Introduction: The Many Crises of Middle East Studies

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It is hard to think of a world region today with more pressing social and political interest than the Middle East: hardly a day has passed in the previous decade without some event from the region making global front-page news. In academia, the region has long held a deep fascination for US scholars—from the establishment of departments of “Oriental” studies in the nineteenth century to the creation of federally funded, university-based national resource centers for Middle East studies (MES) in the 1950s and 1960s. But the Middle East—now often known in its expanded form as “the greater Middle East”—has also been at the center of ongoing controversy and debates about the relationships between knowledge and power, about the role of the federal government in the production of knowledge, and about ways of knowing “other” cultures and places. Current transformations of the university and the ways in which different forms of knowledge are valorized and institutionalized also have a profound impact on the study of the Middle East.

It is a well-worn truth that knowledge and power exist in an intimate and complex relationship, and examining this relationship as it evolves in particular contexts, times, and spaces remains a critical and urgent task. This is due both to the responsibility that scholars and citizens bear toward informed public discussion and policy formulation but also in order to protect the spaces of academic freedom, critical inquiry, and independent commentary at times of crisis and conflict.

We suggest that the greater Middle East is at the center of reassessments of the relationship between knowledge and power. The debates that are
taking place in the United States over the field of MES are local in many ways, focused on particular politics and policies through which control and resistance are being mounted. But the implications of these debates go beyond one small field of knowledge production and a limited number of US universities to encompass a much broader range of fields and academic inquiry more generally. At the heart of the matter are issues related to the securitization of academic knowledge in the name of the “national interest,” the challenges arising out of the possibilities of unbounded, transnational fields of scholarship and the future of the university as an institution.

In this context, it is particularly important to reflect on how global events in the twenty-first century seem to have overturned some generalizations that had become widely accepted in the last decade of the twentieth century. As the world sees increased militarism, deepened suspicions, swelled refugee flows, and renewed obstacles to the circulation of ideas and people, the happy assumptions of global flows and creative hybridities seem a thing of the past. These trends have implications for the field of MES and the ways in which knowledge about the region is produced.

These ongoing controversies and debates have culminated in a series of crises for MES, the analysis of which is at the heart of this volume. This book presents some of the findings of a decade-long (2000–2010) research project organized by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) in New York, which began with examining MES and expanded to investigate other area studies fields as well as the thrust toward the global in US universities. In the first phases of the project—reflected in this book—the focus was on the infrastructures for the production of knowledge on the Middle East and the reproduction of new generations of specialists on the region.

The Middle East at Center Stage

The Middle East, never far from the scene of world politics, is once again holding center stage as this volume goes to print in 2016. And once again, according to some powerful voices, much of the problems in the region and with the region are “in essence” a result of “age-old” enmities as well as fundamental differences between East and West, between Islam and the “Judeo-Christian” civilization. Although new words have appeared in the discourse, or have taken on new valences (“freedom,” “democracy,” “rule of law”), the refrain is familiar.
The renewed invocation of “civilization,” “culture,” and “religion” as central problems in the present and future of the region, the (perceived) refraction of these traits through the phenomenon of “Islamic terrorism” and its newly global scope, reach, and impact as well as the direct American and European military and political interventions in the region’s states, societies, and economies have specific implications for scholars and others who profess expert knowledge of the region, especially in the human and social sciences. First, this situation focuses attention on the type of expertise available on the Middle East—its content, adequacy, and “utility” as evaluated by different actors. Second, it brings to the fore the characteristics of experts and their relationship to those who make policies and govern the forces that have an impact on the region. And third, at a time of heightened polemics and media focus, scholars and experts become—admittedly in partial and incomplete ways—among the shapers of public discussion and opinion. In other words, academia becomes mobilized and drawn into the public sphere in particular ways and for specific purposes at times of crisis.

In the new millennium a number of important works have addressed the history of MES in the United States and the politics of knowledge that have shaped it. Some of this literature is occasioned by the public outcry on “the failure of Middle East studies” to predict the escalation of militant Islam generally and the events of September 11, 2001, specifically and has taken the form of short essays or journalistic articles. Other works have been longer in the making, indicating the felt need for a more in-depth assessment of the politics of the field and its relationship to US power and hegemony.

The context in which the relationship between knowledge and power is currently articulated vis-à-vis the Middle East is shaped by a variety of influences, operates at different levels, and produces different outcomes. This volume focuses on the construction of an academic field of “Middle East studies” in the United States as one particular output of this confluence. It seeks to understand the ways in which such a field is constituted as a domain of knowledge that is able to intervene in, as well as become the object of, the exercise of power.

The first part of this introductory chapter sketches the institutional context and the intellectual interests that have influenced the evolution of the study of the Middle East in the United States. It raises more questions than it answers, not least because the understanding of this long history of knowledge production is fraught with lacunae that future research may fruitfully
address. The second part of the introduction focuses on the configuration of the field in the new millennium, based on the arguments and perspectives presented by the authors of the different chapters, and highlights the common concerns that cross-cut the contributions gathered in this volume.

Studying the Middle East: The *Longue Durée*

In the past three decades perceptive and incisive studies on the relationship between knowledge and power with regard to the Middle East, the Orient, and Islam have emerged. Much of this work investigates the colonial period and the ways in which colonial imagination and governance constructed and transformed the peoples, cultures, and societies of the region. While some works trace the relationship between “East” and “West” and the scholarship that accompanied it over longer periods of time (see, e.g., Hentsch 1992; Lockman 2004, 2016), most are in-depth studies of particular moments in the connections between colonizer and colonized. These studies encompass a wide variety of topics ranging from the construction of state and nation to gender identities and to urban space. The types of knowledge production explored constitute Orientalism writ large: philology, literature, art, ethnology, history, folklore, statistics, architecture, military science, and so on. Central to a conceptual understanding of the region and its objects of study is also the practical arts of politics and domination.

