

Ms. Zeina Barakat, Al-Quds University
zeinabarakat81@gmail.com
American Studies from a Student Perspective
Why American Studies in Palestine

The American Studies Graduate Program at Al-Quds University was founded in 2002 by Professor Mohammed Dajani Daoudi, a political scientist holding two doctorate degrees from American universities and who taught American government courses in U.S. universities, as a multidisciplinary MA program focusing on American culture, politics, history and ethnicity. It is still the only program in Palestinian and Arab universities that offers a specialized graduate degree in American Studies. The Cultural Affairs section at the US Consulate in Jerusalem contributed 64,000 USD financial seed funding for the development of American Studies at Al-Quds University

Developed with an emphasis on the social sciences and humanities, its teaching emphasizes a comprehensive approach to the culture of the American people as well as its traditions and experience. As a result of strenuous efforts, the American Studies in Palestine now occupies a rapidly expanding field that embraces a wide spectrum about the United States as the subjects of its study, including government, economics, politics, law, international relations, foreign policy, diplomacy, military affairs, society, culture, literature, education, film, democracy, religion, philosophy, history, etc. The Center currently offers over 20 different courses for students, heralds American movies in its seminar hall, regularly hosts diverse speakers, and sponsors gatherings and exchange programs for its students. In 2009, its director published in Arabic the book, "Bibliography of Books in Arabic dealing with American Affairs", a comprehensive annotated listing of more than 1000 book entries.

The most studied areas researched by students in their theses are American government, U.S. foreign policy, especially U. S.- Palestinian relations, American literature, American democracy, and American history. More than fifty masters theses on a broad range of political, social and economic topics have been completed. Because academic research relied heavily on library research and since extended stays in the U.S. were difficult to arrange, Palestinian students majoring in American Studies relied mainly on the internet and available books in Palestinian universities.

The mission of the American Studies Center at Al-Quds University in Palestine is: (1) to transmit knowledge and skills to students about the United States, (2) to deepen mutual understanding between the two peoples, (3) to expose Palestinians to American values and culture, (4) to provide a frame of reference for Palestine's development, (5) to explore the unique experience of the American people as part of Western civilization, (6) to make the United States no longer a stranger in the eyes of the Palestinian people, (7) to create Palestinian specialists in the study of the United States, (8) to humanize the demonized stereotype image of the American individual, (9) to create an educated workforce that knows how to deal with Americans, (10) to

provide a unique environment in which leading scholars and promising students strive together to expand knowledge of American society and experience.

In the beginning, few Palestinian scholars and government officials recognized the need to have Palestinian students study the United States, viewed generally as an enemy to be hated rather than a nation to be studied. Not many Palestinian scholars had studied in the United States and only select Palestinian officials working in the government have studied in the US. Palestinian scholars and university staff critiqued the American Studies Program without trying to understand its real focus and goals. The university turned out to be dominated by vocal radical critics of the American Studies. Criticism from within the academia leveled against the American Studies described it to be an arm of US foreign policy aiming to polish American faltering image in the Arab and Muslim world and among the Palestinians. Some claimed it aimed to promote the idea of American exceptionalism -- the notion that the US has had a special mission and virtue that makes it unique among nations. Others linked it to the phenomenon of globalization, or Westernization, and what some call Americanization – namely, the promotion of the U. S. dominant role in global affairs and its policy to advance Western values and ideologies.

It took some time before it was recognized that the American Studies in Palestine does not aim to transplant American values and culture. Instead, American Studies emerged as serving academic purposes, as well as Palestinian national aspirations, by reinterpreting American politics, history and literature in terms that are relevant to Palestinian cause and problems. More significantly, the American Studies have become a lens through which Palestinians could more clearly see and understand the American experience in order to help enrich the Palestinian national experience. The field has become especially prominent in Palestine where the American Studies reflected the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of the field. A number of Palestinian universities offer undergraduate courses in American studies.

The enigma remains—that in Palestine everybody seems to be a specialist in politics and have an opinion to advice the American president about the domestic and foreign affairs, but none of them has Americanism as a profession. Thus much ignorance is pervasive among Palestinians about the American society. Most of the articles and translations related to American issues published in the Palestinian newspapers are on American foreign policy (including U.S.-Israeli - Palestinian relations),and on military affairs abroad. Not much is published on American education, American art, domestic politics, American culture, philosophy and sociology. The reason explaining this interest in American affairs in Palestine being focused on U. S. foreign policy and on U.S. foreign relations rather than on American culture and sports can be found in the preoccupation in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

American Studies in Palestine is still characterized by a weak institutional organization and remains one of the least developed area studies in Palestinian universities, despite the deep and constant interest of Palestinian society in the United States. Only a small number of experts on the United States exist in Palestine. No

Palestinian historian is specialized in US history nor are there political scientists specialized in American political process, as well as scholars specialized in American law, sociology, economics and gender studies. Consequently, no specialized research was conducted in law schools and departments of economics. The scholars who teach or supervises the thesis research tended not to be Americanists, but rather specialists on political science, international law or on literature.

The situation did not improve much, despite efforts from the U.S. government to develop American Studies in Palestine as well as in other Arab countries. The turning point took place in the aftermath of the tragic events of September 11, when the U.S. government designed policies and allocated funding to support the promotion of American Studies Programs in Arab and Islamic countries, helping to teach undergraduate courses such as American history, culture, politics and literature.

At the same time, the political turmoil resulting from the Arab-Israeli conflict and U.S. invasion and consequent occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq made the American Studies an easy target for attack and criticism making it difficult to award American Studies the same legitimacy as English studies. The focus was on soft topics such as media and film courses as well as African-Americans, women, Arab immigrants, Islam in American society.

In recent times, political critique of American Studies subsided, and the dialogue between Palestinian universities and the American studies in the U.S. has increased. Although the anti-Americanism that had long influenced writings about the United States in Palestine and the Arab world (on grounds of being pro-Israel, and/or imperialist), has not receded among specialists, at the institutional level, the field continues to be under-developed.

The lingering problem of American Studies in Palestine, however, remains to be its lack of funding for scholarship, research, publishing, exchange programs with American universities, as well as providing cultural service to society. So far, no grants are being awarded for M. A. candidates to spend time in American universities to do supervised thesis research. Thus keeping the research output limited, beginning with article publications essentially in Arabic.

To promote American studies in Palestine, a professional association, the Association of American Studies in Palestinian Universities, need to be created with the purpose of federating all those teaching and doing research on the U.S. and linking with American charitable foundations. Its membership would be composed of all Palestinian universities, primarily of scholars from American Studies departments as well as Departments of Politics, English, and History and other disciplines. Also, an American Studies Journal needs also to be published at least in the beginning on an annual basis.