

**ANTI-
ZIONISM
ON THE UNIVERSITY,
FREE SPEECH,
AND BDS
CAMPUS**

Edited by

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11 A Controversy at Harvard

Martin Kramer

Martin Kramer describes his experience as the target of a smear campaign. At a conference, he discussed another scholar's work on the relationship between demographics and radicalism and, applying it to Gaza, speculated that if Israel's sanctions on Hamas's Gaza should slow the runaway population growth there, that would also diminish the demographic push toward jihadi radicalization and terrorist activity. The anti-Israel website *the Electronic Intifada* promptly framed Kramer's remarks as a genocidal call against Palestinian births, and the smear campaign was under way. When Harvard's Weatherhead Center, where Kramer was a fellow, issued a substantive rejection of the charges, anti-Israel activists attacked the center itself as a racist defender of genocide, showing that they also target institutions that do not capitulate to their dogma. Kramer analyzes the administration's role in the affair, arguing that while administrations generally should remain neutral in such controversies, in this case, its substantive weighing in was warranted.

Guys, @Martin_Kramer is not calling for genocide against Palestinians. I disagree with him on most everything, but he just isn't.

—Marc Lynch, Professor of Political Science, on Twitter¹

LET US ASSUME that a faculty member has come under a tidal wave of criticism for something he or she said in defense of Israel or against the Palestinians. Let us assume that the responsible administrators, while not in agreement with the faculty member, believe that the assault is over the top. Should the administrators come to the defense of the faculty member? Or should they adopt a stance of strict neutrality?

In February 2010, I was at the heart of just such a controversy at Harvard University, in the role of the faculty member. In comparison to some of the controversies narrated in this book, it wasn't a high-stakes battle. At the time, I was in the last stretch of a courtesy appointment at Harvard's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs. An earlier three-year appointment as a senior fellow had ended; I had shuttered my Harvard project (a strategy blog) and left campus the previous November. When the controversy erupted, I was in Israel,

having resumed my full-time duties as president-designate of a new college. I experienced the controversy from a distance, through emails and the internet. It was the flap of the month at Harvard before another one came along, and it had no lasting consequences.

But this episode, minor though it may have been, reflected in miniature the dynamics of the much larger controversies over Israel and the Palestinians that have roiled American campuses. And if the conduct of administrators in this case deserves special attention, it is because, after all, we are speaking of Harvard—an institution expected by many to embody the best practices in American academe.

An Experimental Speech

What did I say that ignited the controversy? At the time, I was one of the few academics invited regularly to address the Herzliya Conference, a festival of speeches and networking, renowned as a venue where Israeli leaders make important policy statements. It was (and remains) a three-ring circus, with simultaneous panels on every aspect of national security. At the 2010 conference, I was assigned a slot on a panel titled “Rising to the Challenge of Radical Indoctrination.” I wasn’t the headliner; that spot was taken by Baroness Pauline Neville-Jones, who, a few months later, would be appointed Britain’s minister of state for security and counter-terrorism. I’d obviously been invited to provide academic ballast—or, if you will, filler. My affiliation on the printed program was “Senior Fellow, Shalem Center; National Security Studies Program, Harvard University,” a small unit under the auspices of the Weatherhead Center.

If you aren’t a top-billed speaker at Herzliya, you have only five or six minutes to make your point, and a digital countdown clock is prominently displayed to you and the audience. If you want your talk to be remembered (so that you’ll be invited back), it needs to be punchy and provocative. I decided (at the last minute, as I recall) to float a thesis I had encountered in an article about Gaza by a German scholar in the *Wall Street Journal, Europe Edition*. There, he argued that in “youth bulge” countries with high fertility rates, “young men tend to eliminate each other or get killed in aggressive wars.” In Gaza, international aid had encouraged high fertility. He concluded:

As long as we continue to subsidize Gaza’s extreme demographic armament, young Palestinians will likely continue killing their brothers or neighbors.... One may argue that by fueling Gaza’s untenable population explosion, the West unintentionally finances a war by proxy against the Jews of Israel.

