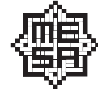
Review of Middle East Studies (2022), **55**, 214–229
doi:10.1017/rms.2022.2



SPECIAL FOCUS: MERIP AND THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN MENA STUDIES

MERIP's Impact on Middle East Studies: Showcasing a MESA Roundtable

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Abstract

In anticipation of the fiftieth anniversary of its founding, past and present members of the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) organized a roundtable for the annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) entitled "MERIP's Impact on Middle East Studies." Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on October 14, 2020, the roundtable was conducted as a virtual webinar. The participants included Joe Stork, Judith Tucker, Zachary Lockman, Ted Swedenburg, Norma Claire Moruzzi, Jacob Mundy, and Stacey Philbrick Yadav. The roundtable was moderated by Waleed Hazbun and offered reflections about MERIP's original mission, explained how its model for "research and information" evolved, and explored how over fifty years MERIP's contributions have helped transform Middle East Studies scholarship. The following is a transcript that has been edited for clarity and length.

Keywords: MERIP; Middle East Studies; knowledge production; political economy; academic publishing

Waleed Hazbun: Most MESA members are likely familiar with MERIP, the Middle East Research and Information Project, but for those who aren't, I will note that the organization was started in 1971 and has continuously published a magazine, *Middle East Report*, as well as several books. It defined its mission to "focus on the political economy of the contemporary Middle East and popular struggles in the region." The task of our panel today is to discuss the impact of this organization, begun by activists and others, on scholarship in the field of Middle East Studies. Rather than formal presentations, I will be asking a series of questions. Let's begin by asking all the panelists to briefly introduce themselves and maybe say a word about their relationship to MERIP.

Joe Stork: Well, I'll start. I was one of the founders of MERIP in 1971 and until 1995 I was the editor of the magazine and sometimes the publisher when we didn't have somebody else in that chair.

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Judith Tucker: I think we're going by dates of when we connected with MERIP. It was 1974 or 1975, so after Joe. I had spent a couple of years in Lebanon and gotten very interested, well more than interested, in the whole Palestinian issue. So when I came back to the Boston area I got involved with MERIP.

Zachary Lockman: I first encountered Joe and Judith and others late in 1975 or 1976 when I arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to begin graduate school. I had spent a couple of years based in Jerusalem where I had a number of political epiphanies. Encountering this group of quite experienced and politically like-minded people was a powerful and very important experience for me. And being here today is like visiting with family, the good kind of family.

Ted Swedenburg: I teach at the University of Arkansas in anthropology. I met the MERIP founders, or some of them, in Beirut in the summer of 1970. And then I happened to be in D.C. in May 1971 when it was founded and met them again in 1976 to 1978, when I was in the collective. My name is not listed there (in the magazine) except as an author on a couple of pieces because of the job that I had. Since then I have been on the Editorial Committee a couple of times between 1997 and 2012. And I was Editorial Committee Chair for a couple of years in that period.

Norma Claire Moruzzi: I'm at University of Illinois at Chicago, and I came to MERIP later, partly because I came to Middle East Studies later. I didn't have a graduate education in Middle East Studies, but I had a field education through MERIP and I started eventually to do some writing and then joined the Editorial Committee from 2010 to 2015. I was chair of the Editorial Committee from 2012 to 2014, and then vice chair the year after. This was when Chris Toensing was editor.[1] For me, it was both an arrival and a homecoming intellectually, but also politically, for the kind of Middle East studies that I saw as a model for scholarship and as a voice in the field.

Jacob Mundy: I discovered MERIP when I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco and searching for information about the Western Sahara conflict, which we weren't supposed to ask about. I wrote my first Middle East Report Online [MERO] in 2004 when James Baker resigned as a lead [UN] negotiator.[2] And it's been fun ever since. And by the way, I teach at Colgate University.

Stacey Philbrick Yadav: I teach at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. I first discovered MERIP as a graduate teaching assistant, which coincided timewise with the second intifada. MERIP became really important to me personally and politically. But as I started to do work on Yemen, it also became intellectually essential because MERIP has been one of the leading forces in detailing the politics of Yemen throughout its span. I later had the opportunity to write

[1] Chris Toensing was executive editor of *Middle East Report* from issue No. 215 (2000) through No. 282 (2017).

