



## What Influence Does Saudi Money Buy?

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An Islamic group came to Temple University last spring with an offer to provide \$1.5 million for an endowed chair in Islamic studies to honor religion professor Mahmoud Ayoub. After months of talks, the deal never got off the ground, once trustees and others raised concerns about the contributor, the International Institute of Islamic Thought, a nonprofit research group that had been under scrutiny as part of a government probe into the funding of suspected terrorists.

Some would like to consider money given by Saudis and other Arab nations to American universities as generous gifts to those U.S. universities who have educated their elites. A closer look reveals a different picture that includes incitement, anti-Semitism and a skewed view of Is-

lam.

There have been some cases when universities have turned down funds. In July 2000, the Harvard Divinity School first accepted \$2.5 million from the ruler of the United Arab Emirates, Sheik Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, to endow an academic chair in Islamic Religious Studies. However, Rachel Fish, a divinity student at the time and a founding member of Harvard University Graduate-Students Friends of Israel, raised an uproar, documenting the sheik's anti-Semitic ties.

The Harvard administration was forced to face facts and take a closer look at who was offering the funds - - and why. As a result, the money was not accepted; in 2004, the sheik withdrew funds.

But this is not the norm. Several years ago, a multimillion gift from the Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal was shared between Harvard and Georgetown universities.

These monetary efforts began in the 1960s and '70s, with Muslim donors funneling millions of dollars into American universities to support Islamic studies, hire faculty specialists in Islam, and fund the writing of books and seminars on the topic.

Such support represents one of the biggest problems academia faces today -- that is, how to arrive at a fair and balanced discussion when it relates to Mideast studies.

A disturbing variable in the equation, which complicates the situation further, is the unwillingness of many American Jews to take a strong stand on the Arab-Israeli conflict. In particular, rabbis and Jewish educators -- no matter where they stand on the political spectrum -- often behave in an apologetic manner when it comes to Israel, rather than make assertive arguments from a Zionist point of view.

This unwillingness to confront the pro-Palestinian propaganda being nurtured by Middle Eastern-studies departments is one of the major sources of confusion among Jewish students. For example, so long as liberal American Jews fail to speak up about the issue of post-1948 Jew-

ish refugees from Arab lands, and instead, merely allow the discussion to center on a Palestinian "right of return," Jewish students will be on the defensive.

If pro-Israel advocates on campus are discussing the Jewish state only in terms of "Israeli oppression," rather than in debunking such notions, the result is always going to favor the anti-Israel forces. That is why college campuses today have become podiums for those who denigrate Israel, as is apparent from the different human rights, anti-globalization and anti-imperialism groups that have adopted the Palestinian cause.

Within academic circles, individual views are often turned into a political litmus test. For example, Fouad Ajami, the articulate interpreter of Arab culture and politics who teaches at Johns Hopkins University, has been subject to scathing attacks from Arab critics. Ostensibly, these critics find his scholarship faulty. In reality, they see him as too soft on the question of Israel, and worse, selling out to the enemy.

As we look to educate ourselves and the next generation about Israel and the Middle East, we should question the sheer amount of cash being offered and the influence these people are thereby buying, creating bastions of noncritical, pro-Islamic scholarship within academia.

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