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Letter from the Editor

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It is an honor to write this, my first letter as editor of the *Review of Middle East Studies* (*RoMES*). I am grateful to be building upon the extraordinary foundations and work of the previous editor, Heather Ferguson, and for her mentorship and support over the last year during the transition between the two editorships. With the expert guidance of our continuing managing editor, Ghayde Ghraowi, we have published several issues and onboarded a new Editorial and Advisory Board, whose input and work have already been instrumental in shaping *RoMES*. I am looking forward to working with this exceptional group as we commission special issues and reviews, field additional works and submissions, and work to highlight the methodological approaches, pedagogical innovations, and considered reflections on where our disciplines are headed. My hope is that *RoMES* will continue to serve as a place where practitioners in the field of Middle East studies can explore developments in our field and consider new ways of engaging with the work that we do as scholars, teachers, and specialists in our respective disciplines.

Many of the pieces in this issue—perhaps unsurprisingly in a year which has already seen the United States and Israeli governments launch another war in the Middle East—are about the stakes of the work that we undertake as academics, artists, and activists working in the field of Middle East studies. Each represents, in its way, the vital connection between what we do as scholars of the Middle East and the work of inquiry and critical engagement that is the hallmark of our profession.

We start with Laurie Brand's retrospective on the work and current challenges of the Middle East Studies Association's Committee on Academic Freedom, a group she has chaired from 2007 until this past year. It provides an important account of the work this committee has conducted for decades and the ways in which that work has only grown exponentially in the last few years, from documenting cases and writing letters in support of scholars all over the world to providing resources for academics facing harassment in the United States and beyond. This piece provides an archive of the threats that practitioners of Middle East Studies have faced and an important look behind the curtains, as it were, to understand how this essential work is conducted. As academics, the public, and people of conscience grapple with events across the globe, we need to ask, as Brand does, "What does the current moment mean for us as members of a Middle

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East studies community?" Her answer is equally apt: we must "take a stand as a community of scholars that will not be cowed by abuses of power or authoritarianism abroad or here at home."

Turning to the question of academic freedom abroad, the roundtable Academic Freedom: Conflict, Political Instability, and State Repression that was originally featured at the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) conference in 2025, is a prescient reminder that academic freedom must be defended everywhere. It cannot stand apart from the bedrock principles of free expression and ethical opposition to governmental overreach, ideological coercion, authoritarianism, and genocide. Introduced by Miriam Lowi and Laurie Brand, our scholar-guides—Marsin Alshamary, Nada Mustafa Ali, Keith David Watenpaugh, and Stacey Philbrick Yadav—provide indispensable firsthand accounts of what research and the precarity of academic freedom looks like on the ground in Iraq, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Beyond documentation, they also provide concrete calls to action on how we, as a community of scholars, can support our peers in the region.

Some of this work to support scholars who are fleeing academic repression has been undertaken by MESA's Global Academy, as reported by Ceren Abi, the Global Academy program manager. Abi's report on the creation of the academy and its work since 2019 is at once galvanizing and inspiring.

Meanwhile, Arabella Bit-Shalom's article "'Propaganda of the Victims': Atrocity Denial, Ethnic Nationalism, and the Disparagement of Assyrians in Middle East Studies" takes aim at the ways our field has perpetuated the minoritization of the Assyrian community through legacies of denialism and selectivity about who gets to claim national identities and on what basis. Her article is an important reminder of the continual reevaluation and reassessment that scholarly work demands.

Saleem Al-Bahloly's review of Dia al-Azzawi's Beirut exhibit, *False Witnesses*, provides an artistic interlude with the work of an innovative artist and the ways in which al-Azzawi's work reflects the vicissitudes of the last few decades of life in Iraq and beyond. Full of shadowy figures and cityscapes, as readers we have the opportunity to experience vicariously the visual world of an artist contending with what witnessing means for all of us.

Last, but certainly not least, we have a selection of posters from the MESA undergraduate poster presentation. These posters represent the best of what our efforts in the classroom can produce: students who are engaged with research that expands how we understand refugee populations, civil war, disabilities, and the historical legacies of pilgrimages. I am honored to work with MESA's Committee for Undergraduate Middle East Studies—with gratitude to co-chair Victoria Hightower, who coordinated these submissions—to highlight the work of these budding scholars.

As we move through the challenges of the present moment, I hope this issue provides a space to reflect upon the ethical and academic obligations we owe each other as well as the contributions we will leave behind.

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