If we seriously want to avoid another generation of war in Gaza, we must have the courage to tell the Gazans that they will have to start looking after their children themselves, without [United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees] UNRWA’s help. This would force Palestinians to focus on building an economy instead of freeing them up to wage war. Of course,

every baby lured into the world by our money up to now would still have our assistance.²

I thought this was an intriguing thesis and decided to peg my six-minute talk on its premise, with a nod to its author. There was nothing particularly controversial in the way I laid out the broader argument about the Middle East. As one critic later allowed, “There is no individual sentence in Kramer’s remarks that is incorrect, and the internal logic is consistent: the high birth rate does lead to increased terrorist violence; aid groups are encouraging that high birth rate; and so on.”³ But it was my finishing flourish that would prove incendiary:

Aging populations reject radical agendas, and the Middle East is no different. Now eventually, this will happen among the Palestinians too, but it will happen faster if the West stops providing pro-natal subsidies for Palestinians with refugee status. Those subsidies are one reason why, in the ten years from 1997 to 2007, Gaza’s population grew by an astonishing 40 percent. At that rate, Gaza’s population will double by 2030 to three million. Israel’s present sanctions on Gaza have a political aim—undermine the Hamas regime—but if they also break Gaza’s runaway population growth—and there is some evidence that they have—that might begin to crack the culture of martyrdom which demands a constant supply of superfluous young men. That is rising to the real challenge of radical indoctrination, and treating it at its root.⁴

I wasn’t just calling for a UNRWA policy change—an unlikely prospect. I was making a provocative argument in support of Israel’s sanctions against Gaza, at precisely the moment when they had become the subject of a growing movement of pro-Palestinian opposition. Even as I spoke, Turkish activists were purchasing a ship, the *Mavi Marmara*, that would attempt to run Israel’s blockade of Gaza four months later.

So I was venturing into stormy waters. But to be candid, I hadn’t anchored my argument in much scholarship, nor had I formulated it very carefully. The concluding punchline did sound sinister. I had succumbed to the temptation to be provocative, in a venue that encouraged just that. A critic later wrote that “Kramer may have brought the academic’s correct love of experimental, extreme, half-held opinions into the unwelcome realm of politics.”⁵ That’s a fair summation of my mood at the time. I also thought it would be interesting to push back against the title of the panel, with its assumption that terrorism came down to “indoctrination” (or, as often claimed in Israel, “incitement”). This was also why my talk fell flat in the “unwelcome realm” of *Israeli* politics. An acquaintance expressed his disappointment in me. “You’re an expert on Islamist *ideas*,” he said. “Why didn’t you concentrate on *that*?”

In any event, my talk left no trace, until I uploaded a video of it to YouTube and posted it on my website. I succumbed to yet another temptation: even though my talk wasn’t a finished product by any stretch of the imagination, a personal

website must be fed with new content to keep the traffic up. So I posted it—and it seemed to disappear again. One journalist friend did repost it on his website, and it prompted a spirited discussion in the comments section. But his readers didn't focus on Gaza at all; they seemed interested only in debating the “youth bulge” theory of terrorism.⁶ After that, even I forgot about my talk; my own research agenda lay elsewhere.

Genocide!

But two weeks later, *The Electronic Intifada* website discovered my post and ran a piece about my talk under this blaring headline: “Harvard Fellow Calls for Genocidal Measure to Curb Palestinian Births.” The article claimed I had “called for ‘the West’ to take measures to curb the births of Palestinians, a proposal that appears to meet the international legal definition of a call for genocide.... The 1948 U.N. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, created in the wake of the Nazi holocaust, defines genocide to include measures ‘intended to prevent births within’ a specific ‘national, ethnic, racial or religious group.’”⁷

Genocide! Harvard! This would become the rubric for the controversy that followed—one that I watched unfold, from a distance, with growing incredulity.

Had a Harvard fellow (or was he a professor?) advocated genocide? The echo chamber around *The Electronic Intifada* answered with a resounding “Yes!” I won't list the various sources of this response or the many forms it took. (Suffice it to say, it produced quite a few demonstrations of Godwin's law.⁸) Israel's perennial adversaries were the most vociferous, parsing my words from every conceivable angle to show that they most certainly did constitute a call to genocide and insisting that Harvard dismiss me or dissociate itself from me.

