

Brandeis Professors' Textbook Attacks Israel Under the Mantle of Objectivity

Middle East Studies Textbook at Brandeis Promises Objectivity, Delivers Broadside Against Israel

By Benjamin Baird (April 2018)



Shai Feldman, Abdel Monem Said Aly, Khalil Shikaki

The Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University claims to take “a balanced and dispassionate approach to the Modern Middle East.” Such an approach to the study of the Near East would indeed be refreshing for a discipline where partisanship and substandard scholarship are the norm. However, the content of the primary textbook that leading scholars at the center co-authored—[*Arabs and Israelis: Conflict and Peacekeeping in the Middle East*](#)—demonstrates that

the Center is failing to comply with its own standards for balanced academic discourse. Moreover, a close examination of one of the Center's flagship courses, "Conflict and Peacemaking in the Middle East," reveals that instead of using supplemental readings to address the textbook's biases, scholars assign articles that exacerbate the textbook's anti-Zionist proclivities.

Arabs and Israelis is the product of two groups of scholars. Shai Feldman, Judith and Sidney Swartz Director of the Crown Center, wrote the Israeli narrative in the book, while Goldman Senior Fellow Khalil Shikaki and senior fellow Abdel Monem Said Aly recount the respective Palestinian and Arab roles, respectively. Feldman calls this [team](#) the "nucleus" of the Crown Center. *Arabs and Israelis* is organized around narratives. Each of the thirteen chapters (designed for a semester of equal length) begins with fundamental facts on which the coauthors have reached a consensus, followed by the Israeli, Arab, and Palestinian narratives.

The book's "[uncontested](#)" facts consistently portray Zionists negatively while validating Arab claims. One example of this bias is the authors' claim that Jewish land purchases from absentee Arab owners after 1882 resulted in "Arab peasants" being displaced by "Jewish laborers." But as late as 1937, a British Royal Inquiry—later known as [the Peel Commission](#)—investigated the root causes of Jewish-Arab instability in Palestine and concluded the allegation was unfounded. The Inquiry, which can hardly be characterized as pro-Zionist, [determined](#) that "Much of the land now carrying orange groves was sand dunes or swamps and uncultivated when it was bought." Yet Feldman and his coauthors presented their claim of expropriation as beyond dispute.

While the “objective” narrative in *Arabs and Israelis* is based on poor scholarship, the Palestinian narrative rests on pure fiction and anti-Semitic superstition. This is no surprise: an Investigative Project on Terrorism [report](#) outlined how the section’s author, Khalil Shikaki, helped fund and support the [Palestinian Islamic Jihad](#) (PIJ), a U.S. State Department-designated terrorist organization that the professor’s own brother, [Fathi Shikaki](#), personally led until the latter’s untimely death. Evidence released by the FBI demonstrates that Khalil Shikaki had undeniable links with indicted terrorism financier Sami Al-Arian and other prominent PIJ members.

Moreover, Shikaki is widely regarded as a leading expert of Palestinian [public opinion](#). As director for the [Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research](#), his insistence that the Palestinian people stood for peaceful reform caused U.S. policy makers and Israeli intelligence officials to [underestimate](#) the popularity of the terrorist group Hamas in the run-up to their victory in the 2006 Palestinian general election. Shikaki’s polls were wildly inaccurate, suggesting that his political activism outweighed any commitment to accuracy. Yet a pollster who has proven himself woefully unprepared to conduct and interpret Palestinian opinion polls is responsible for communicating the Palestinian narrative to Brandeis students studying the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Shikaki’s background is manifested in his attempts to whitewash Palestinian history. He begins the book’s Palestinian segment with an ahistorical portrayal of the infamous Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husseini, who spent World War II as Hitler’s personal guest in Berlin. The Mufti’s support for Nazi Germany—according to Shikaki—was

“justified” and his fondness for Hitler “in no way constitut[ed] an endorsement of Nazi racist goals.”

Yet the Mufti’s support for Nazi anti-Semitism is beyond dispute. His embrace of racial anti-Semitism is evident in his wartime propaganda broadcasts, which were intended to solicit support for the Nazis in the Arab world. The Mufti’s speeches were saturated with racist claims: he likened “Jewishness” to an “infectious disease” and perpetuated the myths that Jews sought to “enslave and exploit Arabs, to seize their land” and “expropriate their wealth.” Al-Husseini demonstrated his loyalty to the Third Reich by providing tens of thousands of Arab Muslim recruits to fight alongside German SS and regular army units.

