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The State of Middle East Studies in the 21st Century

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Thank you Prof. Dr. Meyer for that generous introduction.

It is a great honor to receive an award for outstanding contributions to our field from the World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies. The highest accolades one can receive are those from one's own peers, and I am humbled to receive such recognition from this group composed of my colleagues. I also want to thank the members of the International Advisory Council of the Congress who voted to give me this award. Finally, I thank all of you for being here tonight.

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to address you in Sevilla, whose glorious monuments remind us of the long-standing links between the Middle East and the rest of the world. This great city, one of the loveliest in all of Spain, reminds us of the splendid cultural, intellectual and human achievements that tolerance and the interaction between people of different origins and religions produced in Andalus for over six centuries. Sadly, we meet in Spain at a moment when instead of symbolizing fruitful interaction between cultures and peoples, the Mediterranean Sea is the focus of waves of fear, intolerance and bigotry directed against the weakest, the poorest and the most endangered of our fellow human beings. Many of the targets of this intolerance and bigotry are refugees fleeing wars and instability in the Middle East. It is worth recalling that some of the countries now callously rejecting these refugees played a major role in instigating these wars. In other words, many of those hoping to migrate to

Europe and the US are doing so because European countries and the US helped to destroy their societies. These are facts that media coverage of the migration crisis rarely mentions.

My topic this evening is the state of Middle East studies in the 21st century. I will mention a few of the problems that I perceive and then I will speak about positive developments in our field. Before I do that however, I want to survey briefly the grave political context in which we find ourselves today, because I do not think we can talk about the state of Middle East studies in isolation from the state of the Middle East.

If the entire world has been in crisis since the election of Donald Trump in November 2016, the Middle East has been in a state of acute crisis for much longer. This region has been the scene of repeated external interventions, occupations and invasions by global and regional powers. Four countries have suffered such interventions that triggered or worsened savage civil wars: Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya. These traumatic events shattered these countries, and it is unclear whether in the end they will survive as unified nation states. In large part in consequence of these foreign interventions, Syria and Yemen are today experiencing grave humanitarian crises, which have produced millions of refugees and hundreds of thousands of desperate migrants. This chaotic regional situation provides fertile soil for the rise and expansion of fanatical terrorist formations like ISIS, indeed ISIS grew directly out of the US invasion of Iraq. One could add to this list of scenes of extreme long-term social and political dislocation two countries adjacent to the Middle East, Afghanistan and Somalia, and one at its heart, Palestine. The external interventions and foreign occupations that have caused so much of this suffering were cynical, cold-blooded exercises in *raison d'état* that did, and are still doing, terrible harm to the peoples affected.

Meanwhile, a dangerous rivalry involving the United States and its most important regional allies on one side, and Iran and its allies on another, has overshadowed many of the other problems of the Middle East. The Trump administration, encouraged by Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, has significantly inflamed this rivalry, with several negative consequences. One was the US withdrawal from the joint nuclear agreement with Iran, potentially setting back efforts for limitation of the spread of nuclear weapons in the region. American-Iranian tensions have also envenomed ongoing conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and other parts of the Middle East. This rivalry has also helped to produce a perverse tacit alliance between the Trump administration, Israel, and the leading Arab Gulf powers to force the Palestinians to capitulate to Israel. Even though the Palestinians enjoy very limited external support, and are divided among themselves, they are most unlikely to submit to this diktat. However, the closer links among this array of hostile powers have worsened their already difficult situation, as Israel's unceasing colonization of the West Bank has put the resolution of this conflict farther out of reach. Finally, this American-Iranian confrontation has distracted attention from the deeper problems of the Middle East: widespread poverty, illiteracy and unemployment, assaults on human and civil rights, the lack of democracy, economic and gender inequalities, and systemic corruption by entrenched elites. If the many billions of dollars devoted by all parties to carrying out these invasions, interventions, occupations and subversive activities were redirected to addressing such chronic problems, the region would be much better off.

Whether you agree with this analysis or not, one cannot dispute that the Middle East is in an acute state of crisis. As experts on the region, we cannot pretend that it is not burning before our eyes. This brings me directly to the first of the problems that we as Middle East specialists face: this is the political aspect of Middle Eastern studies.

