

## **A Decade of the Neo-McCarthyite Assault on Middle East Studies**

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Efforts to discredit critical thinking about the Middle East on North American college and university campuses are not new. Soon after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the American Jewish Committee, the B'nai B'rith Anti Defamation League (ADL), and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) sounded alarms about the increasing influence of “Arab propaganda” on university campuses and began to monitor the activities of students and teachers they considered “anti-Israel.” They frequently suggested that criticism of Israel and Zionism bordered on or was equivalent to anti-Semitism. The ignominy of being labeled an anti-Semite was and remains highly effective in silencing or muting campus criticism of Israel. From the 1960s through the 1980s, the ADL illegally spied on some 10,000 individuals and 600 organizations in the San Francisco Bay area, including faculty and students at local campuses, and passed the information to South African and possibly also Israeli security agencies. Hillel, the largest Jewish student organization, compiled lists of university professors it objected to and exerted pressure on university administrations regarding the administration of programs in Middle East studies and other matters.<sup>[1]</sup> Efforts to block the appointment of “pro-Arab” candidates (who were often Jews) to faculty positions were typically conducted quietly and with mixed results.

The 1975-90 Lebanese civil war and the 1979 Iranian revolution, which dethroned a major US ally, led to the intellectual defeat of modernization theory and a search for new paradigms in modern Middle East history and the social sciences. They were supplied by the Generation of 1968, which had just begun to make its presence felt in the field, somewhat behind the curve compared to U.S. and European history. In the broadest terms, the neo-McCarthyite campaign against Middle East scholars of the last decade was a

response to the intellectual defeat of proponents of modernization theory and the ancillary proposition that the most “modern” regimes—Iran, Turkey, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Israel—were the most reliable US allies in the Middle East. It was however most directly motivated by the breaking of the taboo on criticizing Israel in the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA)—the principle scholarly organization for the study of the region, which had consciously constrained discussion of Israel/Palestine during the first years of its existence.<sup>[2]</sup>

The national trauma of 9/11 created a receptive audience beyond academia for the neo-McCarthyites. It allowed them to label those they disapproved of as “supporters” or “justifiers” of terrorism, no matter how flimsy the evidence. Unlike previous efforts to suppress critical thought, this was a well-organized and highly visible nationwide effort exemplified by the “Campus-Watch” website established by Daniel Pipes in 2002.

The campaign has had mixed results. On the one hand, it has damaged the careers of untenured scholars such as Norman Finkelstein, blocked speaking appearances of well-respected senior scholars such as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt and the late Tony Judt, and to some incalculable degree, intimidated people from saying or doing what they otherwise might have. In some cases wealthy individuals or groups purporting to speak in the name of Jewish institutions have apparently blocked senior appointments, though such behind-closed-doors pressure can rarely be conclusively proved. Most importantly, the neo-McCarthyites contributed to poisoning the atmosphere and constricting freedom of speech on many North American campuses, perhaps even more so in Canada than the United States.

On the other hand, they have had no success in either delegitimizing or replacing MESA as the premier organization in the world for the study of the Middle East, despite a focused effort launched by Martin Kramer’s polemical and intellectually insubstantial attack on MESA as an organization in the thrall of (Edward) Saidian postcolonial studies.<sup>[3]</sup> Not only have those Kramer excoriates been elected to the board of directors and the presidency of MESA, they have also served as department heads and directors of interdisciplinary centers for Middle East Studies at Harvard, Columbia, the University of Chicago, New York University, UCLA, and other prestigious institutions, which, by authorizing such appointments, implicitly reject Kramer’s claims. Interviews for academic appointments in

Middle East studies are typically conducted at MESA and rarely, if ever, at the rival Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa, founded by Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami in 2007. A quick comparison of the websites of the two organizations and the individuals most prominently associated with them will quickly establish which institution has a political agenda. So, despite some high-profile and other behind-the-scenes successes, the neo-McCarthyites are not nearly as influential in the scholarly world as they would like to be.

