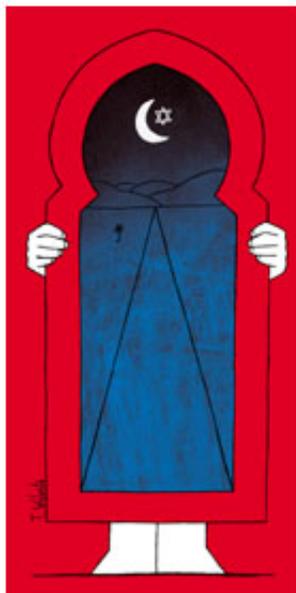


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Lessons of the Middle East

In the scrutinized classrooms of Mideast studies, questions of balance loom everywhere

By Christopher Shea '91

Controversy beckons everywhere in Middle East studies. The leaders of the Princeton research center known, for short, as the Transregional Institute learned that lesson — or relearned it — last winter, when they posted their plans for the 2005–06 academic year.

“Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip has now persisted for over 37 years,” a statement on the institute’s Web site began, announcing the theme for this year: “Society Under Occupation: Contemporary Palestinian Politics, Culture, and Identity.” During those decades, the site noted, Israeli control over the territories has been strengthened through military incursions, checkpoints, and a security wall. But “despite living under occupation, as refugees, or outside their homeland, Palestinians have maintained a vibrant cultural and political life” — and that is what

the center’s lectures and fellows would concentrate on. Of special interest: “Palestinians’ understanding of dispossession and occupation, and their visions of a post-occupation future.”

Few academic announcements attract the interest this one did.

One month after the theme was posted, in December 2004, the right-wing online magazine FrontPageMag.com fired a salvo: Princeton’s announcement “reads like a Palestinian propaganda pamphlet,” an article charged. That’s when the first angry e-mails arrived in the inbox of the center’s interim director, Miguel Centeno.

Centeno went into damage-control mode. He posted a second statement, clarifying that the Palestinians “perceive themselves [emphasis added] to be a society under occupation” and stressing that culture, not politics, would be the focus of the center’s work. Explaining why that theme was picked, he added that “little is known” in America about contemporary Palestinian life.

Intended to appease, the message brought another attack, this time from Martin Kramer ’75 *82, the retired director of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University and a gadfly of Middle East studies. On his Web log he charged that “my alma mater ... insults my intelligence” by suggesting Palestine was little studied. On the contrary, he said, it draws disproportionate interest in Middle East studies. As another example of the center’s bias, he cited a lecture series three years ago that featured only pro-Palestinian speakers and Israeli doves, when the institute was run by anthropology professor Abdallah Hammoudi. Kramer’s conclusion: The institute — whose full name is the Institute for the

Transregional Study of the Contemporary Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia — was an “outpost of Palestinian advocacy,” whose function was “to sew the Princeton flag onto the Palestinian cause.”

The furor led to a remarkable change in plans: Centeno decided to bring in not one, but two fellows — “for identity reasons,” as he puts it. There was no political test, he stresses. One fellow is an American-Israeli sociologist, Lauren Erdreich ’95, who has explored how Palestinian women’s self-conception changes as they make their way through Israeli universities. The other, Kamal Abdulfattah, is professor of geography and chairman of the departments of geography and Arab studies at Birzeit University in the West Bank. Both will teach courses in the spring, his on “Society Under Occupation,” hers on “Anthropology of Palestinian Women.”

“Do I trust the ability of the academy to be objective about this?” says Centeno. “Yes. Am I aware that others out there don’t? Yes.” The institute came up with this improvised solution, he says, “so we can really begin a conversation within the academy, and between the academy and the outside public, that doesn’t immediately begin with this question of bias.” The question of perceived bias is ubiquitous in Middle East studies today, most famously at Columbia University, where several Jewish students accused members of the department of Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures of various breaches of academic decorum last year. (A Columbia committee that looked into the charges could not confirm them, but found problems with how some students’ complaints were handled.) Even at comparatively sedate Princeton, sensitivity is intense. The Near Eastern studies department has been trying to line up a professor for its course on the Arab-Israeli conflict, but “no one is excited about teaching it,” says Julie Taylor, an assistant professor in the department. “It is thankless. You can’t please anyone.” And most of the professors who were interviewed for this article demanded the right to approve their quotes — fearing that the words would be reprinted and highlighted on a left- or right-wing Web site.