It's not pleasant to be denounced as an armchair *génocidaire*. But my critics, in following this strategy, also succumbed to a temptation. They sought to be provocative as well, to draw maximum attention and compel a response. The *genocide* trope definitely achieved that aim. But once they had brought attention to my remarks, would reasonable people draw the same conclusion they drew?

Assuming they might, I girded myself for battle. I knew I had the tools—above all, my own website and social media—to put across my rebuttals. My strategy would be fairly straightforward: you might not like my views, but you have to concede that I've been smeared by extremists who have hurled false accusations driven by ignorance (of genocide) and malice (against Israel). I even laid down a first volley in a blog post titled “Smear Intifada.” (Sample: “Being accused of advocating genocide by people who daily call for Israel to be wiped off the map of the Middle East is rich.”⁹) I figured it would be a pitched battle and that I would be writing every day.

So I was taken by surprise when three directors of the Weatherhead Center—the then-current one, who was on leave, and the two acting directors in her stead—issued their own statement, changing the whole picture.¹⁰

They began by noting that they had heard the demands that the center dissociate itself from me. The center had hundreds of affiliates, the directors pointed out; it did not monitor or control their activities or take any position “on any issue of scholarship or public policy.” This could have been cut-and-pasted from any administration statement in any controversy. But it was followed by this: “Accusations have been made that Martin Kramer’s statements are genocidal. These accusations are baseless. Kramer’s statements express dismay with the policy of agencies that provide aid to Palestinian refugees and that tie aid entitlements to the size of refugee families. Kramer argues that this policy encourages population growth among refugee communities. While these views may be controversial, there is no way they can be regarded as genocidal.”

This constituted much more than a boilerplate defense of my right to express my views. It was a substantive refutation of the most defamatory distortion of them, as retailed by *The Electronic Intifada* and repeated by its camp followers across the internet. And there was more: “Those who have called on the Weatherhead Center to dissociate itself from Kramer’s views, or to end Kramer’s affiliation with the Center, appear not to understand the role of controversy in an academic setting.”

That sentence crossed over into criticism of my critics. Yes, I had made *controversial* statements, but asking for my dismissal or even dissociation displayed an ignorance of the workings of the academy. The statement concluded: “It would be inappropriate for the Weatherhead Center to pass judgment on the personal political views of any of its affiliates, or to make affiliation contingent on some political criterion. Exception may be made for statements that go beyond the boundaries of protected speech, but there is no sense in which Kramer’s remarks could be considered to fall into this category. The Weatherhead Center’s activities are based on a firm belief that scholars must be free to state their views, and [the center] rejects any attempts to restrict this fundamental academic freedom.”

So there *was* a boundary, the directors affirmed, but my “personal political views” fell squarely on the protected side of it.

“Baseless,” “no way,” “no sense”—this was strong stuff. I hadn’t asked for this statement, or any statement, so I was surprised by it—especially since I suspected that the three signatories strongly disagreed with what I had said. But the accusation that they were harboring a *génocidaire* compelled them to consider the actual content of my remarks. The result was not only a defense of my academic freedom but also a rebuke to those who had launched a smear campaign based on the genocide charge.

At that point, it was game over as far as I was concerned. I could stand down—something I couldn't have done if the directors hadn't taken a substantive position on the definition of *genocide*. I posted the directors' statement verbatim on my blog without comment and went silent.

The next day, the student newspaper the *Harvard Crimson* ran an editorial echoing the Weatherhead statement. It was headlined "Weatherheading the Storm: Martin Kramer's Strategy for Curbing Extremism Is Repugnant, but Not a Call for Genocide." The student editorial board described my advice as "morally offensive," "strategically inept," and "ethically unacceptable." But they also believed that "the blogosphere clearly overreacted in perpetuating the genocide meme created by *The Electronic Intifada* and others. . . . Considering the content of Kramer's speech, labeling his policy as 'genocide' is unfair, and steers the debate away from his actual argument." They ended by noting that "a diverse view like Kramer's will certainly foster the sort of debate the [Weatherhead] center seeks to promote" and added that they would not question my continued presence at the center. They urged the blogosphere to follow suit.¹¹

The Electronic Intifada, by putting the genocide charge front and center, thus guaranteed that reasonable people who disagreed with me, sometimes vehemently, would nevertheless reject the loudest accusation against me as "baseless" and "unfair." The excesses of my critics worked to my advantage. Admittedly, it might have turned out differently at a lesser university. Harvard faculty are devoted to the analysis of texts, enamored of their own powers of interpretation, and disdainful of the internet herd. This ensured that my words would receive a reasonably fair and informed hearing—and that the genocide claim wouldn't stick.