College and university campuses continue to be the institutions most likely to encourage critical thinking about US foreign policy in the Middle East and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the issues that prompted the neo-McCarthyite eruption. Moreover, at the political level, criticism of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories occupied since 1967 and a host of related issues is more widespread, better informed, and more politically successful than ever before. Campaigns for boycotts, divestment, and sanctions against Israel are more widespread and have a higher profile on campuses and university towns than anywhere else in North America. University campuses were also prominent sites for opposition to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, although the challenge was too weak to stop the drive to war.

The permissiveness of some—certainly not all—college and university administrations towards the neo-McCarthyite campaign is only one facet of a broader issue: the continuing power and influence of the neo-McCarthyites beyond North American institutions of higher education. The source of their capacity to undermine academic integrity and freedom of speech to any extent at all is the fear and ignorance that have dominated US public discourse since September 11, 2001. One of the most striking examples of this discourse is National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice's repeated statement regarding evidence that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs): "We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."<sup>[4]</sup> This was, at the very least, an injudicious remark that escalated panic in an already traumatized public and effectively hobbled opposition to the administration's war plans. The notion that Iraq had or might soon acquire nuclear weapons was utterly baseless.<sup>[5]</sup> Stanford's administration was so proud of the university's former provost that it invited Rice to be the featured graduation speaker in June 2002. The invitation preceded any talk of mushroom clouds by several months. But by publicly reconfirming the link between Stanford and a prominent figure in the Bush administration, it discouraged criticism of the drive to war in Iraq in the Stanford community without, in any

explicit way, suppressing academic freedom or freedom of speech. When the mendacious talk of mushroom clouds and the like proliferated, the university appeared to be retrospectively complicit in extending the politics of fear to the academy. It would have been embarrassing and arguably academically inappropriate to take measures to undo this.

Prominent neo-McCarthyite rabble rousers David Horowitz, Daniel Pipes, and Martin Kramer, and their more respectable academic allies Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami, were among the most enthusiastic proponents of the costly and unnecessary 2003 Iraq war. They encouraged the George W. Bush administration's drive to war, provided intellectual legitimation for many incorrect or fabricated claims that purported to justify the war, and reversed their positions 180 degrees to support an assault on Baghdad that they opposed in 1991.<sup>[6]</sup> Very few people with serious knowledge of the Middle East, even some who once supported the US invasion of Iraq, will now argue that this was a good idea, that it was executed on the basis of correct intelligence, or that it has or is likely in the foreseeable future to achieve the advertised results.

Even without access to intelligence reports, anyone who had read a decent proportion of the corpus of academic research on Iraq would have known that sharp ideological differences and the need to preserve the delicate Sunni-Shi'i sectarian balance inside Iraq would make Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda unlikely allies. Yet the spurious "alliance" argument was promoted by the Middle East "experts" favored by the Bush administration, who encouraged people to think there was no meaningful distinction between the militantly secularist Ba'ath and the religious fanatics of al Qaeda. Fouad Ajami, for example, wrote

The prospect of using force against Iraq has brought numerous demands that the US establish a definitive connection between the rogue state and the events of Sept. 11. But we needn't look for a "smoking gun" that would unequivocally tie Saddam Hussein to al Qaeda. The more important link—of a more organic nature—has already been established. Iraq and al Qaeda are two main tributaries of Arab radicalism ... If and when America ventures into Iraq, it should cast aside the distinction between secular and Islamist enemies.<sup>[7]</sup>

Bernard Lewis, who coined the term "clash of civilizations" as a description of relations between Islam and the West, is the most highly regarded scholar of Middle East studies among neo-conservatives and Zionists. On February 19, 1998, he co-signed an open letter

sponsored by the Committee for Peace and Security in the Gulf to President Clinton urging him to overthrow the Saddam Hussein regime. The Committee was funded by the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, which also funds the Project for the New American Century and the American Enterprise Institute, both big promoters of the war against Iraq. On September 19, 2001, Lewis addressed a meeting of the Defense Advisory Board, chaired by Richard Perle, where he and Ahmad Chalabi urged the Bush administration to attack Iraq even if it had no connection to the September 11 attacks.<sup>[8]</sup> He subsequently met with Vice President Cheney to discuss Middle East affairs and apparently made a favorable impression. On the eve of the invasion of Iraq, the Vice President told Tim Russert on Meet the Press, “I firmly believe, along with, you know, men like Bernard Lewis, who’s one of the great, I think, students of that part of the world, that strong, firm US response to terror and to threats to the United States would go a long way, frankly, towards calming things in that part of the world.”<sup>[9]</sup>