[2] Jacob Mundy, "Stubborn Stalemate in Western Sahara," *Middle East Report Online*, June 26, 2004. Available at https://merip.org/2004/06/stubborn-stalemate-in-western-sahara/.

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for MERIP as a grad student and as a junior faculty member, and I worked as a guest editor on the Yemen issue in 2019.[3]

Waleed Hazbun: Thanks so much. I teach international relations at the University of Alabama. I'm currently on the Editorial Committee and I'm really excited to have this range of speakers including our participants and our attendees who are all part of the greater MERIP family. Now let's begin and I want to begin by asking Joe Stork why was MERIP established. What were its goals and in particular, its relationship to scholarship?

Joe Stork: I have to admit it was quite enlightening to actually go through some back issues for the first time in many years and to be refreshed about what we were doing, the sequence in which we did things and so forth. MERIP was started by a group of activists, of which I was a part, with the Committee of Returned Volunteers, former Peace Corps members, and other people who worked in the global south. We were a small coterie of people in the committee who had been in one or another country in the Middle East. In my case, it had been Turkey. The work of the committee primarily started out as very much focused on the Indo-China wars. But quickly, because of the different Third World experiences of the members of the committee, it became a broader kind of anti-imperialist resource for what was then "the movement" or the anti-war movement. Because CRV was comprised of people who had been in Turkey and Venezuela and Philippines and Guatemala, we could say publicly, hey, what's going on in Vietnam is not only happening there.

But the discussion on the Middle East, as with most of the anti-war movement, was pretty circumscribed. Even within the broader CRV there were people who resisted any effort to start discussions about the Middle East. These were the years just after the 1967 Six Day War. So it was very much on everybody's mind, but it was, you know, the thing we do not talk about because it's "too complicated," as many were reluctant to criticize Israel. A small group of us who had served in one or another of the Middle East countries started a reading group within the committee. And as the Committee of Returned Volunteers by 1971 had pretty much disappeared for all practical purposes, we then started our own organization. First of all, we organized a trip to Beirut and to Amman,[4] which is where I met Ted in 1970. The occasion was to attend the annual meeting of the General Union of Palestinian Students in Amman. Incidentally, we had front row seats for the whole Black September experience in Amman. There were maybe 15 or so people on that trip and most of them worked in alternative media, the underground newspapers and so forth. Our idea was to bring these people over, expose them to the region, and get them back to the United States writing in their outlets about what they saw and experienced.

[3] "The Fight for Yemen," *Middle East Reports* (hereafter *MERIP*) 289 (Winter 2018).

[4] See the contribution by Michael Fischbach in this issue.

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Well, that idea, of course, only went so far. The group of us who had organized the trip then decided we had to organize ourselves. We started in the winter/spring of 1971 and came out with our first issue in May 1971.[5] It comprised two pages. It was conceived of as a newsletter, not much more than that, but it very quickly became much more than that. We saw that we needed to be that resource that was missing. We couldn't be simply aggregating the very limited work of other outlets on the Middle East. There just wasn't that much. And there certainly wasn't anything being written from a consistent progressive perspective. We saw ourselves very much in solidarity with the Palestinian resistance movement. But we also were very intentional about seeing ourselves as an outlet for information on the region more broadly. You couldn't understand what was going on in Palestine or the Palestine–Israel conflict without understanding the political dynamics of the region as a whole, and particularly the role of the U.S., the role of oil in the world economy, and things like that.

Waleed Hazbun: So MERIP was designed to be like a research project, not just, say, an activist outlet. Let's talk a bit about your critique of existing knowledge about the Middle East. I did notice a couple issues in this "Reading Guide" section, but much of that work was very mainstream.[6] I'm interested in what was the MERIP critique and the degree you paid attention to the academic scholarship about the Middle East in those first years.

