Islamic Studies in U.S. Universities

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The Boom in Islamic Studies

As in Europe, Islamic studies in the U.S. originated in the tradition of Orientalist scholarship and Christian theology, with its strong textual emphasis, but it has gradually expanded to overlap with Middle East area studies as well as a number of humanistic and social science disciplines, especially religious studies.[1] Over the past several decades, and especially since 9/11, scholarly interest in Islamic studies has mushroomed. This interest is visible in the number of doctoral dissertations produced on Islam and Muslims over the past half-century. As a percentage of all dissertations in the Proquest Dissertations and Theses Database, Islamic studies themes grew from less than one percent prior to the late 1970s to three percent in the 1980s and 1990s, to over four percent since 2001 (see Figure 1).[2]

Another indicator of scholarly interest in Islamic subjects is the percentage of articles in the flagship journals of various academic disciplines. Figure 2 shows rolling 5-year rates for eight such journals over the past half-century: the American Academy of Religion's *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, the American Anthropological Association's *American Anthropologist*, the American Economics Association's *American Economic Review*, the American Historical Association's *American Historical Review*, the American Political Science Association's *American Political Science Review*, the American Psychological Association's *American Psychologist*, the American Sociological Association's *American Sociological Review*, and the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*.[3] In the graphs to the right (Figure 2), the thick line is the average for the eight journals; the thin lines are five-year moving averages.

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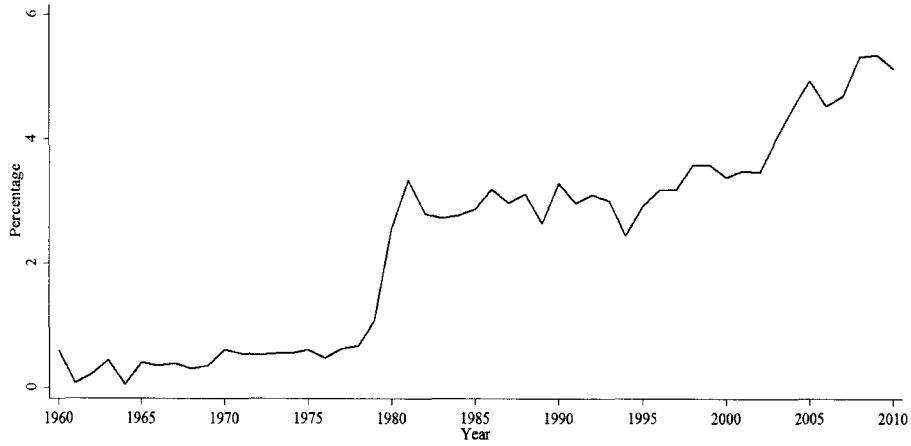


Figure 1. Percentage of Dissertations on Islam and Muslims, 1960-2010

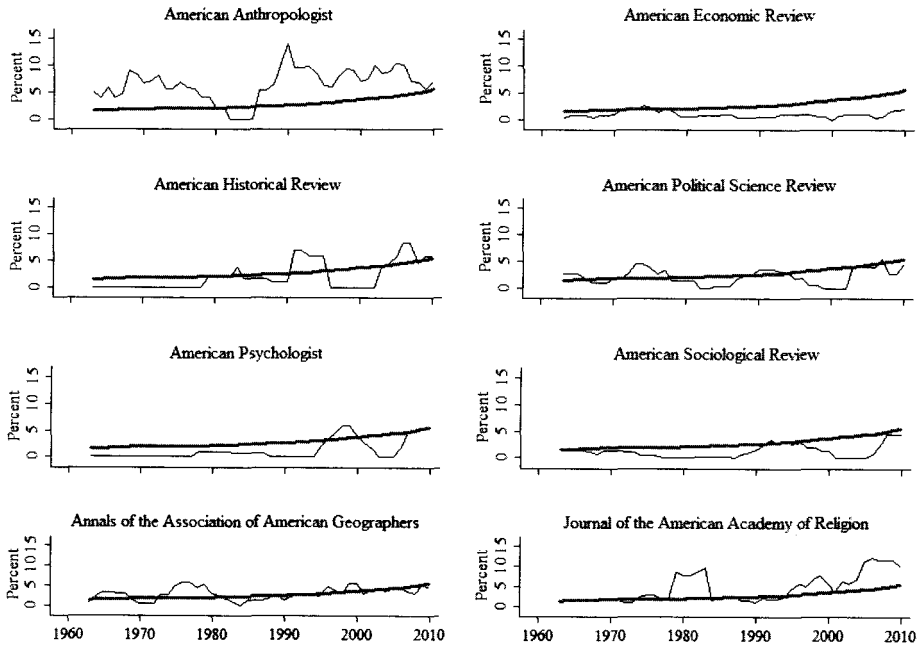


Figure 2. Articles on Islam and Muslims in Selected Journals

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The numbers jump around considerably from year to year, and we do not know if these patterns hold for other journals, but we can offer several observations. First, the rates of scholarly attention to Islam and Muslims remain low, amounting to less than ten percent of articles for all but a handful of five-year periods. These eight journals published 279 articles on these subjects, out of 9,613 total articles, or 2.9 percent. Second, the rates differ by discipline, with economics, psychology, and sociology consistently among the lowest, and anthropology and religious studies are generally among the highest. Third, these rates are affected significantly by special issues, such as the eight articles in the thematic supplement on the Qur'an and Qur'anic exegesis in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* in 1979 and the five articles on the historiography of the Middle East in the *American Historical Review* in December 1991, each of which account for the jumps in the five-year rates for the *JAAR* in the early 1980s and the *AHR* in the early 1990s.[4] Finally, the average rate rose throughout the past half-century, but accelerated after 2001. This is particularly clear when the time periods are dichotomized, as in Table 1. All eight journals devoted more coverage to Islam and Muslims since 2002 than before, and five of eight more than doubled their coverage.

