

Response to criticisms of the G.E. von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies

The G.E. von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies (hereafter CNES) of UCLA is one of the oldest such centers in the United States. It is also one of the largest, currently including seventy-six affiliated faculty (among whom are seventeen lecturers/adjuncts and fifteen academically active and productive emeriti), representing such diverse departments/fields as Anthropology, Art History, History, Comparative Literature, Economics, English, Ethnomusicology, French and Francophone Studies, Law, Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, Political Science, Public Health, and World Arts and Cultures. Its mission is to further understanding of the region through programming, outreach, promoting individual and collaborative faculty and graduate student research, sponsoring instruction in the languages of the region, and furthering the education of undergraduate and graduate students in all aspects of the Middle East.

Recently, CNES, its directors, affiliated faculty, and those who have participated in its programming have been the target of criticism that has accused them of a variety of transgressions. Among them are that CNES has engaged in anti-Semitic activity, has obsessively focused on Israel and singled it out for opprobrium (simultaneously giving other states in the region a free pass), has demonized and delegitimated Israel by condoning terrorism against its citizens and promoting the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. To prove their case, critics of CNES cite bogus statistical evidence, take snippets of talks given by invited speakers and present them out of context, and use McCarthyite smears against respected scholars that verge on the libelous. One report condemning CNES includes among its “evidence” of anti-Semitism the fact that CNES (along with UCLA’s International Institute) is featured on a Saudi Arabian website which contains “openly anti-Israel and anti-Semitic discourse, as well as anti-homosexual and sexist rhetoric.” This is representative of the sort of tactic employed by many of CNES’s critics. Besides the fact that the center has no control over those who wish to use its name to promote their own agenda, anyone taking the time to access the website (<http://kep.org.sa/en/>) will see that the center is not singled out at all, but is included in a rather haphazard list of twenty centers (including those at Oxford, Cambridge, Duke and SOAS) where people might attain information about the Middle East and Islam.

So, here are the facts:

Programming: Because CNES has been the recipient of federal funds, the Department of Education requires it to send in biannual lists of its programming activities. The following statistics on programming come from those lists and, as such, is the most reliable source for programming data. The two lists that follow indicate that CNES programming is hardly obsessively focused on Israel/Palestine.

I. A statistical breakdown of programming sponsored by CNES between 2010-13, the timeframe most often used by critics of the center, is as follows:

A. Total number of events, 2010-2013....278

- B. Top ten topics programmed by CNES during this period (in descending order)
1. Iran (58 events, 20.9% of total)
 2. Arab World (47 events, 16.9% of total)
 3. Israel/Palestine (35 events, 12.6% of total)
 4. History/Historiography (non-Israel related) (30 events, 12.3% of total)
 5. Topical (non-Israel related) (26 events, 9.4% of total)
 6. Pedagogy/Outreach (20 events, 7.2% of total)
 7. Islam (19 events, 6.8% of total)
 8. Armenian topics (13 events, 4.6% of total)
 9. Jewish topics (non-Israel related) (13 events, 4.6% of total)
 10. Other (6 events, 2.5% of total)

II. A statistical breakdown of programming sponsored by CNES between 2010-14, the timeframe used by the Department of Education in its assessment of National Resource Centers, is as follows (note: Because programming is an ongoing process, these statistics are necessarily incomplete. The following is a full breakdown of events from June 22, 2010 to November 1, 2014):

A. Total number of events, 2010-2014....333

- B. Top ten topics programmed by CNES during this period (in descending order)
1. Iran (72 events, 21.6% of total)
 2. Arab World (54 events, 16.2% of total)
 3. History/Historiography (non-Israel related) (41 events, 12.3% of total)
 4. Israel/Palestine (39 events, 11.7% of total)
 5. Topical (non-Israel related) (28 events, 8.4% of total)
 6. Pedagogy/Outreach (26 events, 7.8%)
 7. Islam (20 events, 6.0% of total)
 8. Armenian topics (16 events, 4.8% of total)
 9. Jewish topics (non-Israel related) (15 events, 4.5% of total)
 10. Turkey (10 events, 3.0% of total)

What the statistics indicate:

1. Israel/Palestine ranks third and fourth on the two lists in terms of the number of events that focus on the topic. Israel/Palestine programming has made up 12.6% and 11.7% of total programming in each of the two periods. There has been no obsessive fixation on Israel/Palestine.
2. Much of the programming on the Arab world has concerned the Arab uprisings, which broke out in December 2010. All of that programming has offered harsh critiques of Arab governments, past, present, or both. Most of the programming on Turkey has concerned the Gezi park protests and the creeping authoritarianism of the Turkish government (Armenian programming has also included events that focused on the Armenian genocide, the role played by the Ottoman government in that genocide, and denials by the Turkish government that genocide took place). While much of the programming on Iran concerned culture and history, in this case, too, there were a number of events in which the

government of Iran met with harsh criticism. Overall, then, if Israel was “singled out for opprobrium,” so were Arab states, Turkey, Iran and others.

