

# Current Developments and Future Directions in Middle Eastern Studies<sup>1</sup>

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Area studies, according to the Middle East historian Juan R.I. Cole, is “not a discipline or methodology or theory in its own right.” Rather, it is a “key set of tools [languages] and expertise [knowledge of the culture, society and politics of an area] upon the basis of which a historian, social scientist, literary critic or student of religions may apply disciplinary methodologies.”<sup>2</sup>

Middle Eastern studies has long had problems in defining itself, both geographically and in terms of its periodization, and as a field of study it poses some real problems.<sup>3</sup> Cole has suggested three such problems. First, in the field of Middle Eastern studies in the United States there has been a tendency “to see North America as Self and the Middle East as Other,” which is characteristic of the Orientalist tradition of scholarship, a tradition that long ago seeped into American policy analysis. Second, there has been a tendency to essentialize the region and to attribute to its peoples and cultures “an unchanging essence as expressed in religion, literature, and politics.” Third, there has been a tendency to overemphasize the role of Islam and religion and, one should add, the Arab-Israeli conflict, in the workings of the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> There has been all too much literature published on Islamic Movements and on the Arab-Israeli conflict that passes for scholarship and that is below par in quality. Yet publishers and, one assumes, readers never seem to tire of either topic.

Middle East specialists are adjusting to the end of the Cold War and to the somewhat stinging criticisms leveled at area studies' scholars generally about their tendency to work within a closed box and therefore in isolation from important comparative, cross-disciplinary, and quantitative methodologies and theories. These criticisms come principally from the social sciences (especially from political science), and they cannot be

exclusively identified with either the academic right or left.<sup>5</sup> A generation earlier, during the height of the Cold War and the Vietnam era, the main criticisms of area studies came from the academic left, which accused area studies of being an instrument designed and funded by the United States government to help advance its strategic interests around the world.

The recent wave of criticisms leveled at area studies has had at least two important effects on Middle Eastern studies. On the negative side, these criticisms have helped to undermine some of the traditional funding sources that historically propelled Middle Eastern studies, and diminished funding probably hampers efforts to reorient and revitalize the Middle Eastern studies field and enable specialists to step outside of the box.

On the positive side, these criticisms have spurred the most innovative specialists to chart new directions for Middle Eastern studies. They are taking notice of the forces of globalization and the important questions that globalization poses for the Middle East: how globalization erodes state sovereignty and how it influences environmental change, international and regional migration, and human rights, including women's rights. Moreover, Middle East specialists are finding ways of linking their basic research on these questions and others to policy formation, and, in so doing, they are becoming more closely connected than ever before to international agencies and organizations focused on global change.<sup>6</sup> The charting of these new directions could in time enable the Middle East studies field not only to make new substantive contributions to knowledge but also to convince the social sciences to recognize and incorporate this new knowledge.

What are some of the new directions that specialists are beginning to chart for Middle Eastern studies?

Most noticeably, they are extending the traditional boundaries of the area studies map in ways that are helping to redefine what we mean by Middle Eastern studies. Movement in at least three different directions is beginning to change the face of the field.

First, although North Africa has traditionally belonged to the Middle Eastern studies field, until quite recently scholars had not taken cognizance of the fine scholarship on North Africa produced (mainly in French) by French and North African specialists. Consequently, experts missed opportunities to compare and integrate scholarship across the

entire zone of Middle Eastern studies, from Morocco to Pakistan. New opportunities for comparative studies across the Mediterranean are opening up. Middle East scholars have begun to speak about a Mediterranean zone that also includes the European Mediterranean, something that the French historian Fernand Braudel had long ago suggested. This broader comparative interest is very much associated with the effort to study and write world history, which a growing number of Middle East specialists are actively pursuing.<sup>7</sup>

A second new direction for Middle East specialists is toward the Islamic societies of Central Asia, many of which are Turkish-speaking. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the lifting of the cap on ethnic and religious assertion in Central Asia have driven this new interest. The hunt for oil in the Caspian Sea region and elsewhere in Central Asia is reinvigorating the study of the political economy of oil, which has a long tradition in Middle Eastern studies.<sup>8</sup>