Much less researched are the ways in which similar relationships, forms of domination, and knowledge production operate in postcolonial situations of continued unequal economic and political power, though one might see significant exceptions to this generalization in gender studies and in the reflexive turn in anthropology. This is not to minimize the ways in which the human and social sciences have incorporated an awareness of the situatedness of all scholarship but rather to note that few scholars have shown an interest in examining the ways in which humanistic and social scientific knowledge articulate with national and global political power and economic extraction (for an exception, see Mitchell 2002).

Among the lacunae is a perspective that emphasizes the long history of studying the Middle East in the United States (for an exception, see Lockman 2004, 2016). There are far more works on the practitioners of American Orientalism than on the twentieth-century institutionalization of scholarly interest in the Middle East. While there is a great deal of anecdotal
knowledge, much rigorous archival research is still needed. Studies that have laid the foundation for such research include Thomas Naff’s (1993) examination of how certain scholars chose to work in the region and especially Nancy Gallagher’s (1994) collection of conversations with Middle East historians. Promising studies bringing new understandings to the project of history are included in the volume *Histories of the Modern Middle East: New Directions* (2002), edited by Israel Gershoni, Hakan Erdem, and Ursula Wokock. Excellent recent overviews of the development of the field in the twentieth century are provided by Timothy Mitchell (2004) and Zachary Lockman (2004, 2016).

It is important to link the conceptual apparatus of American Orientalism and its successors to an institutional history of higher education in the United States, particularly how the study of world regions was institutionalized in the university through structural divisions of departments, disciplines, and interdisciplines. In addition, insight is needed into the ways in which this framework of institutions was reflected, shaped, and formed by their roles in the larger cultural and political contexts of American society. The interactions between the “producers, brokers, and users of knowledge” (Zunz 1994, 290) need to be explored through historical and chronological mapping benefiting from research in diverse disciplines such as American studies, the history of science, and the history of higher education.

Historical research on the American university emphasizes the mid-nineteenth century and early twentieth century as key periods in the development of the modern organization of knowledge production with the creation of departments and disciplines, the redefinition of the role of intellectuals, and the rise of research methodologies (Bender 1993; Reuben 1996; Haskell 1998; Rothblatt and Wittrock 1993). Many of today’s scholarly societies were established during this time—for example, the American Oriental Society (1842), the American Ethnological Society (1842), and the Modern Language Association (1883)—and reflected their founders’ broader efforts to establish their authority to categorize and disseminate information. This was also America’s “golden age of museums,” when private philanthropists such as Andrew Carnegie, J. P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, and Phoebe Apperson Hearst sponsored large-scale collecting expeditions (Conn 1998; AAAS 1999) and funded the construction of museums as centers of public enlightenment. Founded in this period also were the American Antiquarian Society (1812) and the Smithsonian Institution (1847), as well as the early and
influential academic centers on the Middle East: the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, Harvard University’s Semitic Museum, the Hartford Seminary, the Departments of Oriental Languages and Literatures at Princeton, Yale, Columbia, and the University of Pennsylvania, among others.

Many crucial questions emerged about knowledge production during this period: How was research on the region conceptualized, promoted, and presented? Which university departments and disciplines explored this area of the world, and how was knowledge about the Middle East defined and organized in the different disciplines? What kinds of alternative, perhaps competing, cultural and political geographies existed? Also part of this empirical set are questions about the students, the primary consumers of knowledge production: When did academic majors in these fields become possible and desirable? What individual courses were offered, and was the study of the Middle East part of more general courses? Which languages were taught, how, and by whom? Is it possible to develop profiles of students engaged in such study or obtain basic information about course enrollment and the like? Did students have or receive any firsthand experience of the region?

Equally important is the nature of the relations between American universities and research institutions and those established by the United States in the Middle East: the American School for Girls (1835), which became the American Junior College for Women (1924); Robert College in Istanbul (1863), which is now Bogazici University; and the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut (1866), which became the American University of Beirut. What interactions obtained between them? To what extent were personnel, including graduates of these institutions, moving between careers in the United States and in the Middle East?

In this period, American museums and overseas centers focused on the collection and display of Middle East–related materials, including objects of natural history, archaeology, ethnography, and art. How did these institutional representations and publications influence the production of knowledge? Among the institutions and activities that can be mentioned here were the Albright Institute in Jerusalem, the American Schools of Oriental Research (founded in 1900), and the archaeological expeditions starting in the 1880s to Mesopotamia and the Nile Valley, organized by the University of Pennsylvania (see Kuklick 1996), and to Egypt, organized by the University of California, Berkeley, and funded by Phoebe Hearst. What were the constraints and opportunities afforded by different kinds of sponsorship? Were
there patterns in funding and in funding sources? Were there debates and justifications in the documentary record about the expenditures that were presented to institutional administrators, boards, or trustees?

Through their shared interest in the region, a wide range of individuals moving within these networks formed epistemic communities and interacted with universities in particular ways. What was the nature of the relationship between academic knowledge and that generated by missionaries, travelers, colonial officers, journalists, and diplomats? What kinds of circulations and exchanges of personnel, information, and resources took place between departments, museums, and associations?

The genealogies of scholarship should include pivotal scholars and other important figures, their institutional affiliations, personal histories, and academic mobility and professional legacies in developing research approaches, schools of thought, and intellectual networks. One important example in this respect is the Lebanese historian Philip Hitti, who was invited to Princeton University in 1927 and then founded its program in Arabic and Islamic studies (for other examples, see Hourani 1980; Gallagher 1994; Kaplan 1993; Naff 1993).

