

Spring 2019

“Anti-Israel, and even Anti-American”: The Politics of Teaching about Israel in American Schools

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Abstract:

Much of the debate around Israel in the U.S. revolves around a rigid dichotomy: you are either “with us” (pro-American and pro-Israel) or “against us” (anti-American, anti-Israel, and anti-Semitic). But the way these controversies are discussed obscures what is really going on. To understand the particular ways in which education is being politicized in the contemporary moment, and why this battle is playing out in American K-12 schools, we must unveil the underlying causes and concerns — which are not, ultimately, about a straightforward fidelity to facts and preference for apolitical teaching. Certainly, controversies over teaching, in Newton and elsewhere, are intimately linked with the current battle over Israel and anti-Semitism that has fragmented American politics. Yet these controversies are also particular to the realm of education, tied to debates over the permissible scope of critique in the classroom, which have impacted American schools for as long as our country’s public education system has existed. Using the controversy in Newton as a guide, I examine competing narratives and interests at stake in the national frenzy over teaching about Israel in American schools. The purpose of this study is not to weigh in on the Newton debate, but to establish the historical and political context necessary to make sense of discourse mobilized by parties involved. This study asks, why is this issue so politically potent, and prevalent in the American consciousness? How do controversies over teaching about Israel fit into larger controversies over the preoccupation with K-12 teaching, and fights over what narratives can and cannot be taught in American schools?

Suggested Citation: Murphy, L. (2019). *“Anti-Israel, and even Anti-American”: The Politics of Teaching about Israel in American Schools* (Unpublished Education Studies capstone). Yale University, New Haven, CT.

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Yale University

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The Politics of Teaching about Israel in American Schools

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Education Studies Capstone

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April 2019

Introduction

Prelude: “The Next Chapter”

In January 2019, the Committee for Accuracy for Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA) convened an event at the Jewish Community Center in Newton, Massachusetts to discuss the urgent need to resist anti-Israel bias in America’s public schools. Miriam Elman, associate professor at Syracuse University and the new executive director of the Academic Engagement Network,¹ was one of the panelists invited to speak. Elman, speaking alongside other CAMERA affiliates, described a process by which “anti-Israel dogma” has in her view trickled down from universities to K-12 schools: centers for Middle East Studies at schools like Harvard satisfy federal contracts by conducting outreach to local public schools. “Virulently anti-Israel” professors thus have an incentive to lead workshops for public school teachers, Elman argued, spreading “poisonous propaganda” that infects curriculum in middle and high schools.² “The entire instructional programming coming from some of these centers is biased, anti-Israel, and even anti-American,” Elman concluded.³

The CAMERA event addressed “the next chapter” in the fight over anti-Israel bias in Newton’s public schools – a fight that began seven years earlier, when a Newton resident complained that the textbooks used by the Newton Public School System⁴ in the high school

¹ The Academic Engagement Network (AEN) is an organization of American university and college faculty and staff formed to to oppose the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement on college campuses. (“Academic Engagement Network – Oppose BDS”).

² I attended CAMERA’s public event — titled “The Next Chapter: Anti-Israel Bias in Newton Schools” — on January 28th, 2019.

³Miriam Elman. “The Next Chapter: Anti-Israel Bias in Newton Schools.” 28 Jan. 2019.

⁴ Newton Public School System in Newton, Massachusetts consists of two high schools, Newton North and Newton South. Both have been implicated in the textbook controversy and subsequent complaints.

curriculum were biased against Israel.⁵ This complaint mobilized pro-Israel community groups, such as CAMERA, which have targeted the school board for its textbook choices, and singled out individual teachers for intensifying the bias. Charles Jacobs, the founder of Americans for Peace and Tolerance (APT), another organization at the forefront of this fight, alleged that teachers in Newton are “indoctrinating” students against Israel: “There is no, really, pro-Israel point of view” in their teaching on the subject, he said.⁶

CAMERA’s January event was a call to action: Elman and others warned that while defenders of Israel have identified pervasive anti-Israel and anti-Western sentiment in universities, they have not paid enough attention to the same problem in middle and high schools, where “students are too just young to understand or recognize the biases that are being pushed and shoved on toward them.” The Newton fight may be unique in its duration, but according to Elman, Newton is not alone. “This is really a national problem,” she declared.⁷

In this respect, Elman is correct: the controversy over Newton’s textbooks is one of many political battles that have been waged over teaching and curriculum in American schools in recent years. At Riverdale Country School, a private school in the Bronx, two teachers lost their jobs after sharing allegedly anti-Israel views with students.⁸ Other recent conflicts incidents include parents expressing outrage over a silent tribute for Gaza victims at a New York public school⁹; a spokesperson for the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) decrying a New York private

⁵ Larkin, “A Test Of Tolerance In Newton, As Teachers Are Pressed On Israel Curriculum.” WBUR-FM.

⁶ Larkin, “A Test Of Tolerance In Newton, As Teachers Are Pressed On Israel Curriculum.” WBUR-FM.

⁷ Miriam Elman. “The Next Chapter: Anti-Israel Bias in Newton Schools.” 28 Jan. 2019.

⁸ Silverman, “How An Elite New York City Prep School Created A Safe Space For Angry Zionists.” Huffington Post.