3. Those responsible for programming at CNES saw no reason to “balance” the criticism of the governments of Arab states, Turkey, Iran, and other states by bringing in speakers who would defend them. Speakers invited by CNES are, after all, accomplished scholars presenting original work. Likewise, in that programming where the Israeli government has been criticized, those responsible for staging events saw no reason to bring in speakers who would defend it. Needless to say, lectures and other events are followed by questions and comments from the floor during which members of the audience may voice their support or disagreement with the speakers’ methodologies, facts, conclusions, etc. (CNES cannot podcast questions and comments for legal reasons.)

III. Co-sponsorship of Israel/Palestine and Jewish events: CNES sometimes initiates co-sponsorship of programs with other units of the university (other centers, programs, endowed chairs, departments, etc.) for financial and promotional purposes. Other units of the university also approach CNES for the same reasons. It can be assumed that those units would not cooperate with the center on programming with which they disagree. The following is a list of Israel/Palestine and Jewish events that were co-sponsored with other units during the 2010-14 period, along with the names of those units. In all, eighteen of thirty-nine events sponsored by CNES concerning Israel/Palestine—46%—received co-sponsorship. The large number of co-sponsored events concerning Israel/Palestine, as well as events concerning Jewish communities outside Israel, demonstrates that CNES was anything but a “rogue operation” specializing in anti-Semitic or anti-Zionist programming. Furthermore, as can be seen from the list below, much of the programming on Israel/Palestine and Jewish communities outside Israel does not concern conflict or politics; rather topics run the gamut from cinematography to food to music and dance. (NOTE: Some of the Jewish topical programming does not appear as such in the statistical breakdown above. In some cases programming with Jewish content has been placed in categories deemed more appropriate):

1. “Preserving the Two State Solution,” UCLA International Institute.
2. Film: “Z32,” UCLA International Institute.
3. “My Heart is in the East” (Lecture, Demonstration Israeli Sacred Music), Younes and Souraya Nazarian Center for Israel Studies, Center for Jewish Studies, Herb Alpert School of Music, UCLA Mickey Katz Chair in Jewish Music.
4. “The Israeli-Bedouin Music Connection” (Lecture, Demonstration), Younes and Souraya Nazarian Center for Israel Studies, Center for Jewish Studies, Herb Alpert School of Music, UCLA Mickey Katz Chair in Jewish Music.
5. “The Magic Carpet” (Lecture, Demonstration of Music of Yemenite Jews), Center for Jewish Studies, Herb Alpert School of Music, UCLA Mickey Katz Chair in Jewish Music.

6. "What is Israeli Music?" (Lecture, Demonstration), Younes and Souraya Nazarian Center for Israel Studies, Center for Jewish Studies, Herb Alpert School of Music, UCLA Mickey Katz Chair in Jewish Music.
7. "West Bank Story: The Role of Humor and Art in Peacemaking," Younes and Souraya Nazarian Center for Israel Studies, Center for Jewish Studies, Herb Alpert School of Music, UCLA Mickey Katz Chair in Jewish Music.
8. "Arabs of the Jewish Faith: The Civilizing Mission in Colonial Algeria," Center for Jewish Studies, Maurice Amado Program in Sephardic Studies.
9. "Narrating Migration around the Table: The Frenchfication of North African Jewish Palates," Center for Jewish Studies, Maurice Amado Program in Sephardic Studies.
10. "Between Memory and Extinction: The Moroccan Jewish Quarter in the Twentieth Century," Center for Jewish Studies, Maurice Amado Program in Sephardic Studies.
11. "Pledging Water: Qadis, Jews, and Water Ownership in a Southern Moroccan Oasis," Center for Jewish Studies, Maurice Amado Program in Sephardic Studies.
12. George E. Bisharat, "Violence's Law," UCLA International Human Rights Program, UCLA School of Law, *Journal of Islamic and Near Eastern Law*.
13. Film Screening, Azi Aiyima, Center for the Study of Religion.
14. *Between Two Worlds: The American Jewish Culture Wars*, Department of History, J Street U.
15. "What Does a Jew Want? On Binationalism and Other Specters," Department of History, Department of Comparative Literature, Center for Jewish Studies.
16. "Imagining 'Back Home' in an Era of Homeland Insecurity: Palestinian-American Youth, Education, and the War on Terror," UCLA International Institute, Program on International Migration, UCLA Division of Social Sciences.
17. "A Jewish Voice from Ottoman Salonica: The Ladino Memoir of Sa'adi Besalel A-Levi" (book talk), Department of History, Center for Jewish Studies.
18. "From Pashas to Pariahs: The Arrogant Years of Egypt's Jewry," Center for Jewish Studies, Maurice Amado Program in Sephardic Studies.
19. "The Tigers of Jinbah: Smugglers and Border Entrepreneurs in the Southern West Bank and Israel (2005-2010)," UCLA International Institute, Program on International Migration, Irene Flecknoe Ross Lecture Series in the Department of Sociology.

