

## The Jerusalem Quarterly

### Introduction

Half a year after I married a girl from New Orleans, I thought I would try to find a job in that quiet city. One Friday afternoon in December, 1969, I approached a member of the History Department in one of its universities. I inquired, "Do you have someone who teaches Middle Eastern history, and if not, would you be interested in hiring a Middle Eastern historian?" The reply came back like a shot. "We have a specialist in the Middle East, Mr. Williams. He has been here for more than a decade." I looked perplexed and answered, "But I checked in the card catalogue, searched the library shelves, and found very little on the Middle East." As I turned to leave the office, I was curious and asked to know Mr. Williams' Middle Eastern area of concentration. The History Department professor put his hand on my shoulder and said in an avuncular tone, "Mr. Williams did his work and has published numerous articles on Tennessee in the 1840s!"

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Middle East, the number, nature and focus of historical writings need improvement and the number of Middle Eastern historians requires augmentation. What is written in English tends to be crisis driven, generated by the last unexpected, spectacular, or violent act in the region. Statistical findings presented in this paper suggest that the writing and research in Middle Eastern history is narrowly focused and specialized. Excellent historical research in Middle Eastern history has been completed during the last twenty-five years. But there appears to be an impatient tendency to rely on explaining contemporary events rather than waiting for documents or archives to reveal the intricacies of historical change. In addition to some abandonment of perspective, foreign language acquisition and usage as applied to the writing and interpretation of Middle Eastern history appear to be less rigorous than in previous years. This seems to be the case for European languages and especially for Arabic.

For the purposes of this paper the Middle East includes discussion of the Palestinians, the countries of Afghanistan, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, and countries of the Arabian peninsula. For reasons of time limitations, those Middle Eastern countries not included in my evaluation are Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Pakistan and Tunisia.

The history of the Middle Eastern profession in the United States is outlined elsewhere. For a sampling see R. Bayly Winder, 'Four Decades of Middle Eastern Study', *Middle East Journal* (Winter 1987), pp. 40-63; Leonard Binder, 'Area Studies: A Critical Assessment', in Leonard Binder (ed.), *The Study of the Middle East Research and Scholarship in the Humanities and the Social Sciences*, New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1976, pp. 1-28; Bernard Lewis, 'The State of Middle Eastern Studies', *The American Scholar* (Summer 1979), pp. 365-381; Albert Hourani, 'History', in Leonard Binder (ed.). For a fine assortment of analyses of contemporary Islamic Studies see Malcolm E. Kerr (ed.), *Islamic Studies: A Tradition and Its Problems*, Undena Publications, Malibu, California, 1980.

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For more polemic views see Gary S. Schiff, *Middle East Centers at Selected American Universities*, The American Jewish Committee, 1981; 'Middle East Studies Network', MERIP Report, No. 38 (September, 1975); Naseer Aruri, 'The Middle East on the US Campus', *The Link* (May-June, 1985), pp. 1-14; and Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, 'Zionist Control of Arabic Studies in the US', *al-Adab* (Beirut) (June, 1974).

Fewer students are learning Middle Eastern languages because of the prolonged period of time necessary to gain research-usage competence. Those who were trained in languages are currently burdened by academic administrative matters; others, by choice, have been recruited at earlier stages in their educational training to policy- and business-oriented occupations, sometimes ending language training or its usage for research purposes. It also seems that fewer students are being trained in the cultures, religions and history of the region. In addition to the fascination with the Arab-Israeli conflict, which is reflected in our writings, many who teach the Middle East have become politicized, allowing emotional predisposition to influence professional judgment.

It is difficult to gauge the impact the state and direction of Middle Eastern history have had on American foreign policy towards the region. It may be coincidental, but the state of historical scholarship on the Middle East and our foreign policy tend to be reactive and event specific, tunneling attention and channeling resources towards an evaluation of the last crisis. Policy makers work hardest in coping with today's events, leaving little time for more long-term conceptualization. Historical writings on the Middle East in the recent past have tended to be event specific as well.

