

Constructing American Academic Knowledge of the Middle East

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This presentation discusses the construction of American academic knowledge of the Middle East. By assessing the roles of Title VI area studies programs, national academic organizations, and the institutional and disciplinary histories of Middle East studies in the United States, this presentation will raise questions regarding the conceptual frameworks and methods behind American teaching and research on the Middle East. A key emphasis of the presentation will be on the relative marginality of Geography as an academic discipline in Middle East area studies. Geography is a somewhat unusual discipline in that it is not defined by a particular ontological area of study, but is inherently interdisciplinary, as Geography emphasizes the spatial, and environmental dimensions of social and cultural processes. Contemporary geographic research examines the interconnections between places and between processes occurring at various scales, and is thus extremely well positioned to examine the contemporary relationship between the United States and the Middle East and the globalization of political, economic, and cultural processes which link these regions. While many disciplines in Middle East Studies, including History and Anthropology, are experiencing a conceptual “spatial turn”, interdisciplinary cooperative research by academics in those fields rarely occurs together with geographers. Many geographers working on issues related to Middle East studies do not actively participate in the Middle East Studies Association and were not trained at Title VI area studies programs, and thus lack the institutional and disciplinary connections which would bridge their research to other fields. This presentation examines the consequences of the relative distance of Geography from Middle East Studies in terms of the kinds of knowledge and understanding of people and places in the Middle East produced in American Middle East area studies.