⁹ Klein, “Parents Outraged at School’s Silent Tribute for Gaza Victims.” New York Post.

high school's trip to Israel that included a meeting with Palestinians¹⁰; and parents pressuring a Philadelphia private school to fire two teachers who invited a Palestinian professor to speak.¹¹ In certain cases the study of Arabic has been deemed political: in 2015, under pressure from the Anti-Defamation League and the Jewish Community Resource Center, the San Francisco Board of Education backed away from a contract with a local Arab cultural group to expand Arabic instruction in San Francisco public schools.¹²

These controversies over teaching about Israel arise at a time when, on the national stage, the debate over the acceptability of public criticism of Israel has come to the forefront. Newly elected representative Ilhan Omar (D-MN) (along with Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), the first Muslim woman ever elected to Congress) has been openly critical of the Israeli government over its treatment of Palestinians, and has expressed support for the Boycott, Divest, Sanctions (BDS) movement, which seeks to use economic pressure on Israel to secure Palestinian rights. Omar has been subject to accusations of anti-Semitism and intense vitriol from activists and lawmakers across the political spectrum.¹³ The controversies with Omar highlight the increasingly narrow realm for criticism of Israel (any criticism of Israel is subject to intense scrutiny), and at the same time, have fueled intense interest in this subject.

Political battles like the one in Newton are proof of the narrow realm of possibility for American discourse related to the State of Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the

¹⁰ Shirazi, "NY High School Students Visit Western Wall, Israel Museum, and AJC, but Foxman Blasts Them for Daring to Meet Palestinians." *Mondoweiss*.

¹¹ Boccella, "Former Friends' Central Teachers Sue School after Firing over Palestinian Professor Invite." *The Inquirer*.

¹² Meronek, "Pro-Israel and Arab Groups Wrangle over Arabic Instruction in SF Schools." *Al Jazeera*.

¹³ Beauchamp, "The Ilhan Omar Anti-Semitism Controversy, Explained." *Vox*.

prevalence of these incidents signifies the political sensitivity of this topic. But as much as incidents such as these have become commonplace — and we have grown accustomed to the intensity of feeling that accompanies them — important questions about why this is the case remain unanswered. Why is the battle about Israel and Palestine being fought here — in American K-12 schools? Why does no other foreign country have this degree of influence and command?

Statement of Purpose

Much of the debate around Israel in the U.S. revolves around a rigid dichotomy: you are either “with us” (pro-American and pro-Israel) or “against us” (anti-American, anti-Israel, and anti-Semitic). But the way these controversies are discussed obscures what is really going on. To understand the particular ways in which education is being politicized in the contemporary moment, and why this battle is playing out in American K-12 schools, we must unveil the underlying causes and concerns — which are not, ultimately, about a straightforward fidelity to facts and preference for apolitical teaching. Certainly, controversies over teaching, in Newton and elsewhere, are intimately linked with the current battle over Israel and anti-Semitism that has fragmented American politics. Yet these controversies are also particular to the realm of education, tied to debates over the permissible scope of critique in the classroom, which have impacted American schools for as long as our country’s public education system has existed.

Using the controversy in Newton as a guide, I examine competing narratives and interests at stake in the national frenzy over teaching about Israel in American schools. The purpose of this study is not to weigh in on the Newton debate, but to establish the historical and political context necessary to make sense of discourse mobilized by parties involved. This study asks,

why is this issue so politically potent, and prevalent in the American consciousness? How do controversies over teaching about Israel fit into larger controversies over the preoccupation with K-12 teaching, and fights over what narratives can and cannot be taught in American schools?

This study, exploring the politics of teaching and curricula about Israel in American schools, emerges from the intersection of three bodies of literature:

1. Educational studies of the politics of teaching about Israel-Palestine and the Middle East
2. Cultural studies of American representations of the Middle East
3. Historical studies of American foreign policy and support for Israel

By forging a conversation between these bodies of literature, my capstone sheds light on the interaction between culture, politics, and education in efforts to regulate teaching about Israel in the U.S. I explore how this interaction is defined by, and continues to define, American identity and American “interests” in other parts of the world.

My capstone is a novel contribution to the somewhat scant literature on the politics of teaching about the Middle East in the United States. There is a dearth of scholarship examining the place of education in shaping, and responding to, the cultural politics of U.S. foreign policy intervention. Many scholars have analyzed the political and cultural implications of American affinity towards Israel, but few have addressed the educational implications of America’s unique – and uniquely controversial – alliance with Israel. Yet education plays a key part in this story. Efforts to regulate teaching about Israel, I argue, are shaped by a particular vision of American identity as intertwined with support for Israel — as these efforts help to shape this vision in turn.

Controversies over American education give insight into how unequal power is reproduced and contested within the context of American foreign policy. These conflicts reveal

the power that is attached to certain narratives — and the ways in which education becomes a battleground, and a means to uphold dominant power structures. In *Ideology and Curriculum*, leading education theorist Michael Apple positions education both as a site of conflict and as a manifestation of political ideology and power structures. Apple argues, “a truly critical study of education needs to deal with more than the technical issues of how we teach importantly and effectively... it must think critically about education’s relationship to economic, political, and cultural power.”¹⁴ This study considers K-12 pedagogy as an especially contested realm, and a useful entry point to examine how culture, politics, and ideology interact.

Methodology

This capstone incorporates methodologies including interviews, curricular analysis and critique, and news analysis. The situation in Newton serves as a case study; to this end, I examine media coverage of this conflict, speak with key players involved,¹⁵ and engage in a close reading of the rhetoric and discourses in published news articles and websites.

This capstone proceeds in three parts. This first part examines the cultural and political history of American support for Israel, providing an essential background to understand why controversy arises over how Israel is being taught in the U.S. We are at a moment in time where Israel is America’s strategic ally in the Middle East, and America is Israel’s most fervent defender on the international stage. Yet over the course of twentieth century, Israel has become not only a foreign issue, but a domestic issue as well, and has shaped — and been shaped by —

¹⁴ Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*. Preface to the 25th Anniversary Third Edition.

¹⁵ I spoke with teachers and members of NGOs. These interviews were informational in nature, and used to enrich my documentation of specific issues or events. I spoke to individuals about their professional work and things that they have been involved in throughout their professional lives. I do not purport to draw generalizable conclusions or to collect statistical data of any kind.

political discourse in the U.S. This section pays particular attention to the domestic implications of American support for Israel. I examine the diverse meanings that the U.S.-Israel alliance has taken on within American politics and culture, and explore how unquestioned support for Israel is intertwined with a belief in both Israel and America as exceptional and irreproachable in turn.

