

WISE WORDS ON DEAF EARS

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11 SEPTEMBER SHOULD HAVE CONVINCED AMERICAN POLICYMAKERS OF THE FOOLISHNESS – DANGERS, EVEN – OF ALLOWING THE US ACADEMIC STUDY OF THE MIDDLE EAST TO BE CONSTRAINED BY THE SENSITIVITIES OF A FEW. IT DIDN'T

To paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of the death of Middle East area studies have been greatly exaggerated. During the 1990s, many manifestos proclaimed that area studies, as a product of the Cold War, were shaped by the political discourse of a bygone era and mired in overly descriptive and untheoretical particularism. Hence we were advised to cast our lot with our individual disciplines, which had a more universalist outlook. The critique of the insularity of Middle East studies was appropriate, though I am not convinced that Middle East studies was or is any more insular than Chinese or Russian studies, or American studies for that matter.

The critique of area studies was also based on a misperception of its history. Middle East area studies began to emerge during the interwar period, not during the Cold War. That is to say that Middle East studies was emerging with an autonomous intellectual agenda before the Cold War and the concerted intervention of the US government. That agenda was shaped by missionary and petroleum projects distinct from, although allied with, the interests of the state and whose success required empathic understanding of Middle Eastern peoples. For this reason, those with Middle East expertise were regarded with suspicion in some circles, including parts of the academy. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 provided financial support and public sanction for the growth of Middle East area studies and simultaneously attempted to mobilise academic knowledge for the purposes of the state.

From these revised understandings of the relationship of area studies to disciplines and the history of Middle East studies we can learn several things. First, while situating our research and teaching in relation to existing bodies of knowledge and intellectual conversations remains imperative as ever, we

need not feel overly inferior about the marginality of the Middle East in the structure of disciplinary knowledge. As 11 September made painfully clear, it is those who did not think that the Middle East or Islam were worthy of study who were insular, if not myopic.

Islamic social movements are a major phenomenon of global modernity, and the contemporary world cannot be understood without giving them a prominent place. Islamic social movements were also a prominent feature of an earlier phase of globalisation – the era of the new imperialism from the 1870s to 1914. It, too, cannot be adequately understood without accounting for them. And, as Janet Abu-Lughod has argued, Islam was the cultural cement of the fourteenth-century Eurasian commercial system. A very strong case can be made that for most of the past two thousand years, China and the Islamic world – not North America and Western Europe – have been the dominant centres of global economic and cultural power.

In several different historical eras, Middle East studies can play an important role in implementing Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to provincialise Europe, and along with it the categories of knowledge that emerged with the global dominance of Europe and North America. This is a worthy project, not because Euro-American culture deserves to be regarded with more suspicion and hostility than any other culture, but because, powerful as the United States now is in relation to the rest of the world, that power is situated in contingent historical conditions, whether we like it or not. Historically informed and self-critical awareness of the categories of our knowledge and the sources of our power is a good antidote to imperial hubris.

The early history of Middle East studies also teaches us that our project has always involved the collaboration of scholars of Middle Eastern origins with those based in North America and Europe. Middle East studies as we know them are inconceivable without institutions such as the American University of Beirut, the American University in Cairo and Robert College; publications such as *L'Égypte Contemporaine* and *Revue du Monde Musulman*; and individuals such as Philip Hitti, Albert Hourani and Charles Issawi. American Middle East studies are a cosmopolitan product. This has always been a source of anxiety, and in some cases outright panic, for those dedicated to policing the boundaries of knowledge and public discourse and enforcing a narrow view of American interests. We should embrace it as a reason for pride.

Middle East studies have had a shifting relationship with the US government and its adventures in the region. During the 1950s and 1960s, modernisation theory was the dominant social science orthodoxy. It was fully compatible with the project of expanding the post-World War II informal US imperium. In those decades, many scholarly studies praised US allies in the Middle East – Turkey, Lebanon, Tunisia and Iran – as successful examples of modernisation.

The 1967 Arab–Israeli war, the second Lebanese civil war and the Iranian revolution undermined the appeal of modernisation theory and stimulated critical intellectual projects that were directly or indirectly inspired by the global upsurge of 1968. Among the most enduring of them is the Middle East Research and Information Project, with which I have been associated for nearly 25 years.

Some have suggested that scholars of the Middle East have been especially prone to adopt approaches critical of US government policy in the region. But even a cursory look at the literature of Latin American studies or scholarship on any other area of the world, including the United States, reveals that this was a broad intellectual tendency that was especially strong in history, sociology and literary studies.

