

Conference Report

The 36th Annual Meeting of the Middle East Studies Association of North America

The 36th annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA), was held at the Wardman Park Hotel, Washington, DC, November 23-26, 2002. This conference, possibly the largest gathering of scholars and students of the Middle East, took place in an atmosphere saturated by 9/11 and Washington's plans for an all-out war against Iraq, as well as considerable right-wing and pro-Zionist pressure applied by such members of the epistemic community of scholars, journalists, and policy analysts as Daniel Pipes (the Middle East Forum) and Martin Kramer, a one-time director and currently a senior research fellow at Tel Aviv University's Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies. Both are behind Campus Watch (<http://www.campus-watch.org>), which monitors academic discourse that opposes American foreign policy toward the Muslim world and its one-sided support for Israel, and which maintains on its website a list of "un-American" academicians and apologists for "militant Islam" and rogue regimes.

November 23, the first day, was reserved for the business meetings of all groups having an institutional affiliation with MESA. The panels, presented as parallel sessions, began on Sunday at 8:30 a.m. Also featured was a presidential address by the outgoing president, a plenary session, a book exhibition, an art gallery, and a film fest. MESA organizers reported that 1,900 people attended the 156-panel event, along with 80 exhibitions.

The first session featured panels on popular culture and identity in the Maghreb, women and development, issues in contemporary Iran, intellectuals and ideas in the making of the Turkish Republic, history of the Ottoman borderlands, legitimation of authority in early period of Islam, comparative perceptions of the "other" in Israeli and Palestinian textbooks, comparative analysis of political Islam, religious conversion and identity, and the Arabic *qasidah*. There was also a roundtable discussion on water issues and a thematic conversation on 9/11 and the Muslim public sphere. In the following

session, scholars shared their research on education and identity, the Egyptian state, Islamic history, language translations, the Hamidian and Young Turk eras of the Ottoman Empire, Iran's regional foreign policy, text-image relationships in Islamic culture, learning Arabic, nation and family in the Middle East, Jordan under the current monarch, Islamic religious practice, Assyrians, comparative political economy of the Middle East as a research field, and Middle East Studies in the wake of 9/11. There was also a session on Yemen's economic reforms, democratization, and its foreign relations sponsored by the American Institute of Yemeni Studies. During lunch, a workshop addressed the challenges to the academic profession, in particular academic freedom.

The 2:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m. session included panels on transregional economic issues, state-building in the Gulf, media and politics, the provision of civic amenities, literary representations of the environment, women with respect to legal reform in the Middle East, studies on the classical Islamic notion of the *wazirate*, problems associated with science and modernity in the Middle East, civil rights in Iran, the making of Arab-Islamic thought, Moroccan fictional narratives, as well as a roundtable discussion on the post-9/11 direction of the Palestinian issue. In the day's last session, panelists examined Sufism, music, urban space, society and institutions in the Ottoman Empire at the dawn of modernity, construction of discourse in the Maghreb, Arabic linguistics, Turkish nationalism, republicanism, and modernity during the inter-war period, post-1991 Iraqi Kurdistan, the study of early Islamic Egypt, gender and globalization, and a comparative perspective on Palestine. The roundtable discussion focused on the present and future of Middle East political science, and the thematic conversation explored the idea of a Middle Eastern American studies program.

The evening's highlight was the special session on "Afghanistan and the War on Terror," which was standing-room only. Presenter after presenter criticized Washington's handling of the war and the associated media coverage. The hallmark of Sunday's program was the presidential address by Joel Beinin, professor of Middle Eastern history at Stanford, which was followed by the book, dissertation, and services award, and the MESA reception. Beinin deserves commendation for his handling of the right wing and pro-Zionist criticism of MESA and the state of the field. His address touched upon many matters, such as the abrasion of civil liberties in post-9/11 America, a brief history of American engagement with the Middle East, the complicity of American foreign policy in fueling the anti-Americanism leading up to 9/11, and the responsibilities of scholars' vis-à-vis the production

and dissemination of knowledge. He also offered a comprehensive deconstruction of the neoconservatives' anit-MESA arguments.