Finally, emphasis should be placed on the formation of intellectual canons through an analysis of seminal books and set curricula about how to “properly” approach the study of the Middle East. What was the nature of these canons? How were they negotiated, consolidated, and changed? How did they unite, limit, or divide communities of inquirers? Who were the gatekeepers of these canons who pronounced on issues of intellectual authenticity and heresy? And to what degree do contemporary canons continue these traditions?

Studying the Middle East: Area Studies

Currently, practitioners of MES in the United States labor under multiple and contradictory burdens: combating accusations of “failure,” dealing with increased political scrutiny and attempts to institute an apparatus of surveillance, high demands from students for courses and especially language teaching, high demands for media commentary and for public education and outreach. With 9/11, the war on Iraq, the “war on terror,” the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the “Arab Spring,” the political and ideological context determines to the greatest degree the politics of the field. However, other
factors should also be considered. As emphasized in the historical overview, it is always important to understand the institutional infrastructure for the production of knowledge at any particular time. The size and characteristics of the scholarly community, the representation of disciplines in the field, the university structure, the availability of funding for training and research—all these contribute to the ability of scholars to respond to demands for particular kinds of knowledge and to shape how they deliver this knowledge. So too do the changing conditions of higher education more generally in the United States, as some of the contributors point out. The gradual erosion of tenure and the resulting challenges to academic freedom, the emergence of “civility” as a hiring criterion, and the growing power of private donors to not only name buildings but also create degree programs are all examples of the conditions that deeply affect US scholars’ ability to produce knowledge and their willingness to take perceived risks or challenge the status quo.

The works by Lockman (2004, 2016) and Mitchell (2004) detail MES’s beginnings in the United States in the post–World War II era when “area studies” grew as a framework for constructing the kind of knowledge about world regions needed for the new role of the United States as a superpower. They describe how three institutional actors—universities, the federal government, and private philanthropic foundations—helped define the field. The ways in which funding was made available and in which universities organized training created area studies as interdisciplinary fields, which emphasized a strong foundation in the language, history, and culture of a world region but gave center stage to the social sciences as the depository of methodological and theoretical skills, which would enable the production of “useful” knowledge.

The social sciences and their professionalization are a product and process of the twentieth century. Therefore, studies of colonial and Orientalist forms of knowledge production can help us only so much to understand how these new tools of power operated and the ways in which they constructed their object of study and methods of analysis. The works cited above emphasize the “dramatic growth” of area studies and MES especially in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet it is important to point out that MES remained one of the smallest of the area studies, with much lower numbers of affiliated faculty compared to scholars of Latin America (the largest group), Africa, and certainly Southeast Asia. The number of MES university centers and departments also reflected the small size of this field.
By the 1990s funding from private foundations sharply decreased (though the same was not true of federal government sources), and there was a turning away by donors as well as some scholars from area studies in general. This reflected two important trends: a methodological turn in the disciplines of economics, political science, and sociology, which led to strong emphasis on quantitative tools and methods that did not require in-depth field research and the concurrent currency of globalization theories that shifted the emphasis of research and analysis to a large degree from the local and national terrain to the global level. Universities responded, more or less swiftly, to the shifts in funding and perceived interest and utility by creating new centers and departments of “global” or “international” studies or by focusing on contemporary cross-national themes like the environment, migration, or terrorism rather than regions per se. Area studies centers became increasingly the domain of scholars inclined to produce in-depth, contextual work on particular places rather than to search for universal theories or explanations, which for many social scientists meant a major break with the mainstream scholarship in their disciplines.

MES in the United States (like most of the other area studies) therefore entered the twenty-first century with a somewhat changed configuration from that of the previous four or five decades of its existence. The social sciences were retreating from regional study, while the humanities—and a broader cultural and linguistic turn—were becoming more central to the ways in which the field was defined and developed.

Studying the Middle East: Into the New Millennium

Many of the widely accepted certainties of the last decade of the twentieth century have been challenged—if not completely overturned—by global events in the first decade of the new century. As mentioned above, increased militarism and security restrictions have created new obstacles to the circulation of ideas and people and have deepened suspicions. It will be important to observe the impact of these developments on the constitution of fields of international training and research and on the ways in which the Middle East will be represented and talked about in academic and public spheres.

In terms of the securitization of knowledge, a great deal has been written in the press and academic newsletters about the worrying trends in the United States: attempts to control the uses of federal funding in MES centers
at universities, increased scrutiny of course curricula and of the opinions and activities of faculty members, hindrance of exchanges and visits by international scholars, and establishment of new funding programs and research centers at universities with support from the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Defense. Three major claims inform the critiques launched by those who profess to speak for the “national interest”: that MES is largely irrelevant because it focuses on historical and literary studies, that it is pervaded by a postmodernist and anti-American perspective (due to the pernicious influence of Edward Said), and that it is peopled by scholars of Middle Eastern origins who, therefore, do not have the national interest at heart. These claims are not based on actual data but on anecdotal evidence and polemical arguments.2

Finally, it is worth noting the establishment, since the 1960s, of a large number of “think tanks” and private as well as governmental special purpose social science and public policy organizations. The extent to which MES appears as a largely humanistic field may be directly related to the burgeoning role of such centers in siphoning social scientists from the university. Such centers have the effect of narrowing knowledge to specific agendas and outcomes and limiting space for contending perspectives. The question becomes, to what extent can the university offer a space for a contrasting set of pluralistic, varied, and innovative visions?3

