

Harvard, Israel, and Academic Freedom

This past week I delivered a lecture at Columbia University on academic freedom and anti-Semitism. I argued that it is the essence of academic freedom that all members of our community can hold whatever views they wish and express them freely. But it is equally the essence of academic freedom that universities as institutions must avoid acting in a way that suggests that they endorse any one position in a political controversy.

Because if a university itself starts to take sides, there is both a risk of chilling dialogue and debate within the community and of undermining public confidence in the university's academic and research pursuits. These risks are magnified if a university repeatedly lends its imprimatur to the same controversial viewpoint on inherently political questions.

I have a growing concern this has happened with respect to Harvard, Israel, and the Middle East. This weekend, in an attempt to garner information about the snowstorm, I looked at the University's official website, the principal window that Harvard presents to the world, and where it highlights especially significant University accomplishments. My eye caught the "Global Engagement" section of the website, where I was surprised to see an op-ed by a Research Fellow at Harvard's Middle East Initiative proclaiming without qualification that "what is certain is that Israeli-Lebanese-Syrian-Iranian tensions and active warfare would not be a recurring problem, as in fact they are, had Israel responded to the Arab peace plan."

While I find this assertion absurd, others would disagree, and it would, of course, be wrong for the University to censor either opinion in any way. It is, though, equally wrong for such an opinion to be given pride of place alongside stories with subjects like Harvard fighting breast cancer, a time lapse of Annenberg Hall, and an audio feature on Robert Frost as a Harvard voice.

No one should overreact to one incident with respect to the University's website. Unfortunately, the official showcasing of a patently anti-Israel article is not an isolated example. Late last year, through some failure of administrative oversight, Harvard University Dining Services altered its procurement policy to avoid purchasing soda machines originating in the West Bank. Unlike many universities who gave up their membership in the American Studies Association in response to the Association's boycott of Israeli scholars, Harvard remains an institutional member. And on multiple occasions in recent years, the University's imprimatur—and seeming endorsement—has been bestowed to support conferences at which speakers advocated the end of Israel as a Jewish state.

In 2012, a Vice Provost of the University was the keynote speaker and "Harvard guest" at the Harvard Arab Alumni Association's conference in Damascus. Conference materials made clear that the conference's patron was The First Lady of Syria, who was described as "an...inspiring and tireless leader...[who] supports President Assad by fostering the emergence of a robust, independent, and self-sustaining society." Since that time the Assad government has killed several hundred thousands of its citizens and been recognized as an exporter of terrorism.

Of course Harvard as an institution and its leadership have no objective of demonizing Israel or supporting terrorists. Nonetheless, the failure to maintain controls sufficient to prevent activists from hijacking the University's name and reputation in support of their objectives is a very serious issue and has led to concerns of community members who feel that they are being attacked. When Harvard allows its reputation to be attached to pernicious ideas, it raises the risk that they will be seen as legitimate in more and more places. And as the University intrudes into politics, the risks that political actors will seek to regulate its activities are enhanced.

And there are fundamental moral issues. More than a decade ago, as a University president faced with petitions that Harvard divest itself of all investments in Israel, I made a speech asserting that these actions would be "anti-Semitic in effect if not intent." There is nothing wrong with criticizing Israel, and I for one believe that aspects of its settlements policy are misguided and potentially dangerous. Yet the US State Department was correct when it stated in its "Anti-Semitism Monitor" that "while criticism of Israel cannot automatically be regarded as anti-Semitic, rhetoric that demonizes,



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delegitimizes, or applies double standards to Israel crosses the line of legitimate criticism.”

In a world of increasing complexity and increasing intolerance, Harvard's example has never been more important. If Harvard is to lead on academic freedom it is essential that we all feel free to assert our views but that our University protect with ferocity its reputation by preventing views demonizing Israel or any other country from being bestowed with its good name.

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