The Columbia controversy threatened to make its way down I-95 last spring when word got out that Rashid Khalidi, the Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies at Columbia University — who was not accused by Columbia students of wrongdoing, although some partisan publications regularly accuse him of radicalism bordering on anti-Semitism — was a candidate for a new chair at Princeton dedicated to modern Middle East studies, financed by Robert H. Niehaus ’77. A scholar of Palestinian nationalism and author of the recent *Resurrecting Empire*, which suggests the United States is following in the footsteps of the older colonial powers, Khalidi has called the Israeli state “racist” and endorsed the “one-state solution,” the joining of Israel and Palestinian territories into a single secular nation that privileges no religion (which, many supporters of Israel say, would mean its effective elimination).

The controversy hasn’t quieted him: At one address to left-leaning political scientists this fall, he delivered a forceful attack against America’s actions in Iraq. “This is nothing if not a faith-based, fact-free administration,” he said, railing against “the right-wing attack-dog pundits, the empty talking heads, and the unscrupulous press that too often fronts for them.” Some Princetonians protested to Nassau Hall that Khalidi’s arrival, should it occur, would make the campus a hostile one for Jewish students — but they were countered by others, including prominent Jewish professors, who called him a fine scholar.

Amplifying such campus controversies is an aggressive network of off-campus groups, notably Campus Watch, that monitor Middle East studies professors for anti-Israel views and organize campaigns against them. At a forum at Princeton this fall on academic freedom and Middle East studies, Joan Scott, a historian at the Institute for Advanced Study, said such activists have created “a climate of fear” in the field, which “has led to caution, self-policing, and avoidance of controversy” on campuses.

In an interview, Kramer scoffs at those claims. “Academia is a great generator of criticism of government and the media and the corporate world,” he says, “yet when [academics] take public positions they are surprised to find themselves criticized.” How do professors handle the most sensitive questions involving the Middle East in the classroom — imparting facts and presenting theories while retaining a stronger point of view than an encyclopedia article?

“In an academic institution I cannot summon a professor and tell him or her how to teach a course,” says Sükrü Hanioglu, chairman of the Near Eastern studies department. “But everyone knows those are delicate issues. Everyone should put his or her political views aside when entering the classroom.”

The question of balance and diversity of perspectives has become more important with heightened interest in the Middle East at Princeton. Before 9/11, the NES department typically offered only one section of Arabic 101. Now there is enough demand to fill five each fall, with about a dozen students each. Students majoring in NES — quite a commitment, given the language requirement — are up to around a dozen a year, from a handful five years ago. A 2002 course on Osama Bin Laden and the forces that created him “broke all box-office records” for NES, Hanioglu says. Enrollment is up, both in NES and in related courses offered by other departments.

Many professors say they appreciate the need to represent a range of views fairly in the classroom, but “balance” turns out to be a tricky concept, and definitions are up to the individual professor. Amaney Jamal, an assistant professor of politics who has taught “Problems of Democracy in the Middle East,” says she has a special reason to aspire to a studied inscrutability. “My problem is, because I’m Arab and Muslim, and I’m visibly Muslim — I wear the head scarf — students come in thinking I have very fixed opinions. Because of the image I present, I think it’s my obligation to tell students that they should be free to bring any and all opinions into the classroom.”

The reading in her course included texts both in favor of, and opposed to, the Iraq war. She had students read U.N. development reports, statements by President Bush on the importance of democracy in the Middle East, and a piece by Zbigniew Brzezinski called “A Wrong Way to Sell Democracy to the Arab World.” They also read *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests*, by Melani McAlister, which explores pop-cultural as well as political views of the Middle East; *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Koran*, by Asma Barlas; and *Contending Visions of the Middle East*, by Zachary Taylor, which discusses the battles over Middle East studies (and takes a dim view of the critics, including Kramer).

