



How Has the Field of Middle East Studies Changed in the Last Five Years? An *IJMES* Retrospective

Pensée 1: From the Catbird Seat

JUDITH E. TUCKER

History Department, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.;

e-mail: tuckerje@georgetown.edu

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As editor of *IJMES* from 2004 to 2009, I spent the last five years in the catbird seat of Middle East studies, where I had the privilege of reading well over 500 article submissions that flowed into the editorial office, some 100 of which were ultimately destined for publication. I characterize the experience as very gratifying on the whole; ours is a field that has attracted talented and skilled scholars who are doing some very creative work—this is not a change per se, although it can be argued that we have a new generation involved in increasingly more theoretically informed projects. Have there been other, more tangible, developments in the field as reflected in submissions to *IJMES*? I mention four trends I have spotted over time that may suggest some of the recent shifts—in region, topic, scope, and critical engagement—in research foci.

First, the study of the Arabian peninsula has moved from the periphery to a position that, if not at the center, is at least in the infield. Over the past five years, *IJMES* has received and ultimately published an unprecedented number of articles dealing with Yemen, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the smaller countries of the Gulf. Although some of these countries, especially Yemen, have been relatively well served in the past, much of the rest of the peninsula had suffered neglect. No doubt the increased presence of Middle East academics in the region, thanks to the explosion of institutions of higher education in the Gulf in particular, has raised the level of interest and opened up new research opportunities. This new research is not spread evenly across the disciplines, however. Although Yemen and Oman have attracted the attention of historians and anthropologists, much of the work on Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates lies in the disciplines of political science and economic development: *IJMES* has published articles on the links between economic development and the

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politics of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, on Yemeni political parties, and on Saudi public opinion, but it seems that researchers in history, for example, have yet to identify the sources and the questions that will allow for a similar level of intellectual engagement.

Second, the broad field of Middle East studies has increasingly embraced the study of popular culture, with some very happy results. The trend is nowhere clearer than in the *IJMES* Quick Studies section, which highlights work in progress. We have been treated to a wealth of research material, both current and historical, including Egyptian and Syrian cartoons, girls' autograph books, photographs of Ottoman officials and Tunisian bridal parties, cosmetic ads, and theater excerpts. When this work comes to fruition in the form of full-length publications, the realm of popular culture will finally be receiving the full attention it deserves. Several recent articles can be seen as riding the crest of this wave: studies of the social history of photography in Lebanon, Egyptian musicals, women's mawlid, and tourism in the wake of war and occupation point to the many creative ways in which scholars are exploring popular culture in connection with social transformations and political discourses. In a field where we have been wedded, by and large, to the written text, the impulse to look across a range of media and diverse forms of human experience is a most welcome development.

Third, Middle East studies, at least from the vantage point of *IJMES*, has been going global. In keeping with trends in many other fields, our research has grown more comparative in nature and alive to connections across space and time. Some of the Quick Studies pieces capture this trend through discussions of the ways in which American popular culture has absorbed and redeployed material of Middle East origin, from rappers in *kufiyas* to Egyptian-themed parades. Full-length articles on the transfer of British colonial practices from India to Yemen and the parallels in archeological discourses between the British and the Americans in Iraq reflect on the project of modern empire in a transregional and transtemporal mode while an article on U.S. Cold War modernization policies in Turkey digs deeply into the history of American liberalism. I could multiply these examples by adding others where the authors take an explicitly comparative approach as well, but I think the overall thrust is one of moving away from an exclusive national (and nationalist) unit of analysis in favor of recognition of a global circulation of ideas and people with a long history and a vital present. The rapidly expanding field of the study of Islam in the West—to be featured in a future issue of *IJMES*—is another indication of how the boundaries of the field have become ever more permeable.

Fourth, no reflections on developments would be complete without some reference to how we, as scholars, have been engaging policy issues in light of the persistent attention the Middle East region receives from world powers. Because the modern field of Middle East studies was constituted in the mid-20th century, it has a history of critical engagement with the policies connected to the geo-strategic interests of powerful outsiders: this is certainly nothing new. What has changed over time are the policies themselves, their substance, rhetoric, and modes of implementation, as reflected in the focus of recent critiques. The pages of *IJMES* capture some of the recent changes and the field's reactions rather well. A Quick Studies analysis of projects of democracy promotion and a set of articles critically examining the international human rights and development discourses that underpinned the Arab Human

Development Report 2005 on Women offer a sophisticated unpacking of the nature of current policies and their effects. I think that the scholars who do this work in our field have lived up to their responsibilities to bring the insights of the academy to bear on the world of policymaking and evaluating. However, we are still very much in a reactive mode. The longstanding challenges we have faced in finding a voice in policy circles seem to persist despite the fact that this is a problem almost as old as the field of Middle East studies. I am not advocating that scholars in the field move into the policy establishment but rather that we think proactively and creatively about policy in our own terms.

In brief, I think there is much to be excited about as to how the field of Middle East studies has changed in the past five years: we are becoming arguably more inclusive, creative, and cosmopolitan in our research agendas. We have not yet cracked the tough nut, however—at least from this catbird’s seat—of how to enhance our contributions to the causes of understanding and equity we value.