Leading Jewish Professors Denounce Pro-Israel Group's 'Blacklist'

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Author:  
Paul Berger  
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A Jewish advocacy group is warning students about 218 Middle East studies professors in colleges and universities across the country whose classes might contain “anti-Israel bias, or possibly even antisemitic rhetoric.”

The AMCHA Initiative singled out the professors because, during the conflict between Israel and Hamas this past summer, they signed a petition calling for an academic boycott of Israel.

“We believe the professors who have signed this petition may be so biased against the Jewish state that they are unable to teach accurately or fairly about Israel or the Arab-Israel conflict, and may even inject antisemitic tropes into their lectures or class discussion,” wrote Tammi Rossman-Benjamin and Leila Beckwith, co-founders of the AMCHA Initiative.

Now, 40 of America’s leading Jewish studies professors, including Hasia Diner of New York University and Robert Alter of the University of California, Berkeley, have signed a statement calling AMCHA’s actions “deplorable” and a threat to academic freedom.

Bernard Avishai, a business professor who splits his time between Dartmouth College and Hebrew University and who has written extensively on Jewish matters, also signed the statement, which said, “We find it regrettable that AMCHA, so intent on combating the boycott of Israel, has launched a boycott initiative of its own.”

The Jewish studies professors say their worries go beyond AMCHA’s list of Middle East professors.

AMCHA, which means ‘your people’ in Hebrew, was founded in 2012. It investigates and monitors alleged anti-Semitism on more than 300 campuses across America. In the past couple
of months, AMCHA has joined other Jewish advocacy groups to call on Congress to withhold federal funds from Middle Eastern studies programs that show an anti-Israeli bias. In September, AMCHA published a 100-page report claiming rampant anti-Israel bias and anti-Semitic activity during the past three years at UCLA’s Center for Near Eastern Studies.

AMCHA defends its methodology. Rossman-Benjamin, who is on leave from her post as a lecturer at University of California, Santa Cruz, said she and her co-researchers analyzed recordings of lectures and conferences posted to UCLA’s website.

But the Jewish studies professors say AMCHA’s monitoring of lectures and conferences “strains the basic principle of academic freedom.”

David Myers, a co-author of the Jewish studies statement and a professor of Jewish history at UCLA, said AMCHA’s research is neither objective nor balanced. “I think they have a very clear idea of what they think they will find and they find it, and it confirms what they knew in advance,” Myers said.

He added that AMCHA’s definition of anti-Israel is so broad that it sweeps up many academics with strong connections to Israel.

Steven Zipperstein, the other co-author of the Jewish studies statement, acknowledged that there is a problem on campuses in the United States regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. “The presumption that there is something fundamentally wrong with the State of Israel has become part and parcel of the cultural code of many faculty in the humanities and the arts,” Zipperstein said.

But he added that the best way to confront such ideas is through intellectual debate, not by “blacklisting” academics. “It’s the blacklisting of my Israeli colleagues that I so abhor,” Zipperstein said. “And I’m not going to support the blacklisting of people with whom I disagree on Israel and Palestine.”

Zipperstein, a professor of Jewish culture and history at Stanford University, said that by singling out faculty, AMCHA stifles professors who might think twice in the future before introducing certain materials into their courses out of fear of being added to a list of anti-Israel or anti-Semitic academics. Zipperstein said he specifically asked senior figures in Jewish studies to sign the statement so that younger, “more vulnerable” professors could continue to teach “without outside interference.”

Among the professors on AMCHA’s list are the following directors of programs that receive federal funding: Lila Abu-Lughod director of the Middle East Institute at Columbia University; Miriam Cooke, director of the Middle East Studies Center at Duke University; Osama Abi-Mershed, chair of the Middle East and North Africa program at Georgetown University; and Sondra Hale and Gabriel Piterberg co-directors of the Center for Near Eastern Studies at UCLA. AMCHA’s Rossman-Benjamin said the Jewish Studies statement misunderstands and distorts her organization’s work. Professors are free to espouse their views outside of the university, she said. But since the professors who signed the boycott petition did so specifically in their capacity
as scholars of the Middle East, Jewish students should know who they are. “We weren’t asking students to boycott those professors,” Benjamin said. “We are just asking them to make informed choices” when they choose their professors.

She added: “I don’t understand why a professor has freedom of expression to sign a boycott petition and I don’t have freedom to say, look who signed the boycott petition.”

But Eric Alterman, one of the founders of The Third Narrative, a group of academics opposed to both the occupation of the West Bank and to the boycott campaign against Israel, said AMCHA’s list is an inappropriate attempt to stifle debate.

“It’s always inappropriate when outside forces seek to attach their political judgments to academic matters and its deeply disturbing that in this case a Jewish organization would do it while so many on the other side are seeking to do the same thing to Israeli professors and scholars,” he said.

Alterman, a distinguished professor of English and journalism at City University of New York’s Brooklyn College, said he was impressed that Jewish Studies professors, many of whose departments are likely funded by people sympathetic to AMCHA’s position, would take a stand on this issue. “These are all the big guns,” he said.

Alterman sees this initiative as part of a growing trend in Jewish activism to silence criticism of Israel. “What could be more un-Jewish than trying to shut down debate?” Alterman asked. “The whole purpose of Judaism is debate, that’s what the Talmud is, and yet these people don’t think students can handle criticism of Israel.”

But Rossman-Benjamin says her group is not trying to shut down speech. She said she is trying to advocate on behalf of Jewish students who suffer intellectual and emotional harassment because of what AMCHA sees as a pervasive atmosphere of anti-Israel sentiment on campus. According to AMCHA’s first and only publicly available tax statement, the group raised $200,000 in contributions and spent just $100,000 in its first year. It boasts an interactive website listing the names of professors who have signed at least one of a number of statements advocating an academic boycott of Israel superimposed on a map of the United States.