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Washington Watch

Pitzer College and the struggle for real academic freedom

By Dr James J Zogby

On March 14th, the College Council, the governing body of Pitzer College in California, overwhelmingly passed (67-28) a resolution suspending its relationship with the University of Haifa until Israel ended its policy of restricting entry on the basis of "legally protected political speech or race or ancestry." The resolution had earlier been approved by the both student body and the faculty. Within a few hours of the College Council's vote, Pitzer's President took the unprecedented step of vetoing the resolution creating a crisis of confidence between the college's governing body and its chief administrator. In the lead up to the vote, I was asked to write a supportive letter.

In my letter, I expressed my "...support for Pitzer faculty's decision to stand up for justice and equality. By suspending Pitzer College's exchange with the University of Haifa until the state of Israel ends its discriminatory entry policy at the border and grants visas for individuals to participate in exchanges with Palestinian universities, the faculty has affirmed its commitment to ensuring that Pitzer College values equality of educational opportunity and the rights of all to engage in the 'dialogue and intercultural understanding.' Israel's discrimination against people based on their ethnicity or advocacy isn't just a problem for Palestinians living inside Israel as second-class citizens or in the occupied Palestinian territories without political rights or dignity. It is also a problem that impacts Americans traveling to Israel.

"For decades, many Arab Americans, because of their ethnicity, and other Americans, because of their support for Palestinian human rights, have been systematically targeted and subjected to discriminatory screening, harassment, detention, and deportation when attempting to enter Israel and/or Palestine. Israel's discrimination appears to be a matter of practice and policy. Indeed, it has become so commonplace that it has warranted US government action. Four years ago, the US Department of State expressed concern regarding the 'unequal treatment that Palestinian-Americans and other Arab-Americans receive at Israel's borders and checkpoints.' Secretaries of State Albright, Rice, and Kerry have spoken out on this matter, objecting to Israel's treating Arab Americans as less than full US citizens.

"It was precisely because of this Israeli policy of discrimination against American citizens of Arab descent, that the State Department opposed and blocked efforts by some in Congress to grant Israel 'visa waiver status.' We were, therefore, heartened by the resolution of the Pitzer College Faculty Council, precisely because we know from direct experience that persons of Arab descent will not easily be able to participate in any exchange program established with Israel and that Palestinian colleges and universities in occupied lands encounter great difficulty when they attempt to establish exchange programs of their own.

"We appreciate that the resolution was smartly crafted to encourage Israel to change its policies. It was not a flat-out boycott. Rather it was a call for the University of Haifa and Pitzer College to take a stand in support of ensuring that the opportunity to participate in educational exchanges is open to all. In doing so, you are sending a signal to Israel that discrimination is not acceptable. Further, this resolution passed by the faculty makes clear that the fair treatment of all of our citizens is a minimum requirement for any Israeli institution that seeks engagement with a US institution.

"I was especially pleased to see that the resolution includes exchanges with Palestinian universities. These academic institutions exist in areas under Israeli military occupation. They and their students should have the same opportunity to participate in exchange programs as do students in Israel, and yet they do not. Israel places obstacles on their hiring faculty from abroad and from students securing visas to participate in their programs.

"If Pitzer College is to foster a relationship with a university abroad, it should ensure that those relationships and associated resources are equally available to all eligible Pitzer students, regardless of ethnicity, national origin, or political views. This equal opportunity requirement is not only a central American value, it is inextricably bound to academic freedom - a freedom that all Israelis and Palestinians deserve, and a freedom they are more likely to enjoy equally if Pitzer College remains on the right side of history by supporting the faculty resolution."

What was especially galling about the Pitzer College president's veto was the way he so flagrantly mischaracterized the College Council's action. He termed their action as one that "curtails the academic freedom of those students who wish to study at the University of Haifa", terming it as "a form of academic boycott of Israel" that "sets us on a path away from the free exchange of ideas." In fact, the faculty resolution embraced by the College Council did not call for a boycott of Israel or restrict the free exchange of idea. What it did do was call on Israel to not restrict students or faculty from participating in programs in Haifa because of their political views or ethnicity. In vetoing this resolution, the Pitzer president has attempted to absolve Israel of its discriminatory policies and has failed in his duty to protect the rights of Pitzer's faculty and students who are either of Arab descent or who hold views on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict that by Israeli law would exclude them from entry to the country. This is the real violation of academic freedom.