In light of this history, the next section turns more specifically to the controversies over teaching at the heart of this analysis, with a particular focus on the situation in Newton. I examine the rhetoric mobilized in controversies over teaching about Israel, and seek to provide to my reader with a better understanding of the stakes and interests attached to particular narratives as well as the tactics of the critique. The discourses mobilized in this controversy both reflects and constructs particular narratives about American identity and support for Israel.

The third part takes a step back from the specifics to think more broadly about the role of education in politics. These controversies — while rooted in the politics of American support for Israel and the broader desire to censor critical thinking about Middle East — are also particular to the realm of K-12 education. The controversies over what children learn stem from a belief that education should uphold, not teach students to question, dominant systems of power. This is a good example of when education is politicized because those in power want to protect their power. I begin with the assumption that we must look more closely at the linkages between U.S. foreign policy and education — as the effort to censor certain teaching clashes with the very values (such as freedom of speech) that our country holds dear.

What has been written on the teaching of Israel in American Schools: A Literature Review

This literature review focuses specifically on what has been written about the teaching of Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in American schools, which provides a necessary background to understanding how battles over teaching play out on this issue.

Most academic studies related to how Israel is taught in American schools restrict their focus to a single context or school: in “Values in Tension: Israel Education at a U.S. Jewish Day School,” Jewish Education professor Sivan Zikai conducts a case study of Israel education at an American Jewish Day school, seeking to explain why many students at the school have ambivalent or conflicted emotions in relation to Israel, even though the school advances a proudly pro-Israel curriculum and stance. Zikai highlights the contradictions for schools that advocate independent thinking overall, but in regard to Israel-Palestine, maintain a skewed and uncompromising educational approach: young American Jewish students, he argues, face tensions “between an open exchange of ideas and a non-debatable loyalty towards Israel.”¹⁶

In *The Politics of Teaching Palestine to Americans*, educator Knopf-Newman provides a critical genealogy of Zionist education within American schools, and proposes pedagogical strategies for educators teaching about Palestine in the United States. This work is useful for its explanation of why many American students fail to learn about Palestinian points of view, but Knopf-Newman is less concerned with the political boundaries of teaching about Israel. This work suffers from the same shortcomings as many works within the field of education: rather than exploring the complexities of education about Israel-Palestine as interrelated with American

¹⁶ Zikai, “Values in Tension,” 239.

politics and society, Knopf-Newman focuses narrowly on the classroom disconnected from the broader political and cultural context.¹⁷

More scholarly attention has been devoted to controversies over teaching about Israel in the university context. Some university professors have addressed battles within their own universities over the teaching and censorship of material about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the ongoing controversies over the Boycott, Divest, Sanctions (BDS) movement on campuses across the country — though usually not through a systemic or academic lens. In “Israel/Palestine and the Paradoxes of Academic Freedom in the U.S.,” Judith Butler looks at the political structures that constrain discussions of Israel. Although Butler focuses on the university context, her study is useful in outlining the institutional factors and power structures that govern the debate over the acceptability of criticizing Israel. Butler concretize debates on academic freedom that have emerged in the U.S. involving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹⁸

While scholars have generally paid little attention to the politics of the representation of the specific topic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, some have written on the politics of representations of the Middle East or Islam in America schools. This body of work is useful for situating education in the context of American cultural politics in relation to the Middle East. In *Unsettled Belonging: Educating Palestinian-American Youth After 9/11*, Thea Abu El-Haj conducts an in-depth case study of a large city public school in the Northeastern United States. Drawing on curricular analysis and classroom observation, El-Haj argues that official social studies curricula “offered students and teachers little in the way of understanding the complex historic and political contexts of the conflicts in the Middle East and South Asia,” and instead

¹⁷ Knopf-Newman, *Politics of Teaching Palestine to Americans*.

¹⁸ Butler, “Israel/Palestine and the Paradoxes of Academic Freedom.”

“articulated the dominant liberal national imaginary, setting up the United States as a beacon of democracy and freedom in the world against the irrational forces of fundamentalist Islam.”¹⁹

It is perhaps unsurprising that the textbooks that Israeli and Palestinian children read and what students are taught has emerged as a potent issue within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.²⁰ The politics of teaching and curricula about Israel-Palestine has been widely discussed within the context of Israeli and Palestinian education. Several studies have been conducted on textbooks in Israel and the Palestinian Authorities. A common myth in Israel, perpetuated over decades, is that textbooks in West Bank and Gaza breed hatred for Israelis and Jews.²¹ In comprehensive three-year study — the most widely regarded to date — a joint Israeli/Palestinian research team proved these charges to be false, but found that textbooks from Israeli state schools, ultra-Orthodox schools and Palestinian schools alike contained biased and politicized historical accounts.²²

In *The Politics of Palestinian Textbooks*, Fouad Moughrabi explores Israeli and Palestinian debates about what historical narratives should be included in Palestinian textbooks. Moughrabi analyzes the attempt by a Jewish-American NGO²³ starting in 2000 to discredit Palestinian school books, and argues that the framing of their criticism aligns with their overall

¹⁹ Abu El-Haj, *Unsettled Belonging*, 3.

²⁰ Moughrabi, “The Politics of Palestinian Textbooks.”

²¹ Margalit, “Are Palestinian Textbooks Actually Any Worse Than Israeli Textbooks?” *Slate*.