As individuals who are in constant touch with Middle Eastern societies, we are more aware than are others of the challenges that these societies are facing. Three of them seem to me to be paramount:

1. We all know about the problems of inequality of distribution of resources, and the greed and selfishness of the elites that dominate most Middle Eastern societies. In this they are little different from other elites. The difference is that most of these societies are relatively poor, so the inequalities are more glaring. Moreover, these elites receive massive support from, and are protected and enabled by, the equally greedy elites of foreign powers that benefit economically from these kleptocratic client regimes. In a region that contains such petroleum and gas riches, this disparity between rich and poor is particularly noteworthy.
2. We are all aware of the fact that the Middle East is the area of the world with by far the highest proportion of dictatorships and absolute monarchies, and that most regimes in the region callously disregard democracy and human, gender and civil rights. This situation is undoubtedly linked to the concentration of most Middle Eastern oil wealth in the hands of absolute monarchies and dictatorships that are the bitter enemies of democracy. In spite of their autocratic and brutal nature, these regimes enjoy strong support from the US, European states and Russia, all of which are beneficiaries of their rule.
3. We are all aware, finally, that the external interventions in the Middle East I just mentioned have been more persistent and more extensive for longer than in most other regions of the world. The disastrous consequences in countries that include some of the original cradles of human civilization have been catastrophic, not just for

the peoples and societies concerned, but for the world's architectural and cultural heritage, with ancient sites destroyed, and libraries and archives scattered or stolen.

Talking openly and vigorously about these grave problems, whether doing so in the Middle East or outside it, is liable to lead to unpopularity, at the very least. At the worst, it can lead to severe persecution, especially for academics living in several Middle Eastern countries. On the other hand, there are many rewards for remaining silent about inequality, oppressive rule by tyrants, and the destructive wars waged in the Middle East by global and regional powers.

I believe that it is our responsibility, as scholars of this region who presumably have sympathy for and understanding of the cultures and histories of the peoples we study, to highlight these terrible realities. In particular, those in secure positions in countries where freedom of speech and academic freedom are valued have a responsibility to use this privilege to speak out on these issues. What is needed is NOT, as is often the case with academic poseurs, to take extreme positions using language that only others with PhD's can understand. Instead, it is necessary for us to attempt to speak to the general public in intelligible ways about the brutal realities in our region.

The second major problem we face in our field is that the Middle East is badly misunderstood in many parts of the world. While we did not create this problem, I believe that scholars in Middle Eastern studies have a duty to address it, not only in our academic writings and in the classroom, but also in the public sphere. We are in fact those most qualified to explain the Middle East and its problems to others. Too many of our colleagues avoid doing this, either out of a lack of the proper training to do so, or because of a desire to avoid the complexities and possible hardships of engaging with the public and the media. That is understandable. In my view, however, this is a major responsibility, one which many academics wrongly shirk.

Remedying this situation will require some courage, and better training of our graduate students to engage in outreach to the public.

A third related problem is that there are serious flaws in our training of graduate students. Specifically, in addition to a necessary focus on academic research, there is not enough concentration on pedagogy, or on how to address wider audiences. We need more MA and PhD students who will **not** go on to be academic specialists, but who will instead inhabit the policy, NGO and media spheres. Many academics in the Middle East field (and in other fields) are poorly qualified to train students to do that. While I cannot speak of other systems, it has been my experience after 35 years working in several major American research universities that they promote and tenure almost only on the basis of scholarship, sometimes of the most abstruse kinds. I cannot tell you how many tenure cases I have been involved in where the **sole** question at issue was the quality of the scholarship, with teaching, collegiality and speaking to wider audiences completely overlooked. Scholarship is of course supremely important: it is the basis of all we do. However, in practice these universities pay only lip service to the rest, including teaching, while public outreach is ignored, and is sometimes penalized.

This is a skewed set of priorities. It is especially dangerous at a moment when the liberal arts and the social sciences are under sustained attack from the philistines who control state power or on whose vast wealth private universities depend. Too many of those who hold the purse strings of the institutions we work in believe that “education” means producing obedient technicians for the narrow disciplines that they consider produce economic value. If as practitioners in the social sciences and the humanities we do not educate articulate advocates for the value of what we do, these philistines will assuredly turn our departments into no more than

appendages of the disciplines they consider worthwhile, whether business, accounting, law, medicine, engineering, economics or the sciences.

