Reflections on Scholarship and Fieldwork in the Middle East and North Africa

Introduction: Reflections on Scholarship and Fieldwork in the Middle East and North Africa

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The importance of fieldwork when investigating political phenomena in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) does not need to be emphasized. The value of fieldwork in comparative political research is generally recognized. Indeed, "best fieldwork" is one of the categories in which APSA offers a best-dissertation prize.

This does not mean that fieldwork is free of challenges and difficult decisions. The articles brought together here, which focus on the MENA region but also address issues relevant for fieldwork elsewhere, illustrate some of these challenges and concerns. In addition to what they tell us about addressing specific issues, these articles remind us of the need to be self-aware and alert to challenges and then to take them on with honesty and ingenuity. In this connection, these articles also remind us that progress in science is cumulative; no single study solves every problem and produces perfect results.

Reading these articles has led me to reflect on my own fieldwork experience, beginning with my dissertation research in Tunisia in the 1960s. This, in turn, made me think about similarities and differences between that earlier period and the present, with respect not only to fieldwork but also to political science research in general.

At the beginning of my dissertation research in Tunisia, I was perhaps better prepared than is usually the case. Two years earlier, I had spent an academic year taking regular classes at the University of Tunis, sitting alongside Tunisian students and residing in the university's dormitory for men. Nevertheless, prepared or not, I still faced challenges.

My goal was to map and then explain the political attitudes and behavior of ordinary citizens. Much of my time in the field was devoted to conducting a public-opinion survey. I decided to conduct the survey myself, partly because there was no clear alternative but also because I thought, correctly, that it might deepen my understanding of ordinary Tunisians and the society they inhabit. Thus, I spent much of the year—guided by my stratified quota sample—finding respondents and conducting interviews in different neighborhoods in Tunis and those in three small towns in different parts of the country. My sample, stratified on the basis of education, income, and location, consisted of 283 men and women.

But would there be interviewer-biasing effects? Would people give the same responses to a foreign interviewer that they would give to a Tunisian interviewer? Because some questions might be sensitive—particularly those about women and about Islam—perhaps respondents who were themselves critical of certain traditional values and practices nevertheless would feel obligated to defend their country's traditions when talking to a foreigner. Or was it the opposite: respondents who were not critical of these traditions nevertheless would express criticism when being interviewed by a foreign researcher, perhaps to appear as "modern" as they presumed the interviewer to be.

In light of these possibilities, I spent considerable time explaining the project and the survey to respondents before turning to the interview schedule and asking my questions. I hoped this would be sufficient to prevent interviewer-biasing effects, but I nevertheless wanted an assessment of this effort. I asked Tunisian colleagues to give the questionnaire to 30 individuals with specific demographic characteristics. When these questionnaires were returned, I compared their responses to those of 30 respondents with identical demographic profiles selected from the pool of people I had interviewed. Happily, the responses of the two groups were very similar.

This early experience helped to shape the way I thought about fieldwork. More specifically, it helped me to understand the importance of being alert to the possibility of errors and unintended consequences, of taking actions designed to mitigate or prevent these problems, and—to the extent possible—of determining whether these efforts have the desired effect. The articles in this symposium provide instructive examples of these understandings and actions in real-world situations.

doi:10.1017/S1049096519000271 © American Political Science Association, 2019
https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096519000271 Published online by Cambridge University Press

My first post-dissertation research project involving fieldwork focused on the Jews of Tunisia and Morocco.[1] Although it did include a survey, my fieldwork for the most part was very different with respect to data and methodology. At the time of my study, in the early 1970s, most Tunisian and Moroccan Jews had left the North African country in which they were born. My objective was to understand the politics—broadly defined—of those who had chosen to remain.

This project resulted in another year in the field, but now my principal methodology was participant observation. Although I conducted semi-structured interviews with community leaders and the senior staff of community institutions, most of my time was spent simply "hanging out" with people. This entailed everything from playing ping pong to attending a small neighborhood synagogue.