²² Margalit, “Are Palestinian Textbooks Actually Any Worse Than Israeli Textbooks?” *Slate*. The study found that dehumanizing and demonizing characteristics of the other were rare, but negative depictions of the other were more common (researchers found “20 extreme negative depictions in the Israeli state books, seven in the ultra-Orthodox books, and six in the Palestinian books.”).

²³ At the time of writing the NGO was called the “Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace,” but has later been renamed the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education.

political agenda — to discredit the Palestinian authority. Moughrabi's article provides a useful methodological framework: he argues that the controversy over curricula, representing a form of struggle over what constitutes "legitimate knowledge," must be addressed alongside wider questions of power relations in Israeli and Palestinian society.²⁴

Though some scholars have discussed conflicts over teaching and curricula about this topic in Israeli and Palestinian schools, no scholars have investigated the same issues in American high schools. Media outlets have covered the specific incidents addressed in this study, but these cases demand further investigation through an academic lens. Specifically, conflicts over teaching about Israel in the U.S. must be connected to cultural studies of American Empire and historical studies of America's political alliance with Israel. In recent years, scholars of History, American Studies and International Affairs have made significant strides in complicating the roots and implications of American support for Israel. This study addresses a gap in the existing literature on the politics of education: education has failed to think critically about the relation between education and American Empire in relation to the politics of teaching about Israel in the U.S.

²⁴ Moughrabi, "The Politics of Palestinian Textbooks."

Part I: An Exceptional Alliance

Behind these conflicts over teaching about Israel lies a deeper political and cultural history, tied to the unique affinity between Israel and the United States. Both defenders and critics of Israel have long understood America's bond with Israel as an exception to international standards and norms.²⁵ This section examines the origins and implications of American support for Israel, and explores how Americans' identification with Israel has contributed to the construction of a narrative that Israel is exceptional and beyond critique.

The "Unbreakable Bond"

For the past seventy years, the U.S. has been Israel's strongest ally and most consistent political and financial backer. U.S. support comes in the form of sustained funding (every year the U.S. sends billions of dollars of aid to Israel in the form of weapons and military support²⁶) and reliable diplomatic backing (half of American U.N. Security Council vetoes are used to block resolutions critical of Israel²⁷). The U.S. benefits from this alliance as well. Israel provides the U.S. with a strong military presence in the Middle East, and is often touted to advance American economic and political interests in the region.²⁸

Israel is today a rare issue with near bipartisan political support. Though Republicans are slightly more likely to take hardline pro-Israel stances, U.S. politicians across the aisle express pro-Israel views.²⁹ Democratic and Republican Presidents alike declare that the bond between the

²⁵ Kaplan, *Our American Israel*, 1.

²⁶ Dorrell, "U.S. \$38B Military Aid Package to Israel Sends a Message." USA Today.

²⁷ Donald Neff, "An Updated List of Vetoes Cast by the United States to Shield Israel from Criticism by the U.N. Security Council." Washington Report on Middle East Affairs.

²⁸ Lapid, "The Invaluable U.S.-Israeli Alliance," *Foreign Policy*.

²⁹ Smith, Samantha and Carol Doherty. "5 facts about how Americans view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict." Pew Research.

two countries is “unbreakable.”³⁰ The lack of political disagreement is reflected in mainstream media discourse, which has historically been relatively constrained: some commentators argue that meaningful criticism of Israel is more commonplace in Israel than in the United States.³¹ American support for Israel is not only political: Israel is a country in which many Americans have intensely charged emotional investments. A May 2018 Gallup poll found that, not only is American support for Israel at a record high (64% of Americans sympathize more with Israel than with Palestinians) but the amount of Americans who sympathize with neither sides, with both sides or who have no opinion, at 16%, is the lowest to date.³² This contrasts with global public opinion, which is generally more sympathetic to the Palestinian cause.³³

American support for Israel exists hand in hand with relative disregard for the human rights of Palestinians. The U.S. is the main enabler of Israel’s sustained military occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which has persisted for over fifty years.³⁴ The occupation today enforces a system of military rule under which Palestinians are denied civil, political, and economic rights and subjected to systematic discrimination.³⁵ The U.S.’s special relationship

³⁰ Duran, “Obama, Netanyahu Play up ‘Unbreakable’ Bond between U.S., Israel.” *Washington Examiner*; Trump, “Remarks by President Trump at Signing of Presidential Proclamation Recognizing Israel’s Sovereign Right Over the Golan Heights,” *The White House*.

³¹ Slater, “Muting the Alarm over the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.” (Slater compared *Ha’aretz* and the *New York Times* (the two most widely esteemed newspapers in Israel and the United States), in the period from 2000-2006 and found, “the range of discourse in Israel over Israeli policies toward the Palestinians is far greater than it is in the United States concerning all the most crucial issues”).

³² Saad, “Americans Remain Staunchly in Israel’s Corner.” *Gallup*.

³³ Beauchamp, “How Does the World Feel about Israel/Palestine?” *Vox*.

³⁴ The view supported by the vast majority of legal scholars in countries around the world — and the United Nations — is that Israel’s continued control over the Palestinian territories constitutes an unlawful military occupation, and that Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem violate the Fourth Geneva Convention. (U.N. Security Council, Resolution 2334, United Nations). (<https://www.un.org/webcast/pdfs/SRES2334-2016.pdf>)

³⁵ Cohen-Almagor, “Fifty Years of Israeli Occupation.”

with Israel undermines its ability to serve as a neutral arbiter in Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations: many scholars trace the failure of the peace process to American acquiescence in allowing Israel to continue to expand West Bank settlements without facing consequences.³⁶ While a strong alliance with Israel benefits the U.S. in certain ways, America's unquestioning support for Israel comes at a significant political cost. The failure of the U.S. to challenge Israeli occupation has not only led to enormous suffering among the Palestinians and others in the Arab world,³⁷ but ultimately, has harmed the long-term interests of both Israel and the United States — as the continued enabling of Israel's human rights violations emboldens ethnocentric elements in Israeli society and inflames extremist groups in turn.³⁸

So, why are Americans so supportive of Israel? Though the special political relationship between the United States and Israel has come to be self-evident, this alliance was by no means guaranteed. At Israel's founding, Americans (including many Jewish Americans) were divided on the question of a state based on an exclusive ethno-religious identity, particularly because this notion seemed to conflict with the professed American value of citizenship regardless of ethnicity or creed.³⁹ Before the late 1960s, Israel did not occupy nearly as central a place in U.S. foreign policy or American life. We must delve deeper in order to understand the roots of American support for Israel — and understand how the discourse on Israel in the United States has come to reflect more about American identity and insecurity than about the specifics of a conflict elsewhere in the world.

