



## The State of Middle Eastern Studies, Revisited

Martin Kramer

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## The State of Middle Eastern Studies, Revisited

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### ABSTRACT

This keynote address to the 2022 Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa (ASMEA) conference assesses the health of Middle Eastern studies in the United States, according to three parameters first defined by ASMEA co-founder Bernard Lewis in 1979: standards, politicization, funding. In all three areas, the field remains plagued by endemic problems.

### KEYWORDS

Academe; Bernard Lewis; Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS); Israel; Middle East studies; Middle East Studies Association (MESA)

In 1979, the journal *The American Scholar* ran an unusual article. *The American Scholar* is the quarterly literary magazine of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. It almost never publishes anything touching on the Middle East. But the summer issue that year featured an article titled “The State of Middle Eastern Studies.” Its author was Bernard Lewis.<sup>1</sup>

For those of you new to this association, Lewis, who died in 2018, was the co-founder of Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa (ASMEA). So I thought it might be useful to return to Lewis’s 1979 article, and review what he thought needed emphasis, with an eye toward how the field has changed. Are the problems the same? Or have they evolved? For better or for worse? And what might lie in the future for our field?

### Failure defined

The first thing that should be noted is chronology. Edward Said had published his book *Orientalism* in November 1978; Lewis’s article appeared after that, in the summer of 1979. But I don’t think Lewis was responding to Said in this essay. First, *The American Scholar* is a quarterly with a long lead time, so Lewis may have written his article before Said’s book appeared. Second, even if Lewis had seen *Orientalism*, the book hadn’t yet had any impact on Middle Eastern studies. That was still a few years off.

All of which is to say that Lewis’s critique referred to Middle Eastern studies *prior* to the impact of Edward Said. As we shall see, he later did register the effect of *Orientalism* on the field. But he didn’t do so in this initial iteration.

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<sup>1</sup>Bernard Lewis, “The State of Middle Eastern Studies,” *The American Scholar* 48, no. 3 (1979): 365–81.

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Let us begin with his first criticism. As was his wont, Lewis prefaces it with a quick history of the field as it developed in the West, from the sixteenth century onwards. Lewis wasn't only a historian of the Middle East; he was a historian of its study in the West, and this preface remains a tour de force. He then moves on to the recent post-World War Two expansion of the field: government and the foundations invested massively in area studies, a dozen or so Middle East centers were founded, hundreds of appointments were made.

Does Lewis celebrate this? Not at all. His verdict: "Given the amount of money and effort spent on the development of Middle Eastern studies in the English-speaking world, the results have been disappointing."<sup>2</sup>

Not just disappointing. Lewis goes on to describe what he calls "the relative failure of Middle Eastern studies in the universities."<sup>3</sup> "Failure of Middle Eastern studies" are fighting words. I used them in the subtitle of my own book, *Ivory Towers on Sand*, and I know how incendiary they are.<sup>4</sup> But I was describing Middle Eastern studies *post*-Said. Lewis called them a "failure" twenty-two years before I did, *pre*-Said. Why?

Lewis finds the field afflicted by what he bluntly calls "ignorance – or, to put it differently, a low level of professional competence." The field had expanded too fast, with what he calls "predictable consequences." He outlines those consequences, in what must rank as the most devastating critique of one's own field ever made by a scholar:

It is painful for a Middle East specialist to admit the fact, but it is nevertheless inescapable. Professional advancement in Middle Eastern studies can be achieved with knowledge and skills well below what is normally required in other more developed fields . . . . This has led to low standards of entry at the student level that continue to the professorial level, to low standards of performance, and to low standards of promotion in academic institutions.<sup>5</sup>

Lewis particularly laments that many in the field don't know a Middle Eastern language. Some universities sought to address this problem by importing scholars from the region itself. But here again, demand exceeded supply, resulting in what Lewis describes as "appointments of dubious value," "unhappy appointments."

Now, let us revisit Lewis's point, at a distance of forty-three years. Could one make the same critique today? Are standards so abysmally low, are languages so little known?

It's not an easy question to answer, partly because of the problem of generalizing about a field covering fifteen centuries, dozens of contemporary

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 372.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Martin Kramer, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America* (Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2001).