These early experiences introduced me not only to the importance and rewards but also to the challenges of in-depth fieldwork. In addition, they led to an interest in the fieldwork done in MENA by other political scientists.

The current situation with respect to political science fieldwork in the MENA region is, in my opinion, a very happy one. For the past 15 years, maybe a bit more, students with an interest in the MENA region who have come from political science doctoral programs at American universities have done exemplary fieldwork. This cohort of assistant and young associate professors—and young full professors in a few notable cases—has also contributed to changing the place of Middle East politics within the discipline of political science.

For much of my academic career, there was a distinction between area studies and social science as paradigms for comparative political and social research. The former tended to prioritize thick description and contributions that to a substantial extent were ideographic and only secondarily nomothetic. The latter, by contrast, emphasized potentially generalizable insights and associated scope conditions. The distinction is not so clearly defined in practice, of course. Nevertheless, these distinctions were real and significant (Tessler, Nachtwey, and Banda 1999).

The divide between area studies and social science as paradigms for research in political science was more significant during the early and middle years of my career than it was later and is at present. For members of the cohort described previously, which is composed of women and men—and perhaps more of the former—who entered the profession during the last 15 or so years, the distinction is not a very significant issue. It is understood that serious engagement with both is important—indeed, essential. For evidence, we need only review the topics, methodologies, and publication placements of those in this cohort.

An example of what I have in mind when thinking about the scholarship of my generation is Clement Henry Moore's *Tunisia since Independence*, published by the University of California Press in 1965. This is a masterful and exhaustive study that reflects deep knowledge of Tunisia. I found it extremely useful in my own work, and I was impressed by the amount of time and care that went into its production. However, Clem's book was much more typical of studies and field research conducted earlier.

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More common in recent years are studies that are grounded in the specifics of time and place but that also seek to produce potentially generalizable insights that account for variance and to identify any associated scope conditions. With respect to fieldwork, this is reflected in the frequent construction of new datasets, not only based on public-opinion surveys but also with the unit of analysis being something other than the individual. Examples are datasets that code communities or neighborhoods with respect to variables ranging from ethnic or tribal composition to electoral behavior and leadership structure. There also are datasets that code events or actions, such as terrorist attacks; in addition, experiments—survey experiments, field experiments, and others—have become common in recent years.

I mention these examples not to privilege quantitative data but rather to call attention to the fact that field research in comparative politics today, at least in MENA, is concerned not only with substantive richness but also, very often, with generalizable concepts, variables, and hypothesized explanations of variance.

Again, this is not at the expense of or an alternative to serious substantive engagement. Thinking about the research and fieldwork of the scholarly cohort to which I previously referred—including the research on which contributions to this symposium report—I can confidently share my view that the incorporation of a more disciplinary perspective has added to rather than displaced the thick description that is usually associated with an area-studies perspective.

I also want to emphasize that the distinction I make between earlier and later research pertains only to modal tendencies. There is wonderful research by today's students of MENA that does not fall within the positivist social science framework that I discuss here. I also acknowledge that the thick description and substantive richness that were the hallmarks of research and fieldwork during an earlier period

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096519000271 Published online by Cambridge University Press

do not mean that the pursuit of generalizable explanatory insights was always absent. An example is John Waterbury's masterful study of politics in Morocco, *The Commander of the Faithful*, published by Columbia University Press in 1970.

Not every scholar or scholarly work on the MENA region can be readily situated within the confines of the categories I am using. Nevertheless, in terms of modal tendencies, the temporal distinction with respect to scholarship and fieldwork should be clear. On the one hand, there is the political research in the MENA region that was carried out at the time I entered the profession and continuing thereafter for a couple of cohorts. On the other hand, there is the work of those who entered the field and established themselves through their scholarship during the past 15-20 years. The research of the latter is more likely than that of the former to be marked not only by substantive depth but also by a concern for potentially generalizable explanatory insight and any relevant conditionalities. For those who want more information about these newer cohorts, I suggest the APSA-affiliated Project on Middle East Political Science website.