³⁶ Freilich, "Can Israel Survive Without America?"

³⁷ Khalidi, "Unwavering Support of Israel Harms U.S. Interests, Encourages Extremism." *New York Times*.

³⁸ Khalidi, "Unwavering Support of Israel Harms U.S. Interests, Encourages Extremism." *New York Times*.

³⁹ Kaplan, *Our American Israel*, 11.

American Identification with Israel: A Historical Approach

Recent scholarship — most notably, Amy Kaplan’s *Our American Israel* — addresses internal political and cultural forces in the U.S. that have played a large role in shaping American affinity for Israel over the course of the twentieth century.⁴⁰ Kaplan investigates Americans’ popular perceptions of Israel, drawing on narratives expressed in news media, fiction, and film, and argues that — from identifying with Israel’s “providential origins,” to projecting their own anxieties of being a nation “existentially threatened” in a post-9/11 world — Americans have made Israel their own.⁴¹ Several of Kaplan’s contributions merit further attention here.

First, Kaplan argues that many Americans have come to identify with Israel’s exceptional founding, including its “providential origins” and anti-colonial roots — and that identifying with Israel has helped Americans to erase memories of our own settler colonial past. To understand how Americans have come to identify with Israel, then, we must revisit Israel’s particular founding. The movement to settle Jews in Palestine (known today as modern Zionism) emerged in the late nineteenth century in reaction to rising anti-Semitism and nationalist movements around the world. Many Zionists saw their movement as the national movement of a persecuted people seeking refuge in a foreign land, and emphasized ancient historical ties or religious tradition linking Jewish people to the land.⁴² Though Zionists today often spurn the “colonialist” label for its negative connotations, prominent early Zionists embraced the colonial framework and professed belief that the Zionist mission would benefit the uncivilized Arabs of Palestine.⁴³ The darker side of Israel’s founding was only later unveiled: the founding relied upon the

⁴⁰ Kaplan, *Our American Israel*.

⁴¹ Kaplan, *Our American Israel*, 3-9.

⁴² Kaplan, *Our American Israel*, 18.

⁴³ Degani, “Israel Is a Settler Colonial State - and That’s OK,” *Haaretz*.

displacement (and in some cases murder) of a large number of Palestinians.⁴⁴ The parallels between Israel and America's founding myths are now apparent: both states were founded by persecuted people seeking religious refuge who relied upon the displacement or killing of the native population and justified the expropriation of indigenous land through claims of providential ordainment or religious ties. But Americans have not always identified strongly with Israelis — rather, this identification is a product of particular political and cultural forces.

Kaplan explains that early American proponents of Zionism and the Jewish state engaged in a conscious effort to “American-ize” the Jewish state, as Israel would then seem entitled to the same exceptional treatment often given to the U.S.⁴⁵ However, Kaplan argues, it was not until 1958 that the bestselling book *Exodus* — made into a blockbuster film two years later — “forged the popular identification with Israel for decades to come.”⁴⁶ *Exodus*, with a hero styled like a hero of an American Western, appealed to Americans' projection of the American frontier myth to Israel. Kaplan contends that *Exodus* was hugely influential in shaping American perceptions of the founding of Israel as unique and exceptional, and not unlike that of the U.S. This moment is thus pivotal in understanding how “Israel” has come to mean more to Americans than just another country around the world.

⁴⁴ Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. The creation of the State of Israel in 1948 led to the forced displacement of over 700,000 Palestinians. The deliberate destruction of Palestinian villages between 1947 and 1949 is important background information: During this time, civilians were massacred and around a million men, women, and children were expelled from their homes at gunpoint. Myths about Israel's founding persisted, relatively unchallenged until about the 1980s — when the New Historians — scholarship written by Israeli and American scholars, starting in the 1990s, that presents a more critical view of Israel — began to question the fundamental founding myths of Israel.

⁴⁵ Kaplan, 59.

⁴⁶ Kaplan, 60.

Throughout the subsequent decades, American identification with Israel evolved in concert with political and cultural shifts. The post-1967 expansion of American support for Israel⁴⁷ is often attributed to the emergence a viable strategic ally for the U.S. in the Arab-Israeli War of 1967.⁴⁸ But, as leading scholar Melani McAlister argues, this emergence is also linked to internal political developments, such as the rising political influence of pro-Israel Christian fundamentalists. McAlister argues that President Reagan and others began to associate the military success of Israel with the military hegemony of the U.S. and the “Western” world.⁴⁹ Kaplan agrees with McAlister, and adds that after the 1967 War, Israel came to represent an idealized self-image for many Americans. After suffering a humiliating loss in Vietnam, Americans projected unto Israel their own fantasies of military prowess, which heightened the need to strengthen military support for Israel and in the United States as well.⁵⁰

Yet Israel has become exceptional in Americans’ minds not only for its invincibility but for its vulnerability — as Kaplan argues, key to the understanding of Israeli uniqueness is a belief in “Israel’s exceptional suffering.”⁵¹ The rise in Holocaust consciousness in the U.S. — which occurred around the time of increasing American political and financial investments in Israel — offered Americans a new framework for understanding Israel’s unique vulnerability.

