



# The Ethics of Research in the Middle East

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## The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by the Carnegie Corporation and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see <http://www.pomeps.org>.

*Online Article Index*

Please see <http://pomeps.org/2014/06/11/the-ethics-of-research-in-the-middle-east-memos/> for online versions of all of the articles in this collection.

## Can there be an ethical Middle East political science?

What are the ethical obligations of an academic studying today's Middle East? Have the Arab uprisings changed how scholars must weigh ethical and moral concerns in their research? How should academics incorporate their ethical commitments into their social scientific research agendas or policy advice? How should they respond when faced with severe moral atrocities such as the human costs of the war in Syria? Is there an obligation to take sides?

These are not the usual questions that are supposed to occupy the professional life of political scientists, who spend more time contemplating research design, replicability, and statistical significance. But, of course, they do. Ethical decisions underlie virtually everything we do. The challenge of incorporating ethics into academic political science was a major theme of this May's annual conference of the Project on Middle East Political Science. The thoughts of 10 first-rate scholars on the subject have now been published as a symposium in this POMEPS Studies.

It's easy to see why many academics would prefer to avoid engaging with ethics. It isn't just the ethos of dispassionate science that pervades today's political science, although that certainly does create professional disincentives. A lot of what passes as "ethical" discourse in the foreign policy debate, and especially about the Middle East, is more like political grandstanding or glorified identity politics. The first 73,000 op-eds and political speeches thundering on about moral clarity are enough to turn anyone off of the language of morality. So is the all too frequent tendency to use ethical language as thinly veiled identity politics, in which one side is right and the other side is evil, and all who disagree must be shamed and condemned. Many political scientists are simply turned off by the misuse and abuse of the language of morality in public discourse.

The popular misuse of ethical language doesn't allow us to turn away from the ethical questions, though. Virtually everything that political scientists study, from Islamist politics to democracy promotion to interventions in Iraq or Syria to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is deeply saturated with ethical dilemmas and moral commitments. As Jillian Schwedler notes, "It is hard to find an issue related to the Middle East or Islamic world that isn't saturated in tense debates about what's 'wrong' with the region, how to 'fix' it, and indeed what the world 'should' look like. We cannot avoid engaging these normative claims even while we reproduce the (false) veneer of scientific objectivity." Faced with those ethical underpinnings, Wendy Pearlman poses the question bluntly: "Is our overriding goal to make a contribution to an academic discipline rather than to do good in the world?" When, she wonders, "Is it ethically appropriate or inappropriate to take an open political stand, or cross the line from scholarship to advocacy?"

I believe that there is an alternative way to frame this question, however. As citizens and as engaged intellectuals, we all have the right – indeed, an obligation – to make moral judgments and act based on those convictions. As political scientists, however, we have a unique set of potential contributions and constraints. Political scientists do not typically have anything

of distinctive value to add to a chorus of moral condemnation or declarations of normative solidarity. What we do have, hopefully, is the methodological training, empirical knowledge, and comparative insight to offer informed assessments about alternative courses of action on contentious issues. Our primary ethical commitment as political scientists, therefore must be to get the theory and the empirical evidence right, and to clearly communicate those findings to relevant audiences – however unpalatable or inconclusive they might be.

My own thinking about how ethics and moral principles could be incorporated into International Relations theory was profoundly shaped by a workshop organized a decade ago by Richard Price in Vancouver, which included key constructivist thinkers such as Martha Finnemore, Kathryn Sikkink, and Christian Reus-Smit. What I took away from Price's project, ultimately published as *Moral Limit and Possibility in World Politics*, was that an ethical approach to world politics depended fundamentally on getting the causal theory right. My own chapter focused on the Iraq sanctions debate, and how to assess the competing ethical claims of harm to Iraqi civilians from sanctions and from Saddam Hussein's regime. That left me painfully aware of the inevitable ethical tradeoffs, the murkiness of the available evidence, and the urgent need for careful causal analysis.

This perspective turns the dichotomy between social science professionalism and moral action on its head. If ethical research and policy advice requires above all getting the causal theory right, then foregrounding ethical questions does not in any way undermine commitments to rigorous social science. There is nothing easier than mounting a moral high horse and demanding that something must be done in response to the horrors of the world. Good political science is harder, but hopefully makes for more effective action in the world.

The purpose of social science, if it has any, must be to inform our decisions about the likely effects of our actions. Favoring human rights is nice, but promoting human rights effectively requires a solid theory of how human rights norms and ideas change. Almost every ethical question, then, is also a causal question: Will war crimes tribunals reduce the incidence of war crimes or won't they? Will boycott and divestment campaigns undermine support for and change the behavior of rights abusing regimes or won't they? Will military intervention reduce or increase civilian suffering? When faced with a mounting apocalypse in Syria, it isn't enough to say that the United States must do something. Truly ethical action demands serious grappling with the best available evidence about what different courses of action might produce. Arming Syrian rebels or declaring a no-fly zone might be an ethical choice if a rigorous look at the theory and evidence suggests that it will reduce suffering or shorten the war, but not if analysis suggests that such actions will most likely make a civil war longer, bloodier, and harder to resolve. Ethical action isn't possible without serious analysis of the consequences of those actions.

I believe that political scientists have an ethical responsibility to engage with the public discourse and to try to inform policy decisions with their research. There is a nearly infinite amount of

commentary, opinion, and analysis in today's gloriously open internet-shaped public sphere. Political scientists writing in places like *The Monkey Cage* should hopefully be able to introduce this methodological rigor and comparative analysis into those arguments. They won't win the day often or easily, of course. Where there is an opportunity to contribute, however slightly, to shaping policies and attitudes more likely to produce ethical outcomes then it must be taken.

Not everyone agrees, of course. If there is no chance of policies really being changed, some people fear that policy engagement will simply put the political scientist in the service of power. In the POMEPS symposium, Laurie Brand warns that a clear divide should be maintained between research that informs debate on important issues (which is core to the scholarly mission) and research in the service of specific policy objectives (which, she argues, is "at the least a violation of professional ethics"). Jason Brownlee goes further, arguing "Middle East political science scholars should turn away from proposing policy implications and aspire to be less implicated in programs that are inimical to basic desiderata of freedom and equality." In an excellent essay last year, Bassam Haddad despairs at the ability of scholars to say anything useful about Syria anymore. For all these thoughtful reservations, I do not feel that an ethically engaged scholar can or should refrain from joining the public and policy discourse on such issues. Remaining silent, thus ceding the field of debate to others less reticent, is an ethical choice as well.

What about the practical ethics of research in today's Middle East? One of the most urgent themes running through the POMEPS symposium concerned how Western scholars treat people from the region they study. Scott Weiner, a George Washington University doctoral candidate, emphasizes the importance of getting the story right, an ethical imperative of accuracy in research, which is itself dependent upon an honest, mutually transparent relationship between the scholar and those he or she studies. Pearlman, who has spent the last few years documenting the experiences of Syrian refugees, shakes her head at "Syrian activists receiving queries from researchers who are crude in addressing them as data sources rather than human beings who have endured horrors." Sheila Carapico, then at the American University of Cairo, and Brand each look skeptically at the "academic tourists" who relied on Egyptian scholars and activists to quickly gather facts about the revolution but denied equal credit to their interlocutors. How can this abuse of our peers be avoided?

We also need to take seriously the extent to which our research might put our interlocutors at risk. With activists being jailed across Egypt and murdered in Syria, how should academics balance their research interests with the protection of those they meet? Sarah Parkinson points out the growing problems with simply protecting our information and the anonymity of our interlocutors. The fact is that "researchers simply cannot promise confidentiality given contemporary U.S. law and are ethically obligated to take this fact into account." We often treat the Institutional Review Board (IRB) as a nuisance. As Nathan Brown argues, however, the ethical considerations at the heart of the IRB should be central to how we conceive of any

research project. Richard Nielsen recounts the horrified response to a “proposal to randomize the framing of requests for fatwas from Muslim clerics online. What if my experiment resulted in clerics advocating violence? Could someone be harmed or killed as a result of my research? Was it ethical to deceive clerics by representing my request as a genuine religious question?” He abandoned the project. These questions of moral judgment in research in conflict zones are not new, of course – Lee Ann Fujii’s “Research Ethics 101: Dilemmas and Responsibilities” is a good place to start.

This also means taking seriously the thoughts, identities, and views of those from the region we study. As a long-time Habermasian, I believe that ethical political judgment must include the equal opportunity to speak and be heard by all those affected. This cannot just mean becoming a loudspeaker for local narratives, however. As Schwedler observes, “Of course the primary goal in our research is to get the story right, but that typically means pushing up against other versions of that story (or against stories that say that our story is irrelevant).”

But there is rarely a single, obviously true story to be told, and our interlocutors in the region are struggling with the same dilemmas and uncertainties. Take the June 30 protests and July 3, 2013 military coup in Egypt, which tore apart academic and political relationships. A very significant number of Egyptians absolutely bought in to the argument that June 30 was a second revolution, which would restore democracy and rescue Egyptians from the evils of the Muslim Brotherhood. They were absolutely furious with Western scholars and analysts who refused to see events through that lens and instead saw a typical military coup. Most of us involved in those arguments could share thousands of “revolution not coup” emails and tweets. But Egypt’s political situation a year later, with thousands of political prisoners, ever-tightening control over media freedom, and the return of the old elite, overwhelmingly confirms the cautions of those Western analysts. Would the ethical thing have been to go along with their convictions and amplify their voices, when the social science evidence strongly suggested that the military coup would create a more authoritarian and repressive regime?

