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## Kenneth Stern on Israel-Palestine Conflict

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On Friday, February 9, the Amnesty and Current Events Clubs hosted a virtual conversation with Mr. Kenneth Stern, the Director of the Center for the Study of Hate at Bard College in New York and the author of *The Conflict Over the Conflict: The Israel/Palestine Campus Debate* (2020).

To open the session, club heads, Lucie Rynne '24, Karla Sahin '24, and Jessica Wu '24 from Amnesty Club as well as Amelia Kwak '25 and Anya Weerapana '25 from Current Events Club posed a question to the audience: Why is having a conversation around what is happening in Israel and Palestine difficult? Students spoke about the challenge to "self-educate and fully understand a stance on something with a lot of complicated and nuanced historical context," being "scared of making statements out of fear of seeming hateful even

when they have good intentions," and finding it hard to discuss a topic where "we are not preaching to the choir because there are many different perspectives even among the people around us."

Following these student responses, Mr. Stern answered the same question from his point of view, observing that "people are afraid of saying something that is going to be heard by someone else in a different way" and studies have shown that "when people's identities are tied to an issue of social injustice, their brains are wired differently to find simple solutions to complex issues, to turn to absolutes." Instead, he reinforced that "you are all students; your job is to learn" and proposed "having the intellectual imagination to think about why people have a diametrically opposing opinion or how contradictory narratives are generated."

Then, the discussion turned to considering tools for creating a community that is conducive to these types of conversations.

Mr. Stern reminded students that they "have control over what happens in [their] community." Moreover, he emphasized that "there is a fundamental difference between knowing that you will not be harassed for your opinions and being disturbed by an idea" and suggested to "be curious and open to each other."

Mr. Stern continued by asking students about their reactions to the Senate hearings of three college presidents on December 5. Replying to an attendee's question about the line between protecting free speech and respecting the campus code of conduct, Mr. Stern noted that while the "college presidents' responses came off as tone-deaf," the code of conduct "should protect pure expression, like speech or ideas, as long as it does not produce harassment or bullying." He continued, "Pure expression is not something you want to chill, because once you open that door, there are other types of free speech people will want to suppress and undercut:

what can be taught about gender, what can be taught about race."

Finally, Mr. Stern was asked about communities that set a model for how we can have conversations about this issue. He particularly pointed to Dartmouth College, which held panels and discussions "inviting students to speak and ask, creating an environment where people were not hunting and shouting down each other but coming together and learning together, forming friendships and connections." In addition, he spoke of a new course he is helping offer this semester at Bard on how terms such as "genocide" or "antisemitism" can act as "rhetorical weapons," hoping to "give students a way to learn about the issues rather than beat each other up."

Following the discussion, Wu explained, "We wanted to create a space to learn and grow together and specifically introduce ways in which to communicate and learn about these issues within the community." Sahin added,

"We must acknowledge the events occurring around the world and the impact they may have on members of our community. Winsor is an educational institution, and it should foster an environment in which students can learn, advocate, make mistakes, and grow without fear of being ostracized."

Mr. Stern's advice was certainly taken to heart: attendee Callie Nelson '24 remarked, "He was very thoughtful and a great source for approaching the complexities of the conflict that we often have trouble speaking about. I feel that the conversation was sensitive and intentional. I do hope there will be more opportunities to talk about this at Winsor." Thank you to Mr. Stern for speaking with the Winsor community about this topic, and thank you to the Amnesty and Current Events clubs for facilitating the conversation as well as Mr. Braxton, Ms. Krier, and Ms. Holland for organizing this discussion.

*Responses edited for brevity and clarity.* □