The SSRC Project and This Volume

*Middle East Studies for the New Millennium: Infrastructures of Knowledge* emerges out of a large-scale comparative study of Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, and Eurasia area studies centers carried out by SSRC in the period 2000–2010. An initial phase was funded by the Ford Foundation and included surveys and consultation meetings aiming at reenvisioning MES in global contexts. More expansive second and third phases were funded by the US Department of Education’s Title VI program. At this later stage, from 2005 to 2008, SSRC assembled a team of researchers to develop a detailed investigation of area studies centers on twelve US campuses. Through site visits that included interviews with key center personnel, senior administrators, deans, vice-provosts, and social science department chairs, as well as focus groups with faculty and doctoral students, the SSRC team amassed a rich cache of qualitative material: some ten thousand transcribed pages of
over two hundred interviews, thirty focus groups, and detailed information about relevant university programming. This book is informed by all of this evidence as well as by consultation meetings, workshops, and presentations in various forums. The contributors to this volume were participants in one or more consultation meetings or were directly involved with data collection and analysis at different stages of the project. (More details about data sources, activities, and outputs are provided in the methodological appendix.) All publications produced from this project use a uniform set of institutional pseudonyms, as discussed in the appendix.

From the wealth of issues researched throughout this project, this volume is concerned with three main themes: the relationship between MES and various disciplines (political science, sociology, economics, and geography), current reformulations and new emphases in MES (in terms of university restructuring, language training, and scholarly trends), the politics of knowledge, and the impact on the field of MES of the many crises in the region.

Disciplines and Their Boundaries

Part 1 of this volume takes up the issue of disciplines and area studies as interdisciplinary fields. The authors trace challenges and trajectories in the production of social scientific and disciplinary knowledge about the Middle East in the American academy, focusing on political science, sociology, economics, and geography. Taken together, these chapters remind us that area studies centers were meant to differ from earlier Orientalist/civilizational scholarly traditions because the social sciences were believed to be problem-solving disciplines. In the new, global context of American academia, however, questions arise about whether and how regionally organized intellectual traditions ought to fit in. Taken separately, the chapters demonstrate how the relationship between disciplines and area studies differs according to the definition of the “universal,” the connection with world regions, and the “prestige area” for theorizing and research within each discipline. This shows us that we need far more nuanced understandings of the ways in which area studies fit, or do not, within disciplinary priorities. Furthermore, the Middle East raises a set of specific problems for the various disciplines in ways that may not arise in the study of other world regions.

Lisa Wedeen’s chapter challenges the ascendance of method in political science, as the discipline has become increasingly compelled by the uncritical
positivist separation of fact and value in ways that have devalued area studies scholarship in the field. She points out that in the case of the Middle East, the discipline has too often produced institutionalist or culturalist analyses that are uncritical of American involvement in the region. Moreover, such studies often reduce culture to traits specific to Arabs or Muslims in order to point out characteristics deemed to prevent progress, without analyzing the broader historical context or power relations in the region. These approaches have helped define the Middle East, Wedeen argues, as a space in need of intervention.

Wedeen traces the impact of rational choice theory in political science in the mid-1980s and the increasingly dismissive approach to cultural and symbolic systems of representation in favor of the study of politics focused on material interests. She shows that a number of studies in the 1990s began to draw attention to broader cultural processes reflected in postcommunist democratic transitions, ethnic violence, identity politics, and religious fundamentalism. But even then, Wedeen notes, political scientists resorted to a version of culture that denoted regional peculiarities or cultural differences that might explain political conflict or lack of democratic development. This kind of cultural essentialism became more pronounced in the discussions about the Middle East after 9/11.

Thus political science's ambivalence to area studies is defined on the one hand by its methodological turn toward the production of universal theories and the concomitant rejection of work that it deems overly relativistic and interdisciplinary and on the other hand by a reductionist approach to culture and an uncritical view of American engagement in the region. Only the subfield of American politics served as exception, Wedeen notes; it was understood as a nonarea that unifies liberalism and science and therefore sets the intellectual and methodological standards for the rest of the discipline. In such a scholarly and political context, the study of the Middle East “became too political for political science.”

Turning to another major social science discipline, Reşat Kasaba examines from a historical perspective the connection between area studies and sociology and describes the cyclical relationship between the two as a push-and-pull reaction to particular political imperatives. He traces variations between European and American sociology at the beginning of the twentieth century and focuses specifically on how American social science became intertwined with US foreign policy during the interwar period, as the demand for experts
on foreign regions grew. This led to a series of internal disciplinary critiques and crises about the relationship between the field and the US government’s defense and intelligence priorities, aptly illustrated by the Troy and Camelot projects. Furthermore, Kasaba discusses the importance of modernization theory in engaging American sociology in the study of “foreign areas.” Despite the possibility of applying alternative approaches to the study of international development, sociologists’ overall interest, he suggests, was to use the particular knowledge produced in area studies to prove the accuracy of broader theories and generalizations.

Kasaba extends this discussion by turning to the development of sociology in the Middle East. The discipline was constituted there at the same time it was in the United States and Europe, and it was rooted in similar interests: social integration, state formation, and national identity. Tracing variation in the themes of interest to Middle Eastern sociologists, Kasaba argues that sociological thought in the region has challenged—at least since the 1990s—the discipline more broadly, contesting, for example, the modernization theory through a critique of the purported incompatibility of Islam and modernity.

Overall, writes Kasaba, the challenge facing sociology in the United States and in the Middle East is increasing fragmentation and parceling within the discipline, which creates significant barriers to studying world regions like the Middle East. Title VI centers, he argues, have the potential to foster communication and collaboration in ways that might help unify some of the disjointed research on the region. However, parallels between the political climate today and during the Cold War in terms of the relationship between academia and the US government need to also be considered, particularly in terms of federal funding.

