israelis knew an attack was coming but, unlike in June 1967, when they ordered a well-planned preemptive strike, in October 1973 they decided to rely on their defenses. The Egyptian plan was limited: to cross the Suez Canal and draw international pressure toward a cease-fire. The Egyptians were stunned at the rapidity with which the Israeli defenses collapsed. I still suspect that the Hamas attack succeeded beyond the attackers’ wildest dreams, and that, like the Egyptian army in 1973, they found themselves deeper into enemy soil than expected and without a playbook.

But could we talk about the motivations of the attackers, the preparedness of those attacked, and the political aims and limitations of both sides? An on-campus forum I organized with our Honors College, at which I and a former colleague were to speak, was quickly denounced — by colleagues but also by people outside the university — to our higher administration, in part because our advertisement did not refer to Hamas appropriately as a ‘terrorist’ organization. Our administrators cancelled (though they claimed it was as a postponement) the event, claiming to fear that outsiders would come to campus (we are public property, open to all) to disrupt it. All without discussion with us.¹¹ By this time the disproportionate slaughter — we were soon to start describing it as genocidal — was already in full progress.

I teach in an increasingly ‘Red’ state. Arkansas, where I came in 2000 was very different, if always religiously conservative. Bill Clinton was leaving the White House; we had two Democratic senators and a tradition of liberal, if not always progressive, elected officials. Democrats, like Bill Clinton, were highlighting the middle ground; but so, to an extent, were the Republicans. Now we are a MAGA stronghold, competing with states like Florida and Mississippi to drive the culture wars that are now plaguing the United States.

Not all of this has to do with the Middle East or Palestine in particular; much of it is tied to issues of gendered identity, sexual preference, and the three words that have become taboo: ‘diversity, equity, and inclusion.’ Words like ‘queer,’ ‘sustainability’ and

¹¹ In November 2023 I contributed to the Verso Books blog *Palestine Uncensored: Diaries of Censorship* <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/palestine-uncensored-diaries-of-censorship>. Mine is Testimonial 8 of 22.

'climate change' have been ordered erased from course and lecture titles. Courses that touch on slavery or the conquest of the American frontier may prove to be more controversial than mine.

But the Middle East is also at the core, in my state driven in part by the relationship between our governor, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, and her father, former preacher, later governor, currently US Ambassador to Israel, Mike Huckabee, an outspoken Evangelical Christian Zionist. A Jewish state within contrived historical boundaries representing a singular moment in antiquity, will pave the way for the Second Coming. What will then happen to the Jewish state, let alone the Jewish people, there, here, and everywhere, is of no particular concern. To a cynical Israeli state – and this goes way back to the post-1967 rise of the Zionist right and the Settler Movement – that is apparently of little concern.¹²

As a state employee working at a state-funded university, I face an increasing set of laws that prescribe and seek to proscribe what and how I can teach about the Middle East, Islam, Zionism, Jewish-Muslim and Jewish-Arab relations, and who I might turn to in order to enhance our knowledge. The so-called BDS Law requires any visiting scholar or lecturer coming from outside our system to sign a release stating that they do not support an economic boycott of Israel or divestment of state funds.¹³

A newer state law requires anyone contracting with the State of Arkansas to refer to the occupied West Bank, the internationally recognized designation, as Judea and Samaria, the terminology utilized by a specific political and religious orientation. This has not impacted us directly; I have not been ordered to change my course content or language, written or oral. However, in November, the Arkansas Bureau of Legislative Research, the official arm of our state legislature, requested the university to submit a number of syllabi related to Middle East studies – and the university complied, even after some of us refused.¹⁴

Finally, my state adheres to the controversial definition of antisemitism promoted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), which essentially equates criticism of Israel, Israeli state policy, and Zionism (simplistically reduced to one essential idea) with antisemitic.¹⁵ The Jerusalem Declaration, signed by many scholars of the Middle East and Islamic World, of European history and the Holocaust, is a critical response to the IHRA definition of what constitutes antisemitism.¹⁶

¹² Some of this may change as a far-right, conspiracy-driven wing of the MAGA movement highlights Israeli and Jewish control over Donald Trump's White House. See Hitchens (2026).

¹³ The legislator who drafted and proposed the bill admitted to a reporter that he had never considered the measure as relating to academia. See Patel (2023).

¹⁴ As a matter of transparency, the two courses requested that I oversee, the History of the Modern Middle East and the History of Modern Palestine/Israel, both mid-level undergraduate surveys, I had not taught in many years. They were taught by graduate students and instructors under my direction, so the syllabi that the university submitted were not technically 'mine.' The number of Middle East-related syllabi seemed to have been somewhat randomly selected and to date there has been no direct communication from the state.

¹⁵ <https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definition-antisemitism>.

¹⁶ I am a signatory. See <https://jerusalemdeclaration.org/>. I also testified, in a virtual session on February 19, 2026, before the United States Commission on Civil Rights in a hearing on *Antisemitism on America's University and College Campuses*. I was allotted three minutes but allowed to submit a longer written statement. The final report is pending. I was only allowed live access to the session to which I had been assigned.

We have yet to have a serious discussion with our administrators about what constitutes hatred of a people and what constitutes a challenge to policies (even before the genocide) carried out by an ethno-state that claims to speak and act on behalf of – and to protect – an entire people. However, the perceived victims of one particular brand of racism have been elevated to a special protected status. Anti-Arab, anti-Palestinian, or anti-Muslim racism receives no such concern. This is, to be sure, a national trend. Speech has become a battleground, and those who determine policy, whether at the state level or on campuses like mine, know little of the history, politics or cultures of the Middle East.

Much of the federal government assault on academic freedom in the United States has been focused on elite institutions, both private and select state universities that have been marked by student activism, that have been singled out as spaces of discomfort to supporters of Israel, and that are major recipients of federal support for research in the sciences. Those of us who teach at less prominent public institutions, particularly in ‘Red’ states, are confronted instead with state-government generated legal statutes based upon specific language – and language restrictions – that may prove to be more difficult to challenge in the long run, in the classroom and in court.¹⁷

It certainly would make life easier if I stuck to Egypt and my colleague to Iraq in our Middle East survey courses.

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¹⁷ The Middle East Studies Association has recently inaugurated an Academic Freedom Initiative (<https://afi.mesana.org/>) to track threats to academic freedom. Categories include Title VI lawsuits and investigations, Congressional interference, employment retaliation, and event interference.

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