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Middle Eastern Studies in the U.S.

Abstract

This paper is a short history of foreign language and area studies (FLAS) programs in the U.S. and, in particular, those relating to the Middle East. It covers the last 50 years of the development of these programs, since the National Defense Education Act was passed by Congress in 1958. The universities and colleges participating in the programs are mentioned along with the typical organization of departments or centers of Near/Middle Eastern Studies.

I had originally planned to write about my current research at New York University. Since, however, I discovered that this is an anniversary conference observing 55 years of Oriental Studies becoming part and parcel of the Polish Academy of Sciences, I decided to write about the development of ‘Oriental Studies’ in the U.S. At the beginning we are faced with the problem of terminology. Since Edward S a i d’s *Orientalism* was published 30 years ago, scholars in many countries, but especially in the United States, have liked to disassociate themselves from the term ‘Oriental Studies’. It is difficult for me to do so because I studied in the Department of Oriental Philology at Jagiellonian University (Kraków) and then in the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London.

In this paper, I will speak about the region that I am familiar with, the Middle East, sometimes referred to by the more traditional term as the ‘Near East’. The term ‘middle east’ was coined in 1902 by an American naval historian, Alfred T h a y e r M a h a n, to denote the area between Arabia and India. This new term was taken up by *The Times* of London and soon after by the British government. Both names – that is ‘Near East’ and ‘Middle East’ – are relics of the world of colonialism, and especially British colonialism, in which every country was classified according to its geographic distance from England.

The evolution of the name of the department at New York University where I have been teaching for the last 40 years, is the best example of this terminology confusion. When I joined the department at NYU in 1968, its name was, 'Department of Near Eastern Languages and Literatures'. Later the name was changed to 'Middle Eastern Studies', and for the last 10 years, it has been called the 'Department of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies'. A change of name for an academic department requires a lot of bureaucratic work and attention as it must be accredited by the Department of Education, (in our case at the state capital in Albany, New York). To add to the confusion is the fact that our area studies center at NYU is called 'Center for Near Eastern Studies'. Both the Department of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies and the Center for Near Eastern Studies are housed in the same building.

To sum up this confusion, I will tell you a story about a colleague from Columbia University. He was traveling by bus in New Jersey, reading a book. A passenger sitting next to him asked, "What are you reading?" The professor answered, "I am reading about the Middle East." The passenger, in a voice of disbelief, said, "My God, I learn something new every day. We have the East Coast and the West Coast and in the middle, the mid-West. But I never heard of the Middle East!"

Prior to World War II, Middle Eastern studies in the U.S. were limited to a few universities and were mainly connected with religious studies (including missionary studies) and archeology. Following the War, a new interest began to unfold, especially in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hebrew languages, and Middle Eastern area studies.

The turning point in the development of interest in the Middle East and other areas of the world took place on October 4, 1957. On that day, a robotic spacecraft was launched by the Soviet Union to orbit the earth. The title of Paul Dixon's book succinctly describes the impact of that event: *Sputnik: The Shock of the Century* (Walker & Co., May 2007). In the space race, the Russians had bolted ahead of the Americans. As a result of this, the U.S. Congress passed the National Defense Education Act in 1958. The world was divided into areas to be studied. The most important area of study was, of course, the Soviet Union and its satellites, followed by Communist China and her dependencies; next came Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and South America. As a result of the Act, area studies centers sprang up like mushrooms around the U.S. Later, the Ford Foundation added further support with grants and scholarships. Since 1958, U.S. Office of Education funds have contributed to the maintenance of these centers, and have additionally provided funding for faculty salaries, grants, student scholarships, teaching aides, summer courses, and travel expenses.

A further stage in the development in Middle Eastern and other area studies occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s when new cadres of specialists, trained with funding provided by the 1958 Act, joined the faculties of universities across the nation. The number of students in undergraduate and graduate programs directly or indirectly involved in Middle Eastern studies increased rapidly.

The centers are administrative and academic bodies. They are responsible for the advancement and coordination of research, development of curriculum, and the presentation

of programs on campus and off-campus. Centers for Near/Middle Eastern Studies in the U.S. are related to two major consortia: one composed of predominantly east coast schools, and the other, composed of schools on the west coast. The eastern consortium includes Columbia University, Georgetown University, Harvard, New York University, Princeton, the University of Michigan, the University of Pennsylvania, and Yale. The western consortium includes Portland State University, the University of California at Berkeley, UCLA, the University of Chicago, the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Utah at Salt Lake City, and the University of Washington at Seattle. Consortium member universities have been particularly active in developing a rotating series of summer programs which focus on the intensive study of languages. The result has been a greater sharing of resources and the ability to reach a wider student constituency.

