

Middle East Studies In The U.S.

Combating Academic Anti-Semitism

By Lois Gottesman

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Most Americans probably didn't focus much on the Middle East before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. All that has changed drastically in the past two years. With American troops now spending long tours of duty in the region, many more Americans across the country are interested in learning as much as possible about the region and developments there, seeking more and deeper knowledge than most newscasts can provide.

So, where can one turn for help? It turns out that for nearly 50 years the United

States government has provided funding for regional academic centers specializing in the study of the Middle East deemed of special interest to U.S. policymakers. Here one can take courses, attend lectures, obtain curricula and other teaching aids on a wide range of topics, from the archeology of the ancient Near East to medieval Arabic poetry to contemporary history of the Islamic world. But many of these centers do not cover Israel as part of the region, and some of them may promote educational materials that present biased views of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian issue. Moreover, as U.S. universities seek funds from the Arab world to establish scholarships, fund travel and host visiting fellows, academia runs the risk of becoming more captive to Arab interests and less open to other points of view that may more truly reflect American interests in the region.

The first Middle East Studies centers

The first Middle East Studies center in the United States was established in 1947 at Princeton University by Lebanese-American historian Philip Hitti. Unlike Europe, which has a long history of engagement in the Middle East and thus has long had academic centers devoted to the study of the languages, peoples and history of the region, in the United States universities did not have available a pool of native-born scholars and experts of established reputation to whom to turn to set up these new programs. Instead, in the early years many universities hired scholars from overseas, both Middle Eastern-born scholars trained in the

West, such as Hitti at Princeton and Iraqi-born Majid Khadduri at Johns Hopkins University, as well as European scholars such as the distinguished Briton Sir Hamilton A. Gibb at Harvard University (1955) and Viennese-born expert Gustave von Grunebaum at UCLA (1956). These and other respected scholars built entire departments and programs from scratch, and trained new generations of American-born scholars in the languages, cultures, history and politics of the Middle East.

How does U.S. government funding work?

In 1958, not long after the launch of the Soviet space vehicle Sputnik, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA), Title VI of which established national resource centers and foreign language fellowships under the umbrella of the U.S. Department of Education, the goal being to create a pool of American scholars and experts focused on critical regions of the world whose expertise would help guide policymakers. Naturally enough, in the Cold War years most funding went to centers focusing on the study of the Soviet Union, Latin America and the Far East. Study of the Middle East took more of a “minor” role until the 1970s, when events there focused much more visibility on U.S. strategic interests in the region.

The public money involved has never represented more than a fraction of the funds uni-

versities spend to support such departments and faculties. Private funding, such as that provided by the Ford Foundation or scholarships established by private individuals, has always exceeded the government’s funding. Nonetheless, having the U.S. government imprimatur and “seal of approval” goes a long way towards giving these programs legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of the public at large and helps universities attract more private funds. Even post 9/11, when Congress increased the amounts devoted to the study of the Middle East and South Asian regions, the additional funds amounted to only about \$20 million. The number of federally funded resource centers on the Middle East increased from 14 in 2001 to 17 in 2004, and grants for graduate research have increased by 250 percent.

Government grants also come with a requirement that the funded programs devote as much as 15 percent of the funds to community outreach programs, thus ensuring that the public at large benefits from the expertise of local departments and scholars. Many centers have established teacher training programs, developed curricula and study materials for K-12 schools, and sent graduate students out into the community to lecture and give classes on the Middle East.

Controversy and Conflict

Politicization and partisanship were usually kept out of the Middle East Studies programs until after the 1967 and, especially, 1973 Arab-Israeli wars. It was then that a confluence of a generation of American students and scholars of Islam and the Middle East coming of age in the post-Vietnam era, combined with the post-’67 rise of Arab and Palestinian radicalism, led to a dramatic change.

Why not establish some kind of oversight to ensure that the programs of study indeed reflect the priority interests of the U.S.?



Scholars such as Dr. Martin Kramer of Tel Aviv University's Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies and author of *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America* (2001), maintain that the turning point can be traced to the publication of a book by Palestinian activist Edward Said in 1978, titled *Orientalism*. In this book Said attacked the entire field of Middle Eastern (or Oriental) studies in the West and proceeded to accuse specific Western scholars, both European and American, of deliberate distortion of Arab culture,

Islam and the Arab world to serve the goals of American imperialism, Israeli Zionism and Western racism. Said argued that it was incumbent to fight against the hegemony of America and its client Israel, and that just as the peoples of the region would no longer submit to a world order designed solely to serve American interests, so too in the academic world, it was incumbent on scholars to actively promote the new native forces and support their aims on the campuses. Moreover, Said argued that Western scholars were agents of their governments and that Western

scholarship was part of a conspiracy to defame Islam and the Arab world.