Period	Percentage of articles on Islam and Muslims, before and after 9/11							
	AA	AER	AHR	APSR	AP	ASR	AAAG	JAAR
1960-2001	6.6	1.0	1.5	1.9	0.9	1.1	2.8	4.4
2002-2010	9.5	1.5	6.1	3.9	3.8	3.6	3.2	11.2

Table 1

This increased attention to Islamic studies has generated an avalanche of publications intended "to give us a crash course in, as the phrase goes, 'understanding Islam.'"[5] Those of us who chose to study Islamic subjects prior to 2001 suffer from mixed feelings toward the sudden surge of interest. While we are gratified to be taken seriously, and welcome the improved career prospects, it is disconcerting that this attention derives in large part from overblown fears of security threats. The field seems to benefit both from Muslims committing atrocities, and also from the ignorance and paranoia of non-Muslims. Because of this, Islamic studies scholars spend much of their time trying to dispel the very stereotypes that helped bring them to attention in the first place.[6]

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The Organization of Islamic Studies in the U.S.

Over the past century, universities have experimented with several institutional formats for this field, and none of them has proved entirely satisfactory. The first professor of Islamic studies in the United States may have been Duncan Black Macdonald, a professor of Semitic languages at the Hartford Theological Seminary, who was appointed director of the "Mohammedan department" at the Kennedy School of Missions when the seminary established the school in 1911. However, interest in Islam was noticeable among intellectuals in America as early as the eighteenth century. Thomas Jefferson owned a translation of the Qur'an, and there were a number of American subscribers to the publications of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in the 1790s (*Asiatick Researches*, etc.). This interest became institutionalized with the formation of the American Oriental Society in New Haven in 1843. Arabic language was taught first at Yale University in 1841, though it was only available at half a dozen universities by 1900.[7]

In the early twentieth century, several departments of Oriental studies were established at the older American universities, typically including within their purview everything from China and Japan to India and the Near East. By the 1960s, "Oriental Studies" was typically split into different sections, with departments of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations emerging as the home for research on Islam and Muslim societies, alongside study of the ancient Near East.[8] Near Eastern studies departments were found primarily in the Ivy League (Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Columbia) along with Chicago and Michigan, eventually joined by a dozen or so others, both public and private. In a 1976 review of the field, Charles Adams distinguished four main approaches to the study of the Islamic religious tradition: 1) normative or religious approaches, whether by Christian missionaries, Muslim apologists, or advocates of interfaith dialogue; 2) philological and historical approaches; 3) social scientific approaches; 4) the phenomenological approach associated with the history of religions. Nevertheless, he concluded that the study of Islam at American universities was grossly underdeveloped.[9]

The discipline of Islamic studies emerged in the mid-twentieth century.[10] The first entity in North America to take on this title was the Institute of Islamic Studies, founded at McGill in 1952. In the U.S., the field of Islamic studies was popularized by the writings of Gustave E. von Grunebaum, who had joined UCLA in 1949, although the center he founded there in 1957 was called the Center for Near Eastern Studies.[11] The first specifically labeled Islamic studies center in the U.S. was the Duncan Black Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at the Hartford Theological Seminary, in 1973, a somewhat specialized center at a seminary,

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rather than a university.[12] Villanova established its Center for Arab and Islamic Studies in 1983, but a listing of Islamic studies centers in the U.S. in 1992 identified only two more centers based at colleges and universities: the American Institute for Islamic Affairs at American University, and the Institute for Islamic-Judaic Studies at the University of Denver.[13] Both are now defunct, as are the Institutes for Muslim Studies at two Christian schools, Wheaton College and William Tyndale College. Since then, at least a dozen more centers have emerged, most since 9/11: Georgetown's Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding (1993), Youngstown State University's Center for Islamic Studies (1995), the Carolina-Duke-Emory Institute for the Study of Islam (1997), the University of Arkansas's King Fahd Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies (2000), Columbia International University's Zwemer Center for Muslim Studies (2000), the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Carolina Center for the Study of the Middle East and Muslim Civilizations (2003), the U.S. Naval Academy's Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies (2005), the Duke Islamic Studies Center (2006), the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago's Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice (2006), the Graduate Theological Union's Center for Islamic Studies (2007), Merrimack College's Center for Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations (2008), the University of Southern California and the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion's Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement (2008), George Mason University's Ali Vural Ak Center for Global Islamic Studies (2009), Lehigh University's Center for Global Islamic Studies (2009), and the Chicago Theological Seminary's Center for Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Studies. It is worth noting that few of these centers focus exclusively on Islamic studies; the others combine Islamic studies with an area studies or interfaith focus.

A similar pattern emerges with interdisciplinary programs and departments in Islamic studies. This is difficult to pin down with any accuracy, but it appears that the first such program in the U.S. was established in the 1960s by von Grunebaum's Center for Near Eastern Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. Ohio State University founded an Islamic Studies Program in the mid-1980s, separate from the campus's Center for Middle East Studies. Texas's Department of Middle Eastern Studies and Berkeley's Center for Middle Eastern Studies started Islamic studies programs in the 1990s, and at least nine schools—in addition to several of the centers already mentioned—have established interdisciplinary Islamic studies programs since 2001, most of them operating undergraduate majors or minors. These new programs include George Mason (2003), Stanford (2003), the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (2004), Harvard (2005), Michigan State (Muslim

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Studies, 2005), the University of Washington (added to the Arabic Program in 2006), San Francisco State (2007), and Lake Forest College (2008). At least two area studies departments have added Islamic studies to their titles: Georgetown's Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies and New York University's Department of Middle East and Islamic Studies, both of which changed their names in 2004.

The institutional arrangements for Islamic studies programs vary tremendously. Some are hosted within a Middle East studies department (such as Texas and Washington) or a Middle East center (such as Berkeley). Some are hosted by campus international centers (such as Michigan State and UCLA). At Columbia University, the School of General Studies has offered a Liberal Studies M.A. Program in Islamic Studies since 1987, administratively separate from Columbia's Middle East Institute and its Department of Middle Eastern and Asian Languages and Cultures. At schools without Middle East departments or centers, Islamic Studies programs are housed in a disciplinary department (such as religious studies at UNC-Charlotte) or in the college of arts and sciences (such as George Mason, Ohio State, and San Francisco State).