Ethical commitments cannot and should not be walled off from our academic research agendas, then. How to effectively incorporate ethics into those agendas remains a highly contested question, though. Schwedler argues compellingly that every choice we make about what to study, how to study it, and how we present our findings is built upon often unacknowledged ethical judgments. I believe that getting the theory right and effectively communicating those findings to relevant publics are themselves ethical imperatives for political scientists. Read the “Ethics of Research in the Middle East” symposium and join the debate.

*Marc Lynch, Director of POMEPS*

*July 2, 2014*

# Ethics and Research on the Middle East

*By Wendy Pearlman, Northwestern University*

Ethics are pertinent to research on Middle East politics both as rules for morally appropriate behavior in gathering information and as the principled commitments that guide our choices about what to study and how to interpret its implications. As a preliminary entry into these topics, I pose and discuss three questions.

A first question concerns the degree to which ethics should direct the questions that drive our research. Various factors generate and justify our research agendas, from theoretical debates to the availability of data and a researcher's own methodological preferences. In political science, it is customary to legitimate a research topic as "filling a gap in the literature." While this is important for scientific progress, it suggests that our overriding goal is to make a contribution to an academic discipline rather than to do good in the world. Sometimes ethical issues emerge in a sentence or two, often at the end of a piece, indicating why the research matters. This risks reading like an afterthought, a begrudging anticipation of what we frequently call the "so what" question.

Yet, for many of us, ethical commitments loom larger than this would suggest. Many of us study conflict because we are moved by the suffering of victims of violence. We study authoritarian regimes because we are committed to free and accountable government, service provision because we care about how people get what they need to live healthy lives, protest movement because we respect individuals' struggles for change, etc. In addition to informing the topics that motivate us, they can also shape how we approach them. For example, most Middle East political scientists who study Islamist movements apply concepts and theories generalizable to movements and political parties at large. Some choose such frameworks not only because they are intellectually compelling, but also due to an ethical stance that groups ought not be treated differently simply because they are comprised by Muslims or invoke Islam.

Ethical issues are implicit in these and many other topics. However, they are not typically addressed explicitly. What is gained or lost due to the relative limits of our discussion of the ethical dimensions of our research questions? Are there substantive choices we might make differently if ethics features more directly, openly, and prominently in our disciplinary conversations?

A second question is to whom or what we have ethical considerations. Identifying the ethical commitments relevant for political scientists of the Middle East entails identifying the sets of relationships in which we are embedded. Here I identify four. First and foremost is our relationship to the people from whom we obtain data. I discuss this further below.

Second is our relationship toward the scholarly community of which we are members. This professional affiliation raises questions about ethical duties to act on issues of academic freedom, inside or beyond the United States. We are able to succeed in our own work only to the degree that we enjoy space to express ourselves. Who will speak up for other practitioners of our craft when they are denied such rights, or punished for their attempted exercise of them? As their natural allies, we arguably have a special responsibility to show solidarity.

Third is our relationship toward own home state and society, insofar as it engages with Middle East politics. The many of us who are U.S. citizens watch as our government's actions in the region sometimes contradict our understandings of what is best for its peoples and/or our own national interest. As academic specialists and citizens, should (or must) we actively attempt to promote the policies that we believe to be appropriate? Should (or must) we attempt to contribute to public discourse?

Fourth is our relationship toward the Middle East and North Africa itself. We have made careers and livelihoods

from the region. This implies some kind of moral debt: an obligation to “give back.”

Within these realms in which ethics are relevant, there is a final question: How do we act ethically? While I will not brave a direct answer to this big question, I put forth a few distinctions for conceptualizing categories or levels of ethical behavior relevant for our research.

In some situations, we have *ethical obligations*. Some minimal standards for appropriate behavior are obligatory. As scholars, we have an ethical duty to be honest and professional in producing knowledge. We also have ethical duty to “do no harm” to the human subjects from whom we obtain data. As directed by university internal review boards, we must abide by principles of informed consent and confidentiality for interviewees and avert exposing them to any undue physical, social, and psychological risk.

Apart from these matters, I would add that it is requisite – or at least highly preferable – to show appreciation and respect for the people who share their knowledge and experiences with us. I have heard of Syrian activists receiving queries from researchers who are crude in addressing them as data sources rather than human beings who have endured horrors. We should remind our students who do fieldwork that politeness and compassion are proper field research practices. We must not forget that ourselves.

If ethical obligations compel us to do no harm, *ethical opportunities* invite us to be of benefit. Here I have in mind the myriad ways in which we can share from our time, access, resources, and knowledge to assist those whom we meet in the Middle East or in the course of studying it. This might entail editing someone’s grant application, translating an NGO’s press release, offering academic advice, endorsing a charity, etc. It might also involve connecting others with resources that we are especially poised to locate, such as the funds for scholars at risk, scholarships for students in need, or the services of human rights organizations.

We do not, strictly speaking, have a duty to provide such assistance. But it is a worthy thing to do. To do

successful field research, one must be vigilant in seizing unexpected chances to learn. Similarly, to do ethically virtuous field research, we can be vigilant in identifying and taking advantage of micro-occasions to help others as innumerable individuals have helped us. In our instruction of students and our own example, we can establish such attention to ethical opportunities as a facet of our work.

Finally, distinct from both ethical obligations and ethical opportunities are *ethical judgment calls*. Politics is about conflict. In attempting to study politics scientifically, we typically distance ourselves from the parties to conflict. Though studying politics is never value-free, the norm of our discipline is to strive for some ideal of objectivity and neutrality in our analysis of causal processes and outcomes. In analyzing the implications of our research, however, we might form judgments about the rightness or wrongness of some actions, policies, or parties, and what should be done in response. When is it ethically appropriate or inappropriate to take an open political stand, or cross the line from scholarship to advocacy?

These questions are not easy in theory or practice. In the complex political situations that we study, “right” and “wrong” are not always obvious. Even when we can justify an action as morally correct, it might be detrimental if it conflicts with other values or politically desirable ends. For example, Nikolaos van Dam recently critiqued the Western approach to the Syrian uprising for giving precedence to “supposedly moralistic ideals” rather than realpolitik. He explains:

By branding the rule of President al-Asad as illegitimate, Western countries may have been morally just, but they thereby prematurely cut off any opportunity they had to play a constructive role in helping find a political solution to the crisis. What should have priority: being morally correct or helping find a solution?

The methodologically inclined among us might model resolutions to such problems. Those of us who are more skeptical will view them as dilemmas that defy science. As Elisabeth Wood writes, “Ethical research inevitably depends on the informed moral judgment of the

researcher.”<sup>1</sup> Our judgments will likely differ. What we can demand of ourselves is that we take into account multiple points of view, think carefully, and act in good faith.

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1 Elisabeth Jean Wood, “The Ethical Challenges of Field Research in Conflict Zones,” *Qualitative Sociology*, Vol. 29, Issue 3 (September 2006), p. 374.

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## Of Power Relations and Responsibilities

*By Laurie A. Brand, University of Southern California*

Fieldwork in the Middle East and North Africa region poses many ethical concerns. Most immediately and obviously, particularly given the authoritarian nature of the regimes of the region, are the need to respect privacy or even anonymity of sources, to do no harm, whether through omission or commission to those who help us, to present ourselves and the purposes of our research honestly, and to accurately report and honestly assess the material we have gathered.

Here, however, I would like to reflect on several other issues related to the broader power relations that affect our research.<sup>1</sup> We cannot escape that much of the history of modern social science in the developing world has its origins in colonial projects to conquer and control. Britain recruited academic specialists primarily from Oxford and Cambridge to work on economics, social services, and educational programs in its colonies. Closer to home, following World War II some of the United States’ most elite academic institutions took money directly from

the CIA, FBI, or other intelligence or military agencies, while others secured government funding indirectly through various foundations that served at the time as laundering channels. Perhaps the most infamous of these programs was Project Camelot, which aimed at creating the information base needed for a variety of social engineering projects and then for the counterinsurgency and psychological warfare operations that were launched when the initial projects failed. Conceived in 1963, it was intended to bring social science expertise to bear on “managing” national liberation movements in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East. It was exposed before it could be launched, but other similar studies and projects were implemented.

Indeed, it is important that those of us who work in a regional studies tradition remain mindful that it was precisely during this period that “area studies” emerged owing largely to similar government concerns, not out of a desire for disinterested knowledge, but in response to the need for experts who could deal with specific problems. As a result of the Vietnam War experience some sectors of the academic community became more wary of government initiatives, but the history here is important. One of its clear lessons should be that it is important to draw and

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1 See my 2004 MESA Presidential Address, “Scholarship in the Shadow of Empire,” *MESA Bulletin*, Vol 39, No. 1 (June 2005): 3-18. For reflections from another discipline and other regions see James Derrick Sidaway, “In other worlds: on the politics of research by ‘First World’ geographers in the ‘Third World,’” *Area*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (December 1993): 403-08.

maintain a clear distinction between research that may contribute to ongoing policy debates and *research in the service of* particular national objectives. The former may be called *policy relevant*, the second, however, is political, not academic, work, and to present it as otherwise at very least violates professional ethics.

Thus, our fieldwork needs to be seen, not just in terms of our individual endeavors, but as a part of a larger set of relations. At the most basic level are the links between each of us and those with whom we interact during our research, from the cab driver, to the archivist, the young revolutionary, and the government official. There are also relations between institutions: between our home universities and whoever else funds our work on the one hand, and the universities, research centers, NGOs and the like with whom we affiliate and from whom we seek assistance, on the other. Framing all of these relationships, however, are the inter- and trans-national structures, the relations between centers of power (and weakness): between the American academy, which increasingly sets the standards for or serves as a model for others, and MENA universities; between the U.S. government and regional governments; and between U.S. corporations and regional/national economies.