⁴⁷ U.S. economic aid to Israel, which was practically non-existent for the first twenty years of Israel’s history, began to rise in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. Israel in 1976 became the recipient of the most annual U.S. foreign aid, and has kept that position ever since. Most aid comes in the form of military assistance. Mearsheimer and Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 26.

⁴⁸ In the War of 1967 (also known as the “Six-Day War”), Israel defense forces defeated the Arab states of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. This war secured Israel’s military control over the territories that continue to be occupied today and proved Israel’s formidable military strength. Kaplan, 94-95.

⁴⁹ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*.

⁵⁰ Kaplan, 99-102.

⁵¹ Kaplan, 7.

Threats to Israel in the 1967 and 1973 invited the use of the Holocaust as a metaphor; which justified hard-line policies against Palestinians. Scholars Novick and Finkelstein argue that this rise was not incidental but intentional: American Jews attached the Holocaust to Israel in the 1960s and 1970s “and pursued a deliberate strategy of seeing Israel, if not the entire Middle East, through the lens of the Holocaust.”⁵² Novick argues that the myth of Israel as the “gift” of the Holocaust (as the world atoning itself for its complicity in the Holocaust) provided defenders of Israeli policy with a framework to argue for Israel’s endemic vulnerability in the Middle East, and heightened the need for ongoing and increased military aid to Israel.⁵³ Though many people (including many Holocaust survivors) reject this myth as offensive and factually inaccurate, as we will see, this rhetorical strategy persists to date — as the Holocaust is often invoked, either explicitly or implicitly, alongside charges of anti-Semitism of anti-Semitism are directed towards those who publicly criticize Israeli policy.

Over time, Israel’s exceptional vulnerability, and the conflation of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, has become a feature of arguments that Israel must be protected at all costs — not only from physical danger, but from the emotional danger of harsh critique. Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982 was a militant undertaking that, for some observers, undermined the narrative of Israel as a “beleaguered underdog.”⁵⁴ The aftermath of this invasion saw increased criticism of Israel from the center and left of American society, which prompted backlash from conservative supporters of Israel in turn. Some critics, Kaplan explains, turned to anti-Semitism to explain (and reprove) media bias against Israel: for instance, neoconservative editor Norman Podhoretz

⁵² Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*; Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry*.

⁵³ Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*.

⁵⁴ Kaplan, 137.

branded criticism of Israel as both anti-Semitic and anti-American, accusing critics of Israel “not merely of anti-Semitism but of the broader sin of faithlessness to the interests of the United States and indeed to the values of Western civilization as a whole.” Podhoretz’s remarks typify a broader trend: “As criticism of Israel became more mainstream,” Kaplan argues, “defense of its special relationship with the United States took on heightened moral resonance and increasingly apocalyptic dimensions.”⁵⁵

These moral and apocalyptic dimensions have re-emerged in recent decades, as Americans have come to identify with Israelis as victims of terrorism and to seek to emulate Israel in the increasingly militarized response to terrorist attacks. Kaplan analyzes the media portrayal of the September 11 attacks, and notes that the attacks led many Americans to identify with Israel, versus other (majority-Muslim) countries that had experienced terrorism.⁵⁶ In media coverage and political speeches, the emphasis was placed on the “moral innocence of Americans as victims of irrational hatred.”⁵⁷ Just as Israel’s perpetual victimhood served as a justification for hard-line policies against Palestinians, the construction of America as victim justified policies during the War of Terror that undermined civil liberties. Increasingly, this construction also served to justify censorship of critical thinking about the Middle East in the United States.⁵⁸

It should be noted that Palestinians are part of this story as well: shifting American representations of Israel are intertwined with changing representations of Palestinians. For example, in a post-9/11 context, rising Islamophobia and the vagueness of the War on Terror led many Americans to conflate Islam, terrorism, and the Middle East, and come to associate

⁵⁵ Kaplan, 153.

⁵⁶ Kaplan, 241.

⁵⁷ Kaplan, 255.

⁵⁸ Abrahamian, “The US Media, Huntington and September 11.”

Palestinians with Muslims and with Islamic extremists. As Americans came to identify more with Israelis as victims, they also came to associate Palestinians as the perpetrator.⁵⁹

This section has sought to describe the contours of American support for Israel and trace the development of this support throughout time. This discussion is necessarily limited in scope, and neglects many critical moments in America and Israel's history that have shaped the relation between the two countries. But the examples presented here illustrate a point that is key to understanding the American discourse on Israel: this discourse is a reflection of what is happening in the U.S. as much as it is a reflection of what is happening in Israel. Conflicts over teaching about Israel, as we will see, are not a negotiation of the actual facts of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but rather, a negotiation over how "Israel" is represented and perceived — which is intertwined with Americans' own identities and senses of security in turn.

⁵⁹ Kaplan, 252.

Part II: “Indoctrinating Our Youth”

Now that we have established an understanding of the complexity of American support for Israel, and how this support has evolved over time, we can approach discourse about Israel in the United States from a more critical lens. At first glance, it might seem that those involved in conflicts over teaching are fighting over the facts of a deeply contested history. But a closer look reveals that what is being contested is not the specifics of a conflict elsewhere in the world, but a particular image of Israel as linked to American identity in turn. Let’s return to Newton — a revealing example for the scope and duration of the critique.

