

# The Status of Middle Eastern Studies in America

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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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

On October 16, 2001, Martin Kramer addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Dr. Kramer recently became editor of *Middle East Quarterly*, having finished a six-year term as director of Tel Aviv University's Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies. At the forum, he presented [\*\*\*Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America\*\*\*](#) ([templateC04.php?CID=142](#)) a new Institute monograph that he began writing while serving as a visiting fellow. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

### The Failed Revolution

Two decades ago, a generation of Middle East scholars in America revolted against their teachers -- the founders of Middle Eastern studies in America. They did so in a bid to revitalize funding and job opportunities in the field. The banner they waived was that of Edward Said's 1978 *Orientalism*, in which he argued that Europeans and Americans were afflicted by bias when analyzing trends in the region. In effect, that left Middle Easterners as the only scholars who could claim to study the region objectively. Said's followers then proceeded to take over the field of Middle Eastern studies in America. But now, the revolutionaries have become the establishment, and it is time for the younger generation of Middle East scholars to effect a revolution against their own teachers.

Middle Eastern studies have not been relevant to U.S. policymaking in the Middle East for the last twenty years. One might suggest that prediction, analysis, and policymaking do not fall within the sphere of academe, yet political scientists have long laid claim to these very faculties as part of their discipline. That said, the record of Middle Eastern studies in America regarding such analysis is not good; they have become further and further removed from Washington, even developing a disdain for the policymaking community.

If one were to confine oneself to the scholarly publications that have emerged in the last twenty years from Middle East scholars in America, one would expect two drastic changes to have occurred in the region. First, that the Middle East would now be populated by benign, nonviolent movements resulting from an Islamic reformation, all promoting political pluralism. Second, that civil society would by now have flourished in the Middle East, accompanied by a corresponding withering of the authoritarian state. It is clear, however, that these two phenomena have not emerged, and this fact represents the abysmal failure of Middle Eastern studies to accurately analyze and

predict the course of events in the region.

This failure is largely due to the particular atmosphere that permeates the field. Middle Eastern studies in America are subject to strong internal dynamics that obscure the external dynamics of the region that should guide their analysis. The field is tiny -- under 3,000 strong in the United States -- and afflicted by ethnic rivalries, political disagreements, and the influence of an academic celebrity (Said) extolling powerful extra-disciplinary theories. Given the widespread feeling that further expansion of Middle Eastern studies in the United States is next to impossible, a new dynamic has come to guide the field. Accountability is limited to peer review, and Middle East scholars have become insecure, defensive, self-obsessed, and concerned primarily with barricading their niche from possible funding and job cuts. As a result, their work reflects the norms and expectations of their academic surroundings in America, but very little of the reality of the Middle East.

### Reclaiming the Field

All area-studies disciplines go through periods of questioning, realization, and change. It is time for the younger generation of Middle East scholars to band together and revolutionize the field once more. Alternatively, if the current generation of leading scholars can be convinced that they have failed in their mission, they may begin to effect change themselves. The events of September 11 may serve as the catalyst for just such a revolution.

One of the crucial decisions that must be undertaken regards funding for Middle Eastern studies. In the wake of September 11, there will be a great deal of money available to those working on the Middle East. The interest of college students has grown tremendously as the region has become globally relevant. Increased government and private funding is likely to capitalize on this newfound passion. Yet, if the money continues to flow to the same recipients, it will enable them to remain in their present state, disconnected from reality, thus stifling the chances of those who would pursue new research that might bring academe back into the realm of policy and return the professors to their former state of relevance.

Second, greater analysis of the internal politics of certain countries in the region is needed, particularly Saudi Arabia. Saudis, however, finance many centers for contemporary Arab study, and it is therefore highly unlikely that such centers will undertake the rigorous analysis of internal Saudi politics deemed necessary in the wake of September 11. Several intellectual decisions must be made to help prompt change in this area.

Third, it would be inappropriate to extend the geographic span covered by Middle Eastern studies. Whether Afghanistan is part of the Middle East or South Asia is open to interpretation. However, the current trend of approaching the Middle East as a collection of ethnic studies (e.g., Jewish studies and contemporary Arab studies) makes it inadvisable for the field to expand to encompass a larger geographic area, since it can barely address -- comprehensively -- the area already known as the Middle East.

Finally, the evolution and proliferation of think tanks and their prominent role in policymaking represents a circumvention of the prevailing culture of Middle Eastern studies in America. The think tanks provide a venue for policy-focused research and writing. They also provide job opportunities and funding for those Middle East scholars who do want to address timely political issues -- a desire that earns them scorn from many of their colleagues in academe and keeps them from obtaining funding from academic sources.

Traditionally, the role of academe is to tell truth to power. Now the question is, who will tell truth to academic power?

◆ This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ehud Waldoks.

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