The good news is that the battle is far from over. Hundreds of Pitzer faculty and students have mobilized to respond. They are calling on the president to reverse his decision or face a "no confidence motion" or even legal action by Jewish and Arab American students who will argue that their right to equal access to educational opportunity is being denied.

NOTE: Dr James J Zogby is the President of the Arab American Institute



A boy looks as forensic investigators comb the ground for DNA evidence near a pile of twisted airplane debris at the crash site of an Ethiopian Airways operated Boeing 737 MAX aircraft on March 10, 2019 at Hama Quntushela village near Bishoftu in Oromia region. —AFP

Suspicion, strife strain Ethiopian crash probe

At the headquarters of the Ethiopian Civil Aviation Authority, a paper sign balanced above room 107 and a threadbare square of carpet welcome a stream of foreign visitors to the Accident Investigation Bureau. The office - with three investigators and an annual budget of less than 2.5 million Birr (\$89,000) - is leading a multi-party, multi-nation probe into what caused an Ethiopian Airlines flight to crash on March 10, killing all 157 people on board.

Brusque foreign investigators in cargo pants and Ethiopians in suits or reflective vests wave away questions from reporters on how their inquiries are progressing. This modest agency is under intense international scrutiny because the results of its investigation could have far-reaching consequences for the global aviation industry. If the investigators highlight flaws in the 737 MAX 8 that echo a recent crash of the same model in Indonesia, their report could deal a major blow to Boeing, the world's biggest planemaker and a massive US exporter.

But if investigators find Ethiopian Airlines fell short in maintenance, training or piloting, that could damage one of Africa's most successful companies, a symbol of Ethiopia's emergence as a regional power. Disagreements have broken out in Addis Ababa between Ethiopian authorities and foreign investigators over issues including the handling of evidence and crash site management, according to several sources close to the investigation.

Kevin Humphreys, a former Irish regulator who founded the country's air investigation agency, told Reuters the high stakes involved tend to make probes like this one particularly tough. "There are tensions because it is unrealistic to assume that international protocols are always going to work. There is a potentially important economic impact from such investigations."

An 18-strong team of American investigators has been sent to aid the Ethiopians with the inquiry, including representatives from

the US National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), Boeing, and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), which certified 737 MAX planes as safe. US and some other foreign investigators are unhappy because Ethiopia is so far sharing only limited information, the sources said. "There is no opportunity for the international community to benefit and learn from this," said one of them, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter.

Some foreign officials are also unhappy about the prominent role Ethiopian Airlines played in the probe, suggesting a possible conflict of interests, they said. But one Addis Ababa-based source said the carrier's role in the investigation does not necessarily indicate it is trying to exert undue influence. The airline is more likely involved because it is the most well-funded and staffed state enterprise able to help the over-stretched inquiry team, he added. "When you have a vacuum, someone has to fill it," he said.

Ethiopian Airlines' spokesman Asrat Begachew said the carrier was supporting the investigation. "We are not taking the lead," he added, declining to comment further. Under global aviation rules, interested parties like airlines and manufacturers are discouraged from speaking publicly about the investigation. Yet in the first days after the Flight 302 crash, Ethiopian Airlines made all of the public statements, including announcing the black box recorders would be sent overseas for data extraction.

It was not until six days after the tragedy that the Ministry of Transport began briefing the media and public. Hours after the crash, Ethiopian Airlines tweeted a picture of its CEO Tewelde Gebremariam holding a piece of debris in the crater of the crash site, surprising aviation experts who said the site should have been preserved for investigators. Musie Yehyies, spokesman for Ethiopia's Ministry of Transport, said the government had been quick to share information about the crash. He denied there was

any mistrust between the Ethiopians and other parties. "Our friendship with the United States is obvious," he told Reuters. "Plenty of governments have been offering assistance, and some of them have helped practically."

Black boxes

The cockpit voice and flight data recorders were recovered the day after the crash, but it took Ethiopian investigators three days to decide where to send them for the information to be extracted and decoded. Like many fast-growing players, the Ethiopians do not have the technology to perform the task. In a sign of the distrust between the parties, the Ethiopians turned down an American offer to perform the analysis in the United States, according to two sources.