Robert Gonzales '06, a politics major, says Jamal was “very, very objective” and “coy” about expressing her own views. “I think the most valuable thing I took from the class was her analysis of discourse,” he says. “She placed a lot of emphasis on the discourse rather than the issues themselves. Rather than talk about how much aid we’re giving to Middle East countries, we would look at how that aid is perceived by Americans at home, Middle Eastern governments, and people living in the Middle East.” That echoes Jamal’s own research: She has suggested that U.S. aid, even when used to foster civil society, is perceived locally as bolstering dictators — and that it, in fact, does so.

Gonzalez did not, some will be relieved to hear, emerge radicalized. “I’m a moderate, a registered Republican,” he says, who supports both the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the war in Iraq. The Arab-Israeli dispute came up almost weekly in class, he says, with partisans on both sides, “but no one was afraid to express their views and everyone was respectful.”

Taylor, the assistant professor who has taught “Political Islam” twice, says she, too, started out at Princeton aspiring to gnostic neutrality. One reason: She had done her undergraduate work at San Francisco State, one of the most activist, left-wing campuses in the country. “It makes Columbia look wimpy,” she says. She once saw a pro-Israel student forcibly expelled from a lecture after rudely challenging a pro-Palestinian speaker — the opposite of the classroom climate she hoped to create.

Teaching her first course at Princeton, she acknowledges, she may have gone too far in the other direction. “There was a little self-censorship,” she says. When she taught about the treatment of Muslim women, for instance, she told students what Islamists said about women, what liberal Muslims said about women, “and I left it for them to sort out.” The second time, she ended with a discussion of the objectification of women in Western society, complete with clipped photos from Maxim magazine and other U.S. media sources. The point was not to suggest a moral equivalence between the treatment of women in the two cultures; still, she

says,

“When people just look at Muslim societies and how they treat women, it does bother me that they don’t look at how women are treated here.” She adds: “I think I’m not as afraid of being provocative, in part because I know the students better now.”

Taylor says she added more of her own perspective to the class partly on the advice of former assistant professor Michael Doran ’97. Until he left last summer, Doran had been among Princeton’s most popular NES professors, both because he taught timely and intrinsically interesting courses like “Introduction to the Middle East” and “The Arab-Israeli Conflict” and because he was — students say — smart, charismatic, and self-deprecating. Sympathetic to Israel and an outspoken supporter of the Iraq war, Doran stands

out in his field for arguing, for example, that the key to peace in the Middle East is changing the relation of Arab rulers to their people (most Mideast studies scholars say it’s the Israel-Palestine issue). As he was awaiting word on whether he would receive tenure, *The Daily Princetonian* published an article that included members of the history department, anonymously, saying unflattering things about his scholarship — criticisms some saw as politically motivated.

“Imagine if we had a person of the ‘appropriate’ political views, but who was mediocre,” says Andras Hamori, a professor of Near Eastern studies. “Is it conceivable that members of another department would be so interested in who NES is promoting? And this is a young man who is anything but mediocre.” In the end, NES professors say, Doran was offered an extension on his tenure clock with the strong suggestion that he would get the promotion — but he took a job running the Middle East desk at the National Security Council instead.

One former student who took three courses with Doran, Gabe Pell ’03, recalled his surprise at learning from the *Prince* article that Doran was controversial, because, as he wrote in a letter of support to the professor, “I never even knew your political leanings.”

“What I always thought was the most intriguing aspect of his approach was that he didn’t evaluate behavior on moral grounds,” says Pell, now a first-year student at Harvard Law School. “Instead, he asked: What are the goals of states in the region, and how are they going about achieving these goals?” It was, in short, a “realist” approach, to use the political-science term of art. (Doran canceled a scheduled interview with PAW at the direction of his superiors at the NSC.)