After the collapse of the Soviet bloc, much of American international studies became enthused by the concept of civil society because it seemed to have played a prominent role in the liberation of Eastern Europe. In the Middle Eastern context, this often involved investigating the extent to which Islam is compatible with democracy. This research agenda was not a conspiracy of anti-American radicals who wished to obfuscate the true character of Islam; it was encouraged by circles in and close to the US government.

Several other conceptual approaches and research agendas have mobilised varying degrees of enthusiasm among scholars of the Middle East over the years. This is not the place to evaluate them. I simply wish to point out that some of them have been compatible with the outlook of successive US governments and American interests as they define them, while others are rooted in competing views of what American interests should be. Moreover, while there certainly have been intellectual fashions and dominant tendencies, there have always been oppositional views of various kinds.

Does anyone doubt that this is the normal state of affairs in a democratic society? Humanistic scholarly life proceeds through a process of argumentation. While there is no final and absolute truth, disputation and debate, intemperate and infused with egoism as it may sometimes be, is the only

vehicle we have to challenge received wisdom and open new intellectual horizons.

The holders of state power have always tried to impose an intellectual agenda compatible with their interests, as students of Middle East history know from the attempts of the 'Abbasid Caliphs al-Ma'mun (813–33) and al-Mu'tasim (833–42) to impose the rationalist *mu'tazili* doctrine on their subjects. And there have always been those who have struggled against the imposition of doctrines associated with state power, as we know from the ardent resistance of Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780–855) to the *mu'tazili* doctrine. As some would have it, the victory of ibn Hanbal in this confrontation is part of 'what went wrong' in Islamic societies. We could just as easily draw a different lesson: that when states attempt to impose an intellectual orthodoxy – even an 'enlightened' one such as rationalism, secularism, modernisation, Arab socialism, Marxism-Leninism or neo-liberal economics and 'freedom' – they inevitably generate a resistance, which may or may not itself be enlightened. And in combating that resistance they may very likely adopt cruel and authoritarian measures that will undermine the legitimacy of whatever 'enlightened' ideas they espoused. The recent histories of Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Iran and Turkey offer volumes of evidence for this proposition.

Governments ought to keep a certain distance from the academy. There will usually be plenty of scholars who will, of their own free will, choose to serve the interests of established power if given even modest incentives. If not, then perhaps they do not deserve to be served.

Let me conclude by saying something about the scurrilous attacks that have been levelled against the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) collectively and several of our members individually during the course of the past year. The gist of these attacks is that MESA has been taken over by a crowd of post-colonial studies/post-modernist radicals inspired by Edward Saïd and that this takeover has been facilitated because half of our membership is composed of people of Middle Eastern origins. MESA is, therefore, an unpatriotic and not truly American organisation. Consequently, MESA and its members have been uninterested in warning the US about the dangers of radical Islam. Against the prevailing opinions in Washington, our members persist in opposing US policy on the Arab–Israeli conflict, on the pre-emptive war against Iraq and other such issues.

Anyone familiar with MESA and its members will know that these claims are an amalgam of outright mendacity and tendentious readings of the



*San Francisco State University, August 2002: student of Middle East studies.
Credit: AP Photo / Eric Risberg*

scholarship and popular writings of some MESA members by a highly selective body. Neither the board nor the Program Committee, which is primarily responsible for the content of the annual meetings, has any interest in imposing an intellectual or political orthodoxy on the MESA membership. This would, in any case, be impossible; and that is a good thing. The board, and especially its Committee on Academic Freedom on the Middle East and North Africa, has consistently defended human rights and academic freedom. The board has also taken the position that it is in the national

interest as well as the interest of advancing scholarship that there be an administrative separation between academic life and the United States government. Reasonable people might disagree about that, but I do not believe that holding one view or another on this matter is evidence of lack of patriotism.

In contrast to the fanciful notions of those who have attacked MESA, the history of the association since it was founded demonstrates that the range of intellectual opinion and topics open to discussion has broadened considerably over time. For example, the first annual meeting was held six months after the 1967 Arab–Israeli war. The board prevented formal discussion of that event at the meeting and even asked a graduate student to withdraw a proposed paper on the Arab–Israeli conflict ‘due to the sensitivity of the subject’.