Monday's first session analyzed perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Islamist thought and practice, governance in the Middle East, the borderlands of the Ottoman Empire, Arabs in America, the role of the Wahabi thought in the political consolidation of al-Sa'ud, commerce in the medieval Middle East, literary writings on Algeria, Coptic identity, and Ottoman Islam. The 8:00 a.m. - 10:00 a.m. roundtable discussion focused on Orientalist caricatures of Ottoman women. The next session dealt with the foreign relations of the Middle Eastern states, colonialism and imperialism in the modern Middle Eastern context, minorities in Israel, women and Islam, Turkish ethnography, Safavid Shi'ism, commerce, approaches to Ottoman history, post-9/11 discriminatory upsurge against Middle Eastern Americans, twentieth-century Persian literature, and court politics in the medieval Islamic world. Two special sessions were allotted to this time slot: Palestinian-Israeli violence and the likelihood of a crisis in publishing on the Middle East. The thematic conversation discussed teaching Arab women's literature in English translation. MESA's business meeting was held during the lunch interval.

After lunch, there was another assortment of simultaneous sessions. This penultimate session featured panels on Islamic and classical Arabic texts, individual vs. community conversion, Islamic and political institutions, interprovincial conflicts in the late Ottoman Empire, art and archaeology in Islamic Spain, elite change in the Arab world, Azerbaijani literary culture, and the "vulgar" and "subversive" in popular Middle Eastern culture. Issues related to Turkish teaching materials and ruminations on Central Asia and the Caucuses, respectively, were covered in the roundtable discussion and thematic conversation for the 2:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m. session. Two special sessions underscored the Iraqi situation and deliberated upon Islam, globalization, and feminist networks.

Among the topics integrated in Tuesday's final group of panels were late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century Egyptian history, Islamist resistance and accommodation, humor and society in Iran, the impact of 9/11 on Israeli domestic and foreign policy, Iran and Africa, identities and nationalism in late Ottoman and Mandatory as well as Jordanian Jerusalem, gender and texts, and classical Arabic poetry. The final round table and thematic conversation highlighted Internet resources and research in Middle East studies and the insider vs. outsider approaches to the study of women in the Middle East. There also was a special workshop for graduate students that provided an overview of nonacademic careers for those focusing on the Middle East,

followed by the MESA graduate student organization meeting and reception. The widely anticipated plenary session, moderated by Lisa Anderson Dean of Columbia's School of Public Affairs and professor of political science, investigated the possibilities of peace and a resolution to the Arab–Israeli conflict. It was addressed by such scholarly heavyweights as Rashid Khalidi, William B. Quandt, and William Joseph Burns (the Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs).

Tuesday, the final day, was lighter in content. The three sequential round of sessions looked into such themes as Turkish foreign relations, conflict literature, Islamic edifices, environmental issues in the Middle East, early Islamic theology, American-Middle Eastern relations in the post-9/11 age, Isma'ilism, the Iranian reform movement, Iranian cinema, rethinking state-community relations in the Middle East, South Asian culture and politics, rethinking the Qur'an and Sunnah, Alevism, durable authoritarianism, and the textile industry in the Middle East.

Such an intellectual buffet allows all attendees to benefit intellectually from a wide range of subjects. As this event is the premier gathering of scholars on many disciplines associated with the Middle East, it was not surprising that the lounges, cafes, and the lobby were crowded far into the night. In contrast to previous conferences, themes related to 9/11 and its aftermath, the "war on terror," al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and the possible American-led war against Iraq pervaded the conference presentations. In an otherwise suffocating atmosphere, given the media's general disregard for accuracy and detail, MESA remains the main source of accurate information regarding the Middle East.

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