As scholars we have different degrees of ability to influence these power relations, but we have a clear ethical responsibility to be aware of them all and of the role they can play in various aspects of our research: from how we conceive of a project, to how we carry it out (how much time in the region, what sorts of regional sources/input), to how we draw conclusions, and how and to whom we present them.

An excellent example of the ethical questions imposed by unequal power relations was raised by Mona Abaza in an article on the phenomenon of “academic tourists.”<sup>2</sup> Her reflections merit repeating here because, while what happened in the immediate aftermath of the Arab

uprisings was perhaps unprecedented in the region, the problems she expressed did not begin in January 2011. She focused the problem of what she termed the local “service providers,” those scholars in Cairo who were bombarded with requests for assistance by Western scholars wanting to study the Egyptian revolution. Her complaint concerned not the interest of outsiders in the developments in Egypt, which she welcomed, but rather the unequal positioning and privilege of the Americans versus their Egyptian counterparts.

Americans with funding and time (sabbaticals, course releases, etc.) went to Egypt and sought help with contacts, logistics, translators, and so on, while implicitly (and in some cases, probably explicitly) treating the Egyptian scholars as helpers, rather than colleagues. It was the outsiders who had the financial means and privileged access to outlets of power (prestigious publishing, lecturing in the United States, etc.) who thereby became the analysts of local developments for the centers of power: They in effect created the knowledge about the uprisings in Egypt, while the Egyptians they consulted became the objects of that knowledge creation.

It is, therefore, critical for all of us to reflect regularly on the nature of our interaction with those who assist us in our work: What do we give back? What do we do to level the playing field, to help break down the barriers of privilege? Clearly, circumstances differ, so there is no single appropriate formula, but the basic, guiding principle should be that of establishing relationships of mutual respect, not some variation on neocolonialism. To list just a handful of ways to ensure this: We must first listen to our colleagues, sources, etc. as much or more than we speak ourselves. We must take responsibility for our own work, and not impose on our MENA friends’ and colleagues’ resources or sources. There should also always be honest pay for services rendered when appropriate: no exploitation facilitated by Arab generosity. We should be creative in finding means of thanking or compensating people: assisting with information or access for our colleagues to enable them to advance their careers – through helping with information on grants, writing

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2 “Academic Tourists Sight-Seeing the Arab Spring,” <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2767/academic-tourists-sight-seeing-the-arab-spring>. Last accessed June 3, 2014.

letters of recommendation, engaging in joint authorship when appropriate, including them in conferences, recommending them for projects and the like, etc.

Finally, we should be ready to defend them when necessary. Here I will mention the Middle East Studies Association's Committee on Academic Freedom, which I have chaired since 2006. We take up cases of academic freedom violations against members of the academy in North America and the MENA region. Bringing to the committee's attention cases of academics and students whose academic freedom has been threatened or violated is a powerful way to put in the service of our colleagues abroad some of the influence that our privileged positions here in the United States offer us.

In sum, it is unethical and amoral (perhaps immoral) for those of us who have had the privilege of learning, indeed, taking, so much from the region – its average people, its scholars, its other experts, its institutes – to regard our involvements there solely or even largely in terms of how they serve our professional advancement. Our research interactions in the region impose upon us a range of ethical responsibilities, some of the most important of which extend well beyond the strictly professional boundaries of our lives.

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## On Local Frameworks And The Ethics of Accuracy

*By Scott Weiner, George Washington University*

Sayid Qutb's 1951 essay "The America I Have Seen" describes a horrific game he witnessed as an Egyptian studying in the United States between 1948 and 1950:

Their lack of attention to the rules and sportsmanship to the extent that they are enthralled with the flowing blood and crushed limbs, crying loudly, everyone cheering for his team. Destroy his head. Crush his ribs. Beat him to a pulp. This spectacle leaves no room for doubt as to the primitiveness of the feelings of those who are enamored with muscular strength and desire it.<sup>1</sup>

Qutb cited the event as proof that Americans are "primitive" and "overlook principles, values, and manners."

Whether or not such inferences can be based on what was in truth a college football game in the town of Greeley, Colorado is perhaps a matter of debate.

Accuracy in academic writing is about more than good scholarship. It also has an impact on the identities of those about whom we write. Qutb's description of football is not "false" *per se*, but it is certainly not the whole truth. Similarly, academics writing about the Middle East have historically been quick to judge what they have seen in the region. Today, even well meaning researchers in the Middle East can fall into tropes about authoritarianism, tribalism, and a general aversion to "liberal values." These descriptions are harmful to people whose identities may already be a matter of sensitivity or contention in the region or in the international arena.

<sup>1</sup> Sayid Qutb, "The American I Have Seen": In the Scale of Human Values," *Al-Risala Magazine*, 1951: 6.

Rather than debate these issues among ourselves as scholars, we should bring people in the region into our conversation. The formalization that comes with treating local sources as “subjects” helps us conceptualize our responsibility toward them. However, it also dilutes the extent to which we consider their agency.

As a doctoral candidate in political science, I spent six months in Kuwait and one month in Oman conducting interviews for a dissertation on kinship and family. Most of my subjects had little experience speaking on the record, especially about these intimate relationships. Furthermore, many were suspicious of my motives as an outsider, while others were reluctant to reveal their true beliefs. In general, my subjects were concerned that I would misrepresent them, their family, or their society – a concern based on precedent in existing scholarship.

In other words, subject and researcher share the same goal of accurately representing the society in question. Yet rather than see the researcher-subject relationship as a collaborative attempt to attain knowledge, scholars often approach subjects – even experts – as “untrained” and “data points” rather than fellow knowledge-seekers who share one perspective that the researcher must then triangulate with others. Obviously, some subjects – government officials, leaders of politically sensitive factions, or mistrusting elders – will deliberately obscure the facts. However, even in such cases, these misrepresentations are overcompensation for some underlying truth that motivates the speaker, even if it is nothing more than a desire to raise one’s profile by talking to a Western researcher. In most cases, taking a subject’s ideological framework seriously until proven otherwise is a better approach than writing off *prima facie* a framework that differs from the Western academic consensus.

In my endeavor to learn important lessons from Gulf societies, local expertise was invaluable. In Kuwait, I benefited largely from the expertise of local scholars, students, and researchers. While not all held a doctorate (or in the case of many students, a bachelor’s degree), these colleagues had extensive expertise on the region

and its people. Some had conducted interviews and even published books of their own. Most importantly, all understood the ideological frameworks of other interview subjects far better than I or any outsider could. My conversations about these frameworks often involved uncomfortable discussions about the privilege of American researchers, cultural imperialism, deep mistrust of the U.S. government, and my inability to truly understand Kuwaiti society. However, their intent in raising these issues was not to alienate me, but to defend an accurate representation of the society in which they lived.

Oman is a country where very little social science research is conducted. Yet even in such an environment, local experts were a vital part of my research process. At first, subjects were often confused *why* I was asking questions like “How did your parents meet?” But they were usually happy to answer once they understood my broader research intent. While in Oman, previewing my questions with local researchers (including fellow doctoral candidates) proved invaluable to this understanding. In particular, female students at multiple colleges, universities, and technical institutes were some of the most informative subjects with whom I spoke. So often treated as victims, these young women were invaluable to my understanding of the politics of kinship in the country.

Political scientists are storytellers. Often, we tell stories of people whose stories have not been shared in our professional and non-professional circles. Before telling our stories, replete with variables, controls, and case selections, our ethical obligation is to ask what kind of story our subjects would want to be told. Finding a balance between total deference and total indifference, our stories must amplify, rather than overpower the narratives that are so important to the identity of those on whose assistance we depend.

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## No Bureaucratic Pain, No Ethical Gain

By Nathan J. Brown, George Washington University

What are the ethical issues facing political scientists who undertake field work in the Middle East? The issues are hardly new but they have rarely been systematically discussed. While our colleagues in some disciplines have long wrestled publicly about the ethics of fieldwork, political scientists have more often discussed such matters among themselves informally.

And so most of us learn by example – often less the positive example of a mentor than the negative example of an apocryphal colleague or two who engaged in clearly unethical behavior by misrepresentation, exploiting colleagues (often from the country where the research is conducted), or blithely evading laws and policies. (In most such stories I have heard, it is the colleague’s interlocutors or researchers who came after him or her who suffered the consequences.)

But if our discipline makes few formal demands of us, a new bureaucracy now confronts us: Most scholars working at academic institutions in the United States now often are required to submit their research proposals to internal institutional review boards designed to protect the rights of the subjects of research.

Such boards are structures many of us love to hate. We complain with some justification that they often are staffed by people who understand what we do poorly; their mechanisms are cumbersome; and their rules sometimes seem better designed to elicit formalistic bureaucratic compliance than protect those whom we research. I have great sympathy with these complaints. But I worry that we can use our justified annoyance to evade the ethical discussions we should be having and to send signals to younger scholars that ethical concerns are bureaucratic niceties.

Underlying the internal institutional review is the principle that we should obtain the informed consent of all those

whom we are surveying. Every element of that principle is elusive. The idea that we can “inform” people of the risks of our questioning them always seems a bit odd: They are often likely to know far better what the immediate consequences can be; and in the tumultuous political environment in some countries, even a sophisticated and able observer is unlikely to be able to predict many consequences. “Consent” can be equally confusing – yes, if we sit down and administer a questionnaire, consent makes sense. But what if we engage in an informal conversation? Attend a rally? Talk with someone who clearly hopes not that we will hold the information quiet but expects us to be able to intervene with a high-level official? What if we overhear a conversation? Are harangued by an official? Questioned by a police officer? What if we are part of an informal discussion in which an argument breaks out among participants? Do our ethical obligations end?

