

## **The Situation of American Studies in Jordan: Scenario and Diagnosis**

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It is argued that American Studies has been struggling for acceptance and recognition in the curriculum of English departments in Jordan. Influenced by the East-West relationship marked by suspicion, conflict, confrontation, and stereotyping, American Studies has been unable to carve a place for itself in the curriculum.

The discussion demonstrates that the attitude of the West (America included) toward the Middle East has been driven by interests, that the USA has been holding onto the negative images of Arabs and Muslims, and that the West has been favoring military intervention, which creates countless problems for peoples of the region and inflames anti-American sentiments.

This biased attitude toward the Middle East does determine the geography of American Studies, which runs counter to the wishes of Americanists. It is hoped that American policy makers will pay attention to this matter, and that the American foreign policy will change for the better. When this change occurs, a parallel change for the better will certainly become of American Studies.

The relationship between the Near (or Middle, as some prefer to say) East and the West (America included) is over one thousand and four hundred years old. In spite of this long period of time, this relationship has unfortunately been marked by confrontation, intervention and stereotyping. After the end of World War I, Europeans, driven by their interests that are, Alkadry claims in "Colonialism in a Postmodern Age," at odds with the national and public interests of the Arab people, changed the geography of what is now called the Middle East, by deciding, at the San Remo Conference held in 1920, that "the whole of Arab Rectangle lying between the Mediterranean and the Persian Frontier [be] placed under mandatory rule" (305-306). While Europeans first arranged for colonizing the Middle East, they empowered and helped the Jews with establishing a state in Palestine.

This choice made by Europeans is informed by their own interests as well as their misunderstanding of Arabs and Muslims who have the right to enjoy their rights as humans in much the same way others do. Weak and divided, Arabs and Muslims have been politically ruled by the West. They have also been subordinated to Israel whose alliance with the US has been stifling the development of any constructive peace talks, and shielding it against criticism. Arguing in support of this view, Zunes claims, in "Ten Things to Know about US Policy in the Middle East," that "[o]ver the past thirty years, the US has used its veto power to protect its ally Israel from censure more than all other members of the Security Council have used their veto power on all other issues combined" (p.5). America's use of its veto power represents not only a direct and unconditional support for Israel, but it also places, Zunes adds, "the United States in direct violation of UN Security Council resolution 465, which calls upon all states not to provide Israel with any assistance to be used specifically in connection with settlements in the occupied territories" (p.6). This attitude of America obviously reflects its double standards despite its claims that it adopts an even-handed policy. Clarifying this situation, Eric Watkins holds, in "The Unfolding US Policy in the Middle East," that "[a]lthough US policymakers claim to adopt an even-handed approach in dealing with the Arabs and the Israelis, their practice traditionally favors Israel" (p.1).

This bias has been igniting a lot of anti-Americanism in the Middle East, which not only springs from, Obeidat argues in "Beyond American Borders:

The Middle East and the Enigma of anti-American Sentiments in the Aftermath of 9/11," "a prejudiced hatred of and a blind bias against the United States or American culture and citizens for that matter, but from a profound feeling about America's role as a leading power at the international level" (p.15).

Like Obeidat, Sumra Salem argues, in “Anti-Americanism in the Middle East,” that the “Israeli- Palestinian conflict, also referred to as the Arab-Israeli conflict, contributes tremendously and is the foremost explanation of the high levels of anti-Americanism in the Middle East. These anti-American sentiments are created by Washington’s stance within the conflict and are best exemplified by its substantial support for Israel politically, economically and militarily” (p.4). Reiterating the same view, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak states that “because of the war in Iraq and Washington’s continued support of Israel, hatred of Americans in the Arab world had reached new heights.” Following Mubarak’s steps, Shehab and Sid-Ahmed view Washington’s unconditional and “eternal support of the ruling right-wing in Tel Aviv,” and alliance with Israel whose stance on the core issue of Palestine is uncompromising “as the foremost reasons for the rancor” (p.7).