Framing the Critique

Recently, Newton History teacher David Bedar was browsing the bookshelves at a local bookstore and happened upon a glossy pamphlet with an alluring title: “Indoctrinating Our Youth: How a U.S. School Curriculum Skews the Arab-Israeli Conflict and Islam.”⁶⁰ Bedar flipped through the pages, and found allegations that Newton’s curriculum was anti-Israel, anti-Semitic, and amounted to indoctrination of Newton’s youth. While the content of the text came as no surprise — Bedar was acutely aware of the attacks that CAMERA, the organization that had published the critique, had leveled on Newton’s School System over the course of the past seven years — Bedar was shocked that a bookstore would expose its patrons to a text replete with claims that, in his view, amounted to propaganda and defamatory speech.⁶¹

CAMERA’s perception of the situation is exactly the reverse. The people who work for CAMERA and the closely related Americans for Peace for Tolerance (APT) find it shocking that

⁶⁰ Stotsky, Steven, and Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America. *Indoctrinating Our Youth: How a U.S. Public School Curriculum Skews the Arab-Israeli Conflict and Islam.*

⁶¹ David Bedar, Interview, 2/16/2019.

a major school district in a progressive Northern city — a wealthy suburb of Boston, and one with a large Jewish population, at that — would expose its students to curricula and teaching that constitutes, in their view, propagandistic and defamatory speech. The hundred-page pamphlet (“monograph”), written by one of the analysts, Steven Stotsky, details the organization’s seven-year critique of Newton’s curriculum, and comes to the conclusion that many of the problems with the curricula would not have arisen had Newton history teachers decided to steer clear of current events and avoid the thorny topic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict altogether.⁶²

Bedar was familiar with the history of allegations of anti-Israel bias in Newton schools, but became personally implicated just this past summer — when Ilya Feoktistov, the executive director of APT, published an article in the *Federalist* regarding a chain of emails between Bedar and other Newton history teachers.⁶³ Feoktistov alleged that the emails, which the organization had obtained through a public records request, revealed that the teachers were bullying conservative students and engaging in liberal indoctrination.⁶⁴ Bedar says that the emails were taken out of context, and were part of a larger conversation on how to best support student learning and prevent a racially hostile environment in a changing national political environment.

⁶⁵ The emails, however, were just a point of entry: APT’s larger concern was Bedar’s senior global politics elective, which includes a unit on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁶⁶

⁶² Stotsky, *Indoctrinating Our Youth*, 67.

⁶³ Feoktistov, “Emails Reveal Teachers Plotting To Hide Their Political Bias From Parents.” *The Federalist*.

⁶⁴ Feoktistov, “Emails Reveal Teachers Plotting To Hide Their Political Bias From Parents.” *The Federalist*.

⁶⁵ David Bedar, Interview, 2/16/2019.

⁶⁶ Larkin, “A Test Of Tolerance In Newton, As Teachers Are Pressed On Israel Curriculum.” WBUR-FM.

Examining the Charges

At least three related groups have leveled charges of anti-Israel bias in Bedar's elective.⁶⁷ Members of these groups have aired their concerns in public meetings and published critiques on right-wing political websites and blogs. These organizations say that their main concern is with anti-Israel indoctrination; they are concerned with promoting Israel and promoting truth. But it seems something else is stake. The purpose of this section is not to evaluate the factual accuracy of their claims, but to understand what these claims actually mean — as the context in which this controversy has been discussed obscures the true intentions and stakes of those involved.

In November 2018, Steven Stotsky — the same analyst who wrote CAMERA's monograph — published an article on CAMERA's website which condemns the anti-Israel bias in Bedar's curricula and details the organization's main concerns.⁶⁸ Stotsky's concerns include the misleading reframing of the Arab-Israeli conflict as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the dismissal of the religious component of the conflict, and the insufficient discussion of aggression against the Jewish state.⁶⁹ Regardless of whether Stotsky's claims are valid, these concerns are puzzling: Why do the primary concerns with Bedar's elective involve not the information is presented, but the information left out? A closer look reveals that each claim is tied to a particular element of the discourse of Israeli exceptionalism: Bedar's course appears dangerous exactly because it threatens to question the myth of Israel as exceptionally vulnerable, uniquely moral, and existentially at threat.

⁶⁷ These groups include Education Without Indoctrination (EWI), CAMERA, and APT.

⁶⁸ Stotsky, "Anti-Israel Indoctrination Continues In Newton Public High School."

⁶⁹ Stotsky, "Anti-Israel Indoctrination Continues In Newton Public High School."

First, Stotsky argues that Bedar's course, by narrowing the focus from the Arab-Israeli to the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, fails to capture "the tenuous position of a tiny, lone Jewish state struggling to survive within a vast Arab realm and an even greater Muslim world community that rejects Israel's right to exist and strives to isolate it." The effect? Students might fail to comprehend the exceptional vulnerability of Israel — which, as we have seen, is tied to an understanding of Israel, and thus of America, as worthy of special support. This claim, on the surface, is that Bedar uses a mistaken label for this conflict (the "Israeli-Palestinian" conflict versus the "Arab-Israeli" conflict), but further analysis reveals a deeper concern: that Bedar's focus threatens to undermine the basis of Israeli exceptionalism and American exceptionalism in turn.

Similarly, Stotsky argues that, by virtue of an insufficient emphasis on radical Islam and the failure to discuss "institutionalized anti-Semitic rhetoric" in Palestinian media and schools, the course casts "Palestinians alone... as victims."⁷⁰ Importantly, the problem is not just that Palestinians may be cast as victims, but that Israelis are not cast as victims. As we have seen, Israel's status of victimhood constructs a narrative of Israel as uniquely deservingness of special financial and military support.

Finally, dismissing the religious component of the conflict threatens to undermine the providential origins of Israel and thus challenge the uniquely moral basis of the foundation of the state of Israel. One of Bedar's slides states that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a religious battle, but "a political struggle over competing national inspirations." Stotsky's problem with Bedar's definition is linked to the American-ization of Israel's founding, which positioned both

⁷⁰ Stotsky, "Anti-Israel Indoctrination Continues In Newton Public High School."