Similarly, universities and donors have begun to establish endowed chairs in Islamic studies, most of them open to a variety of disciplines, not just religious studies. The first ones in the U.S. appears to have been the Ibn Khaldun Chair in Islamic Studies at American University (1981), the King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud Chair in Islamic Studies at U.C. Santa Barbara (1990), the King Fahd Chair for Islamic Shariah Studies at Harvard Law School (1993), and the Avalon Foundation Distinguished Service Professor of Islamic Studies at Chicago (1997). At least a half-dozen chairs have been founded since 9/11: the Humphrey Distinguished Visiting Chair in Islamic World Studies at Macalester College (2003), the Nursi Chair in Islamic Studies at John Carroll (2003), the Imam Khattab Endowed Chair of Islamic Studies at Toledo (2006), the Gorter Chair in Islamic Studies at Duke (2007), the Gorter Chair of Islamic World Studies at Lake Forest College (2007), and the IIIT Chair at George Mason (2008).

Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations

These developments suggest a variety of avenues for the institutionalization of Islamic studies in U.S. universities. The first academic units to house Islamic studies were departments of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, sometimes known by the abbreviation NELC. Since the range of these departments extended from the cuneiform civilizations of ancient Mesopotamia to medieval Islam and Judaism, and eventually to the

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contemporary literatures of the Middle East, they were loose collections of linguistic and textual expertise housed together for convenience because of their geographic association.

If Near Eastern studies departments shared any intellectual perspective, it was the Orientalism that was fostered by a reliance on philological methods and a nearly exclusive focus on texts. Much has been written on this subject, particularly since the 1978 publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which may be said to have overstated the case by painting all Orientalist scholars with the same brush, suggesting active collusion with colonialism or, at best, bad faith as a standard characteristic of the profession. Nevertheless, it may be observed that many Orientalist scholars shared basic presuppositions of European (and by implication American) superiority to the African and Asian peoples whom they colonized. The scientific West was opposed to the superstitious mystic East, and scientific racial theory and the consequent widely accepted racism supported these generalizations. But the philological method encouraged the notion that, armed with a dictionary and a grammar, the armchair scholar of Oriental languages could decipher all that was important about the culture and character of Orientals. For many European and American intellectuals, nineteenth century notions of culture and religion included the widespread notion that religion could be defined in terms of an unchanging essence determined by scriptural texts. The Protestant underpinnings of this presupposition often went unchallenged. Religion could thus in principle be detached from history and understood from texts alone.[14]

In a lengthy review article written in 1978, Marilyn Robinson Waldman remarked that, "In Islamic studies, interdisciplinary research is still in its prehistory, as full of hazards as it is of potential...[because] linguistic, not theoretical, expertise has continued to be the sine qua non for writing Islamic history."[15] This legacy of Orientalist scholarship is very much alive in Departments of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations today, in terms of the persistence of the philological approach and a lack of interest in applying other disciplinary approaches, although there have been notable contributions in these areas of textual study and in the study of modern history. Many dissertations in Islamic studies coming out of these departments focus nearly exclusively on primary texts from the eighth to twelfth centuries, with emphasis on normative disciplines like Islamic law. These studies are often unrelieved by substantial reference to theoretical studies of modern authors in fields like literary theory or moral philosophy; they focus on replicating medieval texts rather than interpreting them in terms of contemporary disciplinary and interdisciplinary issues. Such an

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approach has very little to do with the kind of teaching and research that goes on in the vast majority of jobs available in liberal arts colleges, since few graduates of NELC departments will find placement in the kind of department in which they were trained.

The traditional NELC approach to Islamic studies has faced increasing challenges from post-Orientalist Islamic studies, which has sought to address the recent history of Muslims and non-Muslims, not only in the traditional homelands of Islam, but also in Europe and America. Increasing attention was paid to stereotypes and negative images of Muslims, from medieval times to the colonial and post-colonial contexts. Media and popular culture representations of Islam, which for many Americans are the only source of information about Muslims, themselves became the subject of analysis. Feminism and gender studies brought valuable new perspectives, not only concerning roles of women, but also in terms of reconsideration of all aspects of gender. Ethnography and anthropology focused on small-scale societies with intensive study of the actual practices found in particular locations, providing an important corrective to the often idealized pictures provided in classical texts. The new ideologies of the late twentieth century, including fundamentalism, Salafism, and Wahhabi movements, claimed attention as subjects of inquiry. And while there was much superficial instant analysis of terrorism by journalistic "experts," the nature of jihadist movements also became a subject of serious academic research.

Also spurring these changes was the changing demographics of North America, which brought increasing numbers of Muslims—as well as Hindus, Buddhists, and others—into college classrooms, and into the professoriate. The presence of Muslims in Europe and North America, though the focus of strident anti-immigrant sentiment, has also contributed to a rethinking of colonial oppositions, including the increasingly threadbare binary of "the West and Islam" as articulated by ideologues promoting or predicting a clash of civilizations. It is increasingly accepted that there is no "Muslim world" on a separate planet unconnected from "the West." Any concrete social situation of Muslims will include interactions with members of other religious traditions. The comparative dimension is enriched by regional and cross-regional studies which examine distinctive and rich local traditions that intersect with Islamic scriptural resources, and permit examination of different Muslim regions in terms of a single category or variable. Approaches from literary theory and social science analyses provide depth and breadth to take Islamic studies research outside the Orientalist framework. Most of these developments were already taking place well before 2001.[16]

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Religious Studies

A second academic home for Islamic studies on American campuses is departments of religious studies, found in over 1,400 undergraduate colleges and universities throughout North America (this figure does not include predominantly religious institutions such as seminaries, Bible colleges, yeshivas, or Islamic academies).[17] Religion played an important role in the establishment of American private universities, beginning with the foundation of Harvard University in 1636 for the training of ministers. But gradually most church-related colleges and universities have severed the formal connections with the religious organizations that established them. By the 1960s, the discipline of religious studies played an important role in the American understanding of religious pluralism and the legal doctrine of separation of church and state. Intellectually, religious studies took a descriptive and analytical perspective rather than performing prescriptive or authoritative functions in the public regulation of religion. Legally, the U.S. Supreme Court distinguished "teaching about religion" as an academic activity taking place in schools and universities, while it described "teaching religion" as the inculcation of doctrines and habits appropriate for the formation of particular religious communities. These court decisions not only authorized "teaching about religion" in the public schools, but also confirmed the importance of the comparative study of religion in public universities as an appropriate method for educating citizens in a pluralistic society.[18]