<sup>5</sup>Lewis, "The State of Middle Eastern Studies," 372–3.

states, and a geographic area from the Atlantic shores of North Africa to the Hindu Kush mountains.

My sense is that there is more sophisticated work being done in the field, using an ever-widening range of sources in the languages of the region. Not long ago, my own alma mater, the Near Eastern Studies department at Princeton, began posting webpages for each of its graduates, listing their books. Browsing these pages, I came away impressed, although I cannot vouch for the scholarly value of a huge corpus I haven't read, indeed that no one could read in its entirety. Presumably, every major Ph.D.-producing program could put together such a compendium.

So, some good work is being done, and I would hesitate today to level a general charge of pervasive low standards, despite prominent examples of shoddy work. But I think there is a deeper concern.

One of the great disappointments of Middle Eastern studies today is that they don't seem to produce scholars whose work is broadly appreciated within the academy itself. I am not talking here about public recognition, of the sort achieved by Lewis and Fouad Ajami, his ASMEA co-founder. That is exceedingly rare. I am speaking of the general reader of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

The founding fellows of the Middle East Studies Association – not our association, but MESA – included greats such as Richard Ettinghausen, Shlomo Dov Goiten, Oleg Grabar, Gustav von Grunebaum, and Franz Rosenthal. To them one could add Joseph Schacht and Sir Hamilton Gibb.

They had been imported from Europe in the immediate postwar, and they commanded immense respect on their campuses and in the wider academy, as scholars of formidable and vast learning. That was because they knew not only the Middle East and Islam but possessed a total mastery of the legacy of the West. Lewis himself belongs in this category. They were, to borrow a phrase applied by Lewis to von Grunebaum, “patriots of civilization.”<sup>6</sup>

Where are their heirs? Where are the practitioners of Middle Eastern studies whose names might crop up in general conversation in the better faculty lounges? Whose contributions are so significant that they transcend the narrow confines of Middle Eastern studies? The list of contenders would be very short, and probably not as impressive as the one I just gave you.

If so, then it would still be the case that Middle Eastern studies lag behind many other nearby fields. This isn't because the history, culture, and politics of the Middle East are any less fertile a field for inspired genius. It's because genius tends to avoid them, for reasons I'll come to next.

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<sup>6</sup>[Bernard Lewis], “Obituary: Gustave von Grunebaum,” *The Times* (London), March 16, 1972. Lewis noted in a letter to me (Aug. 16, 1999) that the obituary appeared unsigned, in accordance with the practice of the newspaper at that time.

## Infected by politics

Lewis's second criticism is that the field had become an arena for "the working of emotion and prejudice" by academics with political agendas. These people, he thinks, with their "political allegiances and interests . . . can seriously distort the life and growth of academic departments."

Lewis asserts that some institutions "have become so politicized as to make life unpleasant for teachers or students who do not belong, or will not submit, to the dominant faction." The result is what he calls "subtle censorship and, worse still, self-censorship, which . . . could ultimately be the destruction of the free spirit of inquiry, discovery, and expression."<sup>7</sup>

The fact that Lewis wrote this before the intrusion of Said shows that *Orientalism* reinforced an existing trend that had already started from within. In later years, a problem at a few institutions became endemic to the field as a whole, and Lewis grew much more pessimistic. In his late-life memoirs, he wrote that "the Saidians now control appointments, promotions, publications and even book reviews." And he drew a dramatic comparison:

In Middle Eastern studies, it has become commonplace that certain lines of thought (if that is the right word) must be accepted and applied if one wishes to achieve appointment, promotion and tenure. This kind of enforced orthodoxy can extend even to learned journals and publishing houses and has been used to bring about a level of intellectual conformism unknown for centuries.<sup>8</sup>

On another occasion, he spoke of a greater degree of "imposed orthodoxy than [at] any other time since the Middle Ages."<sup>9</sup> In a keynote address to ASMEA's very first conference, he bemoaned a "degree of thought control, of limitations of freedom of expression, without parallel in the Western world since the eighteenth century, and in some areas longer than that."<sup>10</sup>

That is saying rather a lot, probably too much: no one's books are being burnt. But it might be more accurate if limited to the English-speaking part of the West.

