Middle Eastern Studies in America: Past, Present, and Future

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Four scholars discuss how to improve the increasingly polarized field twenty-five years after the publication of Martin Kramer's groundbreaking critique.

On October 13, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America **(https://martinkramer.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/ivorytowers.pdf)** *, featuring the book's author, Martin Kramer, along with Robert Satloff, Rachel Fish, and Gary Samore. Dr. Kramer is the Institute's Walter P. Stern Fellow, a Middle East historian at Tel Aviv University, and founding president of Shalem College in Jerusalem. Dr. Satloff is the Institute's Segal Executive Director and Howard P. Berkowitz Chair in U.S. Middle East Policy, and founder of its joint master's program* **(https://publicpolicy.pepperdine.edu/master-middle-east-policy-studies/)** *with Pepperdine University. Dr. Samore is the director of the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University, a senior fellow with Harvard's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, and the former White House coordinator for arms control and weapons of mass destruction. Dr. Fish is the new CEO of the Israel Institute, director of Brandeis University's Initiative on Antisemitism, and an associate research professor at the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies. The following is a rapporteurs' summary of their remarks.*

Robert Satloff

Ivory Towers on Sand stands as one of the most consequential works ever released by The Washington Institute, shaping its publications over the past quarter-century. Published three weeks after the September 11 attacks, the book continues to be commemorated for its interpretation and scholarship of the Middle East. Its critiques also inspired the Master of Middle East Policy Studies Program **(https://publicpolicy.pepperdine.edu/master-middle-east-policy-studies/)** jointly established by the Institute and Pepperdine University. Now in its second year, the program seeks to provide an alternative for training and equipping the next generation of Middle East practitioners, policy experts, and diplomats.

Martin Kramer

Ivory Towers resonated at the time of its publication due to September 11, and it resonates again today following October 7. As the late Fouad Ajami put it, the book is "an antidote to the illusions and wishful thinking of a whole way of interpreting the Middle East." Its central argument is that the American academy built an imagined Middle East shaped by how scholars wished it to look rather than how it was.

This gap between imagination and reality was clearest in the lack of attention paid to Islam's role in politics. Secular academics did not know what to make of this religious resurgence in politics and thus downplayed the problems posed by many Islamist movements. Since the book's publication, however, the world has witnessed the Islamic State attempt to establish a modern caliphate, the Erdogan government steadily Islamize Turkey, and Hamas hijack the Palestinian cause. Yet even today, scrutinizing these types of movements still marks one as an "Orientalist" or "Islamophobe" in the field—an attitude owed largely to the late scholar Edward Said.

This "imagined Middle East" also includes the belief that American intervention is never useful, ignoring the possibility that Middle Eastern countries might desire U.S. involvement or that academic expertise could help shape Washington's decisionmaking. Moreover, Israel and the attacks it suffered on October 7, 2023, are excluded from the discourse—in keeping with what happened after Said published his influential essay "The One-State Solution" in 1999, which led many academics who had supported two states to abandon that position in favor of Israel's demise.

The Middle East Studies Association embodies this imaginary view of the region as being secular, democratic, and free from both U.S. intervention and Israel. In 2022, MESA passed a resolution endorsing and pledging to comply with the "Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions" movement against Israel. This academic boycott essentially erased a Middle Eastern nation from MESA, leaving Middle East studies departments with nothing to say about Israel and forcing scholarly study of the country to move elsewhere.

U.S. government executive orders will not change Middle East studies, as academics are embedded in institutions, hold tenure, and have the time to push back. Yet university administrators can and should address the segregation between Middle East studies departments and Jewish/Israel studies departments. This includes appointing professors who are bridge builders. Moreover, given the primacy of tenure in the academic system, universities should create alternative reward systems for outsiders with diverse ideas.

Rachel Fish

Over the years, the influence of scholars like Edward Said encouraged a shift toward ideologically motivated Middle East studies programs that tend to ostracize Israel-focused academics. Institutions interested in including Israel studies in their curricula often face pushback from a small but influential group of faculty members driven by strong ideological agendas. Institutions need strong leaders to restore and uphold values that are currently lost in academic discourse. This entails recognizing that some programs have become venues for advocacy and "grievance studies."

As things currently stand, few Middle East studies programs provide a comprehensive study of the broader region. Even advocates for holistic programs urge the separation of Israel and Jewish studies. Scholars of any nationality who study Israel face ostracization within their departments, and many Israelis have to contend with anti-normalization rhetoric. Students interested in studying Israel also fear negative repercussions from future employers. Going forward, Israel studies should be an interdisciplinary field drawing on expertise from faculty members with a variety of backgrounds.

More broadly, new generations of students and faculty must study the Middle East from a non-ideological perspective, and change must occur from within existing institutions. Deeply ideological faculty members can no longer be ignored. These changes must also trickle down to primary and

secondary education. Currently, many K-12 teachers feel unprepared to answer questions in the classroom, undermining students' ability to meet state educational standards.

Gary Samore

The violence of October 7 and the wars in Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran directly affected scholars and fellows at Brandeis University's Crown Center for Middle East Studies, some of whose family members were killed or injured. In the United States, these conflicts unleashed extreme polarization that became intertwined with antisemitism and Islamophobia. The Crown Center was founded by an Israeli, a Palestinian, and an Egyptian who respect each other and share a commitment to balanced, dispassionate scholarship. Its response to October 7 rested on three principles: that there are different narratives, that explanation is not justification, and that the ultimate goal is to find a way forward.

The center does not take institutional positions on political and policy issues. Its scholars hold differing views, and taking an institutional stance would only sow division. Moreover, most of them work on topics outside the Arab-Israel conflict; after all, study of the Middle East is not limited to its wars. As director of the center, I have tried to nurture a balanced perspective similar to that cultivated through years of working closely with Israeli and Arab officials during my time in government.

The Crown Center also works closely with the university's Schusterman Center for Israel Studies via cosponsored events, speaking engagements, and shared affiliations. Integrating Israel into the broader Middle East is part of the Crown Center's DNA. Yet it is surprising how little interest students have shown in the center's course on conflict and peacemaking in the Middle East. Students today seem to prioritize subjects that they see as more directly relevant to obtaining a job after graduation.

This summary was prepared by Caelan Stewart, Joelle Rosenthal, Ari Nagle, and Mar Casajuana. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Winkler Lowy Foundation. ❖

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