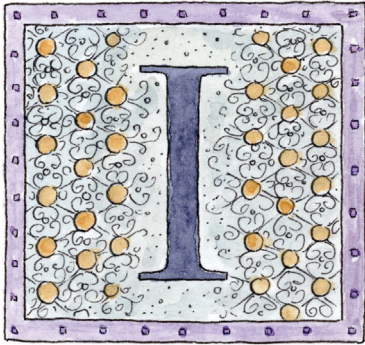


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# Middle East Studies

*How did a demanding academic discipline  
become a haven for activism?*



WAS RECENTLY TOLD a story about a Jewish professor of Islamic studies who, some years ago, was seen standing bewildered outside the hotel gift shop at the annual conference of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) in a North American city. When asked what he was doing there, the professor responded in a mystified tone, “Someone at this conference is either brave or stupid enough to be wearing a kippah, and he just walked into this gift shop. I need to find out who he is.”

That there is a single academic environment in today’s North America where it is considered unsafe to be outwardly Jewish should tell us something. As should the statements of that learned society. On October 16, MESA released a statement about the unfolding war between Hamas and Israel. After paying one sentence of lip service to

the Israeli victims of Hamas's murderous rampage, the next five and a half paragraphs were devoted to a moralizing, accusatory, and error-laden explanation for why Israelis had been killed:

Past precedent has shown that besieging the Gaza Strip and indiscriminately bombarding its population and infrastructure kills, maims, and displaces Palestinians, exacerbating the structural violence of Israeli rule and does little to increase the safety of Israelis. . . . The majority of Gazans are themselves refugees from 1948; they are now contemplating a second forcible removal from their homes, in what risks becoming a campaign of ethnic cleansing. . . . At a time when our members have much to offer through their expertise to understanding these developments and to providing analyses that might contribute to slowing or stopping the escalation of violence, we are deeply disturbed by the chilling of speech and academic freedom on campuses across North America.

For an example of one scholar whose “analyses might contribute to slowing or stopping the escalation of violence,” consider Cornell professor Russell Rickford, author of a 2019 *Journal of Palestine Studies* article entitled “‘To Build a New World’: Black American Internationalism and Palestine Solidarity.” Speaking at a rally the day before the MESA statement was released, Rickford, professing to speak for Palestinians of good will, said of October 7:

It was exhilarating. It was exhilarating, it was energizing. And if they weren't exhilarated by this challenge to the monopoly of violence, the shifting of the violence of power, then they would not be human. I was exhilarated.

A “chilling of speech,” to be sure. On the same day as the rally, an

open letter was posted online defending Columbia professor Joseph Massad’s “right to academic freedom” in reference to his October 8 article lauding the “major achievement” of Hamas’s attack.

Academic scholars of the Middle East could indeed have helped people understand the historical background, the appeal, and the possible implications of such savagery, but the experts who were up to the task of taking on a valid and credible analysis were nowhere to be found, at least not on campus.

How did a demanding academic enterprise that requires serious study to gain language fluency and discipline-related skills become assimilated into a celebration of suffering? How and why are the scholars who are trained to practice careful, comparative explorations of the region’s history, culture, and politics overshadowed by those who have reimagined their intellectual labors as a form of activism?



First, there have long been attempts by scholars of the humanities and social sciences to demonstrate the importance of their work to society. A scholar’s ability to gain traction — even name recognition — outside the walls of the academy is widely considered a sign of success and a confirmation of intellectual status. Politicized scholarship can be an easy route to such recognition.

For Middle East studies, as for other university disciplines, the turn to political action is also, in part, a survival strategy. The sharp decline in college enrollment has generated financial burdens for many institutions of higher education, which face the prospect of empty classrooms and shuttered departments. Politics is expected to attract students to courses about the Middle East and to save the careers of the people who teach them.

Yet the enrollment crisis only began in 2010. Anyone involved

in Middle East studies knows that the field's politicization far pre-dates this period of enrollment decline. Martin Kramer's superbly researched book on the topic, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*, was published in 2001, and traced the roots of this failure as far back as the 1960s and '70s.

Essentially, there is a script to which activist-scholars subscribe. That script has two parts, one about the intimate connections between words and power and the other about colonialism as the starting point for the Arab world's descent into misfortune. The first part of the script, the relationship of words to power, was written by Michel Foucault and asserts that knowledge, and the discourse through which it is communicated, is a function of the powerful. One can identify who has power based on who controls the discourse. In his words, "discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it."

The second part of the script, the focus on colonialism, comes from Edward Said, whose *Orientalism*, quite possibly the most influential academic monograph of the second half of the 20th century, effectively created the field of Middle East studies as we have it today. In *Orientalism*, Said applied Foucault's theory of discourse to Western scholarship of the Middle East, arguing that such scholarship was an expression—and thereby an extension—of Western colonial power over the region. The natural and logical conclusion from this is that only work that assumes the perspective of the people of the region is free from Western colonial power, and therefore legitimate. Because colonial power is sustained by a narrative, academics of the Middle East carry a faith that the right combination of words and phrases can reverse the direction of the colonial headwinds still hovering over all that is said and done in the region.

The notion of a critical link between language and power is enormously seductive for scholars, many of whom are certain that their

own discourse can help bring freedom to the Middle East. There are many problems with this article of faith, the most serious being that it has been shown time and again to be so wrong.