Lewis, then, lived to see his worst premonitions of 1979 come true. The belief that it is the moral duty of the academic to advocate and agitate anywhere and everywhere – in the classroom, in the appointments committee, in the professional association, in the refereed journal, in the book review – is a given in large parts of the field. Not only is perfect objectivity deemed unobtainable – which is true – but aiming even for imperfect objectivity is

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<sup>7</sup>Lewis, "The State of Middle Eastern Studies," 375, 381.

<sup>8</sup>Bernard Lewis with Buntzie Ellis Churchill, *Notes on a Century: Reflections of a Middle East Historian* (New York: Viking, 2012), 271, 278.

<sup>9</sup>Quoted by Daphna Berman, "Revered and Reviled: Bernard Lewis," *Moment*, Sept.-Oct. 2011, available online at <https://momentmag.com/revered-and-reviled-bernard-lewis/>.

<sup>10</sup>Bernard Lewis, "Studying the Other: Different Ways of Looking at the Middle East and Africa," ASMEA Inaugural Conference, April 24–26, 2008, min. 23:30, available online at <https://vimeo.com/19565744>.

dismissed as a dereliction of the duty of the scholar, whose mission is to double as an activist and militant.

Just this year, this tendency produced a new low, when the membership of the Middle East Studies Association, MESA, passed a resolution calling for the academic boycott of Israeli universities. These, so it is claimed, are “imbri-cated” by “their provision of direct assistance to the Israeli military and intelligence establishments.” The vote was 768 to 167, a lopsided count reminiscent of referenda held in parts of the Middle East.<sup>11</sup>

No matter how you parse it, the effect of such resolutions is the intimidation of the few by the many. The sanctions are most threatening not to Israeli universities, but to American scholars and students who would join confer-ences and programs in Israel.

It is ironic that an association for the study the Middle East should boycott the freest universities in the Middle East. According to the Academic Freedom Index, 2022, Israel is the only country in the Middle East to earn “A” status for academic freedom. For comparison, Tunisia and the Palestinian Authority earn a “B,” Iraq, Kuwait, and Lebanon receive a “C,” while Jordan, Libya, and Sudan earn a “D.” Most of the other countries in the Middle East get an “E,” including Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Israel’s score is even higher than those of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Australia.<sup>12</sup>

If MESA really cared about academic freedom in the Middle East, it would hold up Israeli universities as models to the region. Instead, these are the *only* universities MESA thinks deserve to be boycotted.

In fact, the boycott isn’t “academic,” it’s political, something that would have been unthinkable to the founders of MESA. They were meticulous about keeping the association above politics. They knew full well that politics could only divide them against themselves and from the public. You could say what you wanted at MESA, but you didn’t try to drag MESA itself to endorse your cause.

Over the years, a few of the presidents of MESA continued to warn against going down this rabbit hole. Maybe the last to do so was Fred Donner, a well-regarded medievalist at the University of Chicago. In his 2012 MESA pre-sidential letter, he wrote against the US ever going to war against Iran, but added this:

Our organization is open to all scholars, both those who may support such a war and those who oppose it; indeed, MESA must continue to remain open to all points of view if

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<sup>11</sup>Middle East Studies Association press release, “Middle East Studies Association Members Vote to Ratify BDS Resolution in Referendum,” March 23, 2002, available online at <https://mesana.org/news/2022/03/23/middle-east-scholars-vote-to-endorse-bds>.

<sup>12</sup>Katrin Kinzelbach, Staffan I. Lindberg, Lars Pelke, and Janika Spannagel, *Academic Freedom Index 2022 Update* (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg and V-Dem Institute, 2022), DOI: 10.25593/opus4-fau-18,612. The Academic Freedom Index was developed collaboratively by the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU), the Scholars at Risk Network, and the V-Dem Institute.

it is to sustain meaningful dialogue. . . . It is essential that MESA eschew taking an official position as an organization on any issue, even though every one of us, individually, will likely hold strong opinions on them, one way or another.<sup>13</sup>

In 2014, the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) mobilization at MESA gained momentum. In the middle of that year, Donner had personally signed on to the academic boycott.<sup>14</sup> But he still insisted that MESA stand above it. If it didn't, MESA would lose good members, it might come under pressure to take other political positions, and perhaps it would get tangled in lawsuits. Taking a position on BDS, he thought, would be "short-sighted in the extreme" and "utterly irresponsible." But Donner's most telling argument was this:

MESA's endorsement of BDS will hand MESA's enemies, who have persistently (but, until now, wrongly) claimed that MESA has been politicized, exactly the evidence they need to make their case against us – which they will not hesitate to do.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, I won't hesitate. I hope Professor Donner would now agree that MESA, by his own measure, *has* been politicized, having passed the very resolution he so eloquently opposed.