Ethiopian Airlines CEO Tewelde personally approached German authorities to request to send the black boxes to Germany to have the data extracted there, a separate source with knowledge of matter told Reuters. Airlines are not usually involved in such decisions, according to current and former investigators. However German officials said they too did not have the most recent software needed to extract the data, so the devices were eventually sent to France.

Partial data from the flight data recorder was shared informally late on Monday with US and French investigators in Paris, but nothing from the cockpit voice recorder, three sources familiar with the matter said. It is common for the host investigator to closely guard voice recordings to protect privacy but unusual for relatively little data to be available a week after being downloaded. "As an investigator, it is hard to understand the logic behind withholding safety-of-flight information," Greg Feith, a former senior air safety investigator with the NTSB, said on Facebook on Thursday.—Reuters

Syria Kurd autonomy under threat after IS 'caliphate' falls

Now the Islamic State group's "caliphate" has fallen, the hard-won limited autonomy of Syria's Kurds will be left in peril if their key US ally goes ahead with its announced pull-out. Yesterday, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces announced the end of the proto-state that the extremist group declared across large parts of Syria and neighboring Iraq in 2014. The Kurds have largely stayed out of Syria's eight-year civil war, instead building their own institutions in a third of the country under their control.

But a planned US military pullout has left them exposed to an attack by Turkey and in need of protection from Damascus, in a massive blow to their dreams of self-rule. "The Kurds have been caught between a Syrian rock and a Turkish hard place," Syria expert Fabrice Balanche said. Kurdish fighters have spearheaded the fight against IS since late 2014, but neighboring Turkey views them as "terrorists".

The presence of American troops in areas held by Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) had acted as a shield against any Turkish offensive. But US President Donald Trump in December shocked Washington's allies by announcing a full withdrawal of all 2,000 US troops from Syria as IS had been "beaten". "The Kurds are facing an uncertain future. The most urgent threat appears to be from Turkey," analyst Mutlu Civioglu said. After his announcement, Trump attempted to ease tensions by speaking of a 30-km "safe zone" on the Syrian side of the border. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said his country would establish the "security zone" itself if it took too long to implement.

'Recognition?'

The Kurds have rejected any Turkish implementation, especially since any such buffer would include their major cities. They are demanding instead the deployment of an international observer force. "Kobane, Tal Abyad, Darbasiya, Qamishli, Dehik, Derbassiyeh - most of the Kurdish cities are on the border line," Civioglu said. Turkey and its Syrian rebel proxies have led two previous offensives inside Syria, most recently seizing the northwestern enclave of Afrin from the Kurds last year.

Syria's civil war has killed more than 370,000 people and displaced millions since it started in 2011 with the brutal

repression of anti-government protests. It has since spiralled into a complex conflict, with rebel backer Turkey and regime ally Russia emerging as key powerbrokers. Beyond American approval, Civioglu said Turkey would likely need a green light from Russia before any Turkish offensive in Syria. "Russia's position is going to be very important, because Russia has a strong power over Turkey," he said.

President Bashar Al-Assad's regime now controls two-thirds of Syria thanks to Russian military backing since 2015, and it seems determined to also return to oil-rich northeastern Syria. To protect themselves, the Kurds have dispatched delegations to Washington and Moscow. And in ongoing talks, they have scrambled to mend ties with Damascus.

After decades of marginalization, the Kurds have developed their own political system in northeast Syria - holding elections, collecting taxes and running schools teaching the Kurdish language. "In a war-torn country, the Kurdish system is working fine," Civioglu said. "The Kurds want this to be recognized." They want "Kurdish education to be offered officially", he said, after decades of an effective ban on their mother tongue.

'Carved up?'

But talks so far have failed to bear fruit, and Balanche warns the Kurds are in a weak position. "The regime is demanding an unconditional surrender. Damascus does not want to let them retain any autonomy," he said. Syrian Defence Minister Ali Abdullah Ayoub said Monday that the government would recapture all areas held by the SDF "in one of two ways: a reconciliation agreement or... by force".

Although the end of the IS "caliphate" has been declared, IS is still present in eastern Syria's vast Badia desert. The US Defense Department has warned that without sustained pressure on the jihadists, they could resurge in Syria within months. In the end, the future of the Kurds mainly depends on the United States, says analyst Nicholas Heras of the Center for a New American Security. "Every other actor in Syria cannot make a move until there is greater clarity on what the United States ultimately decides to do," he said.