Shikaki and his co-authors refuse to acknowledge the reality of the Mufti’s anti-Semitism. They ascribe his actions to a failed attempt at realpolitik, in which the Arabs would secure Hitler’s support for their ambitions in exchange for Arab support of the Nazi agenda. This claim ignores the fact that Hitler offered no practical incentives to the Mufti, and the Axis powers even refused to support independence for the Arab North African states they occupied. Nevertheless, the textbook claims that “[The Mufti], by allying himself with Nazi Germany during the war in exchange for a German promise that Arabs and Palestinians would be granted independence after it, tainted the Palestinian cause and seriously damaged if not totally destroyed any chance of international support for the Palestinians in the immediate postwar period.” In other words, the Mufti’s association with Hitler is a tragedy not because it inculcated racial anti-Semitism throughout the Muslim world, but because it delegitimized the Palestinian cause by (accurately) linking it to Nazism.

The contributions to *Arabs and Israelis* by Abdel Monem Said Aly unfortunately reflect the vices of his former career. Aly served as [chief executive](#) and chairman of the board of Egypt's premier state-run media outlet, which typified the [sensationalism](#) of Egyptian print media. As Hosni Mubarak's muckraker-in-chief at *Al-Ahram* from 2009 to 2011, Aly oversaw coverage during the "Arab Spring." Yet as millions of discontented Egyptians demanded the dictator's abdication, his newspaper's deceptive [front-page headline](#) read: "Millions March to Support Mubarak Nationwide."

This same partisanship characterizes Aly's academic writing so that the Arab perspective in the textbook resembles unscholarly newspeak. While the Israeli narrative is kept to a close approximation of the truth, Aly twice refers to Israel as "a band of gangsters and conspirators." Strongarm dictator Gamal Abdel Nasser is repeatedly labeled a "hero," despite the abject failures of his Arab nationalist agenda, including dragging his nation into the disastrous Six Days War in 1967 by closing the Straits of Tiran to Israel. Aly also fails to disclose that nine of the "activists" and "Turkish citizens" who were killed by the Israeli Navy after attempting to ferry supplies to the terrorist-designated government in Gaza as part of the so-called "aid flotilla" in 2010 were, in fact, [armed affiliates](#) of al-Qaeda who actively resisted their vessel's takeover. Citing a UN commission that investigated the 2011 raid, Aly concludes that the Israeli commandos "used excessive force" while exercising their right to enforce a naval blockade. This false narrative is in keeping with Aly's current position as CEO of Al Masry Al Youm Publishing House, the media outlet that [sponsored](#) an initiative that provided sanctuary to the "Free Gaza Flotilla" movement.

Disturbing as the textbook's biases is how it is used in the classroom. Consider the Center's class "Conflict and Peacemaking in the Middle East." Brandeis boasts that the [course](#) "has no equivalent in other universities and remains the only class on this topic team-taught by an Israeli, a Palestinian, and an Egyptian." A more accurate summary of the biographies of the scholars who direct "Conflict and Peacemaking" would note that one instructor is a terror-tied Palestinian pollster who falsifies his research, the other a [post-Zionist](#) historian, and the third an unapologetic propagandist and [partisan](#) of Egypt's former Mubarak regime.

As if these prejudices aren't enough, the professors expand the anti-Zionist agenda with even more partisan supplementary readings, the bulk of which is authored by [Benny Morris and Avi Shlaim](#)—hardly the unprejudiced scholars the Crown family envisioned when they gave so generously to Brandeis University. Morris gained fame with his false assertion that Israel's founding fathers perpetrated ethnic cleansing: "The refugee problem was caused by attacks by Jewish forces on Arab villages and towns and by the inhabitants' fear of such attacks, compounded by expulsions, atrocities, and rumors of atrocities—and by the crucial Israeli Cabinet decision in June 1948 to bar a refugee return." Although Morris later recanted and [admitted that](#) ethnic cleansing never occurred, the course's readings omit this crucial fact. Similarly, Shlaim joins Morris in "demythologizing" Israel's founding, arguing that the Palestinians were forcibly expelled from their homeland in a massive conspiracy between Israel, Jordan, and their Western imperialist allies.

By publicizing Arabs and Israelis as a triple narrative, the Crown Center hoped to strike a political balance. Instead, they succeeded only in producing a textbook that is two-thirds

pro-Palestinian propaganda and one-third historical revisionism. As if this weren't enough, each scholar's prejudices are reinforced by supplementary readings from some of the most controversial historians in the field of Middle East studies. Consequently, Brandeis students are subjected to an ideological approach that veers dangerously close to New Right identitarianism wherein each professors' ethnic and national status shunts aside an objective analysis of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Such a biased, politicized, and mendacious approach perpetuates the modern myth that Israel is but a neocolonial settler colony built on the displacement of indigenous Palestinians. Students who emerge convinced of the illegitimacy of Israel as a Jewish state will carry their skewed, ahistorical views into their professions, whether as diplomats, policy makers, legislators, or teachers, thereby perpetuating this malady for generations. Brandeis's trustees and administrators should end this maleducation by replacing it with rigorous, objective scholarship and teaching.

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