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BETH BARON

MESA Presidential Address 2016

Regional and Midlife Crises

I wanted to talk to you today about regional and midlife crises. It is not my midlife crisis—I'll save that for another time though I'm happy to hear about yours—but rather MESA's at fifty that I would like to discuss.

This is not a happy time for Middle East specialists. It seems like only yesterday we were celebrating the Arab Spring and the promise of social justice, economic reform, and political freedom. It is not a happy time for the MENA region. The skies have now darkened, literally in some cases, as oil fires are once again burning in Iraq. The violence has reached new depths. Civilians are targeted, women and girls trafficked and traded as sex slaves, and the region faces severe food and medical shortages. Authoritarian rule has gained new strength, empowered by, among other things, modern technologies and ambitions.

Five years into the civil war in Syria, there may be close to half a million dead, with millions of others displaced internally or dispersed across an increasingly hostile world. Civilians are continuously caught in the crossfire, often purposefully killed, as hospitals have often become the explicit target of aerial bombings. Statistics do not begin to capture the reality of the lives interrupted, upended, or destroyed.

In Iraq, a country fractured after the American-led invasion, war continues, as an uncertain regime attempts to regain territories lost to ISIS. In Yemen, occasional pauses punctuate a war with little logic that has taken a high civilian toll with over seven million people displaced. In Gaza and the West Bank, the Israeli siege continues, with few prospects for transformation. In Egypt, public outcry toppled a tyrant who was soon replaced by yet another military commander.

Of late we—that is many of our colleagues and our students—have become part of the story: from the imprisonment of sociologist and MESA member Homa Hoodfar in Iran, to the killing of the Italian PhD student Giulio Regeni of Cambridge University, to the countless other scholars jailed or barred from entering or exiting countries. Like no other time

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we can recall have research and writing on the MENA region been so imperiled.

The situation is particularly grim for our colleagues in Turkey, a country that has taken a decidedly authoritarian turn with the government sweeping up its opponents in a series of purges. It's hard to believe that less than a year ago, Turkish citizens felt confident enough to voice dissent by signing a peace petition protesting the military crackdown on Kurds in the southeast of the country. Today, democratic freedoms have eroded and academics at all ranks face dismissal and civil death on an unprecedented scale.

As scholars we try to make sense of the unraveling. We note the remarkable resilience of those whose lives have been shattered or scattered, as they attempt to re-stitch and restart lives anew. What else can we do? Protecting academic freedom is a central part of the mission of MESA. Our Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) has been working tirelessly to document the onslaught of states throughout the region against academics and students, with particular attention to the speed and scale of the threat to our Turkish colleagues' lives and livelihoods.

We can do more. Many of you have the privilege of working at universities with deep pockets. I urge you to press administrators at your schools to host a scholar at risk from Turkey, Syria, or elsewhere. While dislocation and dismissals run to the tens of thousands, we can make a dent in the problem by funding visiting or permanent positions for those who have lost their posts. Representatives from the organization Scholars at Risk are here at MESA to provide information on creating such positions. And the MESA board hopes to launch an initiative led by Aslı Bali to fundraise for this purpose.

CAF is also discussing a new initiative to send fact-finding groups to report on infringements of academic freedom. The intent is to pressure governments to change policies. We are considering sending the first such mission to Gaza, where students accepted into foreign universities face enormous hurdles taking up those opportunities. I'd like to take a moment to publicly recognize the members of the CAF committee for their courage and dedication. Special thanks to the chair Laurie Brand, and branch chairs Miriam Lowi and Zach Lockman for leading the work.

Given the risks in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, how are we as scholars of the Middle East to proceed with research and get access to archives, field sites, interlocutors? As you may know, earlier this year, in an exceptional move, the MESA board issued an advisory on conducting research in Egypt. It is clear that the risks are not the same for all of us in Egypt or elsewhere. They may vary depending on disciplines, topics, and national background, as well as gender. It is incumbent on each of us to weigh the risks

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responsibly for ourselves and to advise our students accordingly. Moreover, we all have different thresholds for risk, as do the funding agencies that support our work.

