

## Film's View of Islam Stirs Anger on Campuses

By KAREN W. ARENSON  
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When “[Obsession: Radical Islam's War Against the West](#),” a documentary that shows Muslims urging attacks on the United States and Europe, was screened recently at the [University of California](#), Los Angeles, it drew an audience of more than 300 — and also dozens of protesters.



obsessionthemovie.com  
Urging attacks on the West: a still from the 2005 film “Obsession.”

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Marko Georgiev  
Jordan Dunn, left, an N.Y.U. student, and Robert Friedman, a volunteer discussion leader, after an on-campus screening of “Obsession.”

At [Pace University](#) in New York, administrators pressured the Jewish student organization Hillel to cancel a showing in November, arguing it could spur hate crimes against Muslim students. A Jewish group at the [State University of New York at Stony Brook](#) also canceled the film last semester.

The documentary has become the latest flashpoint in the bitter campus debate over the Middle East, not just because of its clips from Arab television rarely shown in the West, including scenes of suicide bombers being recruited and inducted, but also because of its pro-Israel distribution network.

When a Middle East discussion group organized a showing at [New York University](#) recently, it found that the distributors of “[Obsession](#)” were requiring those in attendance to register at [IsraelActivism.com](#), and that digital pictures of the events be sent to Hasbara Fellowships, a group set up to counter anti-Israel sentiment on college campuses.

“If people have to give their names over to Hasbara Fellowships at the door, that doesn't have the effect of stimulating open dialogue,” said Jordan J. Dunn, president of the Middle East Dialogue Group of New York University, which mixes Jews and Muslims. “Rather, it intimidates people and stifles dissent.”

The documentary's proponents say it provides an unvarnished look at Islamic militancy. “It's an urgent issue that is widely avoided by academia,” argued Michael Abdurakhmanov, the Hillel president at Pace.

Its critics call it incendiary. Norah Sarsour, a Palestinian-American student at U.C.L.A., said it was disheartening to see “a film like this that takes the people who have hijacked the religion and focuses on them.”

Certainly it is a new element in the bitter campus battles over the Middle East that have encompassed everything from the content and teaching of Middle East studies to disputes over art exhibitions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to debates over free speech.

“The situation in the Middle East has been a major issue on campus for decades, but the heat has noticeably turned up lately,” said Greg Lukianoff, the president of the

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At San Francisco State University, for example, College [Republicans](#) stomped on copies of the [Hamas](#) and [Hezbollah](#) flags last October at an "antiterrorism" rally. At the University of California, Irvine, the Muslim Student Union drew criticism last year for a "Holocaust in the Holy Land" program about Israel.

Brandeis University officials pulled an exhibition of Palestinian children's drawings, including some of bloodied Palestinian children, designed to bring the Palestinian viewpoint to the campus, half of whose students are Jewish.

Three years ago a video produced by a pro-Israeli group featuring Jewish students' complaints of intimidation by Middle East studies professors at Columbia set off a campus-wide debate over freedom of speech and academic freedom, prompting an investigation that found some fault by one professor but "no evidence of any statements made by the faculty that could reasonably be construed as anti-Semitic."

Into this milieu stepped the producer of "Obsession," Raphael Shore, a 45-year-old Canadian who lives in Israel, with the documentary. It features scenes like the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Muslim children being encouraged to become suicide bombers, interspersed with those of Nazi rallies.

The film was directed by Wayne Kopping of South Africa, who had worked with Mr. Shore previously on a documentary about the failure of the Oslo peace efforts in the Middle East. Mr. Shore said in a recent interview that they had not set out to make a film for college students but to spur action against Islamic terrorism. "We want to spread this message to all people that will stand up and make a difference in combating this threat," he said.

When no traditional film distributors picked it up, he said, colleges were an obvious outlet — it was screened on 30 campuses last semester — along with DVD sales on the Internet ([ObsessionTheMovie.com](#)), and showings at synagogues and other locales, including conservative ones like the Heritage Foundation in Washington. There were also repeated broadcasts of abbreviated versions or excerpts on Fox News in November and again this month, and on other media outlets like CNN Headline News.

"College students have the power with their energy, resources, time and interest to make a difference, often more than other individuals," Mr. Shore said.

He hired a campus coordinator, Karyn Leffel, who works out of the New York City office of the Hasbara Fellowships program, which aims to train students "to be effective pro-Israel activists on their campuses." " 'Obsession' is so important because it shows what's happening in Israel is not happening in a vacuum," said Elliot Mathias, director of the Hasbara Fellowships program, "and that it affects all American students on campuses, not just Jewish students."

Mr. Shore said that despite the collaboration with Hasbara, the goal was to draw a wide audience.

"The evangelical Christians and the Jews tend to be the softest market, the most receptive to the message of the film, so we have done lots with those groups," he said. "But we are trying very hard to expand beyond those groups, because we specifically don't want it to be seen as a film that has that connection."

Mr. Shore describes his film as nonpartisan and balanced, and many viewers agree with him. Traci Ciepiela, who teaches criminal justice at Western Wyoming Community College in Rock Springs and has a screening scheduled this week, says she learned from the film and did not think that it was unfair or inflammatory.

But others see it as biased. Arnold Leder, a political scientist at Texas State University, San Marcos, decided not to use it for his course "The Politics of Extremism" because of what he called "serious flaws," including that it did not address Islam in general, the

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history of Islam and the schisms within the faith.

"If it were used in a class," he said, "it would have to be treated as a polemic and placed in that context."

Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller, director of U.C.L.A. Hillel, called the documentary propaganda and said it was "a way to transfer the Middle East conflict to the campus, to promote hostility."

While the film carries cautions at the beginning and end that it is only about Islamist extremists — and that most Muslims are peaceful and do not support terror — Muslim students who have protested say they believe the documentary will still fuel prejudice.

"The movie was so well crafted and emotion manipulating that I felt myself thinking poorly of some aspects of Islam," said Adam Osman, president of Stony Brook's Muslim Students' Association, who asked that it not be shown.

While screenings were canceled under pressure at Pace and Stony Brook, Ms. Leffel said that most campus screening, like a recent one at Providence College in Rhode Island, had taken place without incident. Students at New York University decided they wanted to present it, despite misgivings by some Muslim students.

At the screening there late last month, the viewers — many of them Muslims — ganged up on Robert Friedman, a discussion leader who had been sent by the "Obsession" filmmakers. (The event was sponsored by the Middle East Dialogue Group at N.Y.U., the Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life, Arab Students United and the Pakistani Students Association.)

Mr. Friedman told the audience, "You have to understand a problem before you can solve it."

But most of the viewers, including both a rabbi and a Muslim chaplain on a discussion panel put together by the students, said the film did not foster understanding.

"The question about radical Islam and how do we fight it is unproductive," said Yehuda Sarna, the New York University rabbi on the panel. "The question is how to break down the stereotypes facing the two religions."

Steven I. Weiss, editor and publisher of [CampusJ.com](http://CampusJ.com), an Internet site that covers Jewish news on campuses, said he was surprised by the Jewish skepticism to the film at N.Y.U. "Were a Jewish leader from virtually any significant organization to walk in on that discussion," he said, "they'd be very surprised and displeased. This is the opposite of the change they've been looking for in campus rhetoric."

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