20. “Beautiful Resistance: Defying the Occupation through the Theater and the Arts,” Department of History.
21. “Palestine and the UN,” Burkle Center for International Relations, Younes and Soraya Nazarian Center for Israel Studies.
22. Conference: “From Ancient Persia to Contemporary LA: 2,700 Years of Iranian Jewish History,” UCLA Fowler Museum, Younes and Soraya Nazarian Center for Israel Studies, Department of History, Center for Jewish Studies, Center for the Study of Religion.
23. “Said Sarmad the Jewish Saint,” Program on Central Asia, Center for the Study of Religion.
24. “Pinkwashing: Gay Rights and Queer Indigeneities,” Center for Gender Studies, Graduate Council, Department of Sociology Gender Study Group.
25. “Perspectives on Peace, Health, and Hope: A Gaza Doctor’s Journey from Personal Tragedy to a Search for Peace and Human Dignity,” UCLA Student Affairs, Burkle Center for International Relations, International Institute, Fielding School of Public Affairs, Department of History, Hillel, Abrahamic Faiths Peace Initiative, New Vision Partners, Olive Tree Initiative.
26. “Third Annual University of California Ladino Symposium: Judeo-Spanish Revitalization,” Department of Spanish and Portuguese, Center for Jewish Studies, UCLA Center for Student Programming, UCLA Graduate Association, Maurice Amado Program in Sephardic Studies.
27. “The Settler-Colonial Paradigm: Debating Gershon Shafir’s *Land, Labor, and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* on its 25th Anniversary,” Department of History.
28. “Crossing Cairo: A Jewish Woman’s Encounter with Egypt,” Center for Jewish Studies, Center for the Study of Religion.
29. “Ralph Bunche and the Politics of Binationalism in Palestine,” Department of History.

IV. Publications based on CNES Conferences: Every year, CNES sponsors or co-sponsors conferences which feature both American and international speakers. Some of them result in edited volumes published by distinguished presses, special issues of peer reviewed journals, or special sections within those journals. Between 2010-14, eight such publications have appeared. None concern Israel/Palestine, demonstrating once again that rather than having an obsessive interest in that subject, the interests of CNES and CNES affiliated faculty are quite diverse. The publications are as follows:

1. “Criminalization of Islamic Philanthropy,” *Journal of Islamic and Near Eastern Law*, edited by Asli Bali (and ?), 2010.

2. *Clifford Geertz in Morocco*, edited by Susan Slyomovics. London: Routledge, 2010.
3. *The Anthropology of The Middle East and North Africa: Into the New Millennium*, co-edited by Sherine Hafez and Susan Slyomovics. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.
4. "Jews and French Colonialism in Algeria," edited by Susan Slyomovics and Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Journal of North African Studies* (special issue), 2013.
5. *Afghanistan in Ink: Literature between Diaspora and Nation*, edited by Nile Green & Nushin Arbabzadah. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.
6. Roundtable on 'The Future of Afghan History,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, edited by Nile Green, (2013).
7. *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Nouri Gana. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013.
8. *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print, 1850-1930*, edited by James Gelvin & Nile Green. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.