This American collaboration with Israel manifested in the alliance is, Sumra argues, “a legitimate source of grievances in the Middle East and prime generator of anti-Americanism” (p.5). The alliance with Israel intensifies the anti-American anger that also stems from Arabs’ feeling let down due to the United States’ refusal to pressurize Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories, the United States’ consistent policy of supporting Israel at all costs, the United States’ condoning the Israelis’ developing as many nuclear weapons as they please, and the United States’ treating Israel as a country above the law. This stance of America brings about dissatisfaction, anger, and anti-American sentiments. These sentiments are further created by America’s failure to help Palestinians enjoy their rights in a state of their own. They are also directly associated with, Sumra Salem adds, “the effects felt across the region as a result of American policies“(p.4).

Lacking even-handedness, these American policies have been generating bitterness amongst Arabs for a number of reasons. Firstly, the US has been so far helpless to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict giving birth to instability, insecurity, despair, and acts of violence. This situation has been also contributing to America’s losing its credibility. Secondly, the United States’ ongoing support for Israel has been enabling it to defeat Arabs and ,thus, maintain its occupation of Arab territories .Thirdly, the US has been maintaining a military presence in the region, especially in Iraq and the Arabian Gulf countries. Such an ongoing presence is certainly conducive to creating an increasing resentment. Fourthly, the US has been opposing efforts by Arab states to produce, Stephen Zunes claims in “Ten Things to Know about US Policy in the Middle East,” “weapons of mass destruction while tolerating Israel’s sizable nuclear arsenal and bringing US nuclear weapons into Middle Eastern waters as well as rejecting calls for the creation of a nuclear-free zone in the region” (p.2). Fifthly, the United States’ applying grievous double standards in connection with implementing UN resolutions. This American behavior makes Arabs and Muslims all over the world critical of America in particular and the West in general for failing, Andrew Young holds in “The ‘Clash of Civilizations’ and American Intervention in the Middle East,” “to punish Israel for violating U.N. resolutions” (p.2). Young adds that it is not surprising that the West (America included ) “[has] utilized force against Iraq but fails to force its kin countries to behave” (p.2).

This imbalanced, pro-Israeli tilt policy has been hindering the advancement of America’s national interests. A careful scrutiny of American foreign policy in the Middle East since the Cold War demonstrates that the US government has been serving its selfish interests, and, thus, it has promulgated, Isra Jensia maintains in “US Middle East Policy,” “an outpouring of hatred and animosity toward the United States” (p.1). Isra adds that unless the US government changes its policy toward the Middle East “the best interests of the American people will never be served” (p.1). The United States has been subordinating its interests to those of Israel whose diplomats care only for their own interests. To advance its interests, the United States should suspend its aid to Israel whose compliance with the UN resolutions would liberate, Paul Findley maintains in “Reflecting on Our Relationship with Israel,” "all Americans from long years of bondage to Israel’s misdeeds” (p.3). The suspension of this aid is a necessity and a prerequisite for the protection of the interests of the American people. While the United States provides this type of support for Israel, it doesn’t do Arabs and Muslims in the region any justice. It keeps imposing restrictions on them and disempowering them, which does not help them with wresting their inalienable rights as humans. It also arranges for keeping them subordinate to Israelis by holding onto and disseminating their negative images, which makes people unsympathetic with them.

Since World War II, the Middle East has been impacted by Western technology, and more so nowadays with the advent of satellite stations and the Internet. Audiences in this part of the world have been overwhelmed by spates of stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims in the US television and films.

These stereotypes, Jack Shaheen claims in *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, "portray Arabs by distorting at every turn what most Arab men, women and children are really like"(1). Commenting on the image of Arabs in American films, Shaheen argues that Arab Muslims are depicted "as hostile alien intruders, and as lecherous, oily sheikhs intent on using nuclear weapons" (9). Echoing Shaheen, Edward Said similarly argues, in *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, that Muslims and Arabs are "essentially covered, discussed, apprehended, either as oil suppliers or as potential terrorists". Rather than provide "the human density" of their lives, "a limited series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world [are] presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression" (26). Said adds that "there is a consensus on "Islam" as a kind of scapegoat for everything we do not happen to like about the world's new political, social, and economic patterns. For the right, Islam represents barbarism; for the left, medieval theocracy; for the centre, a kind of distasteful exoticism" (*Covering Islam*, pp. x, xv). Like Said, William Leuchtenbur, a distinguished American historian, maintains, in "The American Perception of the Arab World," that the "most striking aspect of the relationship between Arab and American cultures" is that "to Americans, the Arabs are a people who have lived outside of history" (15).