In a Wall Street Journal op-ed explaining why things were “manageable” in Afghanistan while in Iraq “the situation seems to grow worse from day to day,” Lewis appeared to concur with Ajami that “America’s enemies are the same in both places, with the same objectives.”<sup>[10]</sup> Lewis’s solution to the problem was to turn Iraq over to Ahmad Chalabi and the Iraqi National Congress as soon as possible. With Lewis’s approval, Chalabi had been promoted as the solution to Iraq’s problems since the mid-1990s by Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, David Wurmser, Donald Rumsfeld, former CIA-Director James Woolsey, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs. This constellation of forces is similar to the one responsible for the 1998 open letters to President Clinton and congressional leaders.

Chalabi had not lived in Iraq since 1956; in 1992 he was convicted in absentia in Jordan for bank fraud; the State Department raised questions about the financial practices of his umbrella opposition organization, the Iraqi National Congress (INC), in the 1990s; Chalabi led a failed INC coup attempt in Iraq in 1995; he was a major source for the claim that Iraq possessed WMDs, including the nonexistent mobile biological weapons labs described at embarrassing length by Secretary of State Colin Powell in his February 2003 speech to the UN Security Council. It shouldn’t take extensive Middle East expertise to conclude that someone with this track record might not be the leading candidate for the role of “savior of Iraq.” In May 2004, nine months after Lewis’s Wall Street Journal op-ed appeared, US

officials in Iraq accused Chalabi of telling Iran that US forces had cracked its cryptographic code and broke relations with him. Afghanistan in 2010 looks considerably less manageable than Lewis imagined it to be in 2003.

His costly errors of interpretation and prediction have not reduced Lewis's standing among the neoconservatives and the Israel lobby, who continue to consider him one of their guiding lights on contemporary Middle East affairs. Long after his arguments for the war in Iraq should have been discredited, Lewis continued to fan the flames of instability in the Middle East, writing aggressive op-eds in the Wall Street Journal and appearing in other respected venues.<sup>[11]</sup> In November 2006 President Bush awarded Lewis the prestigious National Humanities Medal. The Bush administration and Lewis and the other Middle East "experts" who collaborated in justifying the Iraq war on the basis of deeply flawed evidence and poor analysis continued to praise each other after the debacle in Iraq. To do otherwise would have exposed their shared responsibility for foreign policy malpractice whose repercussions are likely to be more damaging than the consequences of the failed American adventure in Vietnam.<sup>[12]</sup>

In part due to the propaganda campaign in which the neo-McCarthyites played an important role by delegitimizing expert opinion on the Middle East, three months after the US invasion of Iraq, in June 2003, when no weapons of mass destruction had yet been discovered, a majority of Americans believed the Bush administration was telling the truth when it claimed it had hard evidence for the existence of Iraqi WMDs. Nine out of ten Americans thought Iraq had or was close to having WMDs. A third of the population believed that WMDs had actually been discovered in Iraq.<sup>[13]</sup> As late as April 2004, 57 percent of Americans believed that Iraq under Saddam Hussein was providing substantial support for al Qaeda; 45 percent believed that evidence of such support had been found, and 20 percent believed that Iraq was involved in the September 11 terrorist attacks.<sup>[14]</sup> All these notions had been publicly refuted by Richard Clarke, former Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism of the National Security Council, David Kay, former chief of the Iraq Weapons Survey team, and Hans Blix, head of the United Nations Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission from January 2000 to June 2003, to say nothing of countless non-establishment radio programs, websites, and print media.<sup>[15]</sup>

By July 2005, 51 percent of Americans had come to believe that "the Bush administration

deliberately misled the public about whether Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction.”<sup>[16]</sup> But nearly half the population had not reached this conclusion. We can take some satisfaction that a bare majority of the American people joined what Bush administration spokespersons derisively called “the reality-based community.”<sup>[17]</sup> But, they did so belatedly; and they resisted for over two critical years before accepting the conclusions of those with the most relevant expertise and experience.