Governance: Some critics of CNES have been particularly harsh on the past three center directors, all of whom are distinguished scholars. Critics have noted that the directors have signed petitions and otherwise voiced support for the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. It should be noted that such support, while controversial, is not out of the mainstream within the scholarly community: as of this writing more than 700 anthropologists (two of the three most recent directors of CNES are anthropologists) recently signed a boycott petition, and an online BDS petition attracted more than 600 signatures from the wider Middle East studies community. Two former CNES directors also signed a petition for the University of California system to stop Education Abroad Programs (EAPs) to Israel. They did so because Palestinian-American students from the system were either harassed or prevented entry into that country. It's their job and responsibility to look after the welfare of all UCLA students engaged in work on or travel to the region.

Critics claim that the directors' stance is the stance of CNES and that the BDS movement is anti-Semitic because it delegitimizes Israel. Since the official State Department list of anti-Semitic activities does not mention support for the BDS movement as an act of anti-Semitism, one report criticizing CNES had to add an additional criterion of its own to make its case. As the petition signed by forty Jewish Studies professors and published in the *Jewish Daily Forward* (October 1, 2014) put it, that report's "definition of antisemitism is so indiscriminating as to be meaningless." CNES has not taken a position on BDS, nor will it. Directors, as well as affiliated faculty, are free to express their political opinions as they wish.

As far as CNES' stance toward the EAP in Israel is concerned, EAPs are administered by the University of California, not CNES. Currently, there are a number of such programs, including programs at Hebrew University, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, and the Jaffa Cultural Heritage Project. CNES *is*, however, responsible for administering the Foreign Languages and Area Studies (FLAS) fellowships which support undergraduate and graduate language training. As the Department of Education's guidelines stipulate, these fellowships are distributed for all major Middle Eastern languages, including Hebrew, although by far the most popular language (as determined by the number of applicants for full year and summer FLAS fellowships) has consistently been Arabic. During the last FLAS funding cycle (2010-14), CNES distributed seven FLAS fellowships for the study of Hebrew: three students elected to study in Israel, three at UCLA, and one at American Jewish University.

Critics of CNES do not understand how it, or many other centers at UCLA, is administered. While directors make all sorts of decisions, from budgeting to last minute programming, the Faculty Advisory Committee (FAC) is generally consulted for important budgeting as well as important programming decisions (i.e., international conferences, etc.). In her charge to members of the FAC, the Interim Vice Provost for International Studies wrote, "The committee will meet periodically to advise on strategic goals for the Center and to assist in the development of instructional programs about Near Eastern Studies on the UCLA campus." This is exactly what the committee has done. The director is not a member of the FAC and attends meetings led by the chair of the FAC at the sufferance of the FAC—a decision made two decades ago. While the director advises the vice provost on possible members for the FAC, it is the latter, not the former, who selects them. For the 2014-15 academic year, the vice provost tapped twelve scholars from a variety of fields to serve on the FAC. All agreed. Interestingly, of these four are also affiliated with the Center for Jewish Studies and two are affiliated with the Younes and Soraya Nazarian Center for Israel Studies.

One other criticism of CNES underscores how little critics of the center know about academic governance and how academic institutions are actually run. In 2010, Saudi Aramco donated \$14,643 to CNES, earmarked for outreach. Aramco annually donates \$10-20,000 to several Title VI Middle East centers across the country. The money was used for the intended purpose at the discretion of CNES, since in the academy there is a firewall that separates donors from interfering in the scholarly activities they support, be it the selection of the recipient of an endowed chair or the content of programming. During the same period (2010-14), CNES received \$1,928,106 from the federal and state governments, of which the largest sum (\$600,000) went for language instruction (it is a frequent, but ill-informed criticism of Title VI programs that they neglect language instruction). Covering .76% of an institution's budget does not buy much influence—if buying influence in this case were even possible.

Overall, much of the criticism aimed at the Center for Near Eastern Studies is little more than a politically motivated hatchet job. Most critics use the same sets of statistics which bear little resemblance to what CNES actually does and play on the fears of those outside

academia who do not know that area studies programs such as that run by CNES are under multiple layers of scrutiny, including that of the Department of Education and internal and external peer review processes. UCLA and the broader community should feel proud of the accomplishments of CNES, particularly its diverse programming (always open to the public), its attention to the needs of the Los Angeles community, and its outreach program which brings elementary and secondary school teachers together with world-class scholars to the benefit of schoolchildren throughout the Greater Los Angeles area. And those of us associated with CNES want, in particular, to thank our unfairly maligned current and former directors who have put so much effort into making CNES one of the most active and accomplished Middle East centers in the country.

James L. Gelvin, on behalf of the Faculty Advisory Committee of the G.E. von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.