In 2011, for example, we heard cutting-edge Middle East specialists proclaiming the protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square "the Arab Spring," marking it as the regional turning point for emancipation, reflective of events in 1968 Prague, and signifying that the Arab masses, like their Eastern European predecessors, longed for freedom and were determined to build it by their sheer strength of spirit. Well, this discourse turned out to be far from powerful. Writing in *The Nation* in March 2011, Rashid Khalidi, who holds the Edward Said Professorship of Modern Arab Studies at Columbia, said:

Egypt is now thought of as an exciting and progressive place; its people's expressions of solidarity are welcomed by demonstrators in Madison, Wisconsin; and its bright young activists are seen as models for a new kind of twenty-first-century mobilization. . . . Before, when anything Muslim or Middle Eastern or Arab was reported on, it was almost always with a heavy negative connotation. Now, during this Arab spring, this has ceased to be the case. An area that was a byword for political stagnation is witnessing a rapid transformation that has caught the attention of the world.

Needless to say, the transformation was, ultimately, not so rapid, nor much of a transformation at all. Khalidi, like other Middle East academics, failed to note or was unable to discern what was happening in the streets: lootings, muggings, rapes, and kidnappings. Nor did anyone think it important enough to draw attention to the far more devastating natural disaster for the region: the locusts descending almost biblically on the wheat fields critical for providing basic food for the impoverished masses. As the demands for regime change made their

way through Libya, Syria, and Yemen, the countries decomposed into their diverse ethnic, tribal, and religious parts, a virtual invitation for young men to raise armed militias and fight for resources and control over towns, villages, and urban neighborhoods. Increasing numbers of people—some of whom had earlier called for overthrowing the dictators—concluded that authoritarian rulers were the best of the bad options they were confronting. The terror of living under a dictator had been replaced by the horror of living without one.

The failure of Middle East scholars to account for developments in the Middle East is not a bug but a feature of the field's ethos: an exercise in political liberation from Western powers rather than an analytical understanding of the region's deeper dynamics and complexities. With this ethos, the May 1948 resurrection of Jewish sovereignty in its ancient homeland is described entirely as an act of colonial aggression rather than the *actual* springtime revolution that it was after generations of mandated Jewish disempowerment.

And this—the uncanny and beyond-ironic conflation of Jews with their imperial European oppressors—is how the intellectual failure of Middle East studies turns into no kippahs at the MESA conference. One reason for this failure is an unwillingness to account for the role played by the Islamic empire (i.e., the Ottomans) that preceded the arrival of the British and the French. The focus on the ruinous decisions of Western colonial powers, chief among them the creation of separate Arab nation-states, suffers from a bizarre circularity that anachronistically champions supposedly indigenous forms of nationalism (i.e., Palestinian identity) to fight against supposedly newer colonial forces (i.e., Zionism). But both are forms of nationalism. Are the master's tools to dismantle the master's house? Incidentally, such scholars also have it flipped—Judaism has been in the Middle East for thousands of years, Islam for 1,400; Jewish nationalism predates and in fact forged Palestinian nationalism.

The title of Khalidi's most recent book is a perfect reflection of this inversion: *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017*. Palestine came into (non) being only in 1917.

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Paradoxically, this discourse of anti-colonialism has generated its own fantastical belief in a single pan-Arab nation across the region. Because the very notion of separate Arab states was a legacy of foreign rule, the borders themselves were interpreted as unmistakable evidence that the Arab nation was torn apart by a colonialism that blocked a future that could have been built around national unity. In fact, the story of nationalism, typically presented as implanting in Arab consciousness an uncompromised vision of unity and harmony, often served as a foil for minority religious and ethnic communities to anchor and justify their separate and particularistic solidarities. That is, the very assertion of a single Arab nation triggered serious opposition in the lands intended to be included and by many of the people expected to advocate or at least to endorse this aspirational goal. The political project outside of the academy to make this a reality, under the leadership of former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, was a colossal failure and was put to rest most ceremoniously when Nasser's successor signed a peace treaty with Israel. But somehow the embers continue to flicker in one place: the halls of Middle East studies centers at major universities.

None of this is to deny colonialism as an important historical factor in the Middle East, but to avoid the fixation bordering on fetishism. It is a trap preventing scholars from interrogating the reasons why Arab dreams of independence gave way so easily and pervasively in their own nation-states to the same kind of oppression that had stained colonial rule. The effect of the discourse is to think that the colonial

powers of yesteryear are ever present while ignoring the elements of the region that have in fact never left: tribal disputes, clan cultures, and Islam, to name a few. What's more, this Foucauldian-Saidian ethos has now made its way to other regional studies. (Rickford, for example, teaches in Cornell's American studies program.)

And here we arrive at October 7. When a repressive ruling Islamist group engages in cross-border killing, raping, and kidnapping, the inevitable reaction of scholars such as Rickford (who is not an Islamist), is to map the event onto the imbibed story, to think and speak in words that display this anti-colonial framework, to see Hamas as doing the powerful anti-colonial work that the academic discourse promotes. Isn't it more plausibly the opposite: that the academy is the handmaiden of the actual violent religious forces on the ground?

But lurking in the aftermath of October 7, there may be hope for scholarship. The polemics so tightly woven around what can be said and who can be heard on campus may be unraveled when the fighting ends and the accounts are fully audited. A trove of documents was dug up from Hamas tunnels; if and when they are made accessible, they will be impossible to ignore. They will disclose how Hamas maintained its grip on the Gaza Strip. Such material underscores the indispensability of scholarship that gives due regard to data as the foundation of an interpretive framework rather than the opposite: committing to a predetermined narrative because it is believed to be a potent symbol of a righteous cause regardless of whether it addresses all the relevant material or offers adequate explanations for events.

If this research is to be done, it will probably be done outside of the university setting, in think tanks and policy-oriented organizations, where the incentive is to get things right rather than contribute to the conformist culture of an academy inflating its own power. That's where we should look for discourse. \*