Of course not. But that leads us to the heart of the matter: So much of what many of us learn comes not from formally structured interviews but from all the other aspects of conducting field work. We all know this; even those most reliant on formal survey research would never posit it as the substitute for all other kinds of research. And there is much of what we uncover that could embarrass or harm someone.

What are our ethical obligations in such cases? There are several easy principles that we can follow. First, we should represent ourselves fully and accurately to those we meet. Second, we should not harm the person we are quoting. Third, we should not *substitute* our judgment for someone who wishes not to have sensitive information publicized – though we might sometimes *supplement* their judgment with ours by exercising more caution than our interlocutors might have requested.

But those principles, while most of them are laudable, do

not always help us. What are our ethical obligations to tyrannical regimes or oppressive officials? Do we owe them the same protections? How do we react when we suspect – but do not know – that someone is assisting us in the expectation of help we are unlikely to be able or willing to provide?

Many of these are difficult situations that will likely be forever immune to clear rule writing. No institutional review board, however constructed, is likely to be able to give us guidance. Indeed, if such a board were staffed by people who knew our work much better, it is possible that such sympathetic familiarity would lead to too much flexibility rather than excessive rigidity.

I write not to advance answers to the detailed questions I have raised but much more modestly only to suggest that we take a slightly different view of our institutional review boards. Yes, they can be nuisances, but on how many other occasions are we required to think about the ethical implications of what we do? We can use their procedures

to try to look at our work from the perspectives of those with whom we come into contact.

And when we act as mentors, what kind of signals do we send when we suggest that ethical concerns are rules to be massaged or evaded so that we can do what we really want to do? Can we deliver a more helpful message: These are not necessarily the questions you want to be asked about your research, but it is not a bad thing to be asked to consider what you are doing and its effects on those you will meet.

The bureaucratic change in our institutional environment is as good an opportunity as may arise for us to think a bit more self-consciously before conducting field research.

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## Thoughts on the Ethics of Interventions When Studying Religion and Politics in the Middle East

*By Richard A. Nielsen, Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

The hour was late at the Al-Azhar mosque in Cairo, but the students kept up a continuous stream of questions and the young teacher, perhaps eager to increase his following, was entertaining them all. I sat silently in the second row of the study circle, but my blond hair loudly announced my presence. As the class adjourned, a young man asked me, “Is your family Muslim?” When I said they were not, he replied, “That must be very difficult. God bless you.” I panicked slightly. Of course he would assume that I was Muslim, because why else would someone listen to hours

of discussion about the intricacies of Islamic law? Should I tell him that I was not – and that I was there primarily to learn about scholarly networks at Al-Azhar? Should I have announced myself beforehand? Would he be angry if I had? Pleased? Curious? Skeptical? Would he assume that I was with the CIA?

I left as quickly as possible.

In a very different kind of study circle a year later, senior

political scientists debated the ethics of my proposal to randomize the framing of requests for fatwas from Muslim clerics online. What if my experiment resulted in clerics advocating violence? Could someone be harmed or killed as a result of my research? Was it ethical to deceive clerics by representing my request as a genuine religious question? Was it ethical to experiment with religion at all?

I left chastened, with no plans to run the experiment.

My experiences highlight ethical dilemmas that arise because of researcher intervention in a religious space, whether in the service of experimental or ethnographic research. In most areas of political science research, scholars largely agree that ethical intervention requires providing participants ample chance to give informed consent and weighing the benefits of research against the costs. When studying the intersection of politics and religion, meeting either of these criteria can be challenging or impossible. If ethical research on religion and politics in the Middle East faces substantial ethical barriers then scholars may focus on other topics and regions, leaving important holes in our collective knowledge.

Here, I offer some thoughts on the ethics of research intervention in religious settings, based partly on a paper I wrote for the “Ethics in Comparative Politics Experiments Conference” convened by Scott Desposato at the University of California, San Diego in May 2013. I argue that some types of interventions will be difficult or impossible to implement ethically when studying religion and politics in the Middle East. However, we as scholars should do the hard work of creatively identifying ways to carry out research on religion and politics rather than throwing up our hands.

### **Ethical research interventions in religious settings are often hard**

The papers at the UCSD ethics conference catalogued a litany of ethical challenges that experimental research faces in comparative politics, most of which are likely to be present in any study that attempts to experimentally study

religion and politics in the Middle East.

For example, a number of participants noted the challenges of operating in authoritarian regimes in which experimental research might provide tools for autocrats to make repression more extensive and efficient. Should researchers seek local approval when conducting experiments in authoritarian regimes? Not seeking approval might decrease the complicity of the researcher in regime politics, but is possibly illegal and increases the risk that researchers will conduct culturally inappropriate research. When ethics review boards outside of the United States have very different standards or practices than U.S. institutions, should they be followed or ignored? What if they permit research that U.S. institutions find questionable? What if such boards do not exist at all? Given the relatively large number of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, these issues should concern scholars of the region, regardless of methodology and topic.

Others at the conference voiced concerns about whether experiments and surveys of government officials were so time-consuming that they decreased constituency service. After all, an hour-long survey administered to a hundred officials takes up over two workweeks of public time; the benefits of proposed research should be weighed against this cost. These considerations might apply for scholars whose research takes the time of bureaucrats in the Middle East, whether through surveys, interviews, or experiments.

The conference additionally addressed more ethical questions: Does payment for participation in a study create economic inequality and preclude informed consent? Can researchers examine the data produced by ethically questionable experiments carried out by NGOs or governments? Can they partner with NGOs or governments to randomize the rollout of intrusive programs? In most cases, potential answers were framed in terms of informed consent and risk-benefit calculations. Unfortunately, as I describe in the next section, it is on precisely these foundational questions that ethical interventions in religious settings face additional challenges.

### **Ethical research interventions in religious settings are sometimes impossible**

The ability of experiments to produce credible causal estimates comes from the control that researchers exercise over the characteristics of the subjects. Medical trials are credible because researchers control which subjects take the active drug or a placebo and by randomizing this assignment. If scholars want to study the political effects of religiosity with experimental interventions, this requires researcher control over participant religiosity. I offer two theoretical arguments for why this is likely to be unethical in many instances.

The first is an argument that the ambiguity of religious harms and benefits makes it difficult for researchers to do risk-benefit calculations because the risk and benefits are subjective:

- (a) Religion makes untestable claims about harms and benefits.
- (b) People with different beliefs can view identical treatments as clear harm or clear benefit.
- (c) All treatments that meaningfully change religiosity will be a clear harm to someone.
- (d) Such a claim of harm is not demonstrably false by (a).
- (e) Therefore the harm should be taken seriously.
- (f) These harms are often large enough (if taken seriously) to outweigh any benefits of the research.

My second argument is that any study of the effects of manipulating religious beliefs that uses informed consent will be on a sample of participants to which our theories largely do not apply (those participants willing to subject their religious convictions to a coin flip):

- (a) People have a right to determine their own religious beliefs.

(b) This requires informed consent of potential consequences of a treatment intended to change religiosity.

(c) The effect of changing the religiosity in populations who consent to having their religiosity determined by a coin flip is rarely the quantity of interest.

(d) Therefore we cannot experimentally learn about the effects of religion in most populations.

Taken together, these arguments suggest that it will be difficult to use experiments to study the political effects of religion because researchers cannot weigh the benefits of the research against the subjective costs, because people disagree about whether changes in religiosity constitute a cost; and the types of subjects who would consent to have their religiosity randomly manipulated are generally not representative of the population we would like to study. In short, the two axioms of ethical research – informed consent and risk-benefit analysis – lead to the conclusion that experiments manipulating religion may generally be unethical.

My fear is that these challenges will deter young scholars from working on issues of religion and politics. If experiments are privileged and professional rewards accrue to those who use them, young political scientists may naturally gravitate toward topics and questions for which conducting experiments is not fraught with ethical complications. Given the importance of religion in the politics of the Middle East and elsewhere, this would be a real loss.

However, challenges are not for experimentalists alone. Ethnographic styles of research face at least some of the ethical challenges above when undertaken in religious contexts. Ethnographers are not attempting to change the religiosity of others so those arguments do not apply, but certainly issues of informed consent can be problematic as my opening anecdote highlights.

My remedy is to propose that scholars should entertain unethical research designs – not in order to implement

them (please do not!) but because pondering an unethical design can often lead to ideas about how it could be made ethical. If scholars are too quick to reject some approach as unethical, a breakthrough that allows the research to proceed will never occur. This work may be more difficult, but ultimately the importance of understanding the role of

religion in Middle East politics demands that we face the inherent ethical hurdles head on rather than diverting our best efforts to more tractable topics.

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## Why Race Matters

*By Sean L. Yom, Temple University*

*Political scientists of the Middle East frequently engage in critical reflections about what they are doing in the field, perhaps more so than most other subfields. We constantly interrogate from where our discipline originates, whether our research matters, and how we exercise power. Reflexivity comes by raising awkward, even if painful, issues. To this end, I want to engage a frontier of discomfort that ethical dialogues in our subfield almost never broach: race.*

Race matters. When I say some truism like this to colleagues at the Middle East Studies Association and other conferences, they typically agree with vigor. Of course race matters. We, as political scientists, are studying Middle Eastern societies in which the predominant religion and ethnicities are misunderstood and vilified. We articulate outrage when our friends and colleagues from the region come to the United States and face racial profiling. We preach the need to exercise self-awareness given the legacy of Western imperialism we carry, and how we behave accordingly in the field.

