

# You Can't Say That!

## A Forum on How to Discuss Middle East Conflict

Imad Hamed, American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee

Betsy Kellman, Anti-Defamation League

Elias Baumgarten

Ron Stockton

Difficult Dialogues

University of Michigan-Dearborn

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# Teaching the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in an Age of War

Ron Stockton

Since 1979, I have taught a course on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is the most difficult and most rewarding course I teach. The course grew out of violence, that being the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1978. The tensions of that invasion spilled over onto our campus in a confrontation. When a course grows out of such circumstances, only a fool would not anticipate difficulties. I decided it was in the interests of our students to have this course in the curriculum, but I was very apprehensive

I was doubly handicapped in my task, not only by the political environment, but by the fact that I am not a Jew and am not an Arab. I suspected that no matter how knowledgeable and professional I was, some students would question my competence and see me as biased. For those whose people are at risk, this conflict is not the Punic Wars. There are individuals who spend their lives advocating for their homelands. Some are conditioned to be on alert for bias or distortion. Still others have a religious way of thinking, seeing Middle East conflict in theological terms. Public figures, private and governmental, accelerate these tendencies. In such an environment, academic detachment and the questioning of assumptions can be seen as covert advocacy. To be honest, I anticipated a wave of grievances, complaints and protests.

To minimize these problems, I developed certain techniques to insulate me (and my students) from the inflammatory environment in which we live. Let me outline those for you. I am not saying that these are the best techniques or that they would work for anyone else, but they work for me. First, I teach the class out of a course packet that contains over 300 pages of primary source documents. I tell students that if you want to understand the Jewish position, don't ask an Arab, and if you want to understand the Arab position, don't ask a Jew. Nor should you trust me. Go to the documents. It's not what I say or what American Jews or American Arabs say but, What do the Israelis say? What do the Palestinians say? Let them speak for themselves. And don't assume that all Israelis and all Palestinians agree.

Second, I tell students to think about the task of the professor and the task of the student. My task is to provide a learning environment by selecting those topics that I consider important, providing background on those topics, and helping students to understand how the different parties see the issues. When I explain certain views, I present them as logical. When I explain different views, I present those as logical. A cynic might say I take the coward's way out by freeing myself from taking sides. That is not true. I never conceal my preferences, but in front of the class I have a different role. I function as an educator, not a citizen.

The task of the student is to understand each position we encounter until they can explain that position to the satisfaction of someone who holds it. Until they can do that, they do not know enough to have an opinion. For their papers, I tell students to analyze independent of their preferences. This is not easy. When we discuss Herzl's 1896 essay, *Der Judenstaat*, calling for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, and his later comment that we will "spirit the Arabs across the border," it is hard for Palestinians to read. When we discuss the *Hamas Charter*, which says there should not be a Jewish state on even one dunam of Palestinian land, it is hard for Jewish students to read. And when we read data on death patterns, especially the number of children killed, it is hard for everyone. But students like this approach. It frees them to think

I do two other things that some of you might question. In fact, I might question one of them myself. I was trained as an empiricist. One of my professors once told me—when I was getting off base--to stick to what I could count. Numbers force you to deal with reality and free you from both your preconceptions and moralistic judgments. As I told one student, behind every lecture is a data table.

With that said, and having made the case for empiricism, it might seem strange that I give students a moral assignment. I tell them to try to humanize all the parties in this conflict by realizing that in their circumstances each of us might well think what they think and even, God forbid, do what they do. I tell them that if they cannot see themselves in every single position that we encounter, no matter how violent or offensive, then they are not thinking hard enough. Of course, this is a trick assignment because while I am telling them to humanize others, I am really telling them to humanize themselves.

Finally, I ban polemics from my classroom. This means I ask students not to use certain terms. Among them are terrorist, Nazi, fascist, racist, another Hitler, genocidal, anti-Semitic.<sup>1</sup> I discourage these words for several reasons. First, some words have different meanings for different people so that even if you use them in a cautious, responsible manner, others will understand them differently. It is not that I am inherently opposed to certain terms. In my class on Revolution, we define terrorism and discuss specific cases and whether or not they fit the definition. In another class, we read the genocide convention and discuss cases. But in a class on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, these terms are so tainted by what happens in the public arena that they inhibit learning.

Second, anything involving the Nazis or the Holocaust is traumatic in our collective memory. Calling someone by those terms is so hurtful, and so inaccurate given the unique horrors of that age, that, intentionally or not, it turns them into swear words.<sup>2</sup>

Third, certain words implicitly involve assaults upon the dignity and integrity not just of individuals but upon a whole community and its standing in society. They provoke strong reactions. If you don't believe me, read what the ADL and ADC have said about the Nazi/fascist analogy. Verbal slight of hand—"I'm speaking of Zionists, not Jews" or "I am speaking of radical Muslims, not Muslims"—convinces only the choir.

This class operates within an environment of what I call the Rhetoric Wars, the use of inflammatory words, accusatory questions, debasing analogies, and polemical para-theologies that stir up passions, discredit groups, turn political disputes into apocalyptic conflicts, and tend to cut off the consideration of policy options. This is not helpful in Washington and it is not helpful in my class. My students know lots of words.

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<sup>1</sup> President Bush recently said we were fighting "Islamic fascism," a term associated with the ideological right. Senator Rick Santorum embraced it in his struggling re-election campaign as did various right wing talk show hosts. It was criticized by such disparate persons as Patrick Buchanan and Senator Russ Feingold. An NBC/WSJ poll released September 13, 2006 showed that 61% of the public considered the terms Nazi and fascist inappropriate in describing the situation in Iraq. Only 32% considered them appropriate. The question: "President Bush has compared the war in Iraq to the fight against the Nazis and fascists. Do you believe this is an appropriate comparison that reflects the danger of the current situation, or an inappropriate comparison that is only being made to justify the Bush policy in Iraq?"

<sup>2</sup> The Haaretz columnist Bradley Burston has an internet discussion group for his columns. His Guidelines for discussion specify that "the guiding principles" will be "mutual respect and an openness to dialogue. Participants, even if they rule out, dismiss or oppose coexistence, must within the confines of this forum, practice it. Specific exclusions are "racist remarks, as well as slurs on the basis of religion, ethnicity and gender. Use of the terms Nazi, Hitler, genocide, ethnic cleansing, to describe the actions and policies of Israelis, Palestinians or other parties to the Israel-Arab conflict." He concludes: "Censorship will be unapologetic." September 22, 2006.

If they want to say someone is killing civilians, say that. We get the point. But if someone calls them terrorists, that ends the discussion (or else escalates it out of control). These parameters are not designed to cut off discussion, but to facilitate it, to free students to engage in serious discourse around complex and painful topics in a difficult learning environment.

Students like this class. The number of complaints to administrators over the past 27 years have been mercifully few, less than the fingers on one hand. No one has firebombed my office or killed my cat. I am a white guy from the hills of Southern Illinois. I am constantly in danger of embracing those simplistic positions associated with what Paul Tillich, the noted theologian, called the hubris of the uninvolved. I make mistakes and my students sometimes leave class grumbling, but most leave with a sense that they learned something. As students often say to me, “I knew what we felt about those issues, but I never realized that they had legitimate views.”

That is how I define success.