MESA transitioned from scholarship to this brand of political advocacy because determined militants infiltrated its ranks, with the express purpose of using its prestige to advance their partisan political agenda. Serious scholars like Donner were shunted aside by these opportunists. The one who engineered this at MESA was a human rights attorney whose resume I'll spare you, but who defines herself as a grassroots organizer.

Thus has the great MESA fallen, and in its fall, it exemplifies the downward spiral of Middle Eastern studies into intimidation and discrimination on the basis of political differences. The veil has been lifted. No one knows how MESA's BDS resolution will be implemented in practice. But don't be surprised to see faculty bring their biases even more into the open, sanctioned as they are by an official resolution of their professional peers. MESA is already rallying to them whenever they do, with barrages of supporting letters.

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<sup>13</sup>Fred M. Donner, "Presidential Letter," *MESA Newsletter*, 34. no. 1 (Feb. 2012), available online at <https://mesana.org/publications/imes/2012/02/01/fred-m.-donner-university-of-chicago-mesa-president-2012>.

<sup>14</sup>Jadaliyya Reports, "Over 100 Middle East Studies Scholars and Librarians Call for the Boycott of Israeli Academic Institutions," letter submitted Aug. 6, 2014, available online at <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/31063/Over-100-Middle-East-Studies-Scholars-and-Librarians-Call-for-the-Boycott-of-Israeli-Academic-Institutions>. The signers pledged "not to collaborate on projects and events involving Israeli academic institutions, not to teach at or to attend conferences and other events at such institutions, and not to publish in academic journals based in Israel."

<sup>15</sup>Fred M. Donner, "Former MESA Presidents on the Resolution," MESA Members Discussion Forum, Jan. 2, 2015.

## The spreading rot

Now you might think that there are some areas of Middle Eastern studies which are exempt. Surely the study of medieval Islam is sufficiently remote from the passions of the present.

Well, think again. Consider, for example, an organization called Middle East Medievalists, which describes itself as “an association of scholars interested in the study of the medieval Middle East.” This is defined chronologically as the period between 500 and 1500 of the common era. (Our Professor Donner was once president of this association, and he edited its prestigious journal for nearly twenty years.)

In May 2021, the board of directors of this “association of scholars” issued a statement on Palestine. The directors condemned “the unequal legal treatment of Palestinians in Israel and in the Palestinian territories, the ethnic cleansing of Palestinian neighborhoods, towns, and villages, and the subjugation of Palestinians within systems of apartheid.”<sup>16</sup>

Why would an association of medievalists, with a cutoff date of 1500, take a stand on *any* current issue? The answer, I submit, is to be found in the paragraph that followed this ritual denunciation, and it isn’t about Israel at all:

The study of the medieval Middle East is complicit in the formation of Western ideas of inferiority and difference that have long underpinned the logic of settler colonialism. The racial and ethnic composition of academic departments of Middle Eastern Studies, the boards of our journals and our professional organizations . . . contribute[s] to ongoing regimes of scholarship that perpetuate . . . otherness.<sup>17</sup>

Rarely does one encounter such a blatant statement of the bigotry at the heart of it all. This nicely confirms what we already knew: out in the field, Said’s *Orientalism* is deployed to delegitimize scholars of certain races and ethnicities and replace them with others. Achievement counts for nothing; if you are from a racial or ethnic group that is “complicit,” you are part of a “settler-colonialist” logic, occupying and exploiting “our” history.

All this is directly traceable to Said’s famous verdict in *Orientalism*: “For a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of *his* actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second.”<sup>18</sup> The statement still shocks: it is a reworking of the idea of original sin, now attached to ethnic or racial identity at birth. (As Said was also an American from birth, one wonders whether he should be regarded as an American first, and an individual second. No doubt he exempted himself from his own rule of thumb.)