To conclude, I invite reflection on three questions relating to fieldwork. The first is whether and how the focus and content of political science research and fieldwork have been shaped by the frequent changes in regime character, domestic politics, and country-specific access that have marked the MENA region over time.

To conclude, I invite reflection on three questions relating to fieldwork. The first is whether and how the focus and content of political science research and fieldwork have been shaped by the frequent changes in regime character, domestic politics, and country-specific access that have marked the MENA region over time. There were periods when political research in certain countries was extremely difficult, if not impossible, only to see these countries later become more hospitable to on-the-ground research—and then sometimes remaining open and sometimes closing up again after a few years.

The question of why certain research topics and the fieldwork that accompanies them are selected and gain traction is a worthwhile line of inquiry but one that is beyond the scope of these brief reflections. The only point I make here is that part of the answer is to be found in the nature of fieldwork. In which countries and on which topics fieldwork can be conducted play a role in shaping the decisions about what to investigate made by individual scholars. This also helps to explain why certain countries and questions become "hot" at a particular point in time.

A second question concerns the connections between American and other Western scholars on the one hand and scholars from the countries and regions we study on the other. This is discussed insightfully in one of the contributions to this symposium. Collaboration of this type is not new, but connections between local and foreign investigators are increasingly common and also may involve changes in the division of responsibilities.

Among the newer programs that bring together foreign and local social scientists are research workshops organized by the American Political Science Association (APSA) with support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Also notable are programs of the American Overseas Research Centers (ORCs) located in MENA. It is not possible to do more than mention here the APSA–MENA and ORC programs. However, along with other programs, some again supported by the Carnegie Council, they not only bring together foreign and local scholars, they also foster common understandings and competencies with respect to the theory and methodologies of present-day political science research. Whether and how this will change the roles played by foreign and local scholars in collaborative research projects is a question to ponder.

The third question concerns implications of the growing availability of valuable and high-quality datasets. For scholars interested in the attitudes, values, and behavior of ordinary citizens, for example, the Arab Barometer makes available data from almost 50 nationally representative surveys conducted since 2006 one or more times in 15 Arab countries. For those interested in elections and other political processes and institutions, to cite examples involving different units of analysis, valuable datasets have been constructed and are available through the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems and the Varieties of Democracy projects.

Although the availability of these and other datasets is welcome, I wonder whether this enables researchers to omit or at least devote less time to the collection of original data and to the necessary on-the-ground networking and preparatory activities. This does not seem likely; there is, I believe, broad agreement that in-depth fieldwork is as important as ever—and not only for gathering data, broadly defined, but also for contributing to a researcher's understanding. However, the availability of valuable and pertinent data for secondary analysis does make it possible to author papers with rigorous empirics without spending much time in the field. And even if that is not the case, the availability of data resources may shape decisions about which questions to investigate and how to think about the objectives and activities of fieldwork.

I ask these concluding questions only to suggest avenues for reflection. How—if at all—do these and other factors influence decisions about research and fieldwork, and if they do have an influence, in what ways might they bring changes in research and fieldwork—or at least in the latter. More generally,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096519000271 Published online by Cambridge University Press

this necessarily brief essay attempts to give readers a sense of the broad contours and modal tendencies of political science research and associated fieldwork in the MENA region at different points in time.

The following articles move from broad themes to specific issues and problems and to the ways that these might be addressed. Along with their specificity, however, these accounts—taken together—also call attention to considerations that are of general relevance and importance. They remind us of the need to be self-aware and alert to challenges, to take these on with honesty and ingenuity, and to remember that progress in science is cumulative and that no single study solves every problem and produces perfect results. ■

NOTE

1. This was part of a larger theoretically-focused study that also included the Arab citizens of Israel and involved additional fieldwork in Israel.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096519000271 Published online by Cambridge University Press