Social scientists will continue to go into the field or follow the people of the region in their migrations to tell their stories, as Middle Eastern refugees in untold numbers embark on precarious journeys both in the region itself as well as in Europe. Anthropologist Nefissa Naguib followed Syrians to the Arctic, where they crossed Russia's frontier on bicycles to enter Norway. In an age of large migrations, voluntary and forced, of people on the move, we must record and do justice to these stories. What happens to refugees when they arrive at their destinations? Who feeds and clothes them? Toward what end?

For those of us who rely on archival and library work more than on informants, there is great apprehension about lost and destroyed materials, securing entry into archives, and once in, accessing documents. Some of these are not necessarily new problems. In a recent American Historical Review (AHR) article, Omnia el Shakry explains that many postcolonial archives for the region simply don't exist, and she suggests ways for working around this impediment. Yet access to state archives where they exist seems to be getting worse. As Khaled Fahmy has aptly documented for Egypt, the state has been limiting access and denying it on sometimes inexplicable grounds. And gaining access does not guarantee access to material.

The MESA Board has discussed the formation of a Committee on Research and Archives to track activities at libraries and archives in the region and issue periodic updates and reports that will keep the membership abreast of troubling trends inside archives. The Prime Minister's Archive in Istanbul recently moved to a location where documents seem to be at risk, imperiled by high water tables. The Committee on Academic Freedom for the Middle East and North Africa (CAFMENA) issued a letter last fall that raised questions about the process for digitizing the national archives in Israel. The promise of putting masses of documents online both to preserve and make them more accessible to a broader public is appealing. But Israeli and other historians have raised concerns that another round of censorship may result in the withdrawal of large quantities of material once in the public domain. And now, apparently, the archive is closed to most researchers for a digitization process that could go on for years.

Digitization poses problems but also presents great promise in light of current difficulties. We can take advantage of the "digital humanities turn" to create new collections that make documents accessible to a broader audience. As those of you who will be presenting research or holding discussions on digital humanities in the coming days know,

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digitization presents a huge potential for saving materials—both those that are endangered or inaccessible for researchers in the region and others outside who cannot safely travel there. The possibilities seem endless, as libraries put manuscripts online, helping to preserve and disseminate them further. And what of the material that many of us have collected in earlier trips that we no longer need? What of field notes, surveys, and periodical runs? In light of the current obstacles to research in the region, we should consider collaborative websites that make materials widely available.

The MESA Board has approved the launching of a Digital Humanities ad hoc committee that will explore and report on the issues around Digital Humanities, particularly the way in which such work is evaluated and rewarded. We are also hoping to launch a new prize in the digital humanities to recognize outstanding work that is being done. We are also very excited to be launching a Nikki Keddie award in social history.

As students and scholars of the MENA region, we would be wrong to think that the only risks we face are in the field. We run risks at home as well. Having gone to war in Afghanistan in 2002 to "save women," we have, regrettably, done a poor job of protecting female and male students and scholars from predators on our own campuses. Some twenty-five percent of undergraduates report they have been victims of sexual violence or harassment. The militarization of society in the wake of 9/11 and the continuous wars that preoccupy us in the Middle East have exacerbated rape and shame culture on campus. The fact is, there are serial predators on our campuses.

The harassment does not stop with undergraduates nor is it just perpetrated by their peers. Some thirty percent of female graduate students in the United States report that they have experienced some form of sexual harassment in the course of their study, a finding that has been consistent for the past three decades. While colleges and universities have been forced by survivor-led activism to review their policies on sexual harassment and assault, faculty predators have been ignored.

Some may argue that this is an issue for campuses to handle, not an issue for MESA—after all there is nothing particular about this to our field. But it is quite clear that predators do not leave their ways behind when they come to a professional meeting. Students and junior faculty, who are also very vulnerable, have expressed concern about this issue, whether it is on their campuses or at a professional association meeting. They have reported incidents of sexual harassment and have taken legal action in some cases. With the election results, an already fraught issue is now, or should be, a topic of national conversation.