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<sup>16</sup>“Middle East Medievalists Statement of Solidarity with Palestinians,” May 27, 2021, available online at <https://www.middleeastmedievalists.com/2021/05/board-message-palestine/>.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 11.



Here I feel some sympathy for the Fred Donners of the field. Donner, just as an example, marched in Washington against the war in Iraq. He has warned America against waging war on Iran. He signed a BDS resolution. His book, *Muhammad and the Believers*, argues that Islam at its inception was an ecumenical movement. As an individual, Donner did all the right things when he “came up against the Orient.”

What could he *not* do? Change his “racial and ethnic composition,” which makes a scholar “complicit,” regardless of his personal politics and his sympathetic scholarship. And if any more justification were needed, Donner had the temerity to argue that his scholarly association shouldn’t take a political stand on the one true cause, BDS. “Complicit” as charged!

Radicals, whether medievalists or modernists, want to rid the faculty and the boards of associations and journals precisely of individuals who still cling to liberal values. To do so, they denounce merit-based achievement as “regimes of scholarship,” and they openly advocate regime change. It is right out of Orwell: not *1984*, but *Animal Farm*.

So, the fever has spread even into the most remote corners of the field. I imagine there are hundreds of people in MESA, including not a few medievalists, who recoil at this sort of politicization, and think it is a travesty. But I only imagine it because they haven’t spoken up. Where are the scholars with the courage of their convictions? The majority of MESA’s members didn’t cast a vote in the BDS referendum. Do they think that is sufficient? Do they believe that such self-imposed silence is a counterweight to the BDS vote?

As Yeats put it, “The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.” That is why the center of Middle Eastern studies hasn’t held, and I fault not the militants, but those others who failed to stand their ground.

## Money talks

Lewis’s last warning from 1979 is about the corrupting effects of funding by foreign governments. This was just beginning in the 1970s, following the oil embargo of 1973. Arab states thought to turn Middle Eastern studies into their amen corner, by handing out cash at a time of diminished support by the federal government and the foundations.

Foreign funding grew substantially in the 1980s and 1990s, and some centers became addicted to it. But no one knew its scale: while federal and some state laws require the disclosure of such gifts, there isn’t a penalty for failing to disclose, and until recently, there was no effort at enforcement.

Who got the money? Arab governments, and people fronting for them, were very strategic about their giving. They had no particular allegiance to schools they hadn’t attended anyway, and they weren’t overawed by vines of ivy and neo-Gothic courtyards. They rewarded academics with proven track records

of doing what they, the donors, wanted, and since the donors might donate again, recipients gave them what they paid for.

This was a dirty little secret that MESA worked hard to conceal. From time to time, its committees would warn against the corrupting effects of *American* government money, if it came from defense or intelligence agencies. But MESA never demanded transparency about foreign government funding. As a result, the revelations have been haphazard.

The most interesting ones followed a campaign by the Trump administration's Department of Education to hold universities' feet to the fire. This had more to do with Chinese funding than Middle Eastern money, but there were plenty of Middle East disclosures too. My favorite Trump-era revelation dates from 2020: the disclosure that the University of Pennsylvania had contracts with the Saudi ministry of defense for \$2 million, apparently to bring Saudi officers to hear lectures on the Penn campus.<sup>19</sup>

The irony is splendid: the current president of MESA is from Penn. She heads an association that boycotts Israeli universities for being "imbricated" in Israeli state acts. Yet her own university takes money to train a defense establishment that has killed thousands of civilians in Yemen. Needless to say, don't wait for MESA to hold Penn to account, or propose that it be boycotted. The longstanding understanding in MESA is that this dirty laundry shouldn't be aired in public. Actually, I doubt it is even aired in private.

So foreign funding is there, but its effect is not self-evident. On the one hand, it seems to have created black holes of forbidden subjects – forbidden lest their pursuit preclude a potential gift from this or that Middle Eastern prince.

But while the foreign funding probably amplifies the problems in the field, it is not their cause. A new report by the National Association of Scholars devoted to Middle East centers found no difference between the politicization of centers that received foreign funds, and those that didn't.<sup>20</sup> The idea that Middle Eastern studies would have evolved differently without Gulf or Turkish money seems to me somewhat naïve.