Joe Stork: Well, in 1975 we did the first issue about what we called the Middle East Studies network.[7] None of us who were part of the formation of the organization were academics. None of us were on an academic track. The first few issues were written by "the collective" as we called ourselves, or by people we knew in the region, like Fawwaz Traboulsi, who wrote on the Dhofar struggle in Oman very early in the issues,[8] or Emmanuel Dror, who was active with Matzpen, a socialist organization in Israel, and writing about the Black Panther movement in Israel.[9] And yes, our "Reading Guide" list, I think it was 1974, is almost embarrassing to now look at and see how mainstream it is. They were precisely the people we were trying to supplant and displace. And we were producing articles like "Syria under the Baʿth Party,"[10] which very much depended on the same set of standard resources, but with a new spin. I will note that a synergy developed between the activist dimension of MERIP and the young scholars who were in graduate school then. They were engaged in their own work and they wanted to move in a similar direction as MERIP. It was not a case of MERIP appearing on their doorstep and then them seeing the light. They were already of a mind to do the kind of work that MERIP had started doing and actually publishing.

[5] *MERIP* 1 (May) 1971.

[6] MERIP Reading Guide, *MERIP* 28 (May 1974): 11–22.

[7] Peter Johnson and Judith Tucker, "Middle East Studies Network in the United States," *MERIP* 38 (June 1975): 3–26.

[8] Fawwaz Trabulsi, "The Liberation of Dhufar," *MERIP* 6 (1972): 3–11.

[9] "Israeli Black Panthers," *MERIP Reports 3* (1971): 1–14.

[10] John Galvani, "Syria and the Baath Party," *MERIP* 25 (Feb. 1974): 3–16.

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Waleed Hazbun: Judith is one of the people involved in MERIP who went on to become president of MESA. Others include Zachary Lockman and also Joel Beinin. Judith, do you want to pick up the story there? You were involved in MERIP before you got your PhD.

Judith Tucker: As Joe was sketching out those early years, I was putting it together with my own experience. I did join a MERIP trip as a graduate student. I was a member of what was the Boston Collective. I had my own experience in Beirut and became acquainted with the Palestinian issue, and then I was in CASA, studying Arabic in Cairo. So I also had an Egypt experience as well. Being very concerned about the politics of both those places I was struggling with how to square that with my academic work. I think MERIP was the answer to a prayer, which was, how am I going to be an academic and pursue this graduate program, which I very much wanted to do. I felt it was my vocation in a way. But on the other hand, I had a political commitment. And how could I put those two together? Well, enter MERIP with the perfect solution to my problem. It reconciled for me what had seemed like disconnected parts of my life. As Joe mentioned, in 1975 I collaborated with Peter Johnson in doing the research and writing of a piece titled "The Middle East Studies Network" that looked at Middle East studies and the politics of it.[11] It was a revelation and perhaps a bit of a relief for me to understand better what this field was and how one could operate within it and, perhaps most of all, the things to be wary of. That was at the beginning of MERIP's becoming both an academic resource and a tool for educating activists. It was exciting to be a part of it. We can talk further as we go about the different kinds of intersections that we had with Middle East studies and also with our own Alternative Middle East Studies Seminar [AMESS] that developed very much in the context of work with MERIP. But Zach, you might want to pick it up here.

Zachary Lockman: Thank you. Joe and Judith talked about the initial orientation of MERIP as a project, which happened before my time, emerging from the movement against the war in Vietnam and the broader anti-imperialist movement of the left. And then there was a shift as that movement declined. With the end of direct American involvement in the wars in Indochina, various other shifts occurred. This is very much my personal experience as part of the emerging generation of graduate students. Younger scholars eventually entering the ranks of academia become a natural constituency for MERIP as people whose research would fit into what MERIP was trying to do. So they began writing for MERIP and were properly edited by Joe, which was a necessary ingredient without which this wouldn't have worked. But they were also using this material and wanting this material. And of course, many of us came to this in a way that Stacey put really clearly in the memorandum she circulated. She talked about the false distinction between academic research and political engagement. For many of us who were products of this period, as Judith noted, this wasn't a distinction that made any sense to us. Our academic or scholarly work was, from our perspective, thoroughly political and

[11] Johnson and Tucker, "Middle East Studies Network in the United States."

