
Latitudes: Will war further fray colleges' ties in the Middle East?

1 message

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Latitudes



By *Karin Fischer*

In this week's Latitudes: A settlement in an international-recruitment lawsuit. OPT review confirmed. Chinese students and Chinatowns. But first ...

BEFORE WAR WITH IRAN, HURDLES FOR COLLEGES' WORK IN THE MIDDLE EAST



The war with Iran is closing down American programs and satellite campuses across the Middle East and prompting do-not-travel warnings for the region.

Campuses like New York University's in Abu Dhabi and the Rochester Institute of Technology's in Dubai shifted to remote learning, along with local universities. Colleges debated how to bring faculty members and students on research and study trips home.

The flaring of attacks across the Middle East are a blow to a region that had positioned itself as an educational haven, attracting institutions from around the globe to set up [outposts](#) there.

But the conflict is one in a series of events to fray American ties in a part of the world that had been a priority for academic engagement. Consider:

A travel ban is blocking students and scholars from Iran. Even with longstanding tensions, a steady stream of Iranians have sought to study in the United States — especially at the graduate level and in critical STEM fields. That's despite hurdles like traveling to another country to visit a U.S. embassy and extra security vetting that can delay visas for months. Last year, Iran was one of the countries included in a presidential order instituting a [total ban](#) on visitors. (A similar policy during the first Trump administration made an exception for Iranian students.)

The ban has indefinitely shut off a critical talent pipeline for American science; nearly all Iranian Ph.D. graduates stay in the United States, working in higher education or the private sector. It's hard to know how the conflict and travel restrictions will affect the 12,600 Iranians already studying here.

Also unknown: the impact of fighting on Iranian university campuses and students, who have been leaders in antigovernment demonstrations.

The war with Hamas tanked study abroad in Israel. The number of young Americans studying in Israel fell by 50 percent in the 2023-24 academic year, the first year of that conflict. In addition to safety worries, there were calls to [boycott](#) programs in the country, historically among the top study-abroad destinations, as part of broader pro-Palestinian protests.

Since Saturday's attacks, Israel, along with American allies (and hosts of U.S. campuses) like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, have been hit with retaliatory strikes. The U.S. Department of State placed most Middle Eastern countries under its second-highest travel advisory — meaning that even if it was possible to travel there, many colleges, who tie their policies to the government warnings, would forbid it.

Foreign funding to American colleges has become a political hot potato. The Trump administration has criticized colleges' transparency when it comes to overseas gifts and contracts and has opened investigations into several prominent institutions, including Harvard University and the University of California at Berkeley. Additional heat has come from Congress and from states, like Florida, that have passed their own restrictions.

Qatar was far and away the largest source of foreign gifts and contracts last year, spending more than \$1.1 billion. (Britain was second, with \$633 million.) Accusations that Qatar was supporting Hamas, as well as funding weapons research, led to an abrupt decision by Texas A&M University's Board of Regents to [shutter](#) its 20-year-old campus there.

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IRAN WAR LIVE UPDATES

For the latest developments about the conflict with Iran and its impact on higher education, check out this [Chronicle tracker](#).

To contribute news, email me at karin.fischer@chronicle.com.

COMPANY SETTLES OVER STUDENT-RECRUITMENT PAYMENTS

A company that recruited Americans to study in Britain has [settled](#) with the U.S. Department of Justice over claims it charged incentive compensation in violation of federal student-aid law.

The company, Study Across the Pond, agreed to pay \$1.3 million to resolve the allegations. The company is alleged to have demanded commissions for degree-seeking students placed at British universities, falsified documents, and encouraged partner institutions to lie about the payments.

Paying bonuses or incentives for student recruitment is forbidden by U.S. law at any college that is part of the federal financial-aid system, a pool that includes foreign institutions that enroll significant numbers of American students.

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AROUND THE GLOBE

Kristi Noem, the U.S. secretary of homeland security, confirmed that the department is reviewing [optional practical training](#) and could issue a rule changing requirements for the postgraduate work program for international students.

The Florida Board of Governors has approved a [yearlong pause](#) on public colleges' ability to hire new foreign workers on H-1B, or skilled-worker, visas.

A Babson College student who was erroneously deported [refused](#) a government flight back to the United States out of fear she could again be detained and ejected from the country.

A judge dropped charges of smuggling biological material into the United States against three University of Michigan scientists from China, allegedly after [intervention](#) by the Chinese government.

Administrators at Purdue University denied that the institution has a [formal ban](#) on recruiting graduate students from China or other countries of concern. But the statement did not respond to [accusations](#) of an unwritten policy or pressure on individual faculty members.

A professor at Texas State University could face disciplinary action for a sign he [posted](#) saying that his office was a “safe space for immigrant students.” The university said the sign could be considered exclusionary and was in violation of campus policies against “sanctuary spaces.”

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The Budget Crisis Is Here

Colleges find themselves in budgetary turmoil. How can they respond? [Order this report](#) to learn how innovative institutions are adapting to a new financial reality and finding ways to thrive despite headwinds.

AND FINALLY ...

Like many people, I subscribe to a flotilla of newsletters. Some are related to my day job, but many reflect my off-hours interests: books, baseball, cooking, gardening, and Top-40 ephemera.

But the other day an issue of Vittles, a Britain-based online food and culture magazine, landed in my inbox with a subject line that seemed directed at both my work and civilian selves: “How Chinese Students Transformed British Chinatowns.” The fascinating essay details the shifting center of gravity of Chinese food in Britain, away from traditional central Chinatowns and toward neighborhoods that are home to large numbers of Chinese students. And it asks what will happen to Chinese food and culture as universities there attract fewer students from China — a fair question to raise in the American context, too. [Have a read](#).

Thanks for reading. I always welcome your feedback and ideas for future reporting, so drop me a line at karin.fischer@chronicle.com or message me confidentially at [Signal](#). You can also connect with me on [X](#), [LinkedIn](#), or [Bluesky](#). If you like this newsletter, please share it with colleagues and friends. They can [sign up here](#).

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