This was an expression of the gentlemen’s agreement – and the founders of MESA were overwhelmingly gentlemen – which facilitated the establishment of MESA: discussion of the Arab–Israeli conflict would be avoided because it would generate too much controversy and undermine the collegiality of the organisation. Most importantly, as Timothy Mitchell has argued, airing of controversy on topics such as the Arab–Israeli conflict would undermine the claim of Middle East studies to objective and scientific knowledge. Consequently, for years there was no discussion of the Arab–Israeli conflict at MESA.

We have come a long way since then. No one would dare to propose that the Arab–Israeli conflict, or the mass murder of Armenians in the late Ottoman period, or the CIA’s involvement in attempts at regime change in Iran, Syria, Lebanon and elsewhere, to name only a few controversial topics, should be excluded from discussion at MESA meetings.

We have three basic options before us in dealing with such controversial issues: 1) to ignore them; 2) to try to impose conformity; or 3) to encourage free and open discussion. I am sure that the consensus of MESA members is that the third option is the only one a scholarly organisation can consider.

The free and open discussion that has occurred within and beyond MESA has led to a significant expansion of the range of what are considered legitimate topics of enquiry and to a liberation of some space for articulating previously repressed opinions. For example, when I was an undergraduate at Princeton, I was not permitted to write my senior honours thesis on the post-1948 Palestinian national movement, on the grounds that the topic was less than 50 years old. Professors in Princeton’s Department of Near Eastern

Studies who were critical of Israel rarely expressed their views to students. There was no class on the Arab–Israeli conflict. This was not a subject for public discussion. The topic was covered in a single lecture in the survey course on modern Middle East history. Most of us were not fully aware of the differences of opinion among our teachers, even as we saw some of them manoeuvring to reshape the political and intellectual tone of the department.

As a doctoral student at the University of Michigan I was told by my adviser, the late Richard P Mitchell, that he would support me if I wrote a PhD thesis on the formation of the Arab working class in Palestine, but that if I wrote a dissertation about Israel or Palestine I would likely have difficulty getting an academic job. That was the origin of my engagement with Egypt. While this has been an entirely positive experience, it was originally motivated by fear that those who held the then dominant views in the field of Middle East studies would use their power to restrict debate and impede the advancement of those with unorthodox views. I did not need much convincing that Dick Mitchell's advice was wise, as I had already witnessed the misuse of academic power on matters relating to the Arab–Israeli conflict while pursuing an MA at Harvard.

The intellectual boundaries of Middle East studies have been substantially redrawn since the time of my undergraduate and graduate training. This is what the self-proclaimed enforcers of academic propriety object to. Opinions that previously could barely be articulated at all now circulate relatively freely on campuses.

That freedom is now under attack and we must vigorously defend it. For example, Harvard President Lawrence Summers has clumsily attempted to police the limits of acceptable opinion on Middle Eastern topics by suggesting that calling for divestment from corporations doing business with Israel is 'anti-Semitic in . . . effect if not . . . intent'. One need not support the substance of the demand for divestment in order to discern the difference between even the most vehement criticism of Israel and its policies and anti-Semitism. We must resist such attempts to delegitimise dissenting opinion. They are grave threats to academic freedom and intelligent public discourse.

The administration and faculty of the University of North Carolina acted much more wisely and bravely in refusing to capitulate to attacks from the Christian right Family Policy Network and others in choosing as the summer reading assignment for incoming freshmen Michael Sells's transla-

tion and interpretation of the early verses of the Qur'an, *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*.

Those who have attacked MESA are, in the main, neo-conservative true believers with links to the Israeli right. They tend to think that phrases such as 'war on terrorism', 'clash of civilisations' and 'axis of evil' are serious explanations for what is happening in the contemporary Middle East. They are welcome to their opinions; and they certainly have no dearth of outlets for expressing them.

Many of us may feel that because the attacks on MESA are intellectually vacuous, there is no need for us to respond. In my opinion, it would be a mistake for us to dismiss such slogans as arrant nonsense, simplistic and ahistorical as they may be. If we believe so, we must marshal the appropriate arguments to demonstrate the case. We should expose students to this material and teach them to understand the debate. And we should make our case to the broader public in whatever venues are available to us. Moreover, we cannot ignore the fact that these notions are being propagated by circles close to the government of the most powerful country in human history in concert with unprecedented assertions of a right to make and unmake regimes throughout the world, especially in the Middle East. It is a dangerous moment when a state accustomed to thinking its dominion is absolute confronts the limits of its power, as was the case on 11 September 2001. □

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