A third direction is toward South Asia, a zone that falls “officially” within the purview of the Association of Asian Studies (AAS). Why South Asia? Because some of the most innovative theorizing and fieldwork in the postcolonial studies field is on India. Edward W. Said’s *Orientalism*, which was published more than two decades ago and which focused almost entirely on how knowledge and power were inextricably tied together in the expansion of the West into the Middle East, is one of the pioneering texts of postcolonial studies. Ironically perhaps, *Orientalism* has had an even more important influence outside Middle Eastern studies, and especially on scholars writing about the European cultural encounter with India, around which postcolonial theory has developed. Middle East specialists today are increasingly interested in testing postcolonial theory in their region and are looking for useful comparisons with South Asia.<sup>9</sup>

There are also two new developments on the organizational side of Middle East studies that merit mention. First, the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) is interested in how one can use the new digital technologies to enhance learning and forge ties across the field through electronic publishing, and by putting databases and archival materials online. The aim is to make research materials accessible and readily affordable not only for North American scholars but also for those in the Middle East region who have considerable difficulty gaining access to these kinds of materials.<sup>10</sup>

Second, there is growing interest within MESA, which now has nearly 3,000 members, in linking up with Middle East studies organizations around the world. Toward this end, MESA has taken the lead in promoting a world congress of Middle East specialists. The first congress meeting will take place in Germany in September 2002 and will be sponsored by MESA and its sister organizations in Europe, the Middle East and Asia. Middle Eastern studies is following the lead of the Slavic Studies Association and the Association of Asian Studies, which have helped to establish world congresses.

How do events in the Middle East and United States policy in the region influence Middle Eastern studies? The Arab-Israeli conflict, Islamic resurgence, and regional terrorism have not done Middle Eastern studies a service in the sense that the American public still thinks that these phenomena, along with oil, are the sum total of what is important in the Middle East. It is true that war and acts of terrorism often correlate with an increase in media attention on the region, and this in turn provokes student interest and enhances enrollments. However, when these historical moments end, the region once again recedes into the background of the popular imagination until the next act of provocation or violence occurs.

The Arab-Israeli conflict, in particular, has colored Middle Eastern studies in some unfortunate ways. The conflict was already highly visible at the birth of the Middle East Studies Association in 1966. Some scholars and political interest groups have accused MESA itself of being unsympathetic to Israel; State Department "Arabists" over the years have faced similar charges. Behind this accusation is the assumption that significant numbers of MESA members are privately and even publicly critical of Washington's pronounced pro-Israeli policies.

Rivaling the Arab-Israeli conflict in terms of scholarly and quasi-scholarly debate is "Political Islam" or "Islamic Resurgence." Debate rages between two groups of experts: those who warn of a growing Islamic threat that has replaced Soviet Communism as the major force seeking to undermine Western values of democracy and freedom; and those who argue that the Islamic resurgence does not pose an organized, unitary challenge to the West, but rather takes many different political and social forms, both within single countries in the Middle East and across the region. The first group of experts is thought to be alarmist and cultural-

ly hostile to Islam, and the second has been labeled “apologists” for Islam.

Developments at home also influence the Middle Eastern studies field. The presence of concentrated Middle Eastern immigrant communities in the United States—Arabs, Armenians and Iranians in particular — is a noticeable influence. One thinks of heritage learners in language classes and local interest in university programs in towns where significant Middle Eastern communities reside: Detroit, Los Angeles, and Houston. One also thinks of Muslim immigrant communities and their ties with African-Americans who have embraced Islam. Suffice it to say that Islam is the fastest-growing religion in America, and some time in the first quarter of the 21st century Islam will become the number two religion in demographic terms, as it has in Britain, France, Germany and Italy.

Sometimes these local immigrant communities offer financial support to university programs, but even greater financial support for Middle Eastern and Islamic studies comes directly from the Middle East region. This support may change the direction of a university program or spur the creation of a new one. Some examples are Georgetown University’s Center for Contemporary Arab Studies and its Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, which have received support from Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and individual Palestinian donors; Harvard’s Islamic Legal Studies Center, which Saudi Arabia has helped to finance; and the University of Arkansas’ Center for Middle East Studies, which the Saudis have supported with a \$25 million gift (and which former President Clinton helped to negotiate just before leaving the Arkansas governorship). Meanwhile, the Turkish government and private Turkish businesses have endowed professorships and programs in Turkish studies at American universities. Incidentally, these large gifts, and the intentions of their donors, have at times generated attention and even controversy in the American media because the Middle East is always a front-page story, at least in the major cities in the vicinities of these universities. But this kind of support is no different from Korean efforts to build Korean studies programs in American universities.

