

# Ivory Towers on Sand:

## The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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### In-Depth Reports

**A**re Middle Eastern studies in America in trouble? To judge from the numbers, the answer would appear to be "no." The Middle East Studies Association, known as MESA and founded in 1966, has more than 2,600 members. Across the country, there is an abundance of course offerings on the Middle East, and some 125 universities and colleges offer degrees or other programs on the area. Academics generate an endless stream of books and journal articles. New journals have proliferated. So too have new professional associations devoted to individual countries and the advancement of Middle Eastern scholarship within specific disciplines. MESA boasts thirty-four affiliated organizations.

Each fall, MESA convenes an annual conference that surpasses any comparable gathering anywhere in the world. This conference meets every three years in Washington, in an effort to demonstrate the health of the field to the government that subsidizes it. And subsidies do flow. The U.S. Department of Education presently funds fourteen National Resource Centers for the Middle East, at leading public and private universities across the country. It also funds nearly one hundred full-time and summer fellowships for students enrolled at these centers. Funding for these programs is at all-time highs. It would be easy to assemble figures demonstrating a gradual but steady increase in the quantitative inputs and outputs of Middle Eastern studies in America. If there is a crisis, it is not to be found in the numbers.

Yet deep in collected volumes and academic journals, far from the public eye, a different picture emerges. Jerrold Green, a senior political scientist at RAND who once directed the Middle East center at the University of Arizona, looked back at academe in 1994 and concluded that "the Middle East field is in a crisis within the broader discipline of political science."<sup>(1)</sup> In 1998, he took only one step back: "Although it may be extreme to talk about a field in crisis, it is fair to say that this is a field in some trouble."<sup>(2)</sup>

In 1996, James Bill, another noted political scientist at William and Mary, reached the same conclusion: "All is not well in the field of Middle East political studies in the United States. A review of the history of Middle East scholarship suggests we have learned disturbingly little after 50 years of heavy exertion." Many scholars were "severely lacking in the skills necessary to understand and explain Middle Eastern politics," while the few senior scholars "seldom

fulfill their potential in providing original insights and in-depth understanding of Middle East political processes." (3)

By 1999, a similar admission came from a source at the very pinnacle of the field. "Few scholars of the Middle East are in a position to take much satisfaction in the disarray in post-Soviet studies," wrote Lisa Anderson, a political scientist and dean of international and public affairs at Columbia, "for we face dilemmas of comparable magnitude without even being fully aware of it. The end of the Cold War had its own particular dynamic in the Middle East and our failure to capture it is a measure of how little we understood its role in shaping politics in the region in the first place." (4) Admissions of failure in academe are rare occurrences, and are usually made only when the fact of failure is indisputable.

It could be argued, in response, that there is nothing new about this and that scholars have a natural proclivity for lamenting the state of their fields. But it has been a long time since scholars of the Middle East looked critically at themselves. In the 1970s, the field underwent a wrenching crisis, prompted by Middle Eastern turmoil, academic radicalization, and budget cutting. It ended in a great shakeout and a shift of academic power. The new leaders of the field claimed to be more competent, and prided themselves upon possession of more potent paradigms for explaining and understanding the Middle East. They would not make the mistakes of their predecessors. For more than twenty years they have interpreted and predicted Middle Eastern politics with a supreme confidence in their own powers.

Only now have hesitant voices been raised from within the ramparts, pointing to serious problems. They run even deeper than insiders are prepared to admit. It is no exaggeration to say that America's academics have failed to predict or explain the major evolutions of Middle Eastern politics and society over the past two decades. Time and again, academics have been taken by surprise by their subjects; time and again, their paradigms have been swept away by events. Repeated failures have depleted the credibility of scholarship among influential publics. In Washington, the mere mention of academic Middle Eastern studies often causes eyes to roll. The purpose of this paper is to probe how and why a branch of academe once regarded with esteem has descended to such a low point in the public estimate, and what might be done about it.

Chapter one considers just what constitutes Middle Eastern studies in their unique American configuration. Chapter two examines the crucial impact of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Chapters three and four document and analyze the collective errors made by the academic experts in assessing Islamism and "civil society," two core issues that preoccupied the field in the 1990s. Chapter five examines the relevance gap that has opened up between academics and policymakers, and the alienation that besets both sides. Chapter six analyzes the loss of public, philanthropic, and academic confidence in Middle Eastern studies. The conclusion considers what might be done to find another way forward.