Karen Pfeifer traces the persistent lack of interaction between the discipline of economics and MES, which she attributes to several differences between economists and area studies specialists: different methodological and intellectual preoccupations, varying means for dissemination of research, and variation in the criteria for hiring and promotion in universities. Pfeifer analyzes how international financial institutions (IFIs) influence economists’ approach to the study of the region and argues that the combination of stabilization, liberalization, and privatization programs has helped entrench Western and neoclassical economic ideas in research on and about the Middle East.
She examines two regional networks as case studies—the Middle East Economic Association (MEEA), based in the United States, and the Economic Research Forum for the Arab World, Turkey, and Iran (ERF), based in Cairo—noting significant overlaps in their mission, membership, and training programs. Both networks act as focal points for disciplinary work on the region by mentoring and training future generations, shaping research agendas, and providing publication and dissemination outlets. But they differ in important ways as well, particularly in terms of their adherence to IFI research agendas. Neoliberal programs that apply the same policies to all situations have been increasingly criticized, Pfeifer observes, by both activists and academics. This leads her to posit a potentially more constructive dialogue between MES and economics in years to come.

The final chapter in this part of the volume focuses on the “spatial turn” in the discipline of geography, analyzed by Amy Mills and Timur Hammond. Spatial methodologies, the authors contend, provide a means to understand the broader social, political, and economic processes that have underpinned the construction and experience of the Middle East by Western scholars. Although geography has played a relatively minor role in this spatial turn, Mills and Hammond show that debates within geography are closely connected to debates within area studies more generally. For example, initial federal investments in area studies during the Cold War era, with the intention to produce knowledge for national security purposes, led geography to embrace quantitative methods and universal theoretical models. Echoing much of the other disciplinary authors’ contributions in this part of the volume, Mills and Hammond point out that the kind of deep, contextual knowledge promoted by area studies became increasingly devalued, and the distance between area studies and geography grew. Even research that encompasses both geography and MES often proceeds with no formal links between the two disciplines, particularly because many Title VI MES centers are located in universities with no geography departments. Thus many graduate students who use spatial approaches in their work in MES do so from within departments other than geography.

Mills and Hammond close with a positive view of a newer generation of geography scholars who are actively engaged in interdisciplinary work on the Middle East and point to the importance of scholarly networks, conferences, and publication series that elevate scholars beyond their university affiliation. The spatial turn’s interdisciplinary nature has the potential, the authors
suggest, to transform area studies by problematizing both regional boundaries and the extent to which knowledge is situated in a global context in which the Middle East and other regions are deeply interconnected.

Middle East Studies and the University

Part 2 of the volume identifies trends in the organization of knowledge within MES itself, examining the conceptual and methodological scope of recent dissertations on the region, enrollments in courses in Arabic and other Middle Eastern languages, and the emergence or reemergence of thematic organizational forms, such as the rise of Islamic studies. The chapters in this part alert us to the changing institutional forms and architectures through which knowledge on the region is produced and to the capacities needed to meet current demands from students, university administrators, and outside (including government) interests. These changes are also related in an integral way to the emergence of “the global” as a major organizational form within the American university of the twenty-first century.

The first chapter in this part, by Jonathan Friedman and Cynthia Miller-Idriss, thus analyzes the position of the “area studies center” as a major institutional form in the context of a US university that seeks to transform itself into a global institution. They argue that area studies centers have for decades been a critical link between the national and the global in US academia but that their role has become more uncertain in the context of contemporary university internationalization. The authors ask whether and how current university internationalization efforts align with area studies centers’ goals to increase expertise on the world beyond US borders. To answer such questions, they look at the case of New York University (NYU) and its Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies and find that two separate and distinct internationalization logics coexist at NYU and in the contemporary university more generally: the specialist and the cosmopolitan.

The specialist logic promotes deep learning about foreign places, cultures, and languages by immersion in local settings through home stays or extended study abroad. Its roots are in the Cold War era when the world was seen as a set of discrete regions and when universities—and area studies in particular—were viewed as key partners in a collective aim to create an elite cadre of regional experts well versed in foreign cultural norms and languages. In contrast, the cosmopolitan logic promotes breadth over depth in global
experiences. Rather than aim for deep specialist training, the goal of the cosmopolitan logic is to produce global citizens who would be able to address common problems of humanity, even if they lack the linguistic proficiency or deep knowledge to understand cultural difference in larger and historical contexts.

Friedman and Miller-Idriss argue that both logics operate simultaneously in American universities but that it is the cosmopolitan logic that is currently on the rise. In the NYU case, the authors find that these logics work in largely separate but parallel ways rather than in integrated ones. There is no ideal or objective model for universities to follow in organizing knowledge about the rest of the world. But the authors suggest that the newer cosmopolitan logic may not be beneficial to area studies centers in their aim to promote a different kind of learning.

In their contribution, Elizabeth Worden and Jeremy Browne take up an issue that has been the focus of attention since the events of 9/11 and the ensuing “critique” of MES: the question of whether and how universities provide adequate training for the study of Arabic and other Middle Eastern languages. The authors combine data from the US Department of Education’s Evaluation of Exchange, Language, International and Area Studies (EELIAS) database with findings from Worden’s qualitative research of six Title VI–funded Centers for Middle East Studies across the country in order to analyze course enrollment, attrition rates, language instructor status, and work placement of students after graduation.