Different U.S. government exchange programs are also enhancing the study of the Middle East in the United States. Perhaps the most important program is the hardest to assess: the Fulbright Scholar Program. Part of its mission is to bring scholars from the Middle East to address American audiences of non-Middle East specialists.

The limited anecdotal evidence that observers have gathered over the years suggests that when Fulbright Scholars from abroad visit campuses in the United States that have no Middle East studies programs, they often have a positive impact on their American faculty colleagues and students. And they often participate in outreach efforts of one sort or another in the local communities around the universities and colleges to which they are appointed.

Occasionally, the presence of a Fulbright Scholar encourages a university to hire someone in his or her field. There is the example of a visiting Islamic studies scholar from Cairo who spent a semester teaching at the University of Arizona. He attracted a large number of students to his class and this helped to demonstrate to the administration that there was sufficient interest in Islamic studies to warrant a search for a full-time professor of Islamic studies. In fact, the Middle East studies faculty at Arizona had been lobbying for just such a position. The impact of the Fulbright Scholar clinched the deal.<sup>11</sup>

From the perspective of the Middle East studies profession, the opportunity to provide personal contact with scholars from the Middle East is crucial. It exposes Americans to more nuanced views about that region, its politics, and often misunderstood issues such as religion and terrorism—issues which are so often bandied about in the media in irresponsible ways. Although it is impossible to measure the precise impact scholars from the Middle East have, their impact is generally positive for all parties concerned, and in this manner, the Middle Eastern studies field and the American people benefit.

Like other area studies fields, Middle Eastern studies has begun to rethink and even reinvent itself in the wake of the end of the Cold War and the spread of globalization. It is no longer adequate to study the Middle East as a self-contained area or from a single disciplinary perspective. At the same time, reduced funding has caused university administrators to tighten their belts at the expense of area studies programs. What impact have all these changes of the past decade had on the Middle Eastern studies curriculum, on opportunities for study abroad in the Middle East, and on advanced study and research in the region? The answers are mixed.

Budget cuts have taken their toll on the Middle East studies curriculum in various institutions of higher learning. Not all senior faculty

in Middle Eastern studies who retired in the past decade have been replaced, and course offerings in those Middle Eastern languages that have not attracted significant numbers of students have either been reduced or eliminated altogether. Historically marginal languages like Khazakh and Tajik have suffered, but so have Persian and Turkish. Arabic course enrollments, by contrast, have grown considerably in recent years, and Arabic language instruction is faring rather well. Another positive development is the introduction of non-Western culture requirements into the general education programs at some colleges and universities, which has helped to stimulate interest in the Middle East and other regions.

It is not easy to gauge recent trends in American study abroad programs in the Middle East. The climate of political instability and violence that has visited the region in the past twenty years has discouraged American undergraduates from studying in some Middle Eastern countries. The University of California's junior year abroad program at the American University of Cairo has stood the test of time, but similar programs supported by the University of California Education Abroad Programs (UCEAP) and the Great Lakes Colleges at the American University of Beirut (AUB) long ago dissolved, owing to the Lebanon war of 1975-1990.<sup>12</sup> Recently however, AUB and the Lebanese American University (formerly Beirut University College) have introduced summer study programs on their campuses that are once again attracting American undergraduates to Lebanon, especially students of Arab heritage. Also, study abroad opportunities in Tunisia and Morocco have been in place for some time. There is also some encouraging news from the Council on International Educational Exchange, which promotes study abroad programs in two dozen countries. It reports a significant increase in its programs and indicates that it wants to establish new study centers in the Middle East.<sup>13</sup>

There is little doubt that the opportunities for American undergraduates to spend time in the Middle East studying its languages and cultures need to be enhanced. Like all such study abroad programs, they not only expand the cultural horizons of young men and women by enabling them to acquire firsthand knowledge of societies and cultures other than their own, but also encourage the most committed among these undergraduates to acquire early on the basic tool kit required for university, government and business careers focused on (and even in) the Middle East.