From its original typical concentration on Biblical studies and Protestant theology, which reflected the religious origins of many American colleges, the curriculum in these departments of religious studies began to expand in the 1960s.[19] It was not long before Judaism, Catholicism, and the Asian traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Shinto began to be commonly encountered as academic subjects. Islamic studies has also been incorporated into religious studies curricula. However, the number of specialists in this field remained very low, according to the faculty listings in the *Directory of Departments and Programs of Religious Studies in North America*, which was published annually from the late 1970s until 2002. We picked three years to check for change during this period: 1981, 1991, and 2001 (see Table 3).[20] Among all departments in the directory in these years, the percentage with an Islamic studies specialist on their faculty almost doubled, though it was still under ten percent in 2001. Among the religious studies departments with graduate programs, the ratio rose from thirty-six to fifty-eight percent, though even among these departments the commitment to Islamic studies varies considerably.[21]

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Year	Percentage of U.S. departments of religious studies with an Islamic studies specialist on their faculty	
	Council on Graduate Studies in Religion	All departments
1981	36.0	4.6
1991	48.0	5.7
2001	57.9	9.0

Table 2

Some of this increase is due to the increasing number of scholars who have been trained in Islamic studies, and the increasing number of jobs in this field (to be discussed below). In addition, part of the change may be due to scholars who were trained in Islamic studies and were hired and listed under the category of "history of religions," a broad field that includes many traditions from around the world, and later changed their profile to refer specifically to Islam. John L. Esposito, for example, was listed in 1981 and 1991 as a scholar of "history of religions (Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism)"; in 2001, he was listed as a professor of "religion and international affairs, Islamic studies." Others appear to have added Islamic studies to their profiles despite a lack of formal training in the field, as student interest has increased the demand for courses in this area.

The demand for Islamic studies has grown considerably within the field of religious studies. The number of advertised academic positions in Islamic studies, which averaged about five per year before 2001, jumped to twenty-two jobs per year in 2002-2005 and twenty-seven jobs per year in 2006-2010, according to statistics maintained by the Islam Section of the American Academy of Religion.[22] Three quarters of these jobs were in departments of religious studies, and many of them in private liberal arts colleges.

A similar pattern is visible at the annual conference of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), the major national academic organization in the field of religious studies. Formed in 1964 as a transformation of the National Association of Biblical Instructors, the AAR conference had only a single paper on the topic of Islamic studies in 1973.[23] There are now six different academic sections devoted to Islamic studies at the AAR's annual conference, with over one hundred papers presented annually on Islamic topics.

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One drawback to hosting Islamic studies within departments of religious studies is the perception that this site limits the interdisciplinarity of the field. To the extent that religious studies is seen as a single discipline, rather than an interdisciplinary home for studies related to religion, placing Islamic studies within this department may lead scholars in other disciplines and departments to feel that programs in religious studies necessarily privilege the religious aspects of Muslim societies and undervalue culture, demography, history, or politics, despite the broadened self-understandings of religious studies in recent years.

Middle East Studies

If Islamic Studies in the U.S. grew out of Arabic language study and Orientalist textual analysis, Middle East Studies emerged from contemporary geo-political concerns. The term "Middle East," as a region of the world, first came into use just over a century ago. The earliest usage we have located, using newly available digital databases of nineteenth century periodicals, is from *Harper's Bazaar* in 1883: "Locusts and wild honey were the food of John the Baptist in the wilderness; Aristotle gives advice about eating grasshoppers; and the Persians, Arabians, and other people of the dry Middle East have always included them, and do yet, in their bill of fare."[24] By the end of the century, the term had migrated eastward from Arab lands toward Iran and Afghanistan, and was used specifically with reference to the Great Game being played in this region by the United Kingdom and Russia:

> "[Y]ears ago there was a Pennsylvania man, said to have been born a Quaker, who plunged into the Middle East among the Afghans, became a soldier there, and wrote a strange book detailing his adventures."[25]

> "Now that the country has done its crying over spilt milk in the Far East, we venture to put to Downing Street the question in regard to the Middle East which we asked some weeks since: Has it taken advantage of Sir Mortimer Durand's trip home to formulate a British policy in Persia? If nothing has been settled, it is as certain as there are Cossacks in Turkestan that we shall have a Port Arthur 'surprise' in the Land of the Lion and the Sun one of these days."[26]

> "It may be assumed that the most sensitive part of our external policy in the Middle East is the preservation of the independence and integrity of Persia and Afghanistan."[27]

The most famous early usage of the term came from Alfred Thayer Mahan, an American naval strategist (and namesake of the building housing today's Naval Academy's Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies), who envisioned

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the region as crucial territory that commanded the sea routes in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. "The Middle East, if I may adopt a term which I have not seen, will some day need its Malta, as well as its Gibraltar," that is, colonized docking stations for imperial fleets.[28]

The region we refer to today as the Middle East came to be institutionalized in British and U.S. government bodies during and after World War II. It remained a foreign-policy category, even as it was exported to university structures as part of the area studies framework of the Cold War, along with South Asia, East Asia, and other "regions" that were the chief theaters for the political dramas of the time. In academic circles the term "Middle East" came to be applied primarily to North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean, and regions to the east as far as Afghanistan and Pakistan.[29] The Middle East Studies Association of North America, for example, includes in its coverage Spain, India, and Central Asia in connection with the periods of Islamicate civilization in those areas. The term "Middle East" threw together disparate ethnolinguistic communities that had no sense of themselves as a single region. A half-century later, however, the phrase "Middle East" has been translated literally in the region, though the term is used more widely in some languages than others: *al-sharq al-awsat* in Arabic, *mizrah ha-tikhon* in Hebrew, *khavar-i miyanah* in Persian, and *orta doğu* in Turkish.

