

Mideast scholars debate use of intelligence links

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Disclosure of funding links between Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies and the Central intelligence Agency has heated up a simmering debate among Middle East scholars about cooperating with, or doing research for, intelligence agencies.

Today, the Middle East Studies Association, meeting jointly with the African Studies Association in New Orleans, is to vote on a toughly-worded resolution, adopted by its board Thursday night, "deploring" the Harvard center's failure to disclose its CIA ties voluntarily.

The 1800-member scholarly group also is to vote today on a resolution urging creation of a new national body to fund research on other areas of the world. The new body would set funding priorities through academic peer review as an alternative to intelligence-related contract research programs.

The resolution also calls on members "to reflect carefully upon their responsibility to the academic profession prior to seeking or accepting funding from intelligence sources."

Fallout from the Harvard controversy continues to be felt on other fronts as well.

Scholars around the country said this week that since the disclosure about a half-dozen graduate students and academicians from the United States or Arab countries and, in one case, a visiting Indonesian official, have cancelled plans to visit, study at or deliver talks sponsored by the Harvard center. A Harvard source said a graduate student at the center was denied a visa this week to do field work in an Arab country, seriously jeopardizing completion of his doctoral thesis.

Several scholars said in interviews that the CIA links of the center's director, Nadav Safran, had damaged the credibility of the field and may Impede scholarly research abroad.

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The controversy erupted last month following disclosure that 'Safran had accepted \$45,000 la CIA funds for a conference on Islamic fundamentalism, without fully disclosing this to participants, and used more than \$100,000 in agency funds to write a book on Saudi Arabia. Safran disclosed the sponsorship after being ordered to do so Oct. 11 by a Harvard dean.

Safran's secretary said Safran would not comment until Harvard completes its internal review of the matter, which is not expected to occur until next week.

Several Harvard professors including Dr. Richard Frye, the center's founder, and other scholars have urged Safran to resign; last week 20 graduate students at the center called for curbs on the power of Its director and urged the center, and scholars affiliated with it. to adopt a policy not to accept funding from intelligence agencies.

The letter said, in part, that "Safran has greatly damaged the reputation and academic integrity of the center."

And at a meeting in Philadelphia of directors of regional studies centers earlier this month, the impact of the Safran affair on the field was a central topic.

“There was quite a bit of talk about It,” said John E. Woods, director of the University of Chicago’s Center for Middle Eastern Studies. “People are shaking their heads, wondering why he didn’t come out front early with even his own university and how he thought he could conceal it from his colleagues.”

“A lot of us are concerned because we’re all strapped for money,” he said, while the intelligence community is anxious to fund regional studies.

Disclosure required

Woods, and heads of similar centers at Boston University, the University of California-Berkeley, the University of California-Los Angeles, Georgetown, and a joint Princeton-New York University Center said their institutions do not accept any direct intelligence funding and require disclosure of CIA support received by individual researchers.

The US intelligence community has long played a role in founding and subsidizing the work of regional study centers, especially intelligence links those on the Middle East, Latin America and Africa. In 1983, after the CIA advertised research contracts in newsletters of the Latin American and Middle East Studies Associations and attempted to do so with the African Studies Association, all adopted resolutions either shunning ties to the CIA or calling upon members to disclose funding sources fully.

“Something like this does affect the credibility of others because of the delicate nature of working in the Middle East,” said Dr. Philip Stoddard, director of the Middle East Institute in Washington. “Probably there are suspicions of American scholars, and every time one of us applies for a visa you have them wondering if you’re on the CIA payroll.”

Stoddard, a former State Department intelligence officer—said he is not against scholars continuing to work for the CIA per se.

Without It, he said, the government “would just feed on itself with the result being self-fulfilling prophecies and incomplete analyses such as we’ve seen in recent years. One reason the CIA has so much money to spend is that Congress doesn’t. It is to be so inward-facing. The trend is to open things up a bit, to seek academic peer review.

“What the Safran affair does is make it that much harder for people outside the government to interact with those in it in a legitimate, respectable way.” Most of a dozen Middle Eastern scholars interviewed criticized Safran’s actions. Dale F. Elkelman, an anthropologist at the University of New York, and head of the Middle Eastern Studies Association’s ethics subcommittee, called them “an almost obscene violation of academic ethics.”

Some have come to Safran’s aid, however. David Landes, Harvard professor of history and economics and a member of the center’s executive committee, called Safran’s

failure to disclose the CIA funding a bad mistake” but said that Safran should remain. “Safran has been an imaginative and enterprising director ... who has brought a moribund center back to life and made it an exciting place. This sort of thing need not and should not happen again.”

Thomas Stauffer, who teaches at Georgetown’s Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, said Safran’s failure to disclose the CIA funding “was a deceit that compromised his colleagues.”

Stauffer, who recently returned from Jordan and Kuwait, said sentiment toward Harvard students is further clouded by “reports widely discussed in the Middle East that [Safran] has been an agent for Mossad,” the Israeli intelligence agency.

On Sept. 27, Ha’aretz, the Hebrew daily published in Tel Aviv and Israeli’s most authoritative newspaper, published a letter stating that “Safran was one of the heads of Shin Beth [the precursor of Mossad] during the 1948–49 war ... until his emigration from Israel.” It was translated by an Israeli graduate student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and also by MIT professor Noam Chomsky.

Stauffer said he also was bothered by Safran’s apparent insensitivity to his students. “His stunts are dishonorable ... and irresponsible to his students. Since he used some of them as intermediaries for his book, he’s placed ail of them under a stigma. All of us in the field encounter the accusation that we’re spies, and that suspicion is reinforced by the specificity of his links to the CIA.”

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Boston Globe. <cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp90-00806r000100020037-8>

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