Israel and America, by virtue of their as unique and exceptional. Crucially, if Bedar's course questions this myth with relation to Israel, it threaten to destroy an idealized image not only of Israel but of America as well.

I do not purport to know Stotsky's personal intentions, but simply use these claims as an entry point. Analyzing CAMERA's critique of Bedar's elective helps us to understand what is going on in these controversies over teaching about Israel — to unravel something that at first seems irrational. In this discourse, we can trace the roots of cultural and political developments that have shaped American affinity for Israel over time.

Part III: “In Defense of Critical Thinking”

In response to the allegations, Bedar, aided by other members of the Newton teachers’ union, published an article titled “In Defense of Critical Thinking.”⁷¹ In the article, the teachers reject claims of anti-Israel bias in Newton curricula and argue that “teaching controversial subjects now is more important than ever.” The teachers write,

Ensuring that all students feel safe does not mean we keep them intellectually ‘comfortable.’ The classroom is a microcosm of our democratic society. We facilitate civil debate that pushes students outside their comfort zones, challenges their misconceptions, and cultivates empathy and respect... We teach out students how to think, not what to think.

The teachers conclude with a promise: “in a time of decaying civil discourse... we remain committed to teaching students to be critical thinkers.”

At the event in January, Jonah Cohen, CAMERA’s director of communications, censured the teachers for failing to provide a substantive definition of “critical thinking,” and proposed his own understanding of their mistaken use of the term: “My suspicion... is that by critical thinking, the defenders of the school are basically saying the school is a place of critical thinking because it’s open-minded, because it allows controversial subjects such as anti-Israel opinions to be discussed.”⁷²

Is this really a debate over the meaning of critical thinking? Or is there something else is at stake? As we have seen, the rhetoric mobilized in conflicts over teaching about Israel is better understood in the context of the unique affinity between America and Israel. But at this point, we must think more closely about the particular ideologies and stakes associated with K-12

⁷¹ “In Defense of Critical Thinking – Newton Teachers Association.”

⁷² Jonah Cohen. “The Next Chapter: Anti-Israel Bias in Newton Schools.” 28 Jan. 2019.

education. Why has an organization such as CAMERA, which was founded to monitor media,⁷³ turned their focus to monitoring schools?

Schooling in general, and history education in particular, has long been a vehicle of nationalism, designed to socialize students to a particular American creed.⁷⁴ When education encourages critical thinking about dominant narratives, controversies inevitably arise. As Apple argues, education is both a site of conflict and a manifestation of power structures — thus analyzing these controversies over teaching about Israel enables to identify and to better understand the structures that uphold the status quo.

In his critique of Bedar’s curriculum, Stotsky concludes that Bedar’s portrayal risks biasing student perceptions and thus constitutes a “stealth form of anti-Israel indoctrination.”⁷⁵ This language of threat pervades the current discourse over anti-Israel bias in schools, demonizing specific teachers and curricula. The initiators of these charges often claim that the potential for indoctrination is particularly great at the K-12 level, where kids are uniquely impressionable and susceptible to taking on their teachers’ views.

However, yet again, the discourse is not always what it seems. The surface-level fear is that the classroom is being politicized, and that exposing students to a non-dominant perspective will undermine or breed opposition to Israel. The CAMERA analysts express concern that conversations at the university level will begin to trickle down to K-12 schools. The underlying concern, however, runs deeper: if kids start to develop different emotional attachments, then the entire system risks being dismantled. Raymond Williams defines “structures of feeling” as the

⁷³ “A Brief History of CAMERA.”

⁷⁴ Van Sledright, “Narratives of Nation-State, Historical Knowledge, and School History Education.”

⁷⁵ Stotsky, “Anti-Israel Indoctrination Continues In Newton Public High School.”

ideological principles that support and translate arrangements of power into lived and felt patterns of sentiment.⁷⁶ If students develop different “structures of feeling” — which clash with the dominant point of view — then the structures that uphold the status quo could come toppling down.

⁷⁶ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 132-133.

Conclusion

To an outside observer, it might seem as if the controversy over how Israel-Palestinian conflict is taught involves cold, hard, facts — the people involved fundamentally disagree about what happened and when. From the way these controversies are discussed, it seems that this issue is black-and-white: you're either pro-American and pro-Israel on one side, or you're anti-American and anti-Israel on the other. You're either Zionist or anti-Zionist; anti-Semitic or inclusive; a terrorist or a national security hawk.

The way we discuss these conflicts fails to account for the diversity that animates our public discourse. The reality is so much more complex. This study has shown that, in the educational context, the urge to regulate teaching about Israel reflects less about Israel itself — and less about the historical accuracy or merit of the teaching — and more reflects a desire to narrow the realm of acceptable teaching in order to advance a foreign policy agenda and set of ideological views.

In fact, the urge to stifle criticism of Israel in schools has deeper, more complex origins, reflecting elements of internal American politics, and in particular, a politics of fear surrounding America's stability and dominance in the international world order. The way that the controversy is playing out in Newton reflects tensions of the current political moment — including partisan divisions in the Trump era, fears of border security, and fears of threat to the “Western world” or “way of life” — as well as the ever-present urge to use schools as a mechanism to define or circumscribe a particular set of values and particular notions of American identity. In other words, the facts of this specific conflict have become a proxy war, where Americans are

negotiating not the specifics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but rather, their own identities and senses of security. The way we talk about these conflicts obscures what is really going on.

Why does this matter? Entrenched emotional investments in the state of Israel serve to perpetuate American political investments – ultimately, enabling Israel’s human rights abuses and continued denial of Palestinian human rights. This study gives insight into the systems of power that lies behind these myths and propel narratives of American and Israeli exceptionalism. In order to challenge existing power structures, we must disentangle the stories that support these structures, and dare to critically think about the myths that uphold the status quo.

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