

MIDDLE EAST STUDIES IN ACTION

The MESA Global Academy: Sustaining Knowledge Production Among MENA Scholars

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The Middle East Studies Association (MESA) Global Academy is an initiative that sustains research collaborations and knowledge production among regionally-focused scholars from the Middle East and North Africa and their counterparts outside the region. Spearheaded by MESA, the project is an expression of the scholarly field's commitment to scholarship in and from the region. By awarding scholarships to displaced scholars from the MENA region currently located in North America, and thereby enabling them to attend meetings, workshops, and conferences, the project supports individuals whose academic trajectory has been adversely affected by developments in their home countries.

The idea for the Global Academy emerged in 2016, when Asli Bali was serving as director of UCLA's Center for Near Eastern Studies (CNES), a university-wide research center supporting interdisciplinary study of the region. Bali regularly received inquiries from academics in MENA looking to form an affiliation with CNES. These were often academics who had had impressive careers in their home countries but were now finding them upended by circumstances such as war, censorship, and threats of imprisonment. Some may have had prior ties to UCLA for their undergraduate or graduate study, or as a previous visitor to the university, and were reaching out to see if they might establish or renew an affiliation as a way to sustain their career outside of the deteriorating circumstances in their home context.

The frequency with which Bali was being contacted by scholars in this situation alarmed her. This was clearly the tip of the iceberg of a much broader problem faced by academics across the region. As the region grappled with the aftermath of the Arab uprisings of 2011 and the brutal

counter-revolution they engendered in many countries, conditions for university professors in the Arab world – particularly those in the social sciences and humanities – were becoming precarious. Authoritarian repression affecting university campuses and scholarly trajectories was also on the rise in countries such as Turkey and Iran.

These conditions also pointed to another set of serious concerns for those studying the MENA region. Increasingly, MENA-focused scholars based in North America were facing greater restrictions in their ability to travel to their research sites to work or to meet with colleagues, hampering scholarly production. Connecting scholars displaced from the region and specialists unable to reach the region was an obvious opportunity to address both sides of the coin and ensure the growth of Middle East Studies.

Building collaborative ties among scholars at the global level has long been one of the great advantages of MESA, with an annual meeting that attracts international participation. Bali brought up the issue at the center directors' meeting at the MESA annual meeting in 2016, where it deeply resonated. Other center directors had been receiving similar inquiries from scholars in crisis and likewise desired to act, but they did not have the resources they needed to bring these scholars to their campuses. Those who led Title VI and other Middle East centers, with their graduate programs, array of language courses, outreach activities, and other rich offerings, could particularly accommodate displaced scholars if a structure spanning multiple universities could organize placements and disburse funds.

MESA, with the support of its board and then-President Beth Baron, agreed to become an umbrella entity for what would become the Global Academy, and Bali and her colleagues, particularly Greta Scharnweber, then associate director at the Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at New York University, set out to secure funding for the project. In meeting with other scholarly groups and potential donors, it became clear that though many in the broader academic community were aware of scholar repression in places such as Hungary, there was little awareness of the magnitude of the problem in MENA.

In meetings and phone calls over a number of months, the team developed a presentation – drawing on the work of MESA's Committee on Academic Freedom – that provided a concise but comprehensive picture of the threat facing scholars in some parts of MENA. The next step was to identify a pilot project that would enable MESA to offer support to displaced scholars. These discussions evolved through collaboration with university partners who stepped forward to join the MESA initiative,

pledging to provide a forum to connect scholars from the region to interdisciplinary intellectual communities working on similar topics in North America.

These collaborations culminated in a proposal for how MESA could support knowledge production through support for displaced scholars and partnerships with major Middle East research centers at universities across the United States. In 2019, the Global Academy procured support in the form of a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York that has allowed for a three-year pilot project, currently in year two.

Since it commenced in fall 2019, the Global Academy has awarded 24 scholarships. Before Covid-19, it distributed travel grants to the awardees to present their research at universities across the country, many of them Title VI centers, and attend and participate in the 2019 MESA annual meeting. In the spring of 2020, with the spread of the coronavirus, the project shifted to awarding grants to support displaced scholars' academic output and organizing virtual events at universities as well as at the 2020 MESA annual meeting.

The Global Academy also provides publication opportunities to its awardees through partnerships with outlets such as *Jadaliyya*, *Middle East Report* (MERIP), and this publication. In addition, it hosts or organizes professional development workshops on topics ranging from journal and book publishing to careers adjacent to academia.

The project's biggest success lies in the access it provides for scholars of and from the Middle East to the MESA community. Global Academy scholars have expressed excitement and pleasure at the opportunity to connect with this network. They have also expressed gratitude for the solidarity they feel from the field – a form of collegial solidarity that focuses on them as scholars rather than as displaced persons in need of rescue. And, in turn, Global Academy scholars have been making major contributions to panels at the MESA meetings and academic events across the country.

The Global Academy has faced many difficulties, from the Trump administration's travel restrictions (the "Muslim ban") to the pandemic and its implications for higher education in North America and beyond. To sustain the project is already ambitious. Still, the plan is to incrementally expand the Global Academy, with the ultimate goal of fully funding a number of fellows from the region annually to spend two-year stints at North American universities.

More broadly, the hope is that the Global Academy can serve as a standard in the field of Middle East Studies as a proactive expression of solidarity for

fellow scholars in critical circumstances. By becoming a central part of what MESA does and as a permanent MESA program that has the ongoing and enthusiastic support of the board, it can attract more support from other donors as well as MESA's own membership.