A fourth and related problem is that even the specialized academic part of the training in our field is wanting. In particular, there is not enough training of PhD students to teach undergraduates. This is part of a broader problem of disciplinary training, and of the evolution of scholarship generally. Too much of the education we offer is too constricted and narrow, and too much of our scholarship is written in academic jargon, and is comprehensible only to other scholars. There is of course a place for specialized terminology in any field, but there is absolutely no reason why much more of the scholarship that we produce cannot be written clearly in plain, easily understandable language. There is even less reason that developing teaching skills should not be an integral part of PhD programs.

The final problem is one I touched on in my presidential address to MESA in Arizona in 1994: I said then that among Middle East specialists there is not enough engagement with our respective disciplines. I am still of that opinion 24 years later. Having separate departments and centers of Middle East studies has many advantages. But it can also have the effect of cloistering off what we do from the broader trends in our universities, and in academia generally. In my own discipline of history, for example, too many Middle East historians are not part of history departments, where they can participate in broader dialogues, learn from the methodology and trends in the wider historical field, and enlighten other historians about the Middle East. Similarly, study of the great literatures of the Middle East, past and present, is usually separate from comparative literature departments. This is often the fault of these departments, which seem to have a restrictive understanding of the term “comparative.” This separation has two negative effects. One is to make other academics in our respective disciplines less universal in their

understanding, as they are deprived of input from Middle East specialists. The other is to render many Middle East academics more insular and less able to talk to others outside the Middle East field.

That is enough about problems. Let me now speak about some of the positive developments in Middle Eastern studies.

When I began my trajectory as an undergraduate over fifty years ago, the field of Middle Eastern studies was still populated by some of its greatest figures. Among my teachers were Franz Rosenthal and Albert Hourani. At Oxford in the early 1970's, I heard lectures by Sir Reader Bullard, who before World War I had been a dragoman in the British embassy in Istanbul, which he called Constantinople. Philip Hitti, Jacques Berque, Kathleen Kenyon, Charles Issawi, Maxime Rodinson, Andre Raymond, Constantin Zurayq, and Anne Lambton were all still active or had just retired when I was a student. I was privileged to meet most of them. Halil Bey Inalcik was my colleague when I began teaching at the University of Chicago, as were Robert and Linda Braidwood. I know that just mentioning the names of these major figures who have now passed on dates me, but please bear with me: this is more than a trip down memory lane.

Looking back at the writings of these and other scholars of their generation, and considering it in comparison with the work of several dozen former students whose PhD's I have supervised or was a second reader of since the 1980's (a few of whom are here this evening), some aspects of the evolution of our field are clear. One of them is that there are no longer any generalists to rival the leading figures of that earlier era. Sir Hamilton Gibb, for example, wrote on Arabic literature, Islamic history of the classical and medieval periods, religion, and modern Middle Eastern history, the study of which he helped to pioneer through his students. Philip Hitti

made academic contributions in all of these areas, plus epigraphy and comparative Semitics. Jacques Berque was just as prolific, and as much of a polymath. With the departure of these giants of an earlier age, we have lost something in the process of narrower specialization, but much was also gained in terms of expertise and depth of knowledge. For example, modern Middle East history, or the prehistoric archaeology of the Near East, which barely existed when these scholars began their careers many decades ago, are now thriving sub-fields. On balance therefore, I consider this development to be a positive one.

Another positive development is that in spite of the continued ignorance about the Middle East among much of the general public -- ignorance that is maliciously cultivated by politicians and other public figures -- there is a wider base of general understanding about the region today in the United States and Europe than there was a few decades ago. Some of this is due to the great variety and quantity of information provided by alternative media and social media, which have replaced the mainstream corporate media as sources of news for younger people. This is a change that is all to the good. Serious research has shown that exposure to American television news makes viewers less well informed. The correct word for that process in Arabic is not *'ilam*: it is *tajhil*, making people more ignorant. While alternative and social media have played a part in this improvement in public understanding, much of it is also due to the work of dedicated scholars, especially those who are gifted teachers, or are able to speak to wider audiences. As I indicated earlier, much more remains to be done in this regard, but we are in a better place today than we once were, at least among the young. Younger people are more traveled, more inquisitive and less insular than their elders. One can only hope that this open-mindedness will continue to increase, and will eventually overcome the current wave of bigotry and intolerance in Europe and the US.