It is perhaps heartening to know that students wishing to pursue graduate training in Middle Eastern studies can do no better than to enroll in one of the leading American graduate programs in the United States. These programs can be found at Harvard, Columbia, Princeton, Michigan, UCLA, Berkeley and Texas, among other universities. For some time now, American graduate degree programs have been the most competitive in the world, surpassing those in Britain, France and Germany. But it is a decline in support for graduate training in Europe rather than an expansion of funding for area studies in the United States that has produced this competitive edge. In fact, American support for area studies degree programs is not as generous as it once was. And yet, the programmatic requirements for graduate students in Middle Eastern studies have increased. For instance, as part of the effort to broaden graduate training in area studies and to allow for comparative work across the Middle East region, doctoral students must now acquire more than one Middle Eastern language to complete their degrees. This means they must spend more years in graduate school, whether on their home campuses or in the Middle East, and often with fewer resources at their disposal than in the past.

On balance, post-Cold War budget cuts and the attack waged by the social science disciplines on area studies in the 1990s have not been as damaging to Middle Eastern studies as they were predicted to be. In fact, there is reason to be guardedly optimistic that area studies is beginning to enjoy a new lease on life, albeit in somewhat different clothing. The best evidence for this may be the Ford Foundation's decision in 1997-98 to launch a major new funding initiative in support of area studies: "Crossing Borders: Revitalizing Area Studies":

*Through its \$25 Million initiative Ford aims to reinvigorate the study of foreign languages and cultures and to reconceptualize area studies by opening it up to cross-disciplinary and cross-regional approaches and by fostering new international collaborations with scholars and practitioners from around the world. Ultimately, Ford wants to influence American government policy by convincing Washington to generate long-term support for a new kind of area studies.<sup>14</sup>*

The Ford Foundation has committed itself to an ambitious agenda. It is the same Ford Foundation that made the single largest investment in

the development of area studies programs when they were first launched in the 1950s. If Ford is successful in round two, Middle Eastern studies stands to benefit considerably, and this can only mean good news for American students and scholars who wish to study and conduct research in the Middle East.

## Notes

1 This essay is based on a presentation I made to the Council for International Exchange of Scholars (CIES), Washington, D.C., 29 October 1998.

2 Juan R.I. Cole, "Area Studies, Postcolonialism, and the Transnational Problematic," Paper presented at the Middle East Studies Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco, December 1997, p.1.

3 See Rashid Khalidi, "Is There a Future for Middle East Studies?" *MESA Bulletin*, 29, July 1995. 1-6.

4 Cole, *op.cit.*

5 See Robert Bates, "Controversy in the Discipline: Area Studies and Comparative Politics," *Political Science and Politics*, 30, 2, June 1997, 166-174.

6 See Lisa Anderson, "Human Capital in the Social Sciences," *Items. Social Science Research Council Special Issue on Human Capital*, 52, nos. 2-3. June-September 1998, 31-35; Anderson, "Middle Eastern Politics and the Political Science of the Middle East: Defining 'Modernity,'" Draft paper, July 1996, 20 pages.

7 Several historians are leading the effort to bridge the Mediterranean and to link systematically the study of North Africa to the Middle East: Edmund Burke, III, Ross Dunn, and Julia Clancy-Smith.

8 The unpredicted rise in world oil prices beginning in 1999 and stimulated in good measure by OPEC's new ability to convince its members to limit oil production, has caused a mini-revival in the study of the political economy of oil.

9 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon, 1978. Cole, *op. cit.*

10 The American Council of Learned Societies has announced an electronic publishing venture that will involve several learned societies, among them MESA. MESA has recently established a Committee on

Electronic Communication.

11 I wish to thank Dr. Anne H. Betteridge, Executive Director of MESA, for this information.

12 The UCEAP at the American University in Cairo (AUC) was established in 1975 and coincided with the demise of the UCEAP at the American University of Beirut in the same year. Approximately 100 American junior-year-abroad students attend the AUC annually. I thank Mrs. Ann Z. Kerr of UCLA for this information. Mrs. Kerr was a junior-year-abroad student at the AUB in 1954.

13 *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 17 December 1999. On the other hand, the establishment of the federally-funded National Security Education Program (NSEP) in the early 1990s created a stir in the Middle East Studies Association. Because the NSEP funds undergraduates and graduate students to study and conduct research abroad and includes on its board of directors a representative from the Central Intelligence Agency, MESA believes students who take NSEP funds are at risk owing to their association with an organization that has direct connections to the United States intelligence community. See *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 7 April 2000.

14 *Crossing Borders: Revitalizing Area Studies*, Ford Foundation, 1999.