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the converse. These two things went together very smoothly. And finally, we have to remember at that stage MESA is a fairly young organization and pretty conservative. Some of its leading figures, though not everyone, were quite conservative or had ties of various kinds – as that Middle East Studies Network article demonstrated – to U.S. foreign policy circles and in some cases to intelligence groups. Our perspective was also influenced by the early critiques coming out of the Hull group in the UK, including Talal Asad and Roger Owen and that set, which gave us greater intellectual tools.[12] But MERIP was also a political project and an alternative that many of the universities and the institutions we were in, and certainly MESA, did not provide. It was a place to do the intellectual work but as part of a clear political project.

Waleed Hazbun: At the heart of some of the early work in particular was a neo-Marxist critique that would be critical to the development of a political economy approach in Middle East studies.[13] We can also talk about what happened to it in terms of what other approaches evolved since.

Zachary Lockman: I think many of us were looking for alternative analytical paradigms to the dominant approaches. Both modernization theory, which was very much there in the American social sciences, and Orientalism in its various forms, shaped thinking about the Middle East.[14] And the two converged. Political economy was the polite term for Marxian approaches in those days. It offered an alternative because it wasn't culturally essentialist and it was broadly comparative. It thought about things trans-regionally, globally. I can personally remember the intellectual excitement of first coming across some of these early critiques, some of those articles by Roger Owen in the *Review of Middle East Studies* published in the UK. They were saying, here's another way to think about the Middle East. The political economy approach has a clear political thrust because it's critical of established power and it provides a different way to think about this region. MERIP embraced that for the same reasons, because it offered a very productive way to think about things. There has also been an obvious evolution. The cultural turn broadly defined and the linguistic turn have had their impact, and from a variety of directions. The insistence on taking gender into account, which at least in those days was seen as something separate from the political economy approach, entered into it. And then MERIP adapted to that, embraced that, struggled with that, as did everybody in various ways over the course of the 1970s and 1980s and beyond, to define rich, complex, and nuanced ways of thinking and analyzing the Middle East.

Waleed Hazbun: Jacob, do you want to add anything about the political economy approach?

[12] Eric Davis, "Hull Middle East Studies Conference," *MERIP* 57 (1977): 19–20.

[13] See the contribution by Joel Beinin in this issue.

[14] See also Zackary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism,* Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 130–41.

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Jacob Mundy: Sure, I'll speak about North Africa. Gearing up for this MERIP anniversary and looking over the coverage throughout the years about Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, and Sudan, it does seem that there's a certain kind of political economy approach that MERIP takes to different countries on different issues. But it begins to change in the 1990s. I do not want to say it's good or bad. I don't want to play into a debate about post-structuralism being anti-political or anything of that sort, but it does seem that the coverage of repression by the state and capitalism gives way to coverage of human rights and things like that. So there is a change. What I think is also interesting is that post-2008, the political economy approach comes back in a really strong way. These are the historiography questions that would be really interesting to grapple with when we consider the fiftieth anniversary.

Waleed Hazbun: Judith's internet is not working well, so I wanted to note that in the memo she prepared for this roundtable, she talks about how the first writings in MERIP on women's issues followed this political economy approach, as they discussed women's work and its relationship to capitalism.[15] So the introduction of new issues to MERIP, not to mention to Middle East studies more generally, came from an analysis of political economy and then evolved to include other issues like women's role in the Palestine movement and in political activism.

Judith Tucker: Yes, I think the early pieces came very much out of a Marxist-feminist place. One quick thing from the early years is that, like everywhere on the left, it didn't come easy to step up and push this issue. That's probably no surprise to anybody listening to this.