But that is not what I mean at all. I mean, rather, that *my* race has mattered to *me* – because unlike most of my colleagues, I am neither white nor Middle Eastern. And this has enormous implications. Most other Western

academics studying Middle East politics have skin tones that pass as Caucasian or have regional ethnic heritage. To be clear, I am a Westerner, but my Korean ancestors just two generations removed were victimized by colonial occupation. They had no part of Orientalism (other than being, actually, Orientals.) Still, my Korean ethnicity means I do not fit this bimodal distribution. This is not peculiar: Asians and Asian-Americans have always been underrepresented in political science. In our subfield, however, it does present unique problems of behavior and ethics in the field and at home.

Perception matters in fieldwork, which at the end of the day can boil down to positive social interactions. However, in many countries (and not just the Gulf), if I dress very casually as other academics do, many locals – including the very “data points,” “subjects,” or “voices” we seek – refuse to interact with me by virtue of ethnicity. Either they think I am a driver, a waiter, or some other stereotypical image of an Asian worker, or else they think I am lying because Arabic-speaking American researchers are, well, *white* – and so I must instead work for the CIA. This is no laughing matter. The ethical obligations that we learn regarding the “Other” mean little if that “Other” refuses to open the door in the first place. No matter how sharp my Arabic sounds, I cannot change the shape of my eyes. I do not blame

anyone for prejudice; ethnic bias reflects as much the environment as the person, and like any learned behavior can be unlearned. However, it also means I must work harder to have the same kind of fieldwork experiences that many scholars take for granted, to even have the *right* to ask higher questions about academic ethics.

Thus, this means sometimes that when in the field I must dress in a suit even when I am not interviewing government elites, which requires purchasing, carrying, and cleaning heavy woolen clothes everywhere during the summer – real logistical and financial headaches. Yet we are taught to exercise humility about privilege and class in the field. Sometimes, it means I share painful memories with those I meet to help earn their trust and friendship, for instance by comparing experiences of racist exclusion in the United States. Yet we are advised to cause no pain to others, which surely includes the invocation of humiliating experiences. And sometimes, this means I simply cannot access certain individuals and institutions despite my best efforts, truncating my research. Yet we often assume that the quality of data reflects only the competence and grit of the scholar.

Race also matters at home. I am fortunate to live in a plural society that elected, *twice*, a person of color to become the world's most powerful person. However progressive other countries may claim to be, I am not betting that any other outside Africa will soon elect anyone of African descent as president or prime minister. Unfortunately, the social sciences lag behind in racial diversity, with a battery of studies pointing to hidden institutional barriers as the culprit. The comparative political study of a non-Western region, when the scholar is neither white nor from the region, brings some of these to light.

Academic conferences and the mainstream media have one thing in common: They have perpetuated the image of the authoritative region expert as someone with either white skin, or else with Middle Eastern heritage. These are the faces that carry knowledge, insider knowledge, which offers instant credibility. By contrast, many assume that I have too *little* knowledge. In my first years as a scholar, I

lost count of the number of times in which some bemused academic at a major conference would ask me why I chose to study the Arab world rather than Korea, China, or Japan. I recall thinly veiled “academic” criticism that questioned my ability to “get” regional history due to my status as an outsider. Never mind that all else being equal, a Caucasian born and raised in California versus a Korean born and raised in Texas have equally nonexistent cultural ties to the region. Never mind that perhaps more than most, I know too well the tragedy of having an arbitrary boundary forged in near-genocidal war split a country in two and separate families from each other and their homes. At least the Israelis and Palestinians *attempted* to negotiate a settlement; the Koreans haven't bothered to try since 1953.

The flipside is that when I finally do convince others of my identity as a Middle East scholar, that outsider status can give me more credibility than colleagues of other ethnicities, who are supposed to take a certain position due to their primordialist links to the region. However, this also means any position I adopt will be interpreted in a very different, and perhaps more serious, way. For any controversial issue worthy of advocacy or speech – the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Islamism and democracy, intervening within Syria – speaking truth to power becomes a bit more difficult in practice than how others do it. I do not have the luxury of evoking a passing opinion and getting away with it. I must justify everything, partly because again I am the outsider and partly because others often tokenize me as the most neutral and objective person – again, on basis of appearance, not the merit of the argument or quality of evidence.

How we discharge our ethical duties reflects our many positions and statuses. We share a singular one, namely as members of a profession that cherishes knowledge. Yet how we deal with each other, and how we come across to those we study, requires engaging other identities like race. The questions are never comfortable, but answering them makes us better scholars.

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## On Ethics and Implications

By Jason Brownlee, University of Texas at Austin

Since the late 19th century the United States has tried to escape vexing social and economic problems at home through military adventures abroad.<sup>1</sup> When U.S. leaders could not resolve racial, gender, and class inequity among their own citizens, they took the fight against injustice overseas. Whereas domestic politics defied simplification, foreign policy could be depicted in Manichean terms. Waging wars on Evil proved more satisfying than battling white supremacy, patriarchy, or poverty. Hubristic interventions thus swallowed up spectacular amounts of resources, as well as countless lives.

From the conquest of the Philippines to the invasion of Iraq, these projects left Americans profoundly disappointed but never fully disillusioned. Catastrophic failures were blamed on lousy management: not enough troops had been sent, the occupation ended too abruptly, the right local leaders had not been chosen. Rather than questioning the idea of intervention itself, U.S. politicians propagated a mythos of exceptionalism. Absolved from self-criticism, they could then conceal the stark evidence that externalizing America's shortcomings hardly rectified them.

The history of American empire weighs upon the ethics of contemporary Middle East political science research. Our field, to borrow from Antonio Gramsci, is "a product of the historical process to date which has deposited... an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory."<sup>2</sup> In other words, most of us are operating with assumptions and priorities that we unconsciously inherited from our advisors and senior colleagues and that we are set to impart, just as unconsciously, to our students and peers. Of course, we are not destined to be intellectual couriers for prior belief systems. Indeed, it strikes me that a core obligation of our work is to challenge what we are given, question what is taken for granted, and attend to what has been ignored.

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1 William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing Company, 1959).

2 The full quote is available in Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

This premise leads to two suggestions on ethics. Both ideas are guided by a belief that our most important audiences are public ones, for it is in public where communities can debate ideas openly while contesting, if not eliminating, power asymmetries.<sup>3</sup> First, Middle East political science scholars should turn away from proposing policy implications and aspire to be less implicated in programs that are inimical to basic desiderata of freedom and equality. Second, to the extent that we become less enmeshed in the private interests behind government policymaking and more connected to publics at large, we should use that distance to identify the hierarchies and injustices that we aspire to rectify but that, without intense self-reflection and collective deliberation, we are likely to reproduce.

The demands of empirical research seldom allow us to ponder our intellectual lineage, the "traces" that constitute who we are as researchers. Fortunately, anyone seeking a Gramscian inventory of our field has numerous works to draw upon, including by scholars who were trained in political science but still managed to critique it. Brian Schmidt has chronicled how concerns about disorder legitimated colonial exploitation; Robert Vitalis has shown that the field of international relations emerged from a Jim Crow worldview; and Ido Oren has established that social scientific judgments about democracy and dictatorship conform to subjective perceptions of Washington's allies and adversaries.<sup>4</sup> The contributions of Schmidt, Vitalis, and Oren (as well as incisive studies by Roxanne Doty

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3 See Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (New York: Pantheon, 1994).

4 Ido Oren, *Our Enemies and US: America's Rivalries and the Making of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Brian C. Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996); Robert Vitalis, "The Noble American Science of Imperial Relations and Its Laws of Race Development," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2010, 52(4): 909-938.

and Timothy Mitchell), raise a hopeful antinomy.<sup>5</sup> They juxtapose a tradition of political science serving the powerful with the potential for the field to address the vulnerable instead. That potential can guide our pursuit of more ethical scholarship.

Historically, when the United States intervened abroad, political science followed the flag. As U.S. leaders “externalized” their troubles, political scientists helped refine the techniques for correcting *other* societies. Academics adopted research agendas made in Washington – on counterinsurgency, political order, economic takeoff, and democratization – and diligently sought to answer their leaders’ questions. Invariably, earnest efforts yielded meager returns. The public generally ignored political scientists’ results, while scholars of neighboring disciplines disdained them – either for a lack of scientism or from an excess of it. Most importantly, the primary audience, power holders, proved largely indifferent. On occasion, academic arguments crept into prominent political speeches, yet they seldom tipped debates, much less provoked radical rethinking.<sup>6</sup> Today, when we present the “policy implications” sections of our work we risk lapsing back into this role: the scholar-turned-policy-technician, who hones prevailing doctrines instead of replacing them.

There are alternatives. Rather than offering new lessons for the very circles that have defined the agendas of our field, we can actually reduce our implications: the ways our intellectual activity is implicated in the projection of U.S. domestic dilemmas to the Middle East and the ways the knowledge we generate is implicated in the conflicts and inequities we aspire to end. In this sense, ethically minded scholarship would entail rescinding our participation in and our assent for programs like extraordinary renditions,

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5 Roxanne Lynn Doty, *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North-South Relations* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 1996); Timothy Mitchell, “The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science,” in David L. Szanton, ed., *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

6 Examples abound of political scientists taking positions in government (Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Condoleezza Rice), and achieving varying degrees of influence.

nation building, drone strikes, as well as the national security regime from which they hail.