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What can we do? There can be no innocent bystanders. If we know that this behavior takes place, we can't excuse it, or advise young women or men to ignore advances in order to protect their reputations and careers. If we see a pattern, we can't just warn students against being alone with someone who reputedly uses his position and prestige to pressure students into unwanted sexual relations. It is simply unacceptable for an advisor to cross the line with a student and use coercion. It is unacceptable for others to turn a blind eye and ignore what they see. There may not be anything new about these behaviors. What is new is that we have turned a corner. In an age that demands equal rights for all, it's no longer acceptable for "boys to be boys." Sexual predators need to be held accountable.

We have organized a session at MESA this year on sexual harassment in the academy to begin a conversation about how we address this issue as individuals and as an association. We anticipate that the session will contribute to raising awareness about the issue and lead to a review of the code of conduct for MESA meetings as well as guidelines for best practices in dealing with sexual harassment in the academy. Please come to air your concerns and give your suggestions.

Yet these are not the only dangers that face our students and colleagues on campuses. Our CAF North American (CAFNA) committee has documented an alarming trend across the country regarding the silencing of debate on Israel/Palestine in general, and the Boycott, Sanctions, and Divestment movement in particular. From New York to California, there have been efforts to pressure faculty and students, to shut down clubs, to cancel courses, and to ban books. Websites are proliferating that berate students and faculty for their political positions, and sometimes threaten their jobs or prospects for jobs.

MESA vigorously and unequivocally supports freedom of expression and open debate. Two years ago the membership voted to pass a resolution facilitating discussion of BDS at MESA, and a number of panels and special sessions will be an occasion to discuss this issue again this year. Members are also being asked to vote at the business meeting on a resolution that would change the MESA bylaws, eliminating the self-identification of the organization as "non-political." We will discuss the resolution at the business meeting, which I urge you to attend. I also urge you to express your views and to listen to those of others. If passed there, the full membership will have an opportunity to discuss it some more, and to vote.

I promised not to remark on my own midlife crisis, but now might be a good time to recommend to you the best book I've read in the past couple of years. I'm sorry Zach, it's not *Field Notes: The Making of Middle East Studies in the United*

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States, though that is required reading for those interested in learning more about MESA's history now that we celebrate our fiftieth birthday. Rather, the book is *The Zen of Listening: Mindful Communication in the Age of Distraction*. Listening is something that is very hard for graduate students, adept at critique, and more seasoned academics, habituated to standing in front of the classroom and lecturing, to do. There is an art to it. I urge you to practice that art in the days ahead.

Yet in light of the elections, I also urge you to speak out, particularly against racism and Islamophobia. The Board has reaffirmed a statement made last year condemning discriminatory acts. It has also organized a task force headed by Amaney Jamal to brainstorm strategies for addressing the impact of the elections on Middle Easterners and Muslims as well as Middle East Studies.

Covering a region that has been literally at war for decades, dealing with one conflagration after another, one coup after another, generates stresses particular to our field. We are on the frontlines at home, trying to explain the region, defend its people, and advocate for rights. Fatigue and burnout can easily set. Take time to listen to yourself—to your own body and its need for good food, fresh air, and rest—to nurture those you love, to look after one another, and to support your friends and colleagues. Take a moment to breath.

We are most fortunate to have a wonderful community. Thanks to the MESA executive director Amy Newhall, and the secretariat staff: Mark Lowder, Sara Palmer, and Rose Veneklasen. Thanks to the Program Committee, led by Val Moghadam, for selecting the conference panels. Thanks to the MESA Board, particularly Aslı Bali, Nathan Brown, and Charlie Kurzman, who are stepping down. And most of all, thanks to you, the membership. In spite of all of the challenges, or perhaps because of them, our scholarship now defines the cutting edge. And exciting centers keep on emerging, such as the new ones at Brown and NC State. Take a moment to appreciate our accomplishments. And have a productive and collegial conference!

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