Norma Claire Moruzzi: I think for a lot of us who came to MERIP later, an advantage of its coverage of gender having first come from a Marxist political economy perspective was that it meant that writing on gender never fell into an automatic cultural binary; that it's all about Islam and the Islamic patriarchy and we know what the story is. This problem has always been an issue in writing about Iran. In the popular coverage of the region and even in a lot of scholarship there has been an essentializing of Islamic patriarchy and MERIP never did that. So I appreciate that struggle, which was not unique, of course, to MERIP alone. But I think one of the really admirable things about MERIP was the extent to which there was always an awareness that gender is, if we might say, part of an intersectional identity that is part of national conditions and local contexts. That it is intertwined with issues of empowerment and repression of women as citizens, as non-citizens, as activists, as in the domestic realm. It was from the beginning a richer appreciation of gender than the tendency found elsewhere to think about it and segment it under an unchanging, essentialized cultural dynamic. MERIP's different approach was due, I think, to both the political economy perspective and to the extent to which MERIP coverage was always based on people with real experience in the region, who were oftentimes located in the region or had otherwise done fieldwork there. That

[15] An expanded version of her memo appears in this issue.

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meant MERIP fostered a discourse wider than just that of repression, of patriarchy. It was about coming to terms with real experiences in a rich and complicated way. That's one reason why MERIP was one of the few outlets to sense that there could be the possibility of something like the Arab Spring.

Waleed Hazbun: Next let's go to Ted to discuss MERIP's efforts to engage people and popular struggles in the region. MERIP did this by offering writing that was based on personal experiences from the region and on fieldwork and by addressing the issue of Palestine. How did MERIP's approach to Palestine evolve and to what degree has it been distinctive? Has the discourse about Palestine in academia as well as the media changed over time?

Ted Swedenburg: I would say that when it was in its activist phase, there no problem writing about Palestine because there was no negative consequences for anybody who was an activist writing about Palestine. And that was one of the big attractions of being around MERIP because Palestine was so important at the time. Another contribution that MERIP made was that its writers on the subject were not in organizations, Palestinian organizations. So there was some distance – in solidarity but critical, which I think was really useful when the academic period of MERIP started. Everybody here knows that for academics starting out in the mid-seventies, your advisers told you not to touch it. But you could write about Palestine in MERIP. It wasn't your academic work, but you knew about it and you could publish on Palestine. You weren't going to get promoted or get tenure for writing for MERIP but I think you could get away with it. It was a safe place to talk about Palestine, where people were in solidarity. The number of academics who studied the issue was very tiny at that time compared to now. It was very hard to get an academic job… if you worked on Palestine. So a huge change since then. After it became acceptable, a lot of people began working on it.

Joe Stork: I was struck going through the back issues that the early work on Palestine, when it wasn't just sort of reportage (and there was some of that), mainly took the form of debates. Sometimes contributors had to use pseudonyms because they were in the movement, but they were raising questions. For example, should the PLO or the factions of the resistance be supporting the creation of a Palestinian statelet or a mini-state in any part of the occupied territories?[16] Those kinds of debates comprise much of what we published on Palestine, specifically on Palestine in the 1970s and into the early 1980s.

Waleed Hazbun: MERIP offers a really important archive because for anybody interested in those politics, it's the most accessible source to understand those debates. Zach, do you want to talk a little bit about the evolution of the debate about Palestine and the role of MERIP in that?

[16] See, for example, Fred Halliday, "Revolutionary Realism and the Struggle for Palestine," *MERIP* 96 (May/June 1981): 3–12; Khalil Nakhleh, "A Palestinian Option: A Reply to Fred Halliday" *MERIP* 96 (May/June 1981): 13–15.

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Zachary Lockman: The first thing I published in MERIP was an article in 1976 on socialism and Zionism.[17] Looking back on it, it's probably not as subtle and nuanced as I would write it today, but I still agree with the central thrust of it. That was my entry point, given my own particular personal and political trajectory. As Ted says, quite correctly, the number of us in that circle directly engaged with the issue from a progressive or radical political perspective, with a very clear critique of Zionism, was quite small. But given the emergence of the Palestinian movement in that period and all that was going on, there was growing interest in the issue and MERIP played a really important role in trying to address it through the 1970s and into the eighties. For example, MERIP's book on the First Intifada – "Intifada: The Book" as I like to call it – was put together by Joey Beinin and myself using MERIP material that had already been published and sometimes a bit revised, plus other material, including contributions by Noam Chomsky and Edward Said, to try to reach out to a wider American public, not necessarily academic, who were moved by this popular uprising in the West Bank and Gaza against the Israeli occupation.[18] So in that, but also in a whole range of other things including the Lebanese civil war and the Iranian revolution, I think MERIP was a key source of critical information for a lot of people who were open to or looking for such things. And there really wasn't much else out there that people had access to in that era before the Internet. You could not get on the Web and see what people in Beirut or Tehran were talking about. Thus MERIP was a means for people in those places, in the United States and Britain, in Europe and elsewhere, to speak from a progressive anti-imperialist perspective about what was going on in the Middle East and offer analysis.