By the 1960s, area studies emerged as a new academic category, supported by the U.S. Department of Education under its Title VI program (named after the authorizing legislation). Currently there are over one hundred twenty Title VI National Resource Centers devoted to different fields of area studies, of which presently nineteen are devoted to Middle East studies. The centers receiving support from the Department of Education frequently benefit from graduate fellowships for students specializing in the study of relevant languages; formerly these were known as National Defense Foreign Language fellowships, a name emphasizing the connection to national security, though they were later retitled as Foreign Language Area Studies fellowships. Area studies stresses contemporary policy issues, and it encourages multi-disciplinary approaches. While some universities offer academic degrees in Middle Eastern studies, it is more common for students to receive degrees located within other disciplines (anthropology, history, political science) with a specialization in a particular area such as the Middle East.

The scholars who led Middle East studies were hostile to Orientalist modes of inquiry, which they saw as antiquarian and unsuited to contemporary policy-relevant research. Leonard Binder, a pioneer in Middle East studies, expressed this view respectfully but forcefully in an assessment of the field in the 1970s. "We are nearly all agreed now that we wish to study Islamic

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civilization as related to the living societies of the Middle East today. This goal leads us beyond the possibilities of Orientalism and must naturally subvert the orientalist's notion of good scholarship."[30] Several years later, Edward Said famously denounced Binder and Middle East studies as the "new American Orientalism," for the assumption that their object of study existed objectively, outside of their efforts to conjure it up.[31]

In keeping with the modernizationist theories of secularization so popular when Area studies was founded, the first decades of Middle East studies treated Islam as a pre-modern phenomenon that was projected to recede in importance as the region "entered history."[32] The Iranian Revolution of 1978-1979 caused some in the field to rethink this position, but the real rise in interest in Islamic studies within Middle East area studies came in the 1990s, as shown in the *Roster of Members* of the Middle East Studies Association of North America, which has been published almost every other year since 1968. Since 1984, the Roster has included an open-field list of each member's research interests. We looked at the rosters for every eight years since that time (see Table 3). The proportion of MESA members listing the word "Islam" among their research interests increased by sixty-three percent between 1984 and 2008.

Year	Percentage of Middle East Studies Association members who list Islam among their research interests in the MESA directory
1984	23.8
1992	24.0
2000	33.8
2008	37.6

Table 3

By 2000, this increased interest in Islam had found its way into the pages of The *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, MESA's flagship journal. Figure 3 uses the Historical Abstracts database to count every research article with "Islam*" in its title or abstract each year from *IJMES*'s founding in 1970 through 2010. From the 1970s through the 1990s, sixteen percent of the titles and abstracts made some reference to Islam; in 2000, this rate jumped to forty-four percent, and it has averaged twenty-eight percent since then, despite a drop-off since 2008.

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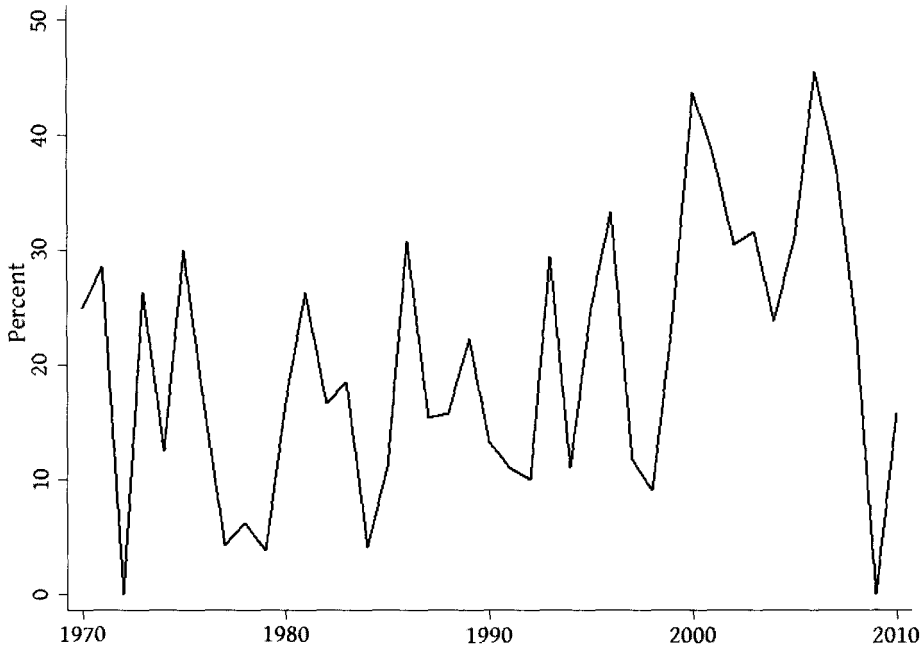


Figure 3. *IJMES* articles on Islam, 1970-2010

The Challenge of Crossing Regional Boundaries

Any regional boundary divides neighbors from neighbors.[34] The Middle East, like all geographic regions, imposes constraints on research subjects that cross over regional boundaries. Migration has flowed for centuries in and out of the region. Several societies of the Middle East are composed heavily of immigrants: large communities of laborers from South and Southeast Asia in the Gulf, for example, or Russian Jews in Israel, and return migrants from the Americas and Europe throughout the region. Migration of Hadhramautis to and from Yemen has marked Indian Ocean populations for centuries.[35] Religious movements also reverberate between the Middle East and Muslim communities across the globe. One dramatic image of this phenomenon is ripped from the headlines: If al-Qa'ida terrorists move from Saudi Arabia or Yemen to Pakistan or Malaysia, must Middle East studies stop studying them? Less hyperbolically, but involving far larger numbers, the transregional character is crucial to some Sufi orders.[36]

Educational centers such as al-Azhar in Cairo and Islamic colleges in Mecca and Medina attract students from around the world, drawing on Islamic

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traditions of traveling studies that date back more than a millennium. Indonesian nationalism, for example, emerged in large part in the dormitories of Cairo and Arabia.[37] Global communications are actively consumed via the Internet and satellite television in many parts of the Middle East. In Iran, for example, despite the government's periodic attempts to crack down on satellite dishes, contraband DVDs, and Internet usage, many young people are more familiar than U.S.-based academics are with the oeuvre of Jean-Claude Van Damme and other Hollywood immigrants.