Worden and Browne trace the history of government funding for foreign language instruction in US universities through Title VI support since the end of World War II. This funding was provided with the hope that students from these programs would go on to work as diplomats, intelligence experts, or military officers. But, the authors argue, there is a disconnect between the government’s need for proficient speakers of Middle Eastern languages and the ability of Title VI centers to produce them, particularly at the MA level.

Several structural and cultural factors help explain why it has been difficult for universities to produce significant numbers of fluent Arabic speakers. First, on a structural level, university curriculum requirements and the nature of MA programs often make it difficult for students to learn the language in the time constraints of a two-year graduate program. Second, language instructors do not enjoy high professional status—their salaries are lower than those of tenure-track faculty, and they have less job security—which makes it
harder for universities to attract qualified teachers. Third, some social science disciplines, such as political science, devalue and even discourage foreign language learning (along with conducting area studies research, often perceived as subjective) because of the additional time required to become proficient in the language, which delays graduation. Fourth, students often find languages such as Arabic difficult to learn, which leads them to abandon their language studies after the first or second year.

In conclusion, Worden and Browne argue that more coordinated efforts and support from across the university are needed in order to help more students attain higher levels of linguistic competency and fluency. Suggestions range from increasing financial assistance for language instruction and reevaluating the roles and statuses of language teachers to implementing language courses at an earlier level of education—in undergraduate studies and even high school—and ensuring that the funding is also used to send students abroad for immersion study.

Turning from language acquisition to the themes, topics, and methods taken up by a new generation of MES scholars, Laura Bier has analyzed 1,864 PhD dissertations across the disciplines in the decade 2000–2010. Because of the magnitude of the research, Bier presents a qualitative analysis of broad methodological and empirical trends in six out of the fourteen disciplines surveyed: political science, sociology, anthropology, economics, history, and MES.

In examining dissertations in sociology, economics, and political science, Bier’s findings add to the analyses by Wedeen, Kasaba, and Pfeifer. Like these authors, Bier argues that the relationship between the social sciences and area studies is a tense one, as social scientists with regional training pursue universal models and at the same time try to challenge the dominance of the universalist approach. Bier notes that neoliberalism as a political project provides an analytical framework for many dissertations in sociology and that—echoing Pfeifer’s findings—economic knowledge about the Middle East is deeply embedded in the Washington Consensus and neoliberal economic agendas more broadly. In both disciplines, however, dissertations have increasingly focused on local and regional meanings, trajectories, and variation in ways that show that key assumptions about Islam and the Middle East are increasingly being challenged. For example, Bier points to a major trend in political science toward the study of Islamist political movements and the relationship between the state and Islam and between Islam and democracy,
which she sees as a potential corrective to the assumption that Islam is fundamentally incompatible with democratization. But at the same time, she finds that many of the dissertations in her analysis assume an ontological problem between Islam and pluralism, compared to secularism.

Bier’s analysis of dissertations in anthropology, history, and MES shows the enduring importance of studies of gender, colonialism, the nation, and Islam, situated within cultural studies and within poststructuralist, feminist, and postcolonial theories. Identity emerges as a dominant theme, as do questions of marginality, hybridity, difference, and governance. She notes that a new generation of scholars has found innovative ways to read and use evidence, drawing on autobiography, newspaper and magazine articles, and court records to tease out the meaning of social events and to offer new understandings of social history from the perspective of different actors.

Across these themes, Bier identifies geographic gaps and understudied countries and societies. These gaps are partly explained by the institutional divisions between different area studies departments, which translate into epistemological divisions as well. Furthermore, Bier argues that trends in MES are not attributable only to changing political realities, but are also linked to methodological disciplinary currents as well as to the relationship between area studies and the broader norms and structures of the disciplines. She outlines several topics with cross-disciplinary salience: women and gender, Islam, ethnicity, the nation-state and the formation of national identities, and, increasingly, transnational processes.

In the next chapter, Charles Kurzman and Carl W. Ernst demonstrate that the renewed and substantial growth in the field of Islamic studies traced by Laura Bier is not just a thematic focus but also an institutional trend. The authors analyze the locations and contexts for the development of Islamic studies in US universities, explaining the field’s growth as attributable in part to exaggerated concerns about national security. They are critical of the field’s location within institutions, pointing out that across time—from the first departments of Oriental and Near Eastern studies to more recent interdisciplinary programs and departments—Islamic studies programs have been constrained by the field’s institutionalization within the academy. They trace the development of Islamic studies within various departments, such as Near Eastern languages and civilizations or religious studies, and suggest that the area studies framework can also impose constraints on Islamic studies if it is not attentive to issues that cross geographic boundaries, such as centuries-old
migration in and out of the region, the transregional character of religious movements, and the importance of global communication.

More recently, scholars have been promoting cross-regional approaches to the study of the Middle East, but their efforts are sometimes hampered by institutional challenges that organize knowledge into clearly defined regions: from job definitions based on specific regions to disciplinary priorities, funding requirements, language skill requirements, the framing of professional associations, or disciplinary classifications of academic book publishers. Several US universities have encouraged cross-regional approaches to the study of Islam by creating more teaching positions and courses, joint programs in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, and conferences. Yet Kurzman and Ernst also point out that these programs and centers face challenges and disadvantages, including access to federal funding. The authors see the expansion of Islamic studies as an interdisciplinary area of research as the best course of action for a successful future of this field.

The Politics of Knowledge

In part 3 three chapters explore the politics of knowledge and the political environment animating MES in the contemporary context. What can and cannot be said? What forces structure and restrict freedom of speech, censorship and self-censorship, or the so-called chilling effects? Using political and diplomatic archives, interviews with faculty and administrators, and other sources, the contributors in this part trace not only how knowledge is produced but also how it is silenced, given the complex and changing politics characterizing US–Middle Eastern relations.

The chapter by Seteney Shami and Marcial Godoy-Anativia focuses on the themes of campus surveillance and public criticism of MES to explore the immediate and enduring impacts of 9/11 and its aftermath on academic practices and institutional architectures. Regarding the field of MES as “the canary in the mineshaft,” the authors argue that many of these dynamics apply to other area studies as well and even further afield to neighboring disciplines and intellectual arenas. At the broadest level, the polemics surrounding MES call into question the “utility” of the social sciences and the humanities and the role of the university in society. Close investigation of these debates and their practical “applications”—establishing systems of surveillance and certain types of
accountability—thus shows implications that go beyond the fate of one rather small intellectual field.

From this vantage point, this chapter examines changes in daily practices on campuses, institutional architectures, and intellectual trends in MES, as perceived and articulated in interviews with faculty, students, and administrators. The research shows mixed results, both negative and positive: criticism concerning the “irrelevance” of MES is accompanied by increased public demand for academic information and outreach activities; attempts to establish mechanisms for outside intervention in university centers of MES is accompanied by increased interest by university administrators in the importance of the field; dismissal by some politicians of the ability of universities to teach Arabic to fulfill national needs is accompanied by skyrocketing demand from students for language classes. The intellectual gains and losses are soberly evaluated by the interviewees: from fears that the study of the Middle East will simply become “Terrorism 101” to hopes that more and more students will be drawn to a more meaningful intellectual engagement with the region.

Importantly, all this takes place in a context of broader economic cutbacks, severe cuts in funding from federal sources, and a more general decline in resources across the university. Moreover, students are increasingly viewed as customers and the commercialization of the university institution is growing. The authors state that the twin processes of securitization and privatization of knowledge are at the heart of the challenges facing MES and its allied and neighboring fields.

In the next chapter, Ussama Makdisi turns to the question of how American scholarship about the Middle East has changed over the past century, arguing that we are currently in a moment of major transformation toward a more critical, postnationalist approach that is more attentive to complexities within the United States and the region. This is a particularly strong trend in Middle East area studies as well as in the field of American studies, and Makdisi is intrigued by the use of new methodologies to illuminate the history of US-Arab relations. Not all work has moved in this direction, however; Makdisi points out the many ways in which stereotypes persist in the framing of both places, positioning innocent America against the “inherent depravity” of Islam and the people and places of the Middle East. Such stereotypes are particularly persistent in popular culture and in books written for a general audience, as well as in some academic circles where the notion of a clash of
civilizations or essentialist depictions of Arabs, Muslims, Islam, or the region endure.

Makdisi begins his historical overview with nineteenth-century missionary chronicles and travelogues, which praised American virtues and framed the American attitude toward the region as an inherently benevolent one. Throughout the twentieth century, he argues, the theme of American benevolence and exceptionalism persisted, as did the image of the United States as a broker of peace between Palestine and Israel. Indeed, the author argues, the Arab-Israeli conflict and US support for Israel has been a major reason for the lack of critical historiography of US power in the region.

In this politicized climate, Said’s seminal book *Orientalism* simultaneously challenged American historiography and pushed it in new interdisciplinary directions. According to Makdisi, *Orientalism* did not do this on its own, but it provided a foundation for further work to create deeper and more critical analyses of the region’s history and the history of empire in Middle Eastern countries. *Orientalism* thus led to a new, more critical engagement with questions of power, representation, and US-Arab relations. This evolution is incomplete, Makdisi suggests. More recent scholarship that has traced the impact of cultural opposition and engagement with the Middle East on American identity, for example, has still neglected to include voices from the region itself. Makdisi argues that this ought to be the task of the nascent critical American historiography of the region. It ought not to deny hierarchies of racial, economic, and political power but has to be critically aware of how concepts like “Islam” and “the West” are essentialized and how we can understand the meaning of cultural clashes involving different groups of Americans and Arabs.

The final chapter in this part, by Irene Gendzier, critically examines issues of academic freedom and the kinds of knowledge and information presented by popular media and the press. She contends that ignorance has strategic value and explains the fear of informed public opinion, tracing efforts by the US government to stifle opposition to its policies in the Middle East using the example of official deception by the George W. Bush administration about the US invasion of Iraq and the mainstream US media’s complicity in this process. The practice of using military analysts as news commentators, as was the case in the lead-up to the war, is another example. Gendzier argues that media coverage of crises in the Middle East (most notably, the Israel-Palestine conflict) usually lacks adequate historical explanation and
rarely allows for the voices of people from the region to be heard. Moreover, the perpetuation of stereotypical representations of the region—what Gendzier calls “the caricatured images that pass for analysis”—has the paradoxical effect of reinforcing the taboo around the region while making it a frequent theme of discussion in popular and political discourse. Information that challenges conventional sources does exist, but it requires time and effort to retrieve. This is what Gendzier calls “the struggle for knowledge”: getting information about war and conflict and its various costs in the region, along with who supports those conflicts and why.

Such stifling of criticism, Gendzier argues, significantly affects university campuses. She addresses right-wing critiques of universities’ liberal biases vis-à-vis the region as well as of the failure of Middle East experts to predict the events of 9/11. Such critiques push universities to promote allegiance to, rather than criticism of, US policies. She also discusses the proposed legislation, HR 3077, designed to amend the Title VI grant program. Among other provisions, this legislation called for the establishment of an advisory board to investigate the activities of grant recipients and make recommendations in line with the program’s purposes—which a number of professional associations and research institutions criticized for its infringement on academic freedom. More broadly, Gendzier reflects on how such external attacks on MES may have intimidated faculty and university administrators and have led to the cancellation of campus conferences or meetings and to blocking visits by internationally recognized scholars on Israel and Palestine; she argues, further, that such efforts reflect an impoverished intellectual and political environment.

Conclusion: Into the New Millennium

In her masterful afterword to this volume Lisa Anderson deplores the state of Middle East social sciences, which she describes as demoralized, lacking academic freedom and reliable research data, and functioning in a general climate of repression, neglect, and isolation. Such conditions call into question the extent to which future social scientists will be able to build supportive scholarly communities or develop critical perspectives so key to social science research and the investigation of questions of public import. Echoing discussions in this volume on methodological shifts in the social science disciplines, Anderson argues that the quantitative turn has produced a narrow,
mechanical field unable to move forward in ways that attend to the diversity of the social and political world. As the field has emphasized technical skills over moral imperatives and as the institutional contexts of US universities has changed, the result has been a simultaneous narrowing of the field and a projection of greater universalization for a global world.

For Anderson, the Middle East serves here as an instructive case study. Complex identities and persistent instability and volatility, combined with a lack of quantitative data on the region, defy Western social scientists trained to look for patterns and make predictions rather than untangle complex cultural phenomena. Few speak the languages of the region or have lived there. The Middle East will never be the kind of case for which Western social scientists have been trained because there is no “essence” to capture: it defies attempts to be presented as a contained or coherent entity.

Anderson’s chapter reminds us that just as philology, ethnology/anthropology, and history fulfilled the needs of colonial power, so the social sciences emerged, in part, to fulfill the needs of global nation-state hegemons for external domination. This latter role remains less articulated, however. Better recognized is the social sciences’ contribution to the internal consolidation of nation-states, though more detailed investigations of this in both Western and postcolonial societies are needed. At the same time, fields of knowledge have their own lives and trajectories, centers and peripheries, hegemonic and marginalized practices. The relationship between knowledge and power is therefore not a simple, unilateral one, not least because power is not external to knowledge fields and institutions but operates within them.

In this volume we have aimed to draw a portrait of the issues animating and challenging the field of MES in their academic and national contexts. Our contention is that the topic of the future of area studies and MES has been, in the main, treated in rather facile ways through polemics and vested interests, whether within the university or without. By examining the shaping of the field through epistemologies, trends, trajectories, themes and topics, this volume focuses on both disciplinary and institutional constraints and opportunities that shape the study of the Middle East region and its increasingly complex relationship with the United States. The chapters variously document, analyze, and critique prevailing concepts, practices, and architectures of knowledge. They examine how region, religion, language, and other notions have come to define and signify “the greater Middle East.” The authors look into the roles of different parts of the university (centers, departments, language labs, study
abroad units, etc.) as well as the roles of federal agencies, professional associations, international organizations, and scholarly networks in creating and transforming the field. Scholarly location emerges as central to defining who is heard and who is not heard, and by whom.

We see this exercise as the opening up of a research agenda and as “field building,” in the best traditions of SSRC, rather than as a masterful rejoinder to the debates and questions that launched this line of inquiry. The issues raised by the particular historical conjuncture in the first decade of the new millennium for the relations between knowledge and power are surely enduring.

Notes

1. Interest in investigating their fields’ historical development has surfaced in other area studies as well, with attention to cultural and political contexts. Latin American studies has been especially cognizant of political aspects (Drake and Hilbink 2003; Berger 1995). Other publications that offer parallels and research models include Engerman’s (2003) work on Russian studies, with a focus on the motivations of American intellectuals; and Bond and Gibson’s (2002) book addressing the increasingly contested role of Africanists in the United States as gatekeepers of knowledge about Africa. This research is part of the considerable scholarship on and recent debates over the place and value of area studies within the US academy, much of which is outside the immediate concern and temporal limitations of this project. Yet in the process of discussing whether or not area studies continue to have scholarly relevance, some critical issues have been addressed (Mitchell 2003; Drake and Hilbink 2003; Mirsepassi, Basu, and Weaver 2003; Kramer 2001; Szanton 2001). Whereas earlier scholarship focused on the ways in which knowledge generated from area studies contributed to the development of particular disciplines (e.g., Binder 1976; McCaughey 1984; Bates, O’Barr, and Mudimbe 1993), in the past two decades there has been a discernible shift to examinations of how knowledge is a product of the interstices between disciplines (Rafael 1994; Tessler 1999; Cooper and Packard 1997; Szanton 2001; Miyoshi and Harootunian 2002; Vitalis 2002).

2. It is interesting to note similarities to and differences from another time of internal and external conflict for the United States, the Vietnam War period. Noam Chomsky’s essay “Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship,” first published in 1969, assesses the role of liberal scholarship in providing ideological legitimization for the policies of “rural pacification,” forced urbanization, and military violence in Vietnam. He
argues that liberal scholarship consistently underplays, if not denigrates, the role of mass movements in favor of “forces of order” that end up being complicit with the exercise of power in the interest of US hegemony. Chomsky quotes Senator William Fulbright’s statement that the university has betrayed “the public trust” because social scientists are not playing their role of providing a critique and counterweight to the military-industrial complex and being “responsible and independent critics of the government’s policies” (2003, 2–3). Chomsky goes on to criticize the development of a “technical intelligentsia” (4), which looks to the social sciences (psychology, sociology, systems analysis, and political science) rather than “philosophy and history” to inform power. He argues that the more this intelligentsia is assimilated into the center of power, the less likely there is to be a critical social science that understands and is able to explain the nature of the conflicts that the United States is involved in, let alone critique its policies.

3. For a critical examination of this question from the viewpoint of the discipline of anthropology, see Deeb and Winegar 2015.

References