The directors' statement (and the *Crimson* editorial) also ensured that the controversy wouldn't make the leap to the *The Chronicle of Higher Education* or *Inside Higher Ed*, the usual course of out-of-control brushfires. And it obviated the need for higher administration to respond. In sum, the directors' statement was smart, and it had the additional merit of being the right thing.

Duty of Neutrality?

Or was it? The wrathful crowd now turned on the Weatherhead Center. A headline in *The Electronic Intifada* announced that the center "defends fellow's pro-genocide statements."¹² Bloggers denounced the "reprehensible statement defending Kramer."¹³ Closer to home, representatives of sixteen student groups at Harvard wrote to the directors. They were "alarmed that rather than taking a dissociating or even strictly neutral stance against such extremist and hateful statements, the Weatherhead Center issued a defensive response." The directors' characterization of my "deeply racist" statements as merely "controversial" was "alarming." (Oddly, no mention was made of the alarming genocide charge, which had prompted the directors' statement in the first place.¹⁴) "Defend,"

“defending,” “defensive”—the overall impression was that the directors had defended me, period.

One of the Weatherhead directors, a human rights scholar, was especially sensitive to this criticism, and she went to lengths to signal to my critics that she had upheld my academic freedom with reluctant resignation. I had no doubt she genuinely reviled my views, although it would have been more interesting had she made a reasoned critique of them. Instead, in two letters to editors, she attempted to parse the directors’ statement in implausible ways.

“The center never exonerated Kramer from those who have disagreed with him”—a half-truth, since it certainly did exonerate me from the genocide charge.¹⁵ “Do not make the mistake of concluding that the Weatherhead Center has defended Mr. Kramer’s positions,” she wrote in another letter. The Weatherhead statement “only makes the case that the speech in question is probably protected, for better or for worse.”¹⁶ But this wasn’t the *only* case the directors made. If it were, I wouldn’t have circulated their statement, and my critics wouldn’t have denounced it.

I was tempted to respond, but this time, I resisted. If there was one thing I and my critics agreed on, it was our reading of the directors’ statement. She also admitted she didn’t speak on behalf of the other two directors; they remained silent. So, while she may have raised a clenched fist in solidarity with my critics, all that really mattered was that she, too, had put her signature on that statement. Indeed, without it, the statement could not have been issued at all. I decided that no more needed to be said.

The most important and interesting criticism of the statement came from a Harvard professor, Stephen Walt, a member of the Weatherhead Center’s executive committee. Walt was no stranger to Harvard-class controversy: his 2006 Kennedy School working paper, “The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy,” coauthored with the University of Chicago’s John Mearsheimer, had caused a firestorm. At the time, the Kennedy School issued a statement that “it stands firmly behind the academic freedom of its faculty, including Professor Stephen Walt.” But somehow the Harvard logo disappeared from the paper, and a more explicit disclaimer replaced the usual boilerplate.¹⁷ When accusations flew at Walt (a rebuttal in *the Washington Post* carried the headline “Yes, It’s Antisemitic”), Harvard remained neutral. Given his own experience, how would he take this statement by his faculty colleagues?

In a post on his blog, Walt began by dismissing the genocide claim as a distraction: “I think the word ‘genocide’ has become a loaded term that gets tossed around too loosely, which makes it easy for Kramer and his defenders to portray legitimate criticism of his extreme views as over the top.” In any case, he added, “what word you use to describe his comments is actually not that important”—they were “appalling,” “horrific,” “offensive,” and “chilling” in their own right.

(On this point, my most vocal critics obviously disagreed. For them, the *g*-word had been the point of it all.) He allowed that “it would be wrong for Harvard officials to cut off Kramer because they disagreed with what he said or even found it offensive.” That would be an infringement of academic freedom.