Joe Stork: Can I jump in here with just one point that I think is underlying all of this. In talking about authors being academics, activists, or non-academics, one thing we tried to do all along was publish the best research in our unbiased, okay actually quite biased opinion, but making it accessible. So even though increasingly the people who produced MERIP, who wrote for MERIP, whose names were on the byline, were academics and not activists, the intent was for all of us, academics included, to make this work accessible to a broader public. It was written for a more general audience.

Ted Swedenburg: To support Joe's point, I can say it was great to read all that stuff again from the beginning. It's fantastic material. And part of the reason is that very good writers were selected and then edited well. People complained that Joe had sometimes had a heavy hand, but it was the editors that make this stuff fantastic. We have to tip our hat to Chris Toensing as well. You send something to those editors and then it gets polished up into something much finer than it was originally and also very accessible. And for academics at the time, it was a real opportunity to escape from your disciplinary constraints. Writing for MERIP, you got a chance to write for a general public and that allowed you to

[17] Zachary Lockman, "The Left in Israel: Zionism vs. Socialism," *MERIP Reports* 49 (1976): 3–18.

[18] Zachary Lockman and Joel Beinin (eds.), *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising Against Israeli Occupation* (Boston: South End Press, 1990).

https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2022.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

write about different things than you were expected to write as an academic and in a different way. So you don't see very much theory in MERIP. Thank God. I mean, there is theory behind the work, but it's not directly cited very much.

Stacey Philbrick Yadav: One of the things that Judith talked about grappling with and it's one of the things I see a lot of MERIP essays doing, especially the ones that are really proximate to the fieldwork, is that you have people who have something that they're trying to work through and they do that working-through on the page. I don't think this produces unpolished work, but maybe it helps to produce less jargony work, because you've got something that you're trying to figure out. And that's what accounts in part for the depth of detail and the freshness of the fieldwork that comes in. When I was a graduate student, MERIP was an absolutely essential place to do writing. Before I was even really finished thinking about a question, I knew that I could grapple with an editor, with Chris in particular, and then grapple out loud in the pages.

Waleed Hazbun: Before we go back to some academic issues, I thought I would ask Norma to talk a little bit about the idea of MERIP as a community.

Norma Claire Moruzzi: Yes, I think that was really fundamental to how and why MERIP endured for so long. It was commitment to a community. It's not just an academic journal which is housed in a university, and you sort of get some professional credit for doing it. It's a different project. And that's tied with the political commitments that so many people have, the engagement with the region. MERIP was also defined by its structure. And it seems it was so from the beginning. It struck me when Joe was talking about the origins that he noted it was a collective and I think that structure has never really left. And that is really more and more unusual as everything in our lives has become more and more professionalized and more corporate and, in our own areas, more disciplinary. But MERIP functions in a truly interdisciplinary way, in which, especially if you were on the Editorial Committee and you went to the meetings, you had all these people who were working in different disciplines with different kinds of training and in different parts of the Middle East. And they would ask you questions like, well, what do you mean by that? You couldn't lapse back into jargon or rely on the expectations in your immediate little tiny subfield. You had to try to be clear and try to work out, as Stacey was just saying, the question of "what do I really mean?" And you would figure it out literally in discussion with the editor, with Chris. In my experience there was often collaborative writing. It's part of the accessibility and voice of MERIP. It's a commitment. It's not just showing off how much I know, whether it's theoretical or my latest little nugget of research. Instead, it's about, well, I think I can provide maybe a little bit of illumination. And I can think that because I've shared and explained this work with others who were not essentially in my narrow, tiny field. So MERIP has an intellectual breadth. I think it's also a commitment to being public intellectuals. MERIP has always been a public journal. It's based in scholarship, on research. It's not just opinion. But it's not overly specialized research. And I think that came out of the commitments of its

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individuals and eventually became an institutional identity. It is very much a collaborative experience of knowledge production. It's scholarship, but it's also it's something beyond that in terms of a public voice.