The very nature of the American public's debate on Middle Eastern issues is heavily influenced by those who teach, write and expound in public about the region. Until recently, the United States avoided

least limited.

Association, a questionnaire circulated to its members in 1974 indicated that about 87 per cent were American or European historians; that 12 per cent taught other geographic regions of the world; and only 1 per cent of the total were Middle Eastern historians; in 1987, less than 1 per cent the membership of the American Historical Association were Middle Eastern historians.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Philip D. Curtin, 'African History', in Michael Kammen (ed.), *The Past Before Us*, Cornell, 1980, p. 114; Conversation with Phylis Coleman, membership secretary, AHA, May 26, 1987.

Just how many modern Middle Eastern historians are there in the United States? In 1986, there were only 640 full-time faculty positions in all disciplines for Middle Eastern studies.<sup>3</sup> In 1986, one third, or 506 of 1,582 of the Middle East Studies Ass<sup>3</sup> ( -3 (lty) d) -3 (TJ ET BT3 ( -3 ) -6 (

university allocations to create new positions in non-European and non-American area histories. Colleagues, chairs of departments, deans, provosts, university presidents, and chancellors must be told repeatedly

Chronicle of Higher Education and the American Historical Association's Employment Information Bulletin indicates, however, that there were on the average less than eight new Middle Eastern History positions announced per year from 1980 to 1987 in the United States.

A handful of new jobs were created in the late 1970s and early 1980s. But committing an average of eight years necessary to complete a PhD in an area studies discipline proved very difficult and not financially inviting. Some students who chose graduate training in the late 1960s did so not because they were just interested in the field of study, but they saw continuing their education as a means of avoiding military service in Vietnam. Many stayed on in graduate school at least until the graduate student deferments were practically removed in 1970-71, or until the lottery system for conscription was implemented and those with safe dates were no longer liable for service. Already in the early 1970s there was a tight academic job market for Middle Eastern historians, but the pull away from completing the PhD became very strong in the mid-1970s.

undergraduate students by that first group of center trained PhDs educated in the early and late 1960s. In comparison to Bachelor's degrees awarded in East Asian or Russian area studies through this period, there were two-and-a-half times more Bachelor's degrees awarded in Russian area studies than in Middle Eastern area studies, and three-and-a-half times more East Asian area studies BA degrees awarded than Middle Eastern area studies Bachelor's degrees.

From 1970 to 1982 there was a slow but steady increase in Middle Eastern area studies Bachelor's, Master's and Doctor's degrees. If we assume an average of two or three years to complete the Middle Eastern area studies MA degree, there was a doubling of MA degrees from 1976-1977 onwards, about two academic years after the October, 1973 war and the application of the OPEC oil embargo. While the absolute number of BA degrees in Middle Eastern area studies decreased in the late 1970s, the number of MA degrees remained about the same. For comparative purposes, there was a regular decline in number of area studies MA degrees conferred from the BA to the MA level in East Asian, Russian, and Western European studies, but not in Middle Eastern area studies, where the number of MA degrees awarded remained relatively constant from 1976-77 through 1981-1982. The data clearly reveals that as an area study, the Middle East is less studied than East Asian or Russian area studies, but more studied than Western European studies.