And after any troop pullout, the United States could still stay on with a paramilitary force, he added. "The hope for the SDF is for the Americans and the coalition to stick it out in Syria for the long haul." The White House has said that around 200 American "peace-keeping" soldiers would remain in northern Syria indefinitely. Acting Pentagon chief Patrick Shanahan said he would be discussing with NATO partners the potential to establish an "observer force" in the area. —AFP

IS loss affirms Pentagon plan, but endgame vague

Now that the Islamic State group has officially lost its geographic "caliphate", the Pentagon is marking a historic moment in its years-long campaign to defeat the jihadists. From a military perspective at least, the United States can claim significant success in its strategy of working "by, with and through" local proxy forces, where a Kurdish militia in Syria and security forces in Iraq bore the brunt of the fighting - and dying.

But IS still has thousands of battle-hardened fighters across several countries, and questions loom over whether the group's territorial loss can be parlayed into an enduring defeat - or whether President Donald Trump's decision to pull most troops from Syria is premature, and risks ruining the end game. "I'd be hesitant to use the term 'winning,'" General Raymond Thomas, who heads US Special Operations Command, told lawmakers recently.

The objective is "to be able to maintain persistent capabilities so that an external threat cannot emanate from that in the future". Asked if he was satisfied the United States was at that point, Thomas said: "I do not think we're there yet." How much the United States can influence things will only diminish after the Pentagon withdraws all but 200 of the 2,000 or so special forces from Syria that have been helping the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces.

Trump in December declared victory over IS, saying the US had "beaten them badly" as he announced the pullout. John Spencer, a scholar at the Modern War Institute at West Point, said things were not so simple. IS "is a terrorist organization, all they have to do is put down their weapons and try to blend in with the population and just escape," he told AFP. "They're not gone, and they're not going to be gone," he said.

Started under Obama

The US-led mission began in late 2014 under president Barack Obama, after IS fighters seized an area the size of Britain across Iraq and Syria. In an effort to "degrade and ultimately defeat" the black-flag-flying jihadists, the United States formed a coalition that grew to more than 70 nations, several of which started bombing IS positions in 2014. In the years since, the coalition has conducted about 34,000

air strikes in Syria and Iraq.

Instead of committing large numbers of troops, the coalition combined its air campaign with training and advising to local forces. The decision stemmed partly from the Iraq War, which saw more than 4,400 US troops die. An American public wary of additional deployments did not want Obama committing more combat troops. The strategy paid off fastest in Iraq, where a national military that had neared collapse in the face of the IS advance morphed into an army that ousted the jihadists from one city after another until retaking their stronghold of Mosul in 2017.

When Trump took office, he essentially continued Obama's strategy, albeit with tougher talk and looser constraints on air strikes. "Overall, the US strategy was effective at pushing back the Islamic State," Daniel Byman, a senior fellow at the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, told AFP. However, he noted, it has not solved the problem of local governance in Syria, where the grueling civil war gave rise to the conditions that allowed IS to blossom in the first place. "So the Islamic State is remaining active - hundreds of killings this month alone - as an insurgency," Byman said. The toll on US-backed local forces has been brutal, with thousands of Syrian and Iraqi fighters killed.

'It's just no'

Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria has left Kurdish partners scrambling for safeguards, and they are hoping a "safe zone" in the north can provide them cover. A US departure makes Kurdish fighters more vulnerable to attack by neighboring Turkey, which considers them to be "terrorists," and dashes their dreams of autonomy. The New York-based Soufan Group, which compiles security assessments, cautioned against claims of beating IS. That would "only serve to offer a false sense of security while showing that the United States remains out of touch with realities on the ground," Soufan said.

General Joseph Votel, who heads the US military's Central Command, said the military cannot take its eye off IS. "The coalition's hard-won battlefield gains can only be secured by maintaining a vigilant offensive against a now largely disbursed and disaggregated (IS) that retains leaders, fighters, facilitators, resources and the profane ideology that fuels their efforts," said Votel, who is about to retire, adding that Trump never checked in with him about a Syria withdrawal.

Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan has tried to convince skeptical allies to help secure Syria. But "it is totally out of the question to have French troops on the ground without the Americans there," one French government source told AFP. "It's just no." —AFP