Middle Eastern Studies:

What Went Wrong?

by Martin Kramer **(/experts/martin-kramer)**

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Martin Kramer is The Washington Institute's Walter P. Stern Fellow and author of one of its most widely read monographs, Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America.

Brief Analysis

MARTIN KRAMER

Over the past twenty years, U.S. academic "experts" on the Middle East have failed to explain or anticipate change in the region they purport to study. This debacle is the result of their lack of intellectual distance, as well as the field's subversion by ideologically driven or faddish paradigms. The consequent groupthink is so intense that it has shut out external evidence, a trend compounded by the general tendency in the humanities and social sciences to substitute advocacy for scholarship. The already small field has become even more intellectually conformist, if not incestuous, than one might expect -- the past two decades have seen a narrowing of the scope of acceptable research topics and approaches. By September 11, 2001, that narrowing had excluded systematic study of the more extreme varieties of Islamism and permitted only the most anodyne analyses of its other varieties.

The heroes of the field have been politically engaged celebrity scholars, most notably Edward Said. Just this year, MESA joined its European counterparts in awarding Said the first international award for "outstanding contribution to Middle Eastern studies," while Columbia University announced an endowed chair in Middle Eastern history in his name. Given that Middle Eastern studies is not Said's academic field, but rather his arena of political advocacy, this parade of honors is effectively a collective endorsement of his politics and of the confusion of scholarship and activism that he has come to personify.

The field has not improved its performance in the wake of the September 11 attacks. Its leaders have denied that the attacks offer any significant insight into the region and dismissed the notion that their field is in crisis. This denial has been compounded by Congress's decision to inject millions of dollars of additional funding into the field, a measure motivated by post-September 11 panic. Although such funding has been justified under the rubric of "national security," some of it has been authorized without any reevaluation (e.g., the additional appropriation of over $20 million per year for academic centers specializing in Muslim countries under the Title VI program of the Department of Education, which has become a semi-entitlement).

Middle Eastern studies has reached an intellectual dead end similar to that reached by Soviet studies after the fall of

the Soviet Union. Yet, whereas a constricting of resources exacerbated the crisis in the latter field, Middle Eastern studies is awash in new money and academic appointments, which together have had the effect of delaying much-needed reform. Nevertheless, Washington could use its leverage to stimulate change in the field. One approach would be to improve oversight of Title VI through the creation of a supervisory board, as seen in the Fulbright and National Security Education Programs. Given the national interest in improving American understanding of the Middle East and other areas, Title VI is in dire need of such a board; indeed, several members of Congress are now considering new legislation to establish one.

On the positive side, Ivory Towers on Sand did prompt a closer examination of Middle Eastern studies by the general public and by students in the field. For example, numerous papers and theses are being prepared on the controversy, and the website dedicated to the book (www.ivorytowers.org) receives thousands of visitors each month. Journalists have begun to report on the field's problems in the general media and in the Chronicle of Higher Education. Campus Watch, a project of the Middle East Forum, further guarantees that the problems of Middle Eastern studies will remain on the public agenda.

LISA ANDERSON

Martin Kramer's assessment of the impact of his book is unduly pessimistic. Many of the internal responses to his critique have been appreciative. Although most in the field agree that the book overstated its case, it has been widely regarded as a useful intervention. Even before the book's publication, however, no one in the field believed that all was well in Middle Eastern studies. The book appeared at a time of growing unease about the intersection of the real Middle East with trends in American academic culture.

The field's marginalization is actually a reflection of wider changes in the relationship between academe and society. The original purpose of American universities was threefold: the education of children; the pursuit of research and the creation of what is now referred to as "new knowledge"; and the creation of citizens and the informing of public debate. Over time, the last of those functions has atrophied, in part due to the fact that academic endeavor has become narrower and more specialized. Part of the responsibility for this trend rests with the system of peer review.

Simultaneous (and partly in response) to this academic specialization has been the proliferation of nonacademic think tanks, resulting in the evolution of two distinct and parallel universes of analysis: one centered at universities and composed of persons governed, and sometimes blinkered, by peer review; and a second composed of persons who are interested in the wider marketplace of ideas and are very engaged in public debate and the creation of an informed citizenry, yet who have no systematic device for accountability to keep them intellectually honest. This polarization of function is not unique to Middle Eastern studies, although it is exacerbated in the field by the problems of the Middle East itself.

Yet, there is more controversy within Middle Eastern studies than Ivory Towers suggested, and the field is no more incestuous than any other branch of academe. Some of those within the field do in fact disagree profoundly over analytical perspectives and government policy, generating many productive and passionate debates about the diagnoses and prescriptions for the problems of the Middle East. As for the many persons in the field who hail from that region, they have come to the United States precisely because it gives them the freedom to express their opinions openly.

It is true that certain valid research topics have been excluded from the scholarly agenda. In particular, the study of terrorism per se has not been a priority. Yet, scholars ought to study what they believe to be compelling issues. Moreover, the record of terrorism studies as a discipline has not been distinguished, a fact that explains the broader aversion in political science to "terrorology."

How do we ensure a diversity of analytical positions and methodologies in political science? The absence of diversity

is the principal downside of peer review, with its tendency to shrink what scholars view as the relevant audience for their work. For this reason, peer review as a mechanism for advancing scholarship is not above question. But this problem characterizes the social sciences and humanities in general, and its resolution within Middle Eastern studies will greatly depend on its evolution in the wider disciplines.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Jacob Zakaria.

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