Stereotypes such as these impede understanding and rapprochement. These negative images do Arabs and Muslims harm for they keep them in a state of stasis. They also stop Americans from understanding Arabs and Muslims as they are. The result is that Americans use these stereotypes to scapegoat them holding them to be responsible for actions they haven't done. In so doing, Americans demonstrate their prejudice against Arabs and Muslims whom they mistakenly blame for their problems. By shifting blame onto Arabs Americans flee their responsibilities, leaving their victims to suffer on their own. This act of shifting blame occurs, Richard Landes holds, in "Scapegoating," *Encyclopedia of Social History*, as a result "of the common defense mechanism of denial through projection" (659).

This projection falls much in the same way scapegoating does. As far as understanding is concerned, stereotypes forbid Americans to understand Arabs and Muslims, and create hostilities as well as anti-American sentiments, which the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines as "opposed or hostile to the government, official policies, or people of the United States." The sources of anti-Americanism remain, Samra Salem argues in "Anti-Americanism in the Middle East, "divided between individuals who simply possess a prejudice against America and those who do so in reaction to the nation's actions. Such diversity develops and changes over time with the current dominant source being the latter option, predominantly regarding America's foreign policy under the Bush administration" (2) (*Global Affairs /Issue 8,2008*). This policy consists of paramount support for Israel and hostility towards Arabs and Muslims. It is this practice which keeps giving birth to anti-American sentiments in the Middle East, that has often been, Stephen E. Ambrose holds in *Rise to Globalism*, "a headache, sometimes a nightmare" for American policymakers, "as each President has tried, in his own way, to pursue an even-handed policy, if only because he needed both Arab oil and Jewish campaign contributions" (p.258).

These two needs, oil and Jewish campaign contributions, constitute American strategic interests in the Middle East. Edward Said argues in "Blind Imperial Arrogance—Vile Stereotyping of Arabs" that, since World War II, "American strategic interests in the Middle East have been, first, to ensure supplies of oil and, second, to guarantee at enormous cost the strength and domination of Israel over its neighbors" (*The Los Angeles Times*, 2003 ?). The second interest, in particular, has been doing America harm. In a sense, America's support for Israel has been occurring at the expense of the interests of the American people. This support has been also maintained despite the cruelties perpetrated by the Israelis against Palestinians in the occupied territories.

Commenting on these atrocities, Paul Findley, a member of the US House of Representatives for twenty years, argues in "Reflecting on Our Relationship with Israel" that hundreds of Palestinians are "detained for long periods and most are tortured. Some are assassinated. Homes, orchards, and business places are destroyed. Entire cities are kept under intermittent curfew, some confinements lasting for weeks" (1). Findley adds, "Injured or ill Palestinians needing emergency medical care are routinely held at checkpoints for an hour or more....The West Bank and Gaza have become giant concentration camps. None of this could have occurred without US support" (p.1/sept.12, 2002). Findley also claims that "Israeli forces treat Palestinians worse than cattle" (1).

Reiterating Findley's argument, Charles L. Black, Jr. claims in "Let us Rethink Our 'Special Relationship' with Israel" that Americans "are being furnished copious and moving, contemporary illustrations of the actions of Israel in cruel derogation of basic human rights" (1).