In an analysis of number of degrees granted in foreign languages and Literatures during the same period at the BA, MA and PhD level in Arabic, Chinese, French, Hebrew, Japanese, Latin and Russian, (no information was available for Turkish or Persian), degrees in Arabic were the least for all languages and at all levels. Our statistics do not indicate how many students were taking Arabic and using it as a research tool in an ancillary discipline. At the BA, MA and PhD levels, French degrees represent the largest percentage conferred in the United States in foreign languages and Literatures. In the twelve-year period investigated for all the languages tallied, for French there were 160,618 BA degrees conferred, 34,993 MA degrees, and 8,131 PhD degrees. For Arabic and French respectively, the total degrees conferred at the BA, MA and PhD levels for the twelve-year period were 123:51,813, 67:9,431, and 26:1,808. For the period 1970-71 through 1981-82, there were ten times more Bachelor's degrees in Hebrew than in Arabic, six times more Master's degrees in Hebrew than in Arabic, and three times more PhD degrees in Hebrew than in Arabic. Anyone who traces the decline in student enrollments from first- to third-year Arabic training is aware of the tremendous attrition rate. In 1982, at five of thirteen US Middle Eastern centers, 341 students were learning Arabic. Of that number only 9 per cent were studying Arabic in the third year and only 6 per cent at the fourth year or higher. In the same sample, 141 students were studying



Persian and 43 were studying Turkish at all levels. Only 4 per cent and 6 per cent of these respective students were in their third year. At the third-year level, by comparison, there were 49 students learning Hebrew and only 39 students learning Turkish, Arabic or Persian.<sup>7</sup> An important reason why graduate students shy away from the study of Middle Eastern History is the prerequisite to study Arabic. Arabic is classified as one of the four most difficult languages

<sup>7</sup> Association of American Universities, *Beyond Growth: The Next Stage in Language and Area Studies*, Washington, April, 1984, p. 322.

to learn, along with Korean, Japanese and Chinese.<sup>8</sup> Instructional materials and a variety of teaching methods are available for teaching Arabic. But enormous amounts of time are required to learn and retain Arabic for use in research and scholarship. According to the 1983 Rand report on Federal Support for Training Foreign Languages and Area Specialists, an average of 3.67 years is spent acqutu



passing interest or no real research knowledge or competence. Sometimes their reviews tend to be facile, polemical, and shallow. At American universities, Middle Eastern courses or programs that are stated as the 'Muslim Middle East', 'Arab World', or 'Islamic countries', are euphemisms for the exclusion of Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Bahais in the first case, Turkey, Israel and Iran in the second case, and Israel in the third case. Much has been written about the influence of

books, (June 24, 1982), p. 49 ff., or with their public jousting at the 1986 Annual Meeting of the Middle East Studies Association now chronicled as 'Special Document' in *Journal of Palestine Studies* (Winter 1987), pp. 85-104. Of special interest is Emmanuel Sivan's 'Edward Said and His Arab Reviewers', *The Jerusalem Quarterly* (Spring 1985), pp. 11-23. In addition to the book reviews commenting on Said's book, one should read some of the earlier commentary in the 'Orientalist' debate. For example, see H.A.R. Gibb, 'Social Change in the Near East', in Philip W. Ireland, *The Near East: Problems and Perspectives*, Universi





America and Europe. The bulk of the world's population of 5 billion and their history is left to a scant handful of other historians. There may be two historians of the colonial or national American period at an American university before our Middle Eastern population of 200 million is even considered for coverage by one professor. Where there is a Middle Eastern position, our Middle Eastern historian is generally responsible for covering a period equivalent of Plato to NATO, or Muhammad to Khomeini. She or he often participates in teaching the history of Western civilization. Not until Middle Eastern historians, in concert with other area specialists, can persuade their colleagues in American and European history that future appointments need to be made to cover the rest of the world, will there be additional slots opened for the history of the Middle East. Of all the regional areas studied in the United States, there are fewer Middle Eastern historians today than of any other regional area.

From the data collected, our profession only began to publish in

events. Personal recollections or numbers should not replace archival or documentation study in describing historical phenomena or charting the mechanisms of change. An overdependence on statistics or numerical acrobatics in writing Middle Eastern history can be dangerous. Until very recently there was little tradition for accurate statistics gathering in the



the early history of the region, we are to blame for the continuity of shallow stereotypes and images of the Middle East. If we do not have properly trained graduate students we cannot hope to influence the public debate on the making and implementation of foreign policy, which requires understanding the linkage of culture and history to policy choices.

Finally, in the absence of more trained modern Middle Eastern historians