

Academic Censorship on Palestine at Columbia College

The Case of Hamman Iymen Chehade

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Iymen Chehade, an instructor at Columbia College, was summoned last fall for a meeting with the chair of his department, he had a pretty good guess as to why. "There's generally been one reason that they ask me to meet," he said in an interview.

Unfortunately, he was right.

Since 2010, Chehade has taught a course about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the department of Humanities, History and Social Science. He initially taught three sections of the course and then was reduced to two. But this semester, in the wake of his meeting with department Chair Steve Corey, he's only teaching one.

So why did Corey want to meet with Chehade? After Chehade held a screening of the Oscar-nominated documentary [5 Broken Cameras](#) in his class last fall, one of Chehade's students went to Corey with a complaint of "bias." Corey told Chehade to teach his class in a more "balanced" way and then requested that Chehade provide proof that he is qualified to teach.

It's not difficult to see why anyone might find a viewing of *5 Broken Cameras* to be a jarring experience, but frank discussion of pressing social issues is precisely why students seek out Chehade's class. The film provides a firsthand account of nonviolent resistance against Israel's attempts to destroy the West Bank village of Bil'in as Israeli troops clear the way for construction of a separation wall.

This apartheid wall snakes its way through Palestinian territory, separating farmers from their fields and families from one another. In 2004, the Hague's International Court of Justice [ruled that Israel's wall violates international law](#). Filmmaker Emad Burnat's moving commitment to document his village's resistance to the wall provides incredible footage of Israeli troops using arrests, beatings, tear gas and live ammunition to attempt to break the spirit of Bil'in.

As an experienced instructor who also teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chehade is accustomed to students who bring their own ideas to his classes. Far from imposing any restrictions on student approaches to course material, Chehade encourages them to explore the issues for themselves. One of Chehade's assignments asks students to seek out both Palestinians and Israelis to interview them about the various issues involved.

The widespread respect among students for Chehade and the consistently excellent course evaluations by those who have taken his class explain why students often tell him that

they've wanted to take his course only to find that it's filled to capacity by the time they try to register for it.

On November 4, just seven days after his meeting with Corey, Columbia College posted course offerings for students seeking to register for the spring semester, including two sections of Chehade's class. Within hours of posting the courses, however, administrators pulled one of his sections, leaving him with only one course this spring.

This isn't the first time that Chehade has found himself fending off charges of "bias." When Chehade was asked to moderate a discussion after a public screening of *5 Broken Cameras* at Columbia College last spring, members of the campus Hillel organization complained about the lack of a "pro-Israel" speaker. (However, [Lynn Pollack, a member of Jewish Voice for Peace, was a featured presenter.](#))

In the fall semester of 2011, eight students from three different sections of Chehade's course, some of them members of Hillel, signed a petition also making the charge of "bias" against Chehade. In a follow-up meeting between the students, Chehade and some Columbia College administrators, the students cited as examples of Chehade's bias that he referred to the West Bank and Gaza as the "Occupied Territories" (they preferred the term "Disputed Territories") and that he used the term "ethnic cleansing" to describe how Israel drove some 750,000 Palestinians from their land and homes through violence, intimidation and terror.

In response, dozens of students also in his class rallied to Chehade's defense, crafting their own petition countering the eight students and describing Chehade's course as an asset to Columbia College. One Jewish student of Chehade's made a special effort to come to his defense, going so far as to write a letter to the administration arguing that Chehade was not "biased."

Of course, the charge of "bias" is really an attempt to constrain the way in which the Israel-Palestine conflict is portrayed. In the words of Chehade:

Academic freedom entails not only the right to speak from a particular perspective, but the freedom from being compelled to engage in a particular type of speech. The frequent demand from Zionists that any discussion of the conflict be "balanced" would be considered absurd in most other contexts. For example, must every presentation about the African American civil rights movement include a speaker who will attempt to justify the denial of these rights?

Chehade also notes that when some student groups at Columbia provided a platform for former Israeli soldiers to speak in defense of Israel's military occupation of the West Bank, he announced the event to his students and offered them extra credit if they attended. He also did not insist on the inclusion of a "pro-Palestinian" perspective.

Speaking about Chehade's situation, Ali Abunimah, an internationally renowned advocate of Palestinian rights and author most recently of [The Battle for Justice in Palestine](#), put it this way:

For too long, teachers and students who want to speak freely about the situation in Palestine have had to live in fear of retaliation. Calls for “balance” are often ill-disguised efforts to ensure that Palestinian voices are not allowed to be heard without supervision, and that fundamental differences in power between Palestinians and the Israeli state that occupies and colonizes their land are obscured with false parity.

This pattern of retaliation against those who engage in open dialogue about the history of Palestinian dispossession begs an obvious question: Why is Columbia College, a respected art school, engaging in such blatant violations of academic freedom? Why would Columbia treat a Palestinian instructor as a second-class citizen when it comes to his right to academic freedom, as if attempting to mimic how Israel denies equal rights to its Palestinian citizens?

One explanation traces back to Louise Love, Columbia’s vice president for Academic Affairs and its Interim Provost. This is not the first time she’s been involved in retaliation against an instructor who exercised academic freedom with respect to the issue of Palestine.

In 2005, as associate provost of Roosevelt University, she defended a department chair who fired adjunct professor Douglas Giles because Giles refused to bar students from discussing Zionism, Islamic beliefs about Jerusalem and the Palestinian question in his World Religions class. [Giles’ account of his outrageous treatment by Roosevelt](#) describes how Love even defended the department chair’s descriptions of Palestinians as “animals” and “not civilized” as nothing more than “defending her position passionately.”

But the attempt to silence Palestinian voices is obviously more than the work of individual university administrators attempting to impose ideological conformity. For decades, there have been very powerful institutional limits on discussion of Palestinian dispossession and Israeli apartheid—most obviously because of the central role that support for an Israel armed with overwhelming military force has played in the foreign policy of successive U.S. presidential administrations, Democratic and Republican alike.

The growth of the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement against Israeli apartheid and occupation is beginning to change this, however. The most striking expression of this was the [American Studies Association’s recent passage of a resolution to honor the Palestinian call for an academic and cultural boycott of Israel](#). “Fortunately, this is a new day, and more people are standing up and speaking out against the silencing tactics that have been used on campuses for so long,” said Abunimah.

Likewise, prominent intellectuals and artists are adding their voices to this effort by helping to explain the Israel-Palestine conflict in terms that so many can relate to. Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Alice Walker, for example, recently compared Israel’s oppression of Palestinian to the conditions facing African Americans in the South prior to civil rights movement. “It’s so much like the South of 50 years ago, and actually more brutal, because in Palestine so many more people are wounded, shot, killed, imprisoned,” Walker said on *DemocracyNow!* in 2012.

The campaign to defend academic freedom at Columbia College and Prof. Chehade’s right to teach free of the administration’s interference is one part of this growing movement. In the words of Chehade:

It is important to provide oppressed and struggling groups with forums in which they speak for themselves and in their own voices—whether it is the LGBTQ community, the African American community, or Palestinians living under occupation. This is precisely what my approach has sought to bring to the Palestine issue, and professors around the country are taking a similar approach. The Zionist demand for “balance” is designed to present the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as symmetrical. However, the severe imbalance is clear: Palestinians are denied their basic civil rights, and Israel continues to be in violation of international law. The demand for “balance” is simply a tool to muzzle.

Note from Global Research

Hamman Iymen Chehade is part-time faculty at the Department of Humanities, History and Social Sciences at Columbia College University. To sign a petition in support of academic freedom and Professor Chehade please [click here](#).

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