As Islamic studies continues its evolution from ancient texts to contemporary religious developments, these sorts of transregional themes are increasingly important, as described by a three year Thematic Conversation on Cross-Regional Approaches to Middle East Studies, held at MESA's annual meetings for 2005-2007, and sponsored by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Center for the Study of the Middle East and Muslim Civilizations. Such themes include research that focuses on the movement of ideas, cultures, people, and goods in and out of the territory defined as "Middle East," following the subject of study wherever it may lead. They include studying our subjects' geographic visions, whether these may be regional, network-based, diasporic, or religious, as well as examining the construction and maintenance of regional definitions themselves, especially the ways in which places and peoples come to be included and excluded. In practice, the Middle East Studies Association is moving in the direction of redefining regions as cores without boundaries, embracing work that is tangential to the core areas of the Middle East while maintaining its primary focus on the lands and peoples that are central to the post-World War II definition of the region. At the same time, we see the importance of comparison of cases in different regions, and exploring questions of interest to multiple regions. The particularities of any single place can only be identified by contrast with other places; collaborative teams of scholars may be necessary in order to explore such contrasts systematically, but at the same time, we can engage as both individuals and as groups in disciplinary and interdisciplinary debates that are central to broader intellectual circles.

Yet scholars who wish to explore these approaches frequently face institutional challenges of various sorts, as reported by participants in the Thematic Conversation. These include language skills; it's hard enough to learn one or more Middle Eastern languages; must we learn the languages of all the regions we study? And how should language instruction be organized, if not along regional lines? They also include job definitions. Disciplines such as anthropology, history, political science, and languages and literatures often create positions based on regional boundaries, creating "Middle East"

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job openings that may be a poor fit for specialists working across regions. Disciplinary priorities often mean that Middle East-based cases may not be considered important to the discipline at large; or the only Middle East-based issues that are considered important have to do with oil or violence. Funding agencies (e.g. the U.S. Department of Education's Title VI National Resource Center competition) define regions in particular ways, and book editors, encyclopedias, and librarians often develop their book lists along region-based lines, creating constituencies for work that fits these categories.

Professional associations also play a role. The Middle East Studies Association and other area-studies associations are invaluable settings for expertise and training, but they necessarily limit scholarly interactions along regional boundaries. Alternative geographic conceptualizations have their own flaws. The "Muslim world," for example, is as much an invention as the "Middle East," since it suggests that Muslims live apart from members of other faith traditions, and that Muslims are to be defined primarily by their faith.

In an extensive set of interviews conducted by the Social Science Research Council in the mid-2000s, area studies faculty and administrators expressed a variety of attitudes toward collaboration across regional lines. Some schools appear to be committed to the area studies model, to the point that collaboration seems unnecessary or at least not imminent:

> "So, there's been no need [at our campus] for something that you see happening at other universities that suddenly has to become a center of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies...."[38]

> "Several people and the provost office also were as involved in various quadrants of the university, the divinity school obviously, public policy, South Asian, Middle East, Central Asia all of that not only faculty and students with interest in Islam but also I think, internationally recognized expertise and yet those components haven't come together in a coherent kind of way or we haven't seeds what might be all of a benefit for intellectual programs by pulling these elements together."[39]

Cross-regional collaboration has improved in many places, for example schools which run joint outreach programs to train high-school teachers in Islamic studies and other world affairs,[40] or jointly fund thematic conferences on aspects of Islam that address multiple area studies regions.[41] A few schools have pushed hard to promote cross-regional approaches to the study of Islam, notwithstanding the traditional turfs of the area studies centers. One such school reported to the SSRC about the school's "new Islamic studies initiative that I mentioned, it's a fairly significant commitment by the university and it's research, it's public affairs programming, it's some visibility conferences

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and it's developing the curriculum."[42] Another school that has decided to make an investment in Islamic studies across regional lines is San Francisco State, which announced a cluster of faculty hires in 2002 and has created a exciting hybrid Middle East and Islamic Studies program that offers courses and organizes conferences both on area studies themes and on Islamic subjects in the Middle East, South Asia, and elsewhere.

Our university, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has pushed hard to insert a cross-regional center into a university with a strong complement of existing area studies centers, forging collaborations without stepping on toes. Over the past several decades, a handful of exceptional scholars at UNC have generated a fruitful cross-regional approach to Middle East and Islamic Studies. In the Department of History, Professor Herbert Bodman did not stick solely to Middle East History courses. In 1958, he developed and taught for years a course on "Islamic Civilizations" that ranged beyond the Middle East region, and continues to be offered at UNC every year. On a national scale, Professor Bodman directed the American Council of Learned Societies' Islamic Teaching Materials Project, which produced a variety of resources, including a set of primary texts that spanned "Islamic life and culture in countries from Spain to Indonesia and from Central Asia to India and Africa"; and a set of photographic slides that cover "not only the old Islamic lands of the Middle East and North Africa, but also those vast areas where Islam has established itself only in early modern and recent times—Sub-Saharan Africa, central and eastern India, Indonesia, etc." Ellen-Fairbanks D. Bodman developed the largest Collection of Middle East and Islamic World Films in the United States. Professor Julio Cortés, who developed UNC's Arabic Program after it was founded in 1959, worked in a Department of Romance Languages and explored literary linkages between Arab and Iberian societies.

So by 2001, there was a good framework in place at UNC for envisioning Islamic studies as a field. The attacks against American targets in September 2001 galvanized scholars engaged with the study of Islam to respond to a nearly overwhelming demand for information from a public that felt it had little grasp on the subject. In the months after 9/11, a UNC faculty and graduate student working group met to beginning plan for a new center that would build on the campus's heritage of cross-regional approaches to Middle East and Islamic studies. The enthusiasm for collaboration, and the sense of purpose that we felt in addressing the urgent policy issues of the day, helped us through difficult negotiations about the focus and scope of the center that we wanted to establish. Debates took place on the proper terminology for such a center, eventually resulting in a lengthy title, the Carolina Center for the Study of the Middle East and Muslim Civilizations. The majority opinion

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reflected in this title emphasized a combination of Middle East area studies and a transregional emphasis on the theme of Muslim societies and civilizations. A number of compromises had to be made in order to secure agreement on this hybrid title, although some of the debates remain unresolved. Some Middle East experts were concerned that cross-regional approaches would dilute Mideast focus and training, and some also opined that an emphatic connection with "Islam" would exclude or deemphasize the study of non-Muslims in the Middle East. At the same time, social scientists were worried that the term "Islamic studies" focused too heavily on Muslims' religious identities, and on the discipline of religious studies, which they regarded as being excessively theological. Scholars who studied Islam or Muslims outside the Middle East worried that their fields were portrayed as just a somewhat irrelevant add-on to Middle East studies.