A few qualifications are in order. In American usage, many branches of scholarship fall under the rubric of "Middle Eastern studies," from Ottoman architecture to Arabic linguistics. Some of these branches have flourished, not failed. A truly reliable assessment of all aspects of Middle Eastern studies could only be accomplished by a multidisciplinary team. But scholars of modern history and contemporary politics enjoy the highest profile in the field. Their texts are assigned in large courses; they are interviewed and quoted; and, in most years, it is they who are elected presidents of MESA. This critique does not claim to encompass all of Middle Eastern studies. But it does accurately identify and aim for the representative center of the field, the points where leaders, ideas, and resources have come together to forge dominant paradigms. It is from these points that the field is defined and defended, and it is here that the trouble resides.

Second, it is important to remember that Islamism and "civil society" do not exhaust the issues that have concerned students of the modern and contemporary Middle East these past twenty years. In their reading of Iran and Arab-Israeli relations, academics again have diverged significantly from other loci of expertise. One observer has written

of "a deep and widening gap between the perception of Iran by the Washington policy community, on the one hand, and by many if not most academic specialists on the other." (5) And largely as a result of Edward Said's influence, academics have tended to discount the "peace process" altogether. (6) It could be argued that, on both these issues, academe has failed or is failing. But the case would not be clear cut, because Iranian politics and Arab-Israeli relations still leave room for contradictory interpretations. Any critique of academic performance on these two issues must await a lengthening of perspective.

Third and last, it should not be assumed from this account that Middle Eastern studies cannot change. Indeed, were it not for a sense of impasse within the field itself, there would be no point in offering a critique. The day seems not far off when discontent might coalesce into a new agenda. The improved performance of Middle Eastern studies is something to be hoped for, even if America has come to look elsewhere for interpretations of the region. The field is still home to many talented, experienced, and knowledgeable people, who could contribute much more than they do, were they not burdened by dogma or pressured to conform. The field is ripe for change and awaits its reformers. If this critique makes their work easier, it will have served its purpose.

This first step could not have been taken by anyone teaching at an American university today. Middle Eastern studies used to resemble a quaint guild, emphasizing proficiency. Now they more closely resemble a popular front, demanding conformity. Professional success depends, in large part, upon deference to certain icons and their defense. And so this is unavoidably the work of an intimate stranger, one who, these last twenty-eight years, has entered and exited the American arena many times, first as a student, and later as an occasional visiting professor and research fellow. Its insights have been sharpened by the experience of directing a major (foreign) academic center for Middle Eastern studies, and observing the American campus many times from a Washington window.

Nearly thirty years ago, as a first-year undergraduate, I was assigned to read Elie Kedourie's essay, "The Chatham House Version." It was an exacting refutation of an entire school of error, one that rested on a nihilistic philosophy of Western guilt, articulated by a self-anointed priesthood of expertise. It captivated me then, as it does even now. In the years that followed, I witnessed my own chosen field fall under the spell of the same idea, propagated (as befits America) by celebrity professors and their fans. Since that time, "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity." But the spell is now diminished. Might it be broken?

#### Notes

1. Jerrold D. Green, "The Politics of Middle East Politics," *PS: Political Science* 27, no. 3 (September 1994), p. 517.
2. Jerrold D. Green, "Where Are the Arabs?" *Survival* 40, no. 2 (Summer 1998), p. 178.
3. James A. Bill, "The Study of Middle East Politics, 1946-1996: A Stocktaking," *Middle East Journal* 50, no. 4 (Autumn 1996), pp. 501, 507.
4. Lisa Anderson, "Politics in the Middle East: Opportunities and Limits in the Quest for Theory," in *Area Studies and Social Science: Strategies for Understanding Middle East Politics*, ed. Mark Tessler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 6.
5. Gary Sick, "The United States and Iran: Truth and Consequences," *Contention* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1996), p. 59.
6. In 1993, a foundation program officer wrote that the Israeli-Palestinian breakthrough would require Middle East specialists to "ask new questions, reexamine conventional wisdoms, explore new methods and approaches, and promote the development of research agendas capable of understanding and explaining the transformation represented by the [Israeli-Palestinian] agreement." See Steven Heydemann, "Peace and the Future of Middle East Studies," *Items* 47, no. 4 (December 1993), p. 78.

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