But he then made a very specific criticism of the directors’ statement: “Notice that the Weatherhead Directors did not quite ‘refrain from passing judgment’ on what Kramer said. The appropriate stance to adopt whenever a faculty member or affiliated researcher takes a controversial or unpopular position is strict neutrality; the *institution*, or its official representatives, should take no position at all about the validity of the person’s views. Therefore, they should have defended Kramer’s right to say what he did but refrained from commenting on whether the accusations against him were ‘baseless’ or not.”¹⁸

To my mind, Walt posed the only lasting question to arise from the entire episode, and I have given his opinion quite a bit of thought—partly because I have spent the years since this controversy as a college president, wondering what I would do were I confronted with a similar dilemma. It remains a theoretical question: my college is very small, and I haven’t had a comparable controversy on my watch.

But as a matter of broad principle, as regards higher administration, I agree with Walt. In a research university, or even in a smaller college, higher administration cannot possibly be expected to determine what is baseless or not in the range of fields represented by the faculty. Only academic peers can begin to make that determination, and even they may differ. If such a determination is necessary, the appropriate approach of higher administration should be the appointment of a committee of peers to review the case.

But the Weatherhead directors were not higher administration. They constituted the mid-level academic leadership of a center for international affairs. And these three professors (of international relations and government) did not pass judgment on all the accusations against me, just a specific one: the claim that my statements were genocidal. Defining concepts such as *genocide* is one of the basic competencies of the Weatherhead Center’s faculty. Who if not they? For Weatherhead’s directors to have taken a position of strict neutrality on what constitutes a genocidal statement would have been unconscionable, especially as they agreed unanimously that my own statements didn’t qualify.

So I would modify Walt’s position. Yes, higher administration does have an obligation to practice strict neutrality. As a rule, it isn’t equipped academically to do otherwise. But in the constituent units and departments of a university, academically qualified administrators have a right to take a position. To abstain is to forfeit their own ground to the blogosphere or Twitter, both teeming with activists animated by agendas. The administrators should exercise their right through the mechanism that governs all academic life, the committee

of peers. In my case, the Weatherhead directors constituted just such an ad hoc committee.

They should also act expeditiously—if need be, within hours. “Rather than encouraging scholarly debate on this most grave of issues,” complained one critic, “the Directors of the Weatherhead Center instead chose to invoke Dr. Kramer’s academic freedom in order to suppress academic discussion of the matter.” The complaints against me should have been “examined and discussed.”¹⁹ Obviously, examination and discussion are the essence of the academic enterprise (and nothing the Weatherhead directors did precluded it). But when controversies bleed into the internet and social media and become part of a news cycle, lack of swift action can do irreparable damage to the reputations of individuals and institutions. If academic administrators have an advantage during such controversies, it is because they are more likely to have thought through contentious issues already. If they can’t act both judiciously and expeditiously in intellectual controversies, they have very little to commend them over professional bureaucrats.

Lessons of a Controversy

I write these lines six years after the affair. For me, it was a virtual controversy. It would have been very different had I been coming in each morning to the Weatherhead Center or crossing Harvard Yard or dining at the Faculty Club. I was half a world away, and my loose affiliation with Harvard was set to expire anyway. The episode (Walt called it a “ruckus”) had no lasting consequences, either for my career or my reputation. Once, when I alluded to it in a conversation in Washington, my interlocutor said: “Yeah, I remember it. Some crazies came after you, but the university stood by you.” If anyone beyond Cambridge recalls the episode, that is probably how it is (vaguely) remembered. The affair didn’t follow me.

But I won’t pretend that the ruckus didn’t leave its mark on me. I had said goodbye to Harvard with a feeling of mission accomplished. That feeling dissipated. I also felt guilt (and gratitude) toward those who brought me to Harvard and who actively defended me behind the scenes after I left. For them, the controversy wasn’t virtual at all, and they took their share of flak. I made one or two tactical compromises to make their lives easier; I wish I could have done more. Later, in May, the *Crimson* asked me if I would contribute an op-ed on the controversy to the commencement issue. I figured my friends had been through enough, and I took a pass.