Ted Swedenburg: Can I add something to that? I'm repeating what Susan Slyomovics told me at my first MERIP meeting with her, which is that MERIP is all of those things that I always want to talk about. Also, it's a network, and people create very close bonds through it. And we shouldn't pretend that power isn't operating in the academic field. For academics having that network is very important for all kinds of things, including promotion and writing letters for grants. So it's not like going to an academic meeting. When you're on the Editorial Committee, you're with people for two days talking about all kinds of stuff. You create bonds that are very important for the project. So there's that extra dimension to MERIP. It's like a secret weapon operating in the field.

Waleed Hazbun: I thought I would bring up some of the challenges for MERIP, such as its relationship to the region and the people of the region. MERIP developed speaking to a North American audience and operates and publishes in English. This is a question we now think about in academia as we try to broaden our connections. On the one hand, MERIP has been so connected to the region. But on the other hand, when I was going through the people involved in MERIP recently, there's not many people in the region. How has MERIP's relationship with people of the region evolved over time, how might it differ across different parts of the region?

Norma Claire Moruzzi: I'll jump in on that. A lot of my connection has been with Iran and it's really noticeable the extent to which, for people based in Iran, and some of them are not there anymore for political reasons, the context for public intellectuals is present. Some people are based in universities, but also journalists, researchers, editors, activists had the chance to write in MERIP and they read MERIP. MERIP was a really important reciprocal dialogue for people in Iran working on the ground and for getting their voices wider coverage outside Iran. It's unique in that sense, really unique.

Stacey Philbrick Yadav: But the same thing is not the case in regard to Yemen, unfortunately. MERIP has produced excellent work about Yemen, but only very, very recently has there been more direct engagement with Yemeni voices and with some activists. A lot of that has been because Yemenis themselves have entered a global diaspora. That's not fundamentally new, but the nature of Yemeni diaspora mobilization is new, especially in North America. And so now I'm starting to see Yeminis talking about MERIP and reading it and being interested in participating in the activities that we've been organizing. But that hasn't historically been the case.

Waleed Hazbun: Does Ted want to add anything? I noticed from your survey of writing by anthropologists that you prepared for this roundtable that MERIP at various times, including the early years, focused on communities outside the region, like immigrant communities in Europe and in America.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2022.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Ted Swedenburg: Yeah, I found that pretty interesting. I didn't remember many issues paying much attention to migrant workers, but in fact MERIP was, really early. But also in terms of the work by anthropologists, they covered minorities and especially Kurds. The coverage of Kurdistan is very strong from early on. One of the first anthropologists to publish in MERIP was Mahfoud Bennoune, who is an Algerian who fought in the Algerian War of Independence and ended up in the U.S. for awhile.[19] If you look overall, I think what's impressive is that there's a lot of anthropologists writing for MERIP who are in Europe. And then over time, there are more anthropologists from the region. If you look at the latest issue on Turkey, it's almost all by anthropologists and almost everybody on that roster, except for like two people, is Turkish. It's going to be hard for U.S. anthropologists to go very many places in the Middle East, so getting people from the region to write for MERIP is a really important way to get ethnographic coverage of the Middle East.

Joe Stork: It's revelatory for me to hear Ted saying how much of our work then in the older days and currently is produced by anthropologists. Because you didn't necessarily realize it, you weren't reading a work of anthropology. They weren't speaking as anthropologists or at least I don't think that came across. And I don't think that was solely due to my editing capacity. It was also because they were at the outset writing for outside the academic community of anthropology or any discipline in particular.