Such a course is not cost free. It would mean, for starters, turning down off-the-record consultancies and retrenching the other chummy relationships with U.S. officials and private firms that skew academic research and circumvent public debate. Nonetheless, the sacrifices of being less implicated in U.S. interventionism are, I reason, more than compensated by the intellectual and ethical perks of aligning our private behaviors with the normative commitments we profess to colleagues, friends, and students.

Consider the foibles of earlier technocrats in the Middle East, wonderfully exposed in books by Vitalis, Mitchell, and Toby Jones.<sup>7</sup> It is hard not to laugh (and gasp) at the cluelessness of the ARAMCONs, the USAID workers in Egypt, and the anthropologists who served the Saudi ruling family. What is more, in my seminars at least, these figures draw not just ridicule but disdain. Looking back from a safe historical distance, we reflexively condemn the ways experts abetted violence and exploitation.

But the issue is larger and more troubling. Academicians tend to reproduce the hierarchies of their times. Are we more self-aware than prior cohorts? Will our behaviors seem any less blinkered to future generations? I suspect not. As a rule of thumb we can expect that our well-intentioned works will be as constrained by the biases of our age as our predecessors’ were in theirs. It is easy to see injustice in hindsight, after activists and movements have boldly dismantled the ideologies shielding base interests and insecurities. The more difficult task is identifying present-day oppression, when the façade is intact and enticing.

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7 Toby Craig Jones, *Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002); Robert Vitalis, *America’s Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

We will never enjoy the temporal distance from the atrocities committed in our names, the historical perspective that allows us to look back and recognize the obscenity of “civilizational uplift” and “separate but equal.” We can, however, strive for a political distance that will help us push back against ideological constraints; that will maximize our ability to look skeptically at official narratives.

The less implicated Middle East political science is in policy, the more likely the field will be to move from

technical tinkering to critical thinking. By this I mean that we will be better positioned to interrogate the provenance of our research agendas, formulate our own questions, and reconsider what audiences we intend to inform. Less occupied by the quandaries of the powerful, we will be free to become more implicated in the communities we cherish.

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## Toward Transparency in the Ethics of Knowledge Production

*By Jillian Schwedler, Hunter College and the Graduate Center – CUNY*

Neither knowledge production nor scientific modes of inquiry are normatively neutral. Most of us studied at least some basic texts in philosophy of science in graduate school, often in gateway courses offered at the beginning of multi-year programs. The readings – typically including Imre Lakatos and Karl Popper – often represent only a narrow (and outdated!) set of debates taught in a manner that emphasizes what one might call the *mechanics* of knowledge production: to build on the existing paradigm until it is overturned, which will happen rarely. A few dissenting perspectives are typically included, but even when courses cover a broader range of epistemologies, these debates are often left checked at the door when the semester ends.<sup>1</sup> Forgotten or minimized – if they were addressed at all – are the substantive questions about the ethics of knowledge production, which I take to mean the rules that guide how we adjudicate our moral judgments

1 The exception, of course, is those majoring in political theory or political philosophy, for whom normative questions remain central. But for most of the top doctoral programs in International Relations, Comparative Politics, and American Politics, normative theory is marginalized in favor of the pursuit of “science.”

about the topics we choose to research and the arguments we put forward in our publications. That is, we forget that our professional ethics should include thinking about how our work intersects with our moral commitments.<sup>2</sup>

Why does this happen? “Social” sciences obviously deal with people, so why have ethics been marginalized? One reason is that the ethical and moral dimensions of research are not always immediately evident. Some ethical questions are obvious, such as “do no harm.” Most people would agree, for example, that torturing humans to learn about pain is unethical even if it produces useful knowledge. But when the effects of our research are less immediately transparent, what are the boundaries of our obligations? These questions are not easily answered, but my concern is that we too often fail to routinely ask ethical questions about social science research. Perhaps this is because we are not trained (or reminded) to think about it,

2 Whereas morals are our ideas about what is good and bad, right and wrong, ethics here refers to the rules of professional conduct concerning our moral values.

or perhaps we are under the mistaken belief that our work is simply less consequential in terms of affecting people's lives. And methods are too often treated as technical issues devoid of moral substance: The near ubiquity of "KKV" in research design courses both illustrates this point and reproduces its consequences.<sup>3</sup> Even as interpretive and other qualitative methods struggle to regain lost ground in political science, ethical questions are often erroneously assumed to be relevant primarily to those who do field research, whether ethnography, participant observation, elite interviews, or field experiments.

Some academics who do field work were mentored by advisors who regularly demanded we reflect on the ethics of our research and publications. But for others, the ethics of field research emerge primarily through the process of seeking Internal Review Board (IRB) approval for human subjects research – a process that is far too often treated as an annoyance. While many IRB committees do indeed have difficulties understanding social science (as opposed to natural science) research methodologies and the risks they entail, the IRB process should remind us that we have obligations to those individuals whose lives we touch with our research. As other contributors to this series of essays on ethics emphasize, we would do well to pay more attention to the substantive issues that motivate the IRB process, and not routinely dismiss it as merely a hurdle to overcome.

Unfortunately, caring about the world, seeking to change or improve it, and empathy toward the communities we study, are treated by many of the gatekeepers in our field as lesser pursuits to "science." Yet on a personal level, these issues remain important for most of us engaged in area studies research, even when we speak little of them at conferences or in our publications. Indeed, it is hard to find an issue related to the Middle East or Islamic world

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3 The extent to which "KKV" needs no translation to most people in the field of political science – even those who oppose its approach or the dominance of its approach – illustrates the norm that "science" is the preferable method in the field. For those (perhaps luckily) uninitiated, KKV refers to George King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton University Press, 1994.

that isn't saturated in tense debates about what's "wrong" with the region, how to "fix" it, and indeed what the world "should" look like. We cannot avoid engaging these normative claims even while we reproduce the (false) veneer of scientific objectivity in order to succeed (through recognition and status) in a discipline that overwhelmingly privileges "fact-based" (that is, not normative, reflexive, or interpretive) knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

I would like to turn our attention to a specific question about the ethics of knowledge production, beyond the IRB issues related to research design or the professional trend of marginalizing normative issues. Here I am thinking about our choices of research topics and how those choices are used either to challenge or reinforce power relations in ways we may or may not find morally acceptable. In the remainder of this short piece, I will draw out what I mean and provide some examples.

Choosing a research topic is never neutral. Our discipline urges us to select topics based on perceived weaknesses in the literature, while advisors routinely urge students to choose something that interests them. We have all heard – and given – the sage advice to choose a topic we find interesting because we may well spend the next decade (from dissertation through publication) working on it. But what we find interesting is necessarily an interpretive process: "Puzzles" are not like Easter eggs waiting to be discovered.<sup>5</sup> They reflect our own curiosities and anxieties, which often mirror those of the societies in which we live. And as such, they are necessarily produced, at least in part,

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4 Lisa Wedeen's "Scientific Knowledge, Liberalism, and Empire: American Political Science in the Modern Middle East," argues that American political science is characterized not by neutrality and objectivity, but by a deep commitment to two intersecting sets of norms: "belief in the inherent value of science as a method of producing objective truth about the real world, on the one hand, and a commitment to the value of preserving liberalism, on the other" (p. 1). Working within this framework, "the Middle East or Islam, as laggard or trouble-maker, becomes the problem to be solved, the incommensurably 'other' place that needs special attention – and new assertions of control" (p. 42). Social Science Research Council, 2007. Available at: <http://www.ssrc.org/publications/view/8A197ABF-ED60-DE11-BD80-001CC477EC70/>

5 Jillian Schwedler, "Puzzle," Symposium on Deconstructing Social Science Concepts, *Qualitative and Multi-Methods Research* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 27–30.

by the dominant ideas circulating at any given time – ideas about what is interesting, what is important, what is worth knowing, all of which are framed by moral notions of what is good and bad.

Thus choosing a topic that we find interesting or important not only reflects the power of certain discourses, but it can also reproduce or challenge those discourses in ways we do not always recognize or acknowledge. *Choosing* itself is an act of power, and as such cannot be neutral. Of course the primary goal in our research is to get the story right, but that typically means pushing up against other versions of that story (or against stories that say that our story is irrelevant). Even in seeking to correct a wrong narrative, however, we may inadvertently reinforce other narratives that trouble us. For example, we often argue that “Islam” has no analytic utility in understanding why some individuals (or communities) support or engage in political violence while others do not. The assertion that the doctrinal elements of a particular religion explain little in terms of its adherents’ predilection to violence challenges the demonization of that religion as inherently violent. In our field, we are right to critique the pervasive but spurious claims of Islamophobia. But we must also recognize that our critiques may reinforce the idea that religious extremism is *rightfully* an abiding concern of our day, and that the *challenge* is to identify the *correct* factors that give rise to it. In this way, our critical intervention may serve to reinforce narratives that we may otherwise reject.

To be clear, I am not arguing that religious extremism either is or is not an important research topic. But I am asking us to more systematically reflect on how our choices of research topics bolster some discourses (and thus power configurations) while challenging others. In the face of dominant ideas that structure what we view as worthy of our attention, sometimes we may choose to engage those ideas head on, and sometimes we may choose to not engage at all (under the view that engaging problematic ideas may nevertheless lend those ideas some ongoing credibility). These are difficult issues to consider, and there is certainly no right answer to whether or not to engage those frustratingly persistent narratives, particularly those

about the regions we study. But I do want us to think more deeply and routinely about those decisions.