I came away with three lessons, which I have tried to apply to myself but may be applicable more broadly. The first almost goes without saying. The Arab-Israeli conflict is not a place for thought experimentation. Don’t take any positions or make any analyses that aren’t thoroughly considered. There is nothing wrong with being provocative, and I have continued to provoke. One should

never shy from controversy, and I haven't. But everything written and spoken should be the product of research and reflection. Academics shouldn't shoot from the hip, nor should they be tempted to reduce complex ideas to sound bites. I have become more deliberate (which may be why I'm no longer an invited speaker at the Herzliya Conference).

The second lesson: over-the-top accusations by your opponents are your best friends. For some reason, the Palestinian cause attracts more than its fair share of exaggerators, fantasists, and conspiracy theorists. In any given controversy, outlandish and nonsensical accusations will fly. Put the focus on them, highlight them, dispute them. There is a notion that even if they are untrue, something of them will stick. That is the entire premise of smear factories like *The Electronic Intifada*. But there will always be people in an academic setting who will feel that excessive claims, against Israel or against you, insult their intelligence. Deepen the sense of insult by shoving the most outrageous claims beneath their noses.

The third lesson: never apologize, retract, or delete. No one will rally to someone in retreat. If critics are spinning your words one way, spin them back the other way. Even if your original formulation was flawed, don't scrap it. Explain it, interpret it, elaborate on it, but don't walk it back. If administrators see you apologize, they will sigh in relief and sacrifice you to your opponents. If they see you are prepared to wage a long, drawn-out, take-no-prisoners battle, they just may make a statement to mollify you in order to bring the controversy to a swift end. If faculty and students see you are determined to fight, they are more likely to suspend judgment until you have had your say. If you can't persuade them that you are right, then try to plant a seed of doubt. Sometimes that's all it takes to win.

Risks and Rewards

I have focused here on the mechanics of a specific controversy, but what about the larger purpose of controversy? The Weatherhead Center directors, in their statement, said that those who demanded my dismissal "appear not to understand the role of controversy in an academic setting." What is that role?

It is to open a discussion that might otherwise never take place because the risks of opening it form a barrier. While a handful of academic gadflies weave in and out of controversies all the time, the vast majority of practicing academics do everything possible to avoid them. A controversy can make a career, but it can also break one, so why take the risk? And the more controversial a subject becomes in the political arena, the more risk attends to saying anything new about it in the academic one. This is true of Israel, the Palestinians, terrorism, Islam, and a host of topics related to the Middle East.

So why chance it? "Our own staff discussed your comments at length," I was told by the *Crimson* editor who solicited my contribution to the commencement

issue, “and there were very different opinions on the matter. Many people submitted op-eds on the topic, and your statements elicited some of the best dialogue our page has seen all year.”²⁰ That is controversy’s reward, and perhaps that was my parting contribution to the intellectual life of Harvard. Students watched, listened, thought, debated. And while my intervention wasn’t my scholarship at its best, it did bring out the best in the responses of some students.²¹ If the affair incidentally caused some discomfort among administrators—well, this is exactly what they are paid to endure.

So in retrospect, I do not regret my Harvard controversy. It made some Harvard students think, and perhaps this retrospective can benefit faculty and administrators elsewhere. I don’t recommend that those who believe they have something important to say about Israel actively seek controversy. For me, the costs of this episode ranged from very low to nil; for someone else, the costs might be appreciably higher. But there will always be openings—windows in time where there is greater receptivity to thoughtful ideas and less tolerance for crude polemics. These openings work to Israel’s advantage and should never be wasted.

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Notes

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19. Patrick Wolfe, "Dr. Martin Kramer's Allegedly Genocidal Remarks," *H-Genocide Discussion Logs* (February 27, 2010), <http://www.webcitation.org/6gQcINhxe>.

20. Private communication, May 18, 2010.

21. A good example is Jeremy Patashnik, "A (Somewhat) Modest Proposal, Literally," *HPRgument Blog* (February 24, 2010), [http://web.archive.org/web/20150530053122/](http://web.archive.org/web/20150530053122/http://harvardpolitics.com/online/hprgument-blog/a-somewhat-modest-proposal-literally/) <http://harvardpolitics.com/online/hprgument-blog/a-somewhat-modest-proposal-literally/>.