Laying the blame on Americans for these enormities, Black adds, "Through the actions of our government, we have put and seem bent on keeping Israel in a position to do whatever it desires, without fear of serious consequences. This corrupting power of Israel is in main truth and substance our creation; we are therefore ourselves fully responsible for the use to which Israel puts the power we thus place in its hands" (pp.1 &2). This support for Israel damages the US national interests. Reflecting on the impact of this support, Paul Findley maintains that "the US government finds itself reviled in most countries because it provides unconditional support of Israeli violations of the United Nations Charter, International law, and the precepts of all major religious faiths" (1). Critical of this support, Black holds, in "Let us Rethink Our 'Special Relationship' with Israel," that "... it is wrong for the United States of America to be arming and supporting such a regime, to the point of ensuring that it can pursue and attain such ends, by such means, while fearing no serious consequences" (10).

Making a strong case that this blind support tarnishes the view of the United States in the Arab World, Steven Walt and John Mearsheimer both claim in *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* that this support for Israel provides arms and money and, at the same time, shields Israel from the consequences of its actions (2008). Dwelling equally on this support for which America's interests are sacrificed, Findley holds, in his capacity as a member of the US House of Representatives, that "[all] members swear to serve the interests of the United States, but there is an unwritten and overwhelming exception: The interests of one small foreign country almost always trump US interests. That nation of course is Israel" (1). Like Findley, Justin Raimondo maintains, in "The Lobby," that "American foreign policy has been weighed down for all too many years by an albatross hung round Uncle Sam's neck, one that distorts our stance especially vis-à-vis Middle Eastern issues and ultimately works against US interests in the region and around the world: that albatross is unconditional support for the state of Israel" (1).

The preceding arguments are highly significant. This significance lies in their being made by insiders who know well all about the grave consequences of their government's support for Israel. These insiders also know that their government is empowering the Israelis who perpetrate enormities against Palestinians in Palestine and flee punishment, that the interests of American people are not in focus, and that this behavior runs counter to America's talk about the principles of human rights, justice, democracy and freedom. Moreover, these insiders' arguments emphasize the distortion becoming of America and its image in the Middle East. This distortion has been manifest in America's losing credibility and, thus, becoming unreliable. This image of the USA affects its interests in the Arab World in general and in Jordan in particular. In other words, America's prejudice and double standards bear upon the recognition of its culture and literature beyond its borders, especially in the Middle East whose peoples have been scapegoated, stereotyped and exploited under the pre text that they are unable to develop themselves.

In Jordan, a country neighboring Palestine, this struggle for recognition marks the march of American Studies which have been denied a place in the curriculum of English departments at a number of universities. The Middle East University, for instance, offers no classes on American literature and American Studies. Whereas the English tradition is emphasized, American literature and culture are not mentioned in the study plan. Similar to this University is AL-lul-Bayt which offers no classes on American Studies. Like Al-lul-Bayt and the Middle East universities, Petra University does not offer any classes on American literature and American Studies.

Opposed to this situation is the good number of classes on English literature. Parallel to this situation is the one at Philadelphia University, the one at Applied Science University, the one at Al-Zaitoonah University of Jordan, and the one at Amman Private University, where there are several classes on English literature, but no ones on American Studies. Similar to these universities are Jadara University, Arab Open University, Jordan University of Science and Technology, the College of Educational Sciences and Arts, the German-Jordanian University, Zarqa Private University, Al-Hussein Bin Talal University, and Balqa University For Applied Sciences which offer no classes on American Studies. The study plans of these universities provide us with the indication that American literature and American Studies do not constitute a tradition, and that they are still thought of as being part of the English tradition..

In other words, these plans show that studies of American culture, politics, literature, education, economy, media, history, geography, etc., have no place in the curriculum of English departments at several universities in Jordan.

The reason underlying the absence of these studies is probably related to the becoming-increasingly-unacceptable American foreign policy in the Middle East and to the current government's short-sighted attitude to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

We have demonstrated that the situation of American studies in Jordan is influenced by the American foreign policy that has been creating resentment in the Middle East. Struggling for recognition, these studies have so far been denied a place in the English curriculum. We hope that this policy will change for the better. When this sort of change occurs, the situation of American Studies will certainly and equally change for the better. As long as nothing can be done about this complex-in-demands situation, the best thing to be done is to wait patiently for a drastic change to take place—it is to be hoped.

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