The years following Said's attack on the field saw both an ideological shift and an ethnic shift among Middle Eastern scholars in the United States. Ideological persuasion became more influential in hiring and tenure decisions at universities, native-born scholars took leadership positions in many departments, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict came to dominate the field. At the same time, a more partisan atmosphere pervaded the centers, fueled by "clientitis"—an affliction that causes its victims to identify so closely with their clients (in this case, their objects of study) that they no longer can maintain any objective distance—and the need to curry favor with Arab governments in order to assure continued access to student visas, government archives and scholarship grants. In many cases, centers actively solicited Arab funding to support their programs, with the attendant risk that some fields of study would no longer be welcome. For example, in 1998 the University of California at Berkeley established the Sultan Program in Arab Studies, funded by a Saudi prince. Some complained that by accepting funding for such a narrowly focused program, Berkeley was ignoring whole parts of the Middle East (i.e., the non-Arab parts) and potentially furthering only the Saudi viewpoint. It is because of such gifts that Congress in 1986 passed the University Disclosure Act, which requires public disclosure of any large foreign grant (defined as any amount more than \$250,000) to an institution that receives federal support.

How effective are the centers?

Kramer and others maintain that the scholars and experts trained in the centers have failed to predict some of the major changes and key events of the past 30 years in the Middle East (such as the Lebanese civil war of the mid-1970s, the Islamic revolution in Iran in

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1978-9, the rise of Islamic radicalism in the 90s, and so on), and that federal funding has apparently yielded little usable expertise to policymakers. If the United States nonetheless desires to continue to fund Middle Eastern studies centers, why not establish some kind of oversight to ensure that the programs of study indeed reflect the priority interests of the U.S.?

This has infuriated Middle East scholars, and prompted the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA), the professional association of scholars devoted to studying the region, to actively campaign against pending legislation that would establish such oversight. In a February 2004 letter to MESA's membership (the letter appeared in the Vol. 26 No. 1 issue of the MESA Newsletter), MESA president Dr. Laurie Brand urged MESA members to confront the threat posed by the "international higher education advisory board" that would be established by the proposed bill, H.R. 3077. (*see box below*)

Some current heads of federally funded Middle East Studies resource centers complain that they are targets of right-wing conservatives seeking to impose restrictions on the academic freedom of scholars. Dr. Rashid Khalidi, appointed last fall to the newly established Edward Said Chair of Middle East Studies at Columbia University (and previously head of the Middle East Studies center at the University of Chicago), noted in November 2003 that in terms of absolute funding, "Title VI grants...are peanuts in university and federal terms, but in terms of these fields, they're really important." Around 30 percent of his graduate students learned foreign languages on area study grants.... Because federal funding

is so crucial to these centers' survival, Khalidi says, the threat that H.R. 3077 poses to Middle Eastern studies in America is "deadly serious." The bill, he says, would do one of two things. Either it would "impose the teaching of one twisted version of Middle East reality, what I call terrorology, impose it at the taxpayers' expense

and not partisan viewpoints or biased perspectives. For the Jewish community, it is important to ensure that the study of Israel is included in these centers and that the community outreach programs and teacher training materials disseminated

by the centers reflect genuine objective scholarship. After all, we know that Saudi schools teach their children that Israel, Zionism and Jews are the enemy of Muslims; what is a Saudi-funded Middle East program in California teaching our teachers about Israel?

It is not enough, as Dr. Lisa Anderson (former MESA president and currently dean of the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University) wrote in the MESA newsletter of February 2003, to "acknowledge the failings of our work without embarrassment," to

admit to "a collective abdication of responsibility" by students eager to get jobs, by junior faculty wanting tenure, and by professors anxious to avoid upsetting local governments in order to preserve access to visas and research authorizations. We need to actively support efforts by Congress and private watchdogs to ensure continued openness and transparency, balance and objectivity, while protecting academic freedom and the right of individuals to express their personal views. It is also the right of the U.S. public to know how its money is being spent, and Middle East Studies is no exception. **A**



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as one central element in the way the subject is taught. Or, by subjecting self-respecting universities to conditions they will not under any circumstances accept, it would curtail the teaching of the Middle East." Some centers currently receiving Title VI funding have already said that if the legislation is passed, they will refuse future U.S. government funds.

The future of Middle East studies in the United States

Most Americans would agree with Dr. Daniel Pipes, founder of Campus Watch, a website devoted to exposing anti-Israel and anti-American bias on U.S. campuses, that "Americans need to know what terms like 'jihad' mean, and why we are being attacked.... This is at the very heart of our foreign and domestic policy." The question is how best to ensure that the taxpayers' money used to fund Middle Eastern studies around the country is promoting objective analysis and scholarship

The International Studies in Higher Education Act (H.R. 3077), passed unanimously by the U.S. House of Representatives in October 2003, is currently stalled in the Senate. It would create an advisory board that will investigate the impact and effectiveness of foreign studies programs that receive monies from the U.S. federal government as pertaining to national security. The board would also see that these programs reflect a diversity of opinions and viewpoints—furthering knowledge of the regions, rather than propaganda.