But exposing that funding serves a salubrious purpose. In 1979, Lewis complained about low professional standards. The problem of Middle Eastern studies today isn't low standards, it's double standards. The field is rife with them, and this is nowhere more easily documented than in the refusal to reveal, discuss, and debate foreign funding – support by governments that consistently get an "E" in academic freedom at home.

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<sup>19</sup>Catherine Dunn, "Penn Got \$258 Million in Foreign Money, and There May Be More It Hasn't Disclosed," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Feb. 24, 2020.

<sup>20</sup>"Centers with little to no foreign involvement teach and research with the same extensive bias as those with significant foreign involvement," Neetu Arnold, *Hijacked: The Capture of America's Middle East Studies Centers* (New York: National Association of Scholars, 2022), 6.

## The ASMEA alternative

Despite Lewis's critique – low standards, rampant politicization, corruption – he ended his 1979 piece on an optimistic note. Lewis praised what he called “a new generation of graduate students and young scholars who are committed to scholarship.” Good students would “somehow find their way to good teachers, and in time do good work.”<sup>21</sup>

This did happen here and there, but many of these students couldn't find good jobs in the deteriorating climate. Indeed, one wonders whether someone with Lewis's astonishing range of talents could find a position in America today.

That is a sobering thought, and this would have been a rather sad story were it not for Lewis's last act: the founding of this association. Lewis and ASMEA's co-founder, Fouad Ajami, didn't go down cursing the darkness. Lewis gave us his vision of ASMEA's role when he founded it, and it rewards revisiting now, because it can and should still guide us.

But first, why did Lewis embrace the idea of ASMEA? Lewis came to America from Britain too late to found his own Middle East program, or build out an existing one. When he arrived in 1975, he was just shy of sixty years old. In those days, Princeton still mandated retirement at seventy, so he only spent about ten years teaching there. He had some students (and I was one), but the time was short, and the numbers were small. For his first four years after retirement, he tried to set up an institute for advanced study of the Middle East in Philadelphia. He described that effort as “a total failure and a personal tragedy.”<sup>22</sup>

ASMEA filled that empty space: an institution which would sustain his vision of what Middle Eastern studies should be. Its purpose was clear to him. ASMEA, he wrote in his memoirs, was established “to counter the straitjackets of MESA,” and “to provide a platform and a medium for ideas and opinions that deviate from currently enforced orthodoxy.”<sup>23</sup>

The fact that ASMEA is still here, fifteen years after its founding conference, validates his belief that there are scholars who want freedom from imposed orthodoxies, who seek unfettered debate, and who need a truly neutral platform, free from political intimidation by activists and militants.

If MESA had sustained the spirit of its founders, there would not have been a need for ASMEA. But with each passing year, MESAns have tightened the cords on their own straitjackets. This past spring, MESA was finally overrun by boycotters, who would subject the freest universities in the Middle East to a ban. In December 2022, MESA met in Denver. It might as well have met in

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<sup>21</sup>Lewis, “The State of Middle Eastern Studies,” 381.

<sup>22</sup>Lewis, *Notes of a Century*, 284. (The institution in question: The Annenberg Research Institute for Judaic and Near Eastern Studies.)

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 279.

Damascus. It has become a place not where the Middle East is studied, but where the worst of it is replicated.

Lewis, in his memoirs, left us one more guideline, which he called “profoundly important.” ASMEA, he wrote, would counter MESA “without establishing a similarly repressive alternative . . . . The battle is now engaged – not between rival ideologies, but between enforced ideology and freedom.”<sup>24</sup>

Which is to say that ASMEA, although conceived in response to MESA, isn’t the anti-MESA. It isn’t pro-this-cause, while MESA is pro-that-cause. ASMEA instead is the true heir to the liberal mission for Middle Eastern studies first defined by the founders of MESA – a mission cast overboard by their radicalized successors. This leaves ASMEA the only scholarly association for the study of the Middle East in America. What is called MESA has become a political advocacy group.

This may seem to you a brash assertion. But if we remain as steadfast in the defense of our academic freedom, as they have been in its suppression, that assertion will come to be acknowledged as fact in the fullness of time. Each one of you is a part of this story of renewal. May we all rise to the task we have assigned ourselves, to restore and preserve our freedoms.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### **Notes on contributor**

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid.