

# Twin Towers and Ivory Towers, 20 Years Later

by Martin Kramer

In 2001, my book *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America* became a part of a much bigger and heated discussion over what made the United States vulnerable on 9/11. The main argument in the book was that Middle Eastern studies in America had consistently missed the most important developments in the region. One of them was the rise of very radical forms of Islamist extremism. That claim is why the book took off.



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The book does not argue that academics or anyone else could or should have predicted 9/11. Even the greatest experts cannot predict such things. Winston Churchill once said, “It is not given to human beings ... to foresee or to predict to any large extent the unfolding course of events.” In fact, nearly all the events that have transformed the Middle East since I started to study it, were surprises: the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Anwar Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem, the Iranian revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, 9/11, and the “Arab Spring.”

However, the book does show that when events failed to conform to academic models, the academics disregarded or distorted the evidence. Still worse, they poured scorn on anyone who dared to propose another way forward. Every intellectual endeavor, to stay credible, has to correct itself. This was the problem: not that Middle Eastern studies got some big things wrong, but that they would not acknowledge it and then revisit their assumptions. This was the greater sin.

## New Experts for Old

So much for what preceded 9/11. What has happened since, and what is happening now?

The market share of academics in interpreting the Middle East for Americans is now much smaller than it was right after 9/11. Up until then, studying the Middle East and writing about it were very much a niche industry. The lead producers were university-based academics and a few specialized think tanks. If you were smart and ambitious and did not have a stake in some Middle Eastern fight, you usually specialized in something else. Sure, the Middle East erupted every so often, but it did not stay on the front burner or the front pages for long.

Following 9/11, Americans demanded to know “why they hate us,” and “how do we change them.” At the time, the academic experts were swamped with invites from television producers, newspaper editors, and senior officials. They performed unevenly, to say the least. That was because the academics tended to sound one repetitive note: America is to blame. This was not so much an analysis as an ideological profession of faith.

But very quickly, the whole ecosystem changed. The main effect of 9/11 was to make the Middle East a matter of very wide concern. That meant that smart people who had not given the Middle East much thought made themselves into experts—some, quite credibly.

Not only did the region-specific think tanks grow large. The all-purpose, general think tanks built out large shops to deal with the Middle East. These alternative experts drove the academics out of the limelight. Generally, the non-academic voices ignored the “blame America” narrative and searched for deeper causes. And they discovered a

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whole world of rage and grievance that the academics had overlooked.

Especially impressive was the way top journalists rode 9/11 to become some of America’s leading interpreters of the Middle East. There is, today, a large shelf of books about al-Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden, Afghanistan and Iraq, Islamism and the “Arab Spring,” written by journalists. Many made the best-seller lists and won prizes.

Then there were the military commanders, diplomats, and intelligence officers who served on front lines from Afghanistan to Iraq to Syria. Before 9/11, few of them had much on-the-ground experience in the region. They took an over-the-horizon view. But the wars cycled several million Americans through the Middle East, and many of them developed a high-resolution knowledge of politics, society, and culture. If one looks today at the people summoned to comment on the region, the proportion who had their boots on the ground is very high, and it is likely to stay that way for years to come.

In sum, very little of what the public reads or hears about the Middle East today comes from academics. This is evident in the 9/11 documentaries that have been broadcast in the general media on this twentieth anniversary. Among the quotable talking heads, academics are almost entirely absent. They mostly write for and speak to each other in a narrow circle, or for the slightly wider circle of the farther left.

If one wants more proof, ask this: Does anyone in the field, any credentialed professor of Middle Eastern studies, enjoy any broad name recognition in America? The answer is an obvious “no.” The last one was the late Bernard Lewis. Lewis had two *New*

*York Times* bestsellers right after 9/11: *What Went Wrong* and *The Crisis of Islam*. They were quick, readable syntheses that filled an immediate void and that flew off the shelves.

But Lewis, and to some extent also Fouad Ajami, were the exceptions that proved the rule: The academic study of the Middle East does not produce high-profile public intellectuals.

America has not looked to academics for its ideas about the region in a long while.

### **A Classroom Monopoly**

And yet, Middle Eastern studies still matter, not because of what the academics say or write but because of what they teach.

The most prestigious universities are no longer the beacons on a hill they once were, but their degrees are still coveted. One still gets mileage from a Princeton degree, or one from Harvard. These are the most durable brands in America, some predating American independence. So it is not surprising that young people still compete ferociously to get into these schools. And from there, they will go on to make policy, form opinion, and command U.S. power in the world.

The best guess is that the indoctrination in these places is as bad as ever. It is a “guess” because the classroom is not public domain. But if academics teach in the classroom what they say and write in the public domain, then it is still a closed circle. Back around 9/11, there were maybe half a dozen universities where a student could find enough balance to get a credential worth having. Today, one would not need all the fingers of one hand.



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Previously, the government might have been able to balance things in institutions subsidized by the taxpayer, such as university Middle East centers. Now, that is doubtful. Higher education has an effective lobby in Washington, and the White House and Congress do not care much because, in relative terms, the money is quite small. So yes, by all means, let us have accountability for biased outreach programs. And let us have universities disclose foreign funding as required by law. But let us not delude ourselves because this will not make much of a dent.

What does seem to work, at least in certain cases, is shaming. Of course, much of academe is shameless, and in those places, the game is long lost. But even in this era of rampant “wokeness,” there are university administrations that care about quality. Calling out error and bias in these settings—as Middle East Forum’s Campus Watch does—has some value. It is not going to reverse the trend. It is not going to stop it. But it might slow it down.



(Left to right) Benjamin Netanyahu (Israel), Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan (UAE), and Abdullatif al-Zayani (Bahrain), at the signing of the Abraham Accords, White House, September 15, 2020. Many gulf states play a positive role overall in Middle Eastern politics.

### Taking the Initiative

But criticism can only do so much. Just as important is creating alternatives. For example, on the disciplinary level, there is the alternative to the Middle East Studies Association, named the Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa, or ASMEA. The *Middle East Quarterly* also makes room for dissenting views. In the field of international relations, including the Middle East, there is the Alexander Hamilton Society. And there are some initiatives at individual universities and colleges.

Creating alternatives is labor-intensive because it involves swimming against the prevailing currents in academe. Success requires cunning, tact, and money. And there is no packaged formula: Every campus is a planet unto itself. What flies on one will crash on another.

But this is the only way left open. We are not going to witness a revolution in Middle Eastern studies. A generation or more

will have to die out before that has a chance of happening. The objective must be more modest: to create some space for alternative views and free debate on the Middle East. To some extent, that has been achieved over the past twenty years. The challenge of the next twenty years is to enlarge that space and fill it.

### Discussion

*Editor's note: The following is excerpted from a Campus Watch webinar, [September 10, 2021](#).*

*Campus Watch:* You mentioned the disappearance of star professors of the caliber of Bernard Lewis. With all due respect to journalists and other non-academic commentators, has anyone really filled those shoes? Has the quality of information that is available to the public today regarding the Middle East, regardless of its source, increased or decreased over the past twenty years?

*Kramer:* My overall impression is that it has probably increased in terms of firsthand familiarity with the situation on the ground. Hundreds of people were sent out to “cover” the region, and they accessed information that even people like Bernard Lewis couldn’t access.

For example, prior to 9/11, the bookshelf on Saudi Arabia was virtually empty. Academics didn’t work on it, either because they couldn’t get access, or they were afraid that if they wrote something uncomplimentary about Saudi Arabia, it would forever block their universities from ever getting any Saudi funding. After 9/11, journalists began to pick up the story, and now we have a very impressive accounting of Islamic extremism



in Saudi Arabia, the leading actors in the Saudi royal house, and so on.

So yes, there's more out there, in absolute terms of quantity. What we don't have is what the likes of Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami provided: the longer historical perspective. That was something that could only be done by academic scholars. No one is doing it for a wider public today. So we get a lot of reportage of a very high quality. But we haven't had a major book or even a major article in a mass circulation outlet like *The Atlantic* or *The New Yorker* putting things in the broader historical perspective.

*CW:* To what practical extent does foreign funding, particularly but not exclusively from Saudi Arabia, impact the agenda of Middle Eastern studies? Does this funding play the same role that it did twenty or twenty-five years ago?

*Kramer:* There is still some money coming in. But I think the more interesting development isn't so much the funding of Middle Eastern studies, but the satellite campuses that have been created by American universities in some of the Persian Gulf states. These universities are internationalizing and creating dependent relationships on certain governments.

I think that many gulf states play a positive role overall in Middle Eastern politics. The Abraham Accords represent a signal breakthrough. But I'm always wary of partnerships between institutions that pride themselves on promoting the pursuit of truth and the free and open exchange of ideas, and governments for which these things are anathema, or at least not priorities.

If you're in the Middle Eastern studies department in a university that is avidly

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pursuing a relationship with a moneyed Middle Eastern state, you're likely to pull your punches. The effect is not so much to generate scholarship that is sympathetic to these countries but to take

unbiased study of those countries off the agenda. No one who wants to advance a career is going to focus on these countries if that's going to alienate their dean or provost.

So you get black holes of research, which no one ventures to fill. It's the non-academics who have managed to keep up our understanding of what goes on in these black holes. I don't think that's going to change anytime soon. We're just going to have to live with the fact that the flow of foreign money is a force that constricts the range of study of the Middle East in the American academy.

*CW:* Does anything remain of the role of the liberal Arabists of old? Is that still a viable school of thought within Middle Eastern studies? If so, how does it affect views about Israel's existence?

*Kramer:* The liberal Arabists were pushed out of Middle Eastern studies a while ago. One of the last of them was Malcolm Kerr from UCLA, later president of the American University of Beirut, where he was assassinated. He wrote a very sharp critique of Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

There was some degree of fair-mindedness about the liberal Arabists. They had their biases and prejudices, and they certainly regretted the creation of Israel. But they understood that Israel had to be accommodated, provided it made far-reaching concessions to the Arabs and the Palestinians.

But these liberals were pushed aside long ago. The people who determine the pace

of Middle Eastern studies today tend to be radical leftists. And they aren't focused on the terms of accommodation with Israel. They seek to delegitimize it completely; they lend their support to BDS [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement], and they champion the "one-state solution" in a form that would end Israel. If only there were still some liberal Arabists around, we could have a meaningful dialogue with them. But instead, we're stuck with radicals, many of whom come from radical political traditions within the Middle East. The Middle East Studies Association resembles nothing so much as a semi-official union of academics in some benighted dictatorship in the Middle East.

*CW:* Just to segue into that, you have over the years noted the increase in the share of those professors whose origins are in the Middle East—not simply by ancestry, but who were themselves born there, and who have come to the United States to work. Do you see that trend continuing? Are we going to continue to import faculty at the rate we have over the past twenty or thirty years?

*Kramer:* I don't know. I don't have the statistical basis on which to answer that.

As a general matter of principle, people coming from the Middle East to teach in American universities could be a huge asset. Fouad Ajami, an immigrant from Lebanon, was one of my undergraduate teachers, and later my close friend. He made a major contribution to America's understanding of the Middle East.

There is potentially huge value here. The problem is when people bring along, in their baggage, the very same ideas in which they were indoctrinated in their countries of origin. Ajami was a good ex-ample. As a young man,

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he was indoctrinated as a Nasserist. But through his long engagement with American values, American mores, American politics, and Americans, he had a change of heart.

And so it's really a question of acculturation. We want an amalgam of people with regional knowledge. Sometimes the knowledge of individuals who come from the region can't be surpassed. But are they acculturated to the values that America generally shares, such as openness, tolerance, and the free exchange of ideas? That's a problem for those who remain embedded in another culture and have not adapted to the norms that make intellectual life in America tolerable.

*CW:* You have written that when you received your PhD in 1981, so grim was the situation that you didn't bother applying for jobs in the United States. That was forty years ago. It doesn't seem to be getting any better in hiring. The gates are still controlled by the people who are as hostile to someone with your viewpoint as they were when you came out of Princeton. Do you agree with that? Can anything be done about such ideological homogeneity?

*Kramer:* I hate to end on a pessimistic note. But I have a hard time even getting invited to speak on American campuses today.

I come back to the point I made in my remarks, about creating alternatives. I see shoots coming up from the ground that have the potential to create alternatives even within an academic setting. And remember, while the top tier institutions are the same as when I was a graduate student, once you get down to second and third tier, there's a lot of room for entrepreneurs to try new approaches.

I said earlier that no one can make predictions about the Middle East. I don't

think anyone can make predictions about Middle Eastern studies and be sure that they'll come to pass. So, I'll just end on an optimistic note and say that, hopefully, in another twenty years on the fortieth anniversary of *Ivory Towers on Sand*, I'll be able to report on more progress.

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