To give an example that came up at a recent panel on this topic, a political scientist in the audience commented that he had been asked to contribute a piece to a prominent national publication defending the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Palestine, which declared itself a sovereign, independent state years ago, is actively seeking recognition in many international bodies (particularly in various U.N. agencies). Our colleague, who believes in the right of a Palestinian state to exist, declined to write the piece as solicited (defending the two-state solution). The reason was that while he would welcome the existence of a sovereign and independent Palestine, the reality on the ground was that aggressive Israeli settlement expansion and rampant land appropriation had made an independent Palestine an impossibility without massive Israeli withdrawals from settlements – something he believes would never happen. To write an article defending the two-state solution, he felt, would give credence to the idea that such an outcome was still possible. Such a narrative works in Israel’s favor by maintaining the illusion that the conflict is stalled because the two sides cannot agree on the details of a two-state solution, thus buying time for Israel to continue its aggressive appropriation of Palestinian lands that make a two-state solution impossible. He felt it was unethical to contribute to that narrative, even while he would support a real two-state solution.

As this example illustrates, we need to consider the ethics of knowledge production in addition to the ethics of field research. We each need to be personally comfortable with the ethical and moral implications of whatever knowledge we contribute.

This is not easy work. The reality is that we cannot control how our scholarship is used or interpreted by others, but we can anticipate how it might be used and be more self-conscious about what forms of power our work challenges or reinforces. And we can be explicit and transparent in our publications, our mentoring and advising of students, and our public speaking about those ethical choices,

pointing out where we find ourselves conflicted and where we are concerned about how our work may contribute to modes of power we otherwise hope to challenge.

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## **Practical Ethics: How U.S. Law and the “War on Terror” Affect Research in the Middle East**

*By Sarah Elizabeth Parkinson, University of Minnesota*

Scholars of the Middle East are likely familiar with ethical debates surrounding topics such as Minerva funding and the U.S. military's Human Terrain System program.<sup>1</sup> Put briefly, these conversations deliberate the extent to which individual scholars and academia as a whole should align with U.S. government interests, specifically regarding security and defense policy.<sup>2</sup> Yet discussions regarding these two programs mask a deeper dialogue that scholars of the Middle East should have regarding the ways that U.S. law and politics interact with their research designs, data practices, and interactions with subjects. How should the “War on Terror” and related legal structures affect researcher positionality and reflexivity, both in the field and “back home”? More broadly, how should U.S. law and politics affect researcher ethics?

This essay focuses on two recent legal cases that should give Middle East scholars pause. The first, involving Boston College's Belfast Project, demonstrates both the

ethical risks associated with collecting data on “sensitive” topics and specifically the ways that scholarly projects can be treated as potential evidence from a government perspective. The second, linked to the search and detainment of McGill University graduate student Pascal Abidor at the U.S.-Canadian border and encompassing the *Abidor v. Napolitano* filing, reveals how the border search exemption can be used to justify the examination and seizure of academic data, particularly when related to the Middle East and Islam.<sup>3</sup> Each of these cases challenges scholars' current understandings of vulnerability, confidentiality, and third-party access to academics' unpublished data. Together, they paint a picture of an academic field that is largely unaware of how to situate itself within U.S. (and other countries') laws and of the ethical considerations that should evolve as a result.

Scholars working with the Boston College Belfast Project collected oral histories from former Republican and

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1 On Minerva funding and the associated debate, see: <http://www.ssrc.org/programs/minerva-controversy/>. Regarding the Human Terrain System, see: Forte, Maximilian C. 2011. “The Human Terrain System and Anthropology: A Review of Ongoing Public Debates.” *American Anthropologist* 113 (1): 149–153.

2 This piece, for reasons of brevity, personal experience, and expertise, focuses on U.S. law and politics. It is based on my conversations with university counsel at two universities, one private and one public, as well as discussions with personal acquaintances who are attorneys and scholars of U.S. law. This discussion is not meant to serve as legal advice, but is intended to contribute to ethical conversations related to scholarship on the Middle East and North Africa.

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3 A third case, which I do not have space to discuss here, centered on a state-level Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request made by a non-profit organization regarding Professor Michael Mann's climate change research at the University of Virginia. Mann's work was also the subject of a civil subpoena by Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli; a Virginia judge dismissed the subpoena in 2010. This case revealed vulnerabilities faced by researchers at public universities and/or by those who receive federal and state funding, particularly when conducting research on politically-charged topics. It merits longer review and consideration than this essay will allow.

Loyalist paramilitaries in Northern Ireland.<sup>4</sup> Following the researchers' publication of a book following the (natural) death of one of the participants, the British government requested the recordings as part of a criminal investigation into the murder of Jean McConville, a woman who the Irish Republican Army (IRA) wrongly accused of being an informant. A mutual legal assistance treaty (MLAT) between the United States and Britain allowed the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) to issue a subpoena for the recordings on Britain's behalf; Boston College, against the researchers' wishes, released the deceased participant's tapes to the DOJ. A U.S. judge later forced the university to surrender others. The tapes were used, in part, to arrest and question Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams for his alleged role in McConville's murder.

The Boston College case is not simply about a single project's seemingly weak confidentiality protections. It is about a foreign government's ability to call forth treaty obligations in order to access confidential researcher data. Several ethical implications arise as a result of this case. The clearest is that research on political violence, mobilization, and opposition writ large may unwittingly generate, in the view of U.S. and other governments, evidence for criminal cases (however politicized). The United States and other countries may consequently use their legal apparatuses, including MLATs, to subpoena researchers' data if it is deemed to be relevant. In the Middle East and North Africa, the United States currently has MLATs with Egypt, Israel, Morocco, and Turkey. Additionally, the United States and Algeria have a mutual legal assistance agreement.<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that a criminal case against a Gezi Park protester in Turkey or a Salafi imam in Algeria will necessarily bring forth a DOJ

subpoena on behalf of a foreign government for a scholar's data (in all likelihood, it will not). It is to say that MLATs, and other federal laws, constitute vulnerabilities that affect some researchers and projects – those of contentious politics or radical religious groups, for example – more than others. This says nothing of what foreign laws affect governments' access to researcher data in the field.

The Abidor case is different in its treatment of academic data and involved scholars. A dual U.S.-French citizen and doctoral student in Islamic Studies at McGill University, Pascal Abidor was stopped, searched, handcuffed, and detained at the U.S.-Canadian border under what is commonly termed the border search exemption.<sup>6</sup> This exception to Fourth Amendment requirements allows for suspicion-less, warrantless searches of person and property, including electronics, at U.S. borders or border equivalents. In Abidor's case, the search found pictures of Hamas and Hezbollah rallies that he had taken as part of his research into religious movements. The U.S. government argued that his possession of these materials constituted "reasonable suspicion."<sup>7</sup> Unlike the Boston College case, officials invoking the border search exemption did not need to suspect the academic's possession of evidence in a specific criminal case; Abidor's academic data were the cause of suspicion and detention.

Functionally, this contention, which has since been upheld in court, means that someone carrying a laptop with unencrypted field notes, photographs of research sites, or interview recordings could be detained and have his or her electronics searched, confiscated, and/or copied by the U.S. government. The border search exemption is thus noteworthy for two reasons: one because of the way that it can be used to detain academics with "suspicious" materials (a vague category, to be sure); and two, because it allows government officials access to a much broader array of materials than MLATs or criminal

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4 For the most comprehensive overview of the Belfast Project and the related court case, see McMurtrie, Beth. "Secrets From Belfast." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 26, 2014. Online: <http://chronicle.com/article/Secrets-from-Belfast/144059/>. Accessed June 15, 2014. The project did not go through IRB or legal review, though the researchers discussed issues of confidentiality extensively and provided for it in their consent documents.

5 Department Of State. The Office of Website Management, Bureau of Public Affairs. *Treaties and Agreements*. Report. Department Of State. The Office of Website Management, Bureau of Public Affairs, March 7, 2012. <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2012/vol2/184110.htm>.

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6 See, for example: <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/homsec/RL31826.pdf>

7 Sledge, Matt. "Judge Dismisses ACLU Lawsuit Over Suspicionless Laptop Searches At Border." *Huffington Post*, December 31, 2013. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/31/pascal-abidor-lawsuit\\_n\\_4525364.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/31/pascal-abidor-lawsuit_n_4525364.html). Accessed June 15, 2014.

subpoenas. Put succinctly, it provides a legal avenue for U.S. government agencies to use academic materials to add to what is sometimes called “the mosaic” – the assembly of background knowledge that aids government understanding of foreign organizations, places, and people.

So, how should researchers studying, working, and traveling in the United States balance their obligation to follow U.S. law and their ethical responsibilities to the spaces, cultures, ideologies, organizations, and, most importantly, the people that they study? Moreover, given that U.S. government agencies may consider data related to the Middle East and Islam, in and of itself, potential intelligence or evidence to claim “reasonable suspicion,” what can scholars do to protect themselves and their data?<sup>8</sup> Below, I suggest three immediate courses of action centering on education, research design, and data practices.

First, before conducting fieldwork, scholars have an *ethical* obligation to familiarize themselves with legal institutions and procedures relevant to their research. These may include MLATs, federal and state Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and “sunshine” laws, and the Patriot Act, among others.<sup>9</sup> This process may involve, for many researchers, conversations with university counsel. At the very least, scholars must know what to do if they are stopped at customs.<sup>10</sup>

Second, researchers simply cannot promise confidentiality given contemporary U.S. law and are ethically obligated to take this fact into account. Moreover, while it may seem inherently disruptive – or even “unscientific” – to contemplate how to generate data without generating

8 There are U.S. laws in place that protect researchers from being approached by agencies such as the Central Intelligence Agency while they are in the field.