Doran’s technique, Pell says, was to begin with something like a bellicose speech by Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser in the run-up to the 1967 war with Israel. “You can take it at face value and say, ‘He really wants to get Israel,’” Pell says. “Or you can look at the political climate. This is a time when Egypt wants to be ascendant in the Middle East, and it is being challenged by Syria, Jordan — by every other Arab country. How do you gain supremacy? You pick an enemy.”

Doran’s view that the Palestinian question is a potent symbol used by Arab leaders to solidify their own rule and as a card to play in relations among states — rather than a straightforward case of aggressive occupier and victimized occupied — runs through his work. Of course, that in itself is a point of view: Doran wasn’t being purely “neutral.”

The department has had a string of luminaries — Hitti, sociologist Morroe Berger, economist Charles Issawi, historian L. Carl Brown — but in recent years has been best known for its affiliation with Bernard Lewis, a towering and controversial figure in the field, who arrived in 1974. He retired in 1986, but remains prolific and still has an office in Jones Hall.

Lewis was engaged in a critical and decades-long debate with the late Edward Said ’57, a longtime Columbia professor, over the worth of much modern scholarship on the Middle East. Said, beginning with his 1978 book, *Orientalism*, argued that most scholarship produced by American and English professors on

the subject was rife with racism, oversimplification, and stereotype. “For generations, the culture at large put the orientalist at the barricades,” Said wrote, “where in his professional work he confronted the East — its barbarities, its eccentricities, its unruliness, and held it at bay on behalf of the West.” Lewis, in turn, said that Said’s attack was absurdly sweeping and that Said’s true goal was to place identity and political tests on scholarship: You had to be born in the Middle East to understand it — and you had to stand behind the Palestinians in their struggle.

Princeton’s department was never swept up in the Saidian revolution that broke over academia; Said’s views are now gospel in departments at many other universities. “To that group, Princeton is in the doghouse,” says Brown, now a professor emeritus. Seven Agir, a third-year graduate student from Turkey, says the idea of Princeton as a conservative redoubt is overblown but that there is something to it, in intellectual approach if not necessarily politics. Asked if his department could be compared to an English department that managed to avoid hiring any postmodernists, Michael Cook, an NES professor, says: “There could be an element of truth in that.”

Lewis and, after him, Doran, argued that the key question in Middle East studies is: What went wrong? (It’s the title, in fact, of a Lewis book.) Lewis felt that the story that had to be explained was the Arab world’s decline from intellectual and political eminence, centuries ago, into inwardness, stasis, and political strife. James McDougall, an assistant professor of history who is working on a history of Algeria and will teach “Modern Worlds of Islam” this spring, says the question is posed “on entirely false premises,” arguing, “It’s a problem to suggest that ‘our’ world is modern, and we invented this thing called modernism, and ‘they’ haven’t caught up or they have rejected it.”

“I think it’s very important to suggest to undergraduates that whatever this thing called modernity is, it’s a product of the way human societies have interacted over hundreds of years, rather than something that was invented in Europe and exported elsewhere,” McDougall says. He believes that professors who hold the Lewis view, and those who hold the opposite view, should present both perspectives in the classroom — and so, in addition to books like *An Introduction to Islam*, by David Waines, students in his course next spring will read essays by Lewis and by Samuel Huntington, author of *The Clash of Civilizations*. But McDougall says he will argue against the views he disagrees with. “I think people have a responsibility to be equitable in presenting the moral and intellectual complexity of contemporary problems,” he says. But “if you go into scholarship and academics as your life’s work,” he adds, “you only do it because you are passionate about something.” (Michael Reynolds, an assistant NES professor who teaches “Introduction to the Middle East,” has students read a Lewis essay at the start of the semester — but also one by Isaiah Berlin called “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” which implicitly suggests that the modern West may not have found the only possible acceptable combination of freedom and equality, or mercy and justice.)

The noisy debate over Mideast studies overlooks that a lot more goes on in these courses than fighting over Israel– Palestine, or Lewis and Said, or the Iraq war. On a recent drizzly Tuesday, inside a Frist Campus Center classroom, students in a precept for “Introduction to the Middle East” were struggling to remember the details of the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration, as preceptor Seven Agir quizzed them about post-World War I political geography.