Arabic and Hebrew studies have a long tradition in the U.S. largely due to their being taught as part of Biblical Studies programs. In fact, the religious factor was so great that emphasis was continually placed on the ancient Middle East as if the medieval and modern ages never existed. Arabic studies in the U.S. have an advantage over Persian and Turkish studies since there are more American facilities in Arab-speaking countries. The American University in Cairo and in Beirut, and the CASA (Center for Arabic Study Abroad) are very active in providing American scholars and students with facilities, grants, and support for research and language training. In addition, as the result of U.S. loans of agricultural goods, some Arab countries have incurred substantial indebtedness to the U.S. Since their currencies are not convertible to international tender, monies to repay these loans must be spent locally. Under U.S. Public Law 480, the U.S. will accept various forms of repayment from Arab countries, including books, which are distributed for free (including shipping) to libraries at various American universities. Public Law 480 also permits that the repayment funds may be spent on grants and scholarships for American students and scholars who wish to pursue research in certain Arab countries.

During the Cold War, there were thousands of Americans studying Russian at centers of Russian and East European studies. Today, there are thousands of Americans studying Arabic at centers for Near/Middle Eastern studies. At NYU, there are 130 students studying Arabic at various levels in the Department of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies. Those who study and specialize in Arabic now have an advantage over those who study Persian. There are many Arab countries and, as I have noted, many American research facilities in them.

Since the Iranian Revolution of 1978/79, the U.S. has had no diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran and it is difficult to travel there. Contact with Iranian scholars is mainly via the internet. However, many Iranian scholars specializing in Iranian studies have settled in the U.S. As for Iranian students from Iran in the U.S. – there are very few at the present time. But there are a great number of Iranian Americans born in the U.S. who are interested in studying their heritage. Within the typical framework of a Near/Middle Eastern department or center in the U.S., the nucleus of Iranian studies consists of 1. Persian language, 2. Persian literature, 3. Iranian civilization, and 4. Islamic studies. Departments offering these studies are usually designated as ‘Department of Near

Eastern Languages and Literature' or 'Department of Middle Eastern Languages and Culture', etc. These departments offer Arabic, Turkish, Hebrew, and Persian. Iranian area studies include: anthropology, archeology, art and architecture, economics, geography and geology, history, law, library science, linguistics, philosophy, political science, religion, and sociology. These courses are conducted by specialists in their respective departments and are cross-listed and coordinated under the umbrella of the Center for Near/Middle Eastern Studies. In this way, students specializing in Persian language, literature, and Iranian civilization, for example, can take courses in other departments, and students in other specialties can take courses in Persian subjects.

Like scientists before them, many specialists in Near/Middle Eastern studies have come to the U.S. from other nations and integrated themselves with the larger population of immigrant scholars. Mark Dresden, Richard Ettinghausen, Sir Hamilton Gibb, Oleg Grabar, G.E. von Grunebaum, Hoening, George Lenczowski, Joseph Schacht, Bernard Lewis are but a few of these. The presence of Iranian scholars and their participation in the American experience has caused a broadening in the area of Iranian Studies. Now, with Middle Eastern studies having come of age in America, a whole new generation of American-educated scholars is gradually replacing the old guard. American schools are in the forefront of Middle Eastern teaching and scholarship.

In 1967, the then-director of my center, Bailey Winder, went with several of his colleagues to register the new Middle East Studies Association (MESA) with the appropriate authorities. During the process of registration, a clerk asked how many members were expected to join the organization. Winder replied, "I don't know. I presume 350–400 people." Today, there are more than 3000 MESA members, including 62 institutional members. Each member (in return for annual dues) receives a quarterly volume of *IJMES*, *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 4 MESA Bulletins, and 4 MESA newsletters. MESA holds an annual meeting every November which lasts for 3–4 days and attracts 1200–1500 members. The meetings are held in major cities in the U.S. and Canada and feature more than 100 panels, typically with four speakers.

Like the Russian centers that flourished during the Cold War, centers for Near/Middle Eastern studies are flourishing today. These days scholarships coming from the government are designated FLAS: Foreign Language and Area Studies. What is interesting, however, is that the Federal Government, which has funneled so much money to these centers, seldom employs their graduates!