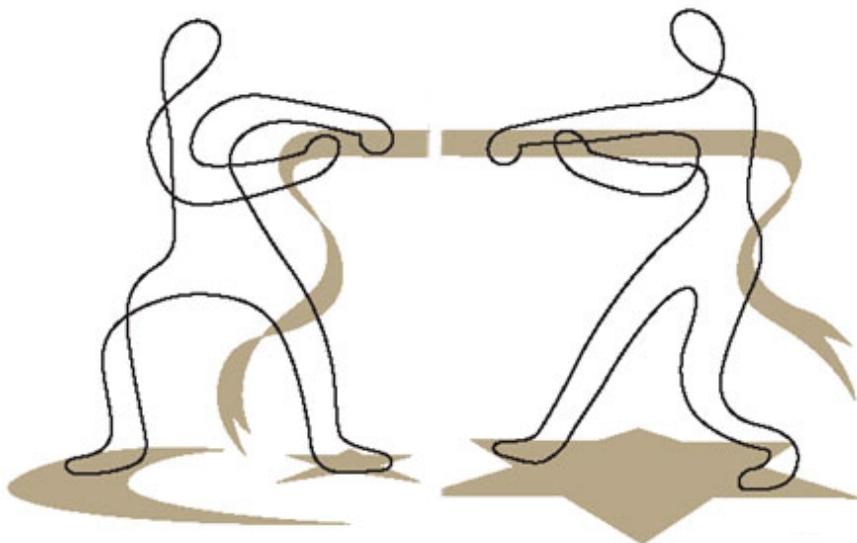


[HOME](#) > [NEWS](#) > [BOSTON GLOBE](#) > [IDEAS](#)



(Illustration / Felix Sockwell)

The Boston Globe

CRITICAL FACULTIES

Fields of battle

Can Brandeis bring peace to Middle East studies?

By Christopher Shea | March 27, 2005

SHAI FELDMAN HAS an interesting crash course ahead of him, to say the least. The director of the new Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University—an expert in Israeli and Arab security issues who headed the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University for the past seven years—insists he doesn't know much about the controversies roiling the field of Middle East studies in the United States, although there has been no more ferocious fight in academia this year. "I don't fully really understand what it is about," Feldman said in a recent phone interview.

ADVERTISEMENT Evidently he has missed all the magazine and newspaper articles about "Columbia Unbecoming," a widely screened documentary about the university's Department of Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures (MEALAC) that was produced by the David Project, a pro-Israel group with offices in Boston and New York—missed the anecdotes, retailed in the film, about how professors at Columbia allegedly intimidate anyone who does not toe a pro-Palestinian line.

In the film, one Jewish student who had served in the Israeli Army says an assistant professor in the department, Joseph Massad, asked him at an off-campus lecture, "How many Palestinians have you killed?" Another student says Massad told a third student, in class, "If you are going to deny the atrocities being committed against the Palestinian people then you can get out of my classroom!" Massad denied both accusations and says he is the victim of a "witch hunt" designed to "ensure that only one view is permitted, that of

TOOLS

- [PRINTER FRIENDLY VERSION](#)
- [E-MAIL TO A FRIEND](#)
- [TOP E-MAILED ARTICLES](#)



(Photo / Mike Lovett / Brandeis University)



At top, Shai Feldman, head of Brandeis's new Middle East studies center. Brandeis president Jehuda Reinharz, above, has raised hackles by calling US Middle East studies departments biased and "third-rate." (Globe Staff Photo / Janet Knott)

SEARCH GLOBE ARCHIVES

uncritical support for the state of Israel."

Apparently Feldman has not followed the saga of the bill in the House of Representatives (now moribund) mandating that Middle East studies centers teach "diverse perspectives." He has missed the creation of the project Campus Watch by the independent American scholar Daniel Pipes, which monitors Middle East scholars for what it perceives as anti-Israeli and anti-American bias-and overlooked the complaint by Rashid Khalidi, chair of Columbia's Middle East Institute, that the goal of Pipes and his allies, like Martin Kramer, a Middle East expert at Tel Aviv University, is to create a situation where "the only people left in the field will be discredited Uncle Toms" and bland mediocrities.

Even Princeton, which has a reputation as one of the more traditionalist Near Eastern studies departments-it's home to the prolific Arabist Bernard Lewis, a hero to many neoconservatives-has not been immune. In December, the Daily Princetonian quoted unnamed history professors who opposed the tenure bid of Michael Doran, an assistant professor of Near Eastern studies. One said the appointment was a "litmus test" for whether the department aspired to be a vibrant place-or a haven for old-fashioned, politically conservative professors. Doran, who has called himself a "September 12 Republican" (and who reportedly turned down a recent tenure offer from Brandeis) called the charge "ludicrous." "Nobody in the department agrees with my politics, and they respect my right to have those politics," he told the paper.

Yes, Feldman has missed all that. But the president of Brandeis, Jehuda Reinharz, has ensured that Feldman will land in the thick of the controversy. He has boldly announced that his university would create a center that is "not pro- or anti-anything," as he put it in a recent interview. Of the other centers in the United States-including those at Harvard, the University of Chicago, and Berkeley-Reinharz told the Jerusalem Post recently: "My problem is not the anti-Zionism or even that many of them are anti-American, but that they are third-rate."

Such comments won't make things easy for Feldman to build bridges with his American colleagues. According to Juan Cole, a history professor at the University of Michigan and president-elect of the Middle East Studies Association, Reinharz is "talking out of both sides of his mouth," leveling ideological attacks on other centers while claiming to be above ideology.

Ali Banuazizi, current president of the association and co-director of the Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies program at Boston College, is similarly unimpressed. "What does it mean for a new center to start out by being so derisive toward the other centers? Why is that necessary?" asks Banuazizi. "Let them come and put down their suitcase and start their work-and hopefully they will achieve the highest standards of scholarship."

...

Feldman, for his part, seems to take this bridge-building thing seriously. "If there are two camps' in this debate, and if either one of them thinks the new Crown Center will be in one of them, they are going to be mistaken," he says.

The center has an endowment of \$25 million-a sum described as "lavish" and "enormous" by professors elsewhere-including money for four endowed chairs. (The lead donors are the Crown family of Chicago, known for their contribution to secular Jewish causes.) Three chairs are already occupied by Brandeis faculty members who predate Feldman-one in Israel studies by Ilan Troen, one in Sephardic studies by Jonathan Decter, and one in Islamic studies by Kanan Makiya, an Iraqi dissident and writer who has accumulated an archive documenting the history of Saddam Hussein's brutal regime. Turkish studies and Middle East economics are next on the list.

Makiya, who supported the US invasion of Iraq and has long been a harsh critic of what he sees as Arab intellectuals' silence in the face of atrocities committed by Arab leaders

GO

- Today (free)
- Yesterday (free)
- Past 30 days
- Last 12 months

[▶ Advanced search](#)



against their own people, is a somewhat divisive figure. "He is not a scholar, says Michigan's Juan Cole. "Last time I checked he was an architect." (Makiya, author of "Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq" and "Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising and the Arab World," trained as an architect but has not practiced since the 1980s.)

Feldman's crash course in the politics of Middle East studies in the United States-if it hasn't already begun-will start in earnest on April 4 and 5, at a conference that will also serve as a sort of coming-out party for the center. He will chair a session, titled (somewhat naively) "Middle East Studies in the U.S.: What Is the Debate About?," featuring the directors of Middle East studies centers at Harvard and Tufts together with Kramer of Tel Aviv University. Starting next fall, Feldman will also co-teach a course on Arab-Israeli relations with Abdel Monem Said Aly, director of a think tank in Cairo focused on strategy, and Khalil Shikaki, director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in Ramallah. Both will spend five weeks each year at Brandeis.

"I frankly don't know of any university that in a single course allows students the possibility of enjoying the three different perspectives simultaneously," Feldman says, allowing himself just a touch of Reinharzian boasting.

Reinharz says other centers obsess about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the exclusion of all else. So it is a bit ironic that that's exactly what the new director of the Crown Center has spent his career studying. Born in Jerusalem, Feldman attended Hebrew University and then Berkeley, where he planned to get a doctorate in political psychology. But then the 1973 Arab-Israeli war broke out, and he says, "I didn't have the luxury of studying something so innocent."

He switched to security studies. His dissertation, which became his first book, "Israeli Nuclear Deterrence" (1982), argued that Israel had to withdraw to its 1967 borders, but that only nuclear weapons could provide the security that would allow it to do so.

"He has believed for a long time that Israel has a lot of strengths, but that it will only find ultimate security when it makes a historic compromise with the Palestinians, particularly over territory," says Geoffrey Kemp, director of regional strategic programs at the Nixon Center, a Washington think tank. Kemp describes Feldman as a perfect intermediary between the generally conservative think-tank world and academia, which tilts to the left.

In recent years, Feldman has written about-and participated in-the so-called "Track Two" talks between Israeli and Arab cultural and intellectual leaders. It may prove to be useful experience for the conflict he is about to wade into.

Says Feldman, "I don't think there is an Israeli in the field of security studies who has been involved with more cooperative projects with one's Arab colleagues than I have."

Christopher Shea's column appears biweekly in Ideas. Email critical.faculties@verizon.net.

 [PRINTER FRIENDLY](#)  [E-MAIL TO A FRIEND](#)

[feedback](#) | [help](#) | [site map](#) | [globe archives](#) | [rss](#)

© 2005 The New York Times Company