9 For example, there are nine exemptions to FOIA, which could theoretically be used to request a researcher’s raw data if he or she were at a state university or accepted public grant money. Initially, the sixth, which restricts invasions of personal privacy, may seem the most relevant for researchers working with human subjects. However, the fourth (which protects business trade secrets) may actually lend researchers more leverage in protecting their data and analysis.

10 For example, one is not legally obligated to provide a password to an electronic device such as a computer or smartphone.

evidence, it may be the only ethical path for scholars of sensitive topics to take. Thus, advisors and those who teach field methods should instill the value of not asking, not recording, and not photographing as ethical decisions with legal implications, not simply as trust-building techniques. Indeed, deliberately considering why and how to collect data on specific violent or illicit acts, whether and when to employ anonymity versus confidentiality, and how to mask identities in field notes and interviews may generate innovation in both research design and practices.

Third, researchers must take data protection seriously. Especially since the popular encryption program TrueCrypt was reportedly compromised, this issue has become even more fraught. Scholars can benefit, here, from discussions with university technology services, institutional review boards, and, again, with university counsel. For instance, many scholars may have the option to upload encrypted backups of their data to university servers via secure VPNs before traveling. The use of whole disk encryption technologies should be more widely adopted. Where one stores data – on a work computer, on university servers, encrypted on external hard drives – is an intensely personal issue and choice; knowing one’s options can only help.

While these policies affect all scholars, it is a simple fact that due to contemporary U.S. politics and security concerns, they stand to disproportionately affect those who study the Middle East and North Africa. Furthermore, beyond their immediate implications, these cases bring forth several deeper questions that I am unable to address here. Future conversations should continue to address practical ethics while taking on difficult issues such as when and whether one should destroy data, to what extent consent procedures should consider U.S. laws, and how to contend with requests tied to data transparency and replicability.

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# On The Moral Hazards of Field Research in Middle East Politics

*By Sheila Carapico, University of Richmond*

American political scientists studying the Middle East face ethical dilemmas not shared by most of our disciplinary colleagues. Sometimes – perhaps unexpectedly – our presence in countries or communities experiencing repression and/or political violence puts our local colleagues, hosts, or contacts at risk by association. The massive U.S. military footprint and widespread mistrust of U.S. policies and motives multiplies the risks to our interlocutors.

The trademark methodology of American Arabists is fieldwork, meaning, in political science, in-depth interviews, participant observation, data collection, document-gathering, opinion polling, political mapping, and recording events. As sojourners but not permanent residents, we rely heavily on the wisdom, networks, and goodwill of counterparts “on the ground,” particularly other intellectuals.

In any environment where agencies of national, neighboring, and U.S. governments are all known to be gathering intelligence, our research projects may look and sound like old-fashioned espionage. Even under the very best of circumstances (which are rather scarce) a lot of people are wary or suspicious of all Americans, including or sometimes especially Arabic speakers who ask a lot of questions and take notes. Immediate acquaintances probably grasp and trust our inquiries. Their neighbors or nearby security personnel may not. It is common knowledge that at least some spies and spooks come in academic disguise and that some U.S.-based scholars sell their expertise to the CIA or the Pentagon. Instead of treating whispered gossip as the product of mere paranoia or conspiracy theories, we need to recognize its objective and sociological underpinnings.

I reflected some years ago on the complex ethical implications of scholarly detachment, engagement, activism, or even espionage in an age of U.S. interventions

and constant surveillance by regional governments of foreign and citizen researchers.<sup>1</sup> Recently some POMEPS colleagues raised important normative considerations. In this memo I offer some anecdotal examples of the moral hazards of political research in Middle Eastern countries – how the burdens of our apparent risks may be borne by Arab colleagues.

U.S. passport holders do face occasional threats to personal safety; witness the intimidation, expulsions, and sentencing of international news reporters. State Department travel advisories are the rule rather than the exception. With extraordinarily rare exceptions, however, the perils braved by scholars who know the territory well enough to “blend in” are the “first-world problems” of a sudden departure or denial of a visa. Benefits of media attention, grant or job opportunities, lecture invitations, interest from publishers, and so forth back home usually make it worth our while. Unfortunately the real costs and liabilities may be borne by local residents to whom we owe but may pay scant thanks.

Sometimes we are literally imposing. Our interview schedules may depend on investments of time by busy professionals. When I approached officers or employees of civil society organizations in Jerusalem, Ramallah, other West Bank towns, and Gaza, almost everyone who granted me an hour assumed I had some project or funds to offer. Otherwise, with all due respect, they had other priorities than contributing to my study of their donors.

Later I sat on the other side of the desk, as head of the political science department at the American University in Cairo. One newly arrived graduate student opened her interview by asking whether I had “written anything?” – as if dictation notes were preferable to a Google search. Now,

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1 Carapico, Sheila. “No easy answers: The ethics of field research in the Arab world.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 39.03 (2006): 429-431. <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=454443&fileId=S1049096506060690>

senior scholars should mentor newcomers; but her closing question, “Are there Egyptian professors I should speak with?” gave me pause. Would I ask my junior faculty, or their underpaid counterparts at the national universities, to give this researcher part of their day?

More importantly: Our actions may heighten risks to scholarly or activist colleagues of harassment or worse. Unfortunately this can be true even when we are trying to share rewards like funding, international conference invitations, or credit for research assistance. Almost everywhere, police states monitor visitors, whom they talk to, whom they work with, and their local sponsors. In the old days independent researchers were so few that each was assigned a supposedly clandestine observer. There is a perhaps apocryphal story of a scholar who noticed the same gentleman in every cafe and on every outing until finally he suggested that they share taxi fares; soon, they noticed another agent tailing both of them. I can personally vouch for instances when faculty at Sanaa or Aden universities took foreign scholars under their wings and were called in for extended questioning, or got ominous phone calls asking what their visitors were up to. Now, in the days of electronic eavesdropping, dissident intellectuals may come under additional suspicion for their overseas communications.

Already sticky wickets get thornier in times of U.S. military operations, civil strife, or mass upheaval. In April 2003 (during the invasion of Iraq) when colleagues in Sanaa invited me to lunch, a Jordanian news reporter objected to “breaking bread with an agent of imperialism.” Day in and day out friends were called upon to defend me.

During Egypt’s 18-day popular uprising in 2011 I and other foreign faculty at AUC went to Tahrir Square regularly, in pairs or small resident-expat groups, but most of us refrained from asking to join Egyptian activists who really were taking great risks. Western companions could easily have compromised their safety and/ or security.

After Mubarak’s resignation dozens of U.S. and European colleagues – from Egypt specialists and Middle East hands

to experts in comparative transitology not familiar with the region – flocked to Cairo for the “Arab Spring Break.” So many enthusiastic visitors contributed to a heady sense of newly open intellectual space, but they also imposed on bilingual Egyptian intellectuals, who had political or writing projects of their own. Many of the U.S. and European scholars talked more than they listened. Afterwards, citing Edward Said’s notion of “permission to narrate” and sometimes Frantz Fanon’s comments on the diagnostic elements of colonial medicine, several of them wrote or spoke thoughtfully but critically.<sup>2</sup> In the end, the short-term visitors who published articles and books about the uprisings were more likely to thank Egyptian scholars in the acknowledgements than to cite them in their bibliographies. The ubiquitous expression “Arab Spring” was coined in English and doesn’t make much sense in Arabic.

As that euphoric spring semester ended, and during the troubled three years since then, space for either political research or public dialogue has narrowed in almost every Arab country. Academic sojourners and even some long-term expats came home, fewer ventured to fewer countries, and there are no revolutionary tourists anymore. Our colleagues and associates are still there.

The level and nature of U.S. involvement in recent events and their antecedents varies tremendously, but everywhere there is suspicion. Moreover, perhaps ironically, the fewer American civilians there are, the more widely they are assumed to be undercover agents. Between security organizations’ efforts to intimidate my colleagues and the U.S. drone war, I’ve been wary of visiting Yemen in recent years. The professional benefits of going would almost certainly have outweighed the miniscule likelihood of physical harm to myself – because both parts of this equation count on the kindness of colleagues, contacts, and hosts. Now that almost all Western civilians have left most

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2 See, for instance, Abaza, Mona “Academic tourists sight-seeing the Arab Spring.” *Ahram Online* 26 September 2011 <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/22373.aspx>; El-Mahdi, Rabab. “Orientalising the Egyptian Uprising.” *Jadaliyya*. 11 April 2011. <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1214/orientalising-the-egyptian-uprising>; and Antoun, Naira “Threads of ‘Narrating the Arab Spring’” *Egypt Independent*. 25 February 2012. <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/threads-narrating-arab-spring>

of the country, both the moral and the personal hazards are greater. Although it's been reported that all researchers and journalists have left, in fact the Yemenis remain.

Before concluding it is important to consider a complication, because college professors have a responsibility to serious political enquiry, to contribute to the production of knowledge in our field. If political scientists who devote years to studying languages, countries, institutions, and patterns stay away for whatever reasons, coverage of developments in Iraq, Yemen, Israel/Palestine, and other parts of the region falls to U.S. commercial media and/or security reconnaissance.

One way of addressing both the moral hazards of field research in times of crisis and our responsibility to foster accuracy of public discourse is to be doubly attentive to scholarship and opinions published by colleagues in the region. Reading, citing, publishing, and assigning materials written in English or available in translation (the volume is considerable) might sometimes be the least we can do, so to speak, which makes it all the more important.

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## **The Project on Middle East Political Science**

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by the Carnegie Corporation and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see <http://www.pomeps.org>.