Yet another positive factor is the much greater diversity that exists in our field today. When I began my academic career, there were very few senior faculty members in the US and Europe who were not men, and even fewer who were from the Middle East or members of minorities. Unless one thinks that only men of European origin are capable of providing insights into the history, cultures and societies of the Middle East, which on the face of it is an absurd proposition, a broader range of perspectives can only enrich the field. The quality of current scholarship shows that this has begun to happen. Partly because of greater diversity, PhD students and young scholars are asking questions that no one ever asked before, about gender, or minorities, or human and civil rights for example, as well as other issues worthy of study, and that is an entirely good thing.

One area where we have lagged behind in this regard has to do with social and class aspects, both in terms of diversity of recruitment into the field, and in terms of the topics we work on. Elite American research universities tend to draw their students from the upper economic strata, and that is true of the best universities in the Middle East and Europe. Although there has been some improvement, I see insufficient concern in academia about this phenomenon, which ought to be an important consideration in the future. Just as insights in our field should not be expected only from men of European origins, so should they not be coming only from the offspring of the rich and the comfortable.

Let me conclude by returning to political matters, by referring you to a recent poll of over 18,000 respondents in 11 Arab countries that the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies released last week. This is probably the largest sampling of such opinion extant. You should not be surprised if you have not heard much about the results: they challenge the received wisdom that the corporate mainstream media broadcasts about the Middle East, and that is comforting to

most Middle Eastern governments. These results show that several major Arab governments are on a completely different page from the majority of their peoples. The media tells us, for example, that “the Arabs,” or “the Sunni Arabs,” are supportive of closer ties with Israel, and that they see Iran as the greatest danger to the region. That is certainly true of the autocrats who rule several leading Arab states. However, this poll shows that these rulers in no way represent the views of “the Arabs,” or “the Sunnis.” Every single year since 2011, over 84% of those polled in these eleven Arab countries opposed recognition of Israel, with the main reason given for this opposition being its occupation of Palestinian lands. That number in 2017-18 was 87% against recognition, with only 8% in favor. Three quarters of respondents this year considered Palestine an Arab cause, while 82% considered Israel the main foreign threat to the region, followed by the US at 70%, Iran at 47% and Russia at 34%. Negative attitudes towards US policy have gone from 49% in 2014 to 79% in 2017-18. The views of respondents on a variety of other topics are also at variance with the image that the media usually presents of the Arab world. They are at variance too with the policies of many repressive Arab governments. These majority views include support for a democratic political system, which is at 76%, and opposition to a sharia-based political system, which is at 61%.

The results of this poll indicate something that all of us who are in close touch with the Middle East know well. At least as far as the Arab countries are concerned, much that is happening in the region is taking place against the will of a large majority of the peoples concerned. They want democracy, and not the collection of absolute monarchies, military dictatorships or veiled authoritarian governments operating under cover of fake democratic institutions that dominate most Arab countries. They do not support the military interventions of the US in the region, or the military interventions of other powers. They are overwhelmingly

opposed to Israel's policies, and in particular to its occupation of Arab lands and its unceasing colonization of them. Whenever Jared Kushner finally reveals his noxious plan for the so-called "deal of the century," which is being carefully tailored to maintain Israel's occupation and colonization of Palestine, you can be sure that whatever dictatorial Arab governments may say about it privately, their peoples will be resolutely opposed to it. This means that such a plan has no long-term viability whatsoever. Nor does any other so called peace plan that is not squarely based on international law, justice and complete equality for both peoples concerned.

We should try to reflect these realities honestly in our teaching and in our public outreach, if we are to maintain faith with the peoples of the region we study. They are facets of Middle Eastern societies we should be making every effort to bring into the public realm, in place of shallow news coverage that focuses on the whims of Middle Eastern tyrants whose values are abhorrent to most of us, and on the schemes of their great power enablers and protectors. It is our job as scholars to produce knowledge, and to share it with others. We unfortunately cannot solve the problems of the Middle East, nor is that our task. But it **is** our responsibility to at least spread knowledge of these real life problems among all of those we teach and interact with.