

The Disingenuous Apologies for Israel's Assault on Palestinian Education

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As the American Historical Association (AHA) prepares to vote this week on a symbolic [resolution](#) that affirms support for the right to education in the occupied Palestinian territories, apologists for the Israeli regime's policies against Palestinians are putting forward nonsensical rationalizations for their opposition to the measure. Writing in [History News Network](#), University of Maryland History Professor Jeffrey Herf (pictured left) essentially argues that his profession has no practical value: "as historians we have neither the knowledge nor expertise to evaluate conflicting factual assertions about events in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza."

If historians should not evaluate the veracity of factual assertions about an issue then what exactly is the use of historical studies? To merely compile and organize documents? Surely a historian's job involves analytical – in addition to technical – skills. And surely their methods include empirical analysis – no different than a scientist testing a theory. If someone says the earth is round but another person says the earth is flat, that doesn't mean the scientist should throw his hands up in the air and say "as scientists we have neither the knowledge nor expertise to evaluate conflicting factual assertions."

Historians analyzing political questions use the same principles as scientists testing a theory. Take, for example, conflicting accounts of the actions of the Belgians under King Leopold in the Congo near the end of the 19th century. Leopold claimed he treated the Congolese people benevolently as part of his "Christian duty" to help the poor. Others claimed Leopold's forces were engaged in the systematic plunder of resources carried out through massive violence. They described women held hostage by Belgian forces to force Congolese men to engage in involuntary labor, with the hands of those who did not produce enough rubber for the colonists cut off and kept as trophies.

According to Herf's axiom, historians would not have the ability to distinguish between these competing claims. It would be outside the scope of the historical vocation to evaluate the available evidence and reach a conclusion about the truth.

In the Congo, the African American historian George Washington Williams worked tirelessly to document the true condition of the local population under Belgian rule. As Adam Hochschild explains in his book [King Leopold's Ghost](#), Williams's insistence on questioning the official narrative enabled him to uncover and expose the brazen lies meant to cover up the genocidal destruction of an entire society for the material enrichment of a tyrant.

"Williams was a pioneer among American historians in the use of nontraditional sources. He sensed what most academics only began to acknowledge nearly a hundred years later: that in writing the history of powerless people, drawing on conventional, published sources is far

from enough," Hochschild writes.

Much like the Belgian regime in the Congo more than a century ago, the state of Israel today covers up its crimes against Palestinians by denial, deflection and counter-accusations. They rely on the support of apologists in media, government, civil society, and academia to side with authority by accepting their justifications at face value.

Herf writes that "(i)t is fair to insist that where there is an indictment, we must pay attention to the case for the defense." Absolutely true. But we must pay attention to the evidence for the case itself, not merely conclude that the existence of a defense means there is no way to draw a conclusion about the facts.

Herf requested a response from the Israeli Embassy on accusations presented in the AHA resolution. Among their claims are that the movement of faculty, staff and visitors in the West Bank are not limited except occasionally because "Palestinian universities periodically serve as sites of violence and incitement."

The evidence is overwhelming that movement in the West Bank is severely limited and adversely impacts education. A [UN report](#) found that checkpoints, settler violence, and long commutes present risks to West Bank students. Another [UN report](#) documented 542 obstacles to movement in the West Bank. Students from Gaza are denied permission to study in the West Bank, a policy that has been criticized by [Amnesty International](#). The policy has been endorsed by [Israel's High Court](#). The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) have [raided](#) West Bank universities. Visiting academics are denied entry to the West Bank. After arbitrarily being denied entry to deliver several lectures there, world-renowned scholar [Noam Chomsky](#) compared his treatment by Israeli authorities to that of Stalinist regimes.

There is no evidence presented, however, to support the claim that Palestinian universities serve as sites of violence and incitement.

Herf also quotes the Israeli Embassy defending their bombing of the Islamic University in Gaza (IUG) in 2014 during Operation Protective Edge "not because it was a university but because it was used by the terrorist organization Hamas to manufacture and fire rockets at Israeli civilians."

First, it should be noted that Hamas is not recognized as a terrorist organization by the United Nations. The description carries exactly as much weight as Hamas calling the Israeli regime a terrorist organization. But that is beside the point. The accusation is that Hamas used the university to make and fire rockets.

The source provided for this claim is "Israeli military intelligence officials." After the bombing, the IDF [claimed](#) to target a "weapons development center" within the university. This is a predictable accusation. The IDF made similar accusations after bombing the same university in 2008. A [UN report](#) on that conflict "did not find any information about their use as a military facility or their contribution to a military effort that might have made them a legitimate target."

Rami Almeghari, who teaches journalism at IUG, noted in the [Electronic Intifada](#) that the university is not run by Hamas or any other political party. Students and faculty, like those at any higher educational institutional, have varied political affiliations. Many others, like

himself, belong to no party.

“Contrary to what Israel claims,” Almeghari writes, “Gaza universities do not have departments dedicated to military research or training. This is in contrast to Israeli universities which play an integral role in the military occupation and weapons development and have actively promoted the onslaught in Gaza.”

None of the Israeli government’s accusations are substantiated by anything other than its own word – which should be treated with the same skepticism as any criminal defendant pleading his innocence. On the other hand, a mountain of evidence from independent sources ([Amnesty International](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), [UNESCO](#), [Palestinian Centre for Human Rights](#), [Institute for Middle East Understanding](#), [B’Tselem](#), etc.) supports the accusations in the AHA resolution.

The idea that evaluating contrasting factual assertions and reaching a judgment is outside the scope of a historian’s profession is asinine. This notion is beneficial for the propagation of state propaganda, but devastating for the advancement of human rights, including the right to education.

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