The fear and ignorance that produced this response to the Iraq war is the basis on which the neo-McCarthyite campaign against Middle East studies can have any success at all. Consequently, the task for college and university-based scholars remains what it has always been: to promote critical thinking, civil debate, and careful evaluation of evidence brought to bear to sustain contending arguments about the Middle East and the US role in the region. But this alone will be insufficient to challenge structures of power that make a principle out of error and ignorance.

1. 1. For details on all of the above see Joel Beinin, “The New McCarthyism: Policing Thought about the Middle East,” in *Academic Freedom after 9/11*, edited by Beshara Doumani (Cambridge, MA: Zone Press, 2006), 237-66.
2. 2. Timothy Mitchell, “The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science,” in *The Politics of Knowledge*, edited by David Szanton (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), <http://repositories.cdlib.org/uciaspubs/editedvolumes/3/3/>.
3. 3. Martin Kramer, *Ivory Towers Built on Sand* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy Studies, 2001).
4. 4. The first pronouncement of the “mushroom cloud” argument appears to be on CNN during the “Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer,” September 8, 2002.
5. 5. For an analysis of what Rice may or may not have know about Iraq’s WMD see Dana Milbank and Mike Allen, “Iraq Flap Shakes Rice’s Image; Controversy Stirs Questions of Reports Unread, Statements Contradicted,” *Washington Post*, July 27, 2003.
6. 6. Robert Blecher, “Free People Will Set the Course of History: Intellectuals, Democracy, and American Empire,” *Middle East Report Online*, March 2003. Blecher catalogs the about-face of Pipes, Lewis, Ajami and others on the advisability of occupying Baghdad. For examples of false information about Iraq to justify the war

see <http://www.alternet.org/story/16274/>; <http://www.bushlies.net/pages/1/>;  
<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20040329/scheer>; <http://www.afterdowningstreet.org/>.

7. 7. Fouad Ajami, "Two Faces, One Terror," *Wall Street Journal*, 11 November 2002.
8. 8. Peter Waldman, "A Historian's Take on Islam Steers U.S. in Terrorism Fight," *Wall Street Journal*, 19 February 2004.
9. 9. NBC, *Meet the Press*, March 16, 2003.
10. 10. Bernard Lewis, "Why Iraq is Proving Much Tougher than Afghanistan," *Wall Street Journal*, 29 August 2003.
11. 11. Bernard Lewis, "Does Iran Have Something in Store?" *Wall Street Journal*, 8 August 2006, and Bernard Lewis, "Was Osama Right?" *Wall Street Journal*, 16 May 16 2007.
12. 12. Michael Hirsh, "Bernard Lewis Revisited," *Washington Monthly*, November 2004, <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2004/0411.hirsh.html>. Hirsh dissects the roots of Lewis's errors. Adam Shatz, "The Native Informant," *The Nation*, 28 April 2003, <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20030428/shatz>. Shatz performs the same service for Fouad Ajami.
13. 13. Michael Kinsley, *Washington Post*, 23 June 2003. The last conclusion is perhaps not surprising, since President Bush publicly said on May 30, 2003, on Polish TV, "We found the weapons of mass destruction," a reference to equipment subsequently determined to have been most likely used to inflate artillery balloons with hydrogen.
14. 14. The PIPA/Knowledge Networks Poll, April 22, 2004.
15. 15. Richard Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004). Clarke appeared on the CBS program 60 Minutes on 21 March 2004 when the book appeared (<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/03/19/60minutes/main607356.shtml>). In January 2004 David Kay resigned as chief of the Iraq Survey Group. Days later he testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee about the pre-war WMD intelligence and the agencies that produced it, saying, "We were almost all wrong" (<http://www.cnn.com/2004/US/01/28/kay.transcript/>). Blix spoke on BBC television on 8 February 2004 and accused the United States and British governments of dramatizing the threat of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in order to strengthen the case for the war ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/politics/3469821.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/3469821.stm)).
16. 16. *USA Today*, July 26, 2005.



17. 17. Ron Suskind, "Without a Doubt," *New York Times Magazine*, 17 October 2004.