In practice, this hybrid approach has spawned numerous courses, faculty-graduate student seminars and workshops, and campus and community events that bring together Middle East studies with explicit attention to comparisons and connections outside of the region. Many of these events are organized jointly with UNC's neighbor and frequent collaborator, Duke University. UNC has sought to build on its comparative advantage in this area through faculty hires and graduate student recruitment in Middle East and Islamic studies that treat cross-regional research interests as a special strength rather than a bureaucratic problem or an irrelevant curiosity. Most recently, after another debate mirroring the concerns outlined above, faculty members approved a new minor in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (housed in the Department of Religious Studies), with a variable set of course requirements: two courses in Middle Eastern studies, plus three from Islamic studies, or vice versa. Conversations over this minor demonstrate that there is still some debate about the most appropriate form of training in this hybrid field. Yet the creation of a graduate certificate in Middle Eastern studies (jointly with Duke University) has proceeded very successfully, perhaps because it is explicitly interdisciplinary and does not privilege Islamic studies in relation to other fields of study.

Yet UNC and other programs that seek to move Islamic studies beyond regional and disciplinary boundaries face a serious disadvantage with regard to federal funding through the Department of Education's Title VI National Resource Center program. Islamic studies is primarily located in the nineteen Title VI Middle East studies centers, although Muslim societies figure prominently in the Title VI regions of South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Central Asia. Conversations with staff in the International Programs Office of the Department of Education have yielded inconclusive results regarding

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an application focus on Islamic studies rather than the Middle East region. Reviews of Title VI Middle East applications are typically done by the standard combination of area studies and language specialists from universities that do not have Title VI program in that field (for conflict-of-interest reasons). This encourages applicants to formulate the proposal rather strictly in terms of the Middle East region as commonly understood. The premier program that supports research in Islamic studies therefore tilts against the recognition of Islamic studies as an autonomous subject of study. UNC, in consortium with Duke, applied as a straight Middle East center, winning Title VI support in 2010 just in time for major budget cuts to the program. In recent years, only one university has successfully taken this risk: the Islamic Studies Program at Indiana University applied for and won a Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) award under the Title VI program in 2010, in addition to the more conventionally geographic Title VI grant awarded to that university's Center for the Study of the Middle East.

Beyond the reorganization of university programs, Islamic studies also faces the larger challenge of politicized attempts to associate Islam with security threats. While this sense of threat accounts in large part for the rise of Islamic studies since 9/11, it also binds the hands of scholars who work in this field and universities that wish to promote this work. Specialists in Islamic studies are under pressure from hostile political movements to predict al-Qa'ida's next terrorist attack and to expose the unchanging "essence" of Islam, but neither of these tasks is achievable. Islamic studies as an academic field is not designed for intelligence work, and the state of the art has long since abandoned the notion of religious "essences." Like other scholarly endeavors that happen to come under public scrutiny, including various area studies programs, Islamic studies is searching for institutional buffers that will protect academic freedoms from politicized demands. The most attractive course for securing a successful future for Islamic studies will be one that solidifies the intellectual basis of the field through authentic interdisciplinary engagements, in order to make Islamic studies a significant contributor to meeting the genuine needs of the humanities and social sciences in the American academy.

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End Notes

[1]We thank Seteney Shami and the Social Science Research Council for their support of this project. For a comparative international overview of the field, see the June 2008 report of the Higher Education Foundation Council for England (HEFCE), "International Approaches to Islamic Studies in Higher Education," http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2008/rd07_08/.

[2]ProQuest's Dissertations and Theses Database. Search terms: Ph.D. dissertations only, Islam* or Muslim* in title, abstract, subject, or keyword. Includes a few non-U.S. dissertations.

[3]Geographic focus is determined from article titles and, where available, abstracts. Articles whose geographic focus could not be determined are excluded, as are articles shorter than six pages in length. We thank Ilyse Morganstein Fuerst, James Knable, and Katherine Locke for their assistance with this coding.

[4]"Qur'an and Tafsir," edited by Alford T. Welch, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 47, No. 4S, December 1979, pp. 619-758; "In This Issue: The Modern Middle East," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 96, No. 5, December 1991, p. iv.

[5]Clifford Geertz, "Which Way to Mecca?" New York Review of Books, June 12, 2003, p. 27.

[6]Charles Kurzman, "Islamic Studies and the Trajectory of Political Islam," *Contemporary Sociology*, Vol. 36, No. 6, November 2007, pp. 519-520.

[7]John Starkey, "Arabists in the USA," *Saudi Aramco Magazine* (July-August, 1965), pp. 16-25.

[8]For a brief overview, see Muhsin Mahdi, "The Study of Islam, Orientalism and America," in *Mapping Islamic Studies: Genealogy, Continuity, and Change*, ed. Azim Nanji (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1997), pp. 149-179.

[9]Charles J. Adams, "Islamic Religious Tradition," in *The Study of the Middle East: Research and Scholarship in the Humanities and the Social Sciences*, ed. Leonard Binder (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1976), pp. 29-95, esp. pp. 34-54, quoting p. 53.

[10]P. K. Hitti, "Arabic and Islamic Studies in Princeton University," *Moslem World* 31 (1941), pp. 292-4.

[11]G. E. Grunebaum, "Islamic Studies and Culture Research," *Studies in Islamic culture history* (Menasha, WI: American Anthropological Association, 1954), pp. 1-22; Abdallah Laroui, "For a Methodology of Islamic Studies: Islam Seen by G. Von Grunebaum," *Diogenes*, Vol. 21, No. 83, September 1973, pp. 12-39; Amin Banani, "G. E. Von Grunebaum: Toward Relating Islamic Studies to Universal Cultural History," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2, April 1975, pp. 131-147.