That same day, visiting professor Sadik al-Azm, a retired professor of philosophy from the University of Damascus, led a seminar in a wood-paneled room in Jones Hall on “Issues in Contemporary Arab Social and Political Thought.” Conservatives might be ready to pounce on al-Azm because he wrote, in the October-November 2004 issue of *Boston Review*, an essay recounting his initial “schadenfreude” at the attack on the Twin Towers. The guilty twinge came from the “satisfaction of seeing the arrogance of power abruptly, if temporarily, humbled,” he wrote. Yet that same essay included an almost Lewisian lament about the inwardness of Middle Eastern culture: “In fact, contemporary Islam does not even form a civilization in the active, enactive, and effective sense of the term.” He’s an object lesson that not everyone in the field can be assigned to a “camp.”

Al-Azm counseled students in the small seminar against certain “misconceptions” when discussing the

Arab world. One of them: “If you want to know why a Muslim does something, you have to look at the Koran, as if they only act out of their convictions in Islam.” Later, he added another one: Islam is “impervious to secularism.”

Lori Piranian '06, an NES major in the seminar, may be typical of the new breed of student attracted to Middle East studies: She has no connection to the Middle East, but began taking Arabic out of curiosity and loved it, and found the NES classes she took rich and satisfying. Far from hardening her political views, her exposure to the literature and history of the region has her thinking about most intercivilizational issues: “The story is so complicated.”

Overall, says Earle Trott, an Army major working on his master’s degree in NES via the Foreign Area Officer Program, his Princeton professors have “dealt with the subject matter very nonpartisanly and have been very factual about it.” But Sami Hermez, a first-year graduate student in anthropology and a member of the Princeton Committee for Palestine, says, from his vantage point, not all views are welcome in the classroom — though he blames not professors, but general assumptions about what views are acceptable. “You generally feel that if you take a position that is pro-Palestinian, you have to qualify it. You don’t see the same thing coming from the other side.” Princeton’s approach to Middle Eastern studies is evolving — with or without Khalidi. (As of early November it appeared that the leading candidate for the Niehaus chair was not Khalidi but Muhammad Qasim Zaman, a specialist in Islam from Brown, though the history department was in discussions with Khalidi about hiring him for a different position.) Top-heavy with senior scholars who study premodern subjects, NES is advertising for two positions in modern fields, which by their nature are more sensitive. Meanwhile, the history department has taken a fresh interest in the Islamic world. And the former U.S. ambassador to Israel, Daniel C. Kurtzer, has just joined the Woodrow Wilson School as a visiting professor of Mideast policy studies.

Pending federal legislation intended to give Congress more oversight on how money for Middle East studies is spent also could have an impact. At present, language in a House bill would create an independent advisory board that would suggest to Congress how best to spend the Title VI money devoted to “area studies” programs at universities. The bill grew out of complaints from several quarters that Middle East studies programs were biased. (A related provision in the Senate does not call for an advisory board, but requires programs that apply for federal funds to make clear how they foster intellectual diversity.) Many professors lament Congress’ move, but the University’s former director of government affairs, Diane Jones (who spoke before leaving her Princeton job), says: “What Congress is trying to do is to get a community to deal with the problem itself.”

Meanwhile, the discussion Miguel Centeno wants to start with his “Society Under Occupation” theme has begun. In response to a letter from two students that the Transregional Institute was biased in its use of the phrase “Palestinian Israeli” — as opposed to “Israeli Arab” — in one of its public statements, Erdreich, one of the current fellows, posted this reply on the institute’s Web site:

“The term ‘Palestinian Israelis’ is ... intended as a rejection of coercive state attempts to deny this community its heritage and identification, as well as a reflection of the community’s experience of duality in identifying as citizens of a state that often discriminates against them and their brethren.” And so the discussion continues — wary, tense, and diverse, if not always “balanced.” 

Christopher Shea '91 writes a column for The Boston Globe Ideas section about books and academia.

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