

# Terrorism? What Terrorism?!

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Articles & Testimony

**T**he Middle East Studies Association of North America convenes Saturday in San Francisco. Its membership includes 2,600 "experts" on the Middle East, most of them based in universities. On Sept. 21, MESA's board issued a statement on the terror attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. It encapsulates all the ills of this very sick discipline -- one that did nothing to prepare America for the encounter with Muslim extremism, and that can't contribute anything to America's defense.

Before we get to the statement, a little background is necessary. For 50 years, American universities and foundations, along with the U.S. government, have fostered the growth of Middle Eastern studies. Today, most Americans can take degrees in Middle Eastern politics, history, and languages without crossing a state line. Fourteen Middle East programs are National Resource Centers -- that is, they enjoy an annual subsidy from the American taxpayer, through the Department of Education.

Some of these scholars have done important work. But when it comes to contemporary affairs, their record has been abysmal. The last time they basked in the national limelight, a decade ago, they warned that a war to expel Iraq from Kuwait would be disastrous. Later, in order to burnish the image of contemporary Islam, they downplayed the growth of Muslim extremism, helping to lull America into complacency.

In so doing, they dutifully followed the lead of Columbia University's Edward Said, an honorary member of MESA. In introducing the latest edition of his book, "Covering Islam," Mr. Said mocked "speculations about the latest conspiracy to blow up buildings, sabotage commercial airliners and poison water supplies." Such talk was based on "highly exaggerated stereotyping."

Many denounce U.S. policy in extreme terms, believing the Middle East is subjected to a "neoliberal, repressive 'pax Americana'" -- a description of the American role offered by incoming MESA president Joel Beinin of Stanford. The past head of Columbia's Middle East Institute, Richard Bulliet, has called American efforts to promote democracy part of "a world hegemonic discourse of Western cultural imperialism."

This is the necessary background to understanding MESA's statement. Its most striking feature is a studied avoidance of the words "terror," "terrorism," and "terrorist." These were "violent acts," "horrific acts," and "tragic events." But even now, the board members of MESA cannot bring themselves to describe any Arabs or Muslims --

even suicide kamikazes who kill thousands of American civilians -- as terrorists.

It's not surprising. For years the academics' response to terrorism has been to act as amplifiers for the "grievances" behind it. For the professors, terrorism was a kind of political protest -- and since they sympathized with its supposed motives, they expelled the word "terrorism" from their lexicon. This weekend's conference demonstrates the neglect: With the exception of a hastily announced special panel, nothing in the program deals with terrorism.

MESA urges calm while "those who planned and perpetrated the crimes are identified and brought to justice in courts of law." Crimes -- not acts of war. The same professors, who in one breath will tell you that the roots of terrorism are political, will tell you in the next breath that mass murder should be treated like a felony.

And the scholars imply that lone men committed these "crimes," ignoring the role of the state or states that must have aided, abetted and sheltered the terrorists. MESA's bottom line: No use of force is legitimate, even against terrorists and their accomplices.

Finally, MESA's board members are "deeply concerned that innocent people in the Middle East may become the targets of misguided retaliation." Needless to say, no one wants "misguided retaliation." But where is the companion sentence expressing "deep concern" that attacks could recur? It isn't there, despite the fact that the Middle East may be pregnant with more such attacks.

In short, the academics remain in a state of denial. They refuse to acknowledge that their paradigms collapsed with the Twin Towers. But the record of failure exacts no price. Ironically, the very same professors who helped to anesthetize America to the dangers of radical Islam are enjoying a windfall: Their phones don't stop ringing, their books sell briskly, and their courses fill to overflowing.

During or after this crisis, they will find some pliant senator or congressman willing to propose additional budgets for Middle Eastern studies under the rubric of national security. The State Department already wants to use professors for "public diplomacy" in Muslim countries.

But as we begin to ask why the country was so unprepared, one conclusion is inescapable: The academics are part of the problem, not its remedy. It will be necessary to start from scratch in building the understanding that must inform America's future actions. There are no quick fixes, and no steps should be taken before a comprehensive assessment of national needs in Middle Eastern studies.

In the meantime, there is no danger in simply ignoring the professors who meet this weekend in San Francisco. MESA's board called on "those with responsibility for U.S. policy in the Middle East and the Islamic world to avail themselves of the insights of scholarship." Mr. President, don't waste your time. The professors don't meet the course prerequisites. Members of Congress: There is no justification for an additional penny of support for this empire of error -- and no better time to reexamine the federal subsidies it already enjoys. ❖

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