[12]W. A. Bijlefield divided the century-long history of the study of Islam at Hartford seminary into three periods: 1) The "Muslim Lands" Department, 1892-1966; 2) Islamic studies within the history-of-religions context, 1967-1973; 3) The Duncan Black McDonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, 1973-present. W. A. Biejlefeld, "A Century of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Hartford Seminary," *Muslim World*, Vol. 83, No. 2, April 1993, pp. 103-117.

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[13]Michael Köszegi and J. Gordon Melton, eds., *Islam in North America: A Sourcebook* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), pp. 303-305.

[14]Carl W. Ernst and Richard C. Martin, "Introduction: Toward a Post-Orientalist Approach to Islamic Religious Studies," in Ernst and Martin, eds., *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010).

[15]Marilyn Robinson Waldman, "Islamic Studies: a New Orientalism?" *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 8, 1978, pp. 545-562, quoting 545-546.

[16]Marcia K. Hermansen, "The State of the Art of Islamic Studies in the United States and Canada," *Islamic Culture*, Vol. 65, No. 1, 1991, pp. 1-22; Hermansen, "Trends in Islamic Studies in the United States and Canada since the 1970s," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1993, pp. 96-118; Brannon W. Wheeler, "Report on the International Workshop on the Integration of Islamic Studies into Liberal Arts Curricula," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 1998, pp. 159-66; Carl W. Ernst, "The Study of Religion and the Study of Islam," paper given at Workshop on "Integrating Islamic Studies in Liberal Arts Curricula," University of Washington, Seattle WA, March 6-8, 1998, http://www.unc.edu/~cernst/study.htm.

[17]A. M. Mohamed Mackeen, in a 1965 essay on the design of an Islamic University, demonstrated a theological trend towards establishing Islamic studies as a normative discipline within Muslim societies, and we note in passing that there are numerous such institutions in majority Muslim countries today. See A. M. Mohamed Mackeen, "Islamic Studies: A University Discipline," *Muslim World*, Vol. 55, Nos. 3 and 4, July and October 1965, pp. 246-260, 297-303.

[18]The Supreme Court's distinction between "teaching religion" and "teaching about religion," spelled out in the case of School District of Abington Township v. Schempp (1963), is discussed in Charles C. Haynes and Oliver Thomas, *Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools* (Nashville, TN: First Amendment Center, 2001), available online at http://www.freedomforum.org/templates/document.asp?documentID=3979.

[19]For overviews of the development of religious studies as a discipline, see Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2nd ed. (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1986); Jan de Vries, *The Study of Religion: A Historical Approach* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967).

[20]*Directory of Departments and Programs of Religious Studies in North America*, published by the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion (1981, 1991, 2001 editions). The directory has apparently not been updated since 2002. Not all departments paid to be included in the directory.

[21]For a list of Ph.D. programs in Islamic studies in religious studies departments, see http://www.unc.edu/~cernst/reliprograms.htm.

[22]We thank Professor Omid Safi for assistance in collecting these figures. For a list of current job openings in Islamic studies, see http://mideast.unc.edu/jobs.

[23]Charles J. Adams, "The History of Religions and the Study of Islam," *ACLS Newsletter*, Vol. 25, Nos. 3-4, 1974, pp. 1-10.

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[24]Anonymous, "Curiosities of Diet: Locusts and Wild Honey," *Harper's Bazaar*, March 10, 1883, Vol. 16, No. 10, p. 154.

[25]*The New York Times*, July 9, 1898, Saturday Review of Books and Art, p. BR4624.

[26]D.L., "Problem of the Middle East," *The Outlook* (London), Vol. 1, May 14, 1898, pp. 455-456.

[27]T.E. Gordon, "The Problem of the Middle East," *The Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 37, March 1900, p. 413. See also Clayton R. Koppes, "Captain Mahan, General Gordon, and the Origins of the Term 'Middle East'," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, January 1976, pp. 95-98.

[28]Alfred Thayer Mahan, "The Persian Gulf and International Relations," *The National Review*, Vol. 40, September 1902, pp. 27-45. See also Roderic H. Davison, "Where Is the Middle East?" Foreign Affairs 38 (1960): 665-675; Nikki R. Keddie, "Is There a Middle East?" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 4 (1973): 255-271; Roger Adelson, *London and the Invention of the Middle East: Money, Power, and War, 1902-1922* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

[29]Charles Kurzman, "Cross-Regional Approaches to Middle East Studies: Constructing and Deconstructing a Region," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, Vol. 41, No. 1, June 2007, pp. 24-29.

[30]Leonard Binder, "Area Studies: A Critical Reassessment," in Leonard Binder, ed., *The Study of the Middle East: Research and Scholarship in the Humanities and the Social Sciences* (New York: Wiley, 1976), p. 10.

[31]Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979 [1978]), p. 300.

[32]Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958).

[33]These abstracts are written by the Historical Abstracts staff, not by the articles' authors; *IJMES* does not run abstracts. An alternative method, counting articles with the word "Islam" in the full text of *IJMES* articles, shows no trend over the period 1970-2003. However, this method, using JSTOR's Data for Research service (http://dfr.jstor.org), does not allow for truncation (it would have to be run separately for the word "Islamic," for example), and picks up a large number of articles that do not focus primarily on Islam.

[34]The following discussion draws on Kurzman, "Cross-Regional Approaches to Middle East Studies."

[35]Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility Across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

[36]Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

[37]Michael Francis Laffan, *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The Umma below the Winds* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

[38]MSSRC Evaluation, respondent P42, school #500, 2005-2006.

[39]Respondent P43, school #500, 2005-2006.

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[40]Respondent P11, school #400, 2005-2006; Respondent P7, school #600, 2005-2006.

[41]Respondent P38, school #300, 2005-2006; Respondent P40, school #100, 2005-2006.

[42]Respondent P1, school #200, 2005-2006.

[43]William A. Graham, Marilyn Robinson Waldman, and Miryam Rozen, eds., *Islam-Fiche* (Zug, Switzerland: Inter Documentation Co., 1983); Herbert L. Bodman and R. Stephen Humphreys, eds., *The Lands and People of Islam: A Traditional Perspective* (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 1987).

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