Waleed Hazbun: Another topic to include in our discussion is teaching. Many of us first discovered MERIP in the context of reading something that was on a syllabus. And many of us who teach draw upon MERIP is a resource.

Stacey Philbrick Yadav: A couple of years ago, before Sheila Carapico put out her edited volume of MERIP essays, *Arabia Incognita*,[20] I put together a syllabus that took pieces from MERIP talking about Yemen at different moments in its history to give students a sense of what the issues looked like at the time. It was an exercise that worked well in the classroom and something that I've tried to replicate with different issue areas. It's amazing to have this resource to be able to re-create the intellectual moods that people took to interpreting, at different moments. And the website has made that a lot easier. Being able to get all of that material free is a wonderful asset.

Waleed Hazbun: How have the needs of teaching changed and how have the needs of information-distribution changed? There is now a lot more information and research about the Middle East than when MERIP was founded. So I am wondering how, if at all, is MERIP still distinct?

Zachary Lockman: I haven't been very directly involved in MERIP for some time. I was in the 1970s and the 1980s into the 1990s, before people had direct

[19] Mahfoud Bennoune, "Maghribin Workers in France," *MERIP* 34 (1975): 1–30.

[20] Sheila Carapico (ed.), *Arabia Incognita: Dispatches from Yemen and the Gulf* (Charlottesville: Just World Books, 2016).

https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2022.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

access to the Internet. Now, there is a wealth of information available, local views as well as English-language articles. And so one finds a range of perspectives easily, including newspapers, websites, blogs, etc. That presents a challenge for a project like MERIP. There was a time when, if you wanted to get some sense of what's going on in Yemen in the 70s or 80s, or in lots of other places, or, again, critical, intelligent, well-informed analyses of the Iranian revolution or the Iranian opposition before that, issues which the American media paid very little attention to, MERIP was where you got it from. It was a key source. And it was produced by people who knew a lot about these issues and these places, and had something important to say, and it was generally well written and well analyzed, so that material is often still valuable. It's a challenge in this day and age, especially when a lot of people want instant access without the analysis. I'd like to hope that there's still a place for the kind of thing MERIP excelled at. I think the articles which have been on MERIP Online have been great in the last couple of years because they're very well written and they provide an analytical perspective. They are deeply informed and from a critical place. I would hope that kind of thing is still useful for teaching and for wider publics. But I don't know. I'd be interested to hear from people how they navigate that wealth of unfiltered information that's out there in relation to these well thought-out pieces, which, of course, take a lot of work to produce and disseminate. And there's the financial side of things which also has to be sustained.

Norma Claire Moruzzi: I was going to add about teaching that what I found is that it's when undergraduates really get interested in a topic that they really start appreciating what MERIP provides. They find that there's so much out there and that's a problem. It's always been a problem to get good, accurate, insightful information about the region and issues related to the region. But now it's not because there isn't any accessible information, it's because there's too much. And most of it, like everything else, is static in a certain way and from a certain perspective. Students don't necessarily quite understand that at the beginning but once they get a sense of it, or especially if they're doing their own research, they recognize what they can get from MERIP.

Stacey Philbrick Yadav: We have to also think in a more forward way about representational issues. I don't want to put it in a kind of market logic, but I think my students also turn to Jadaliyya a lot and find that it has maybe less of the coherence of a singular intellectual tradition, but more mixed methods in the way that they bring in multimedia materials and primary sources. Those are things that MERIP doesn't do. And I don't think that MERIP needs to do the exact same things. But I do think that Jadaliyya does a better job of bringing forth voices from the region directly through some of these materials.

Jacob Mundy: When I'm teaching how to start research and where do you go for peer-reviewed scholarship, I tell them you can go to a journal's web page and look at its peer review standards. But I always bring up the counter-example of *Middle East Report*. I feel like my piece on Libya a few years back

https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2022.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

went through more rigorous peer review in some ways than any other piece I've done.[21] And so I always like to bring up the fact that this three-thousand word update on the chaos in Libya was probably one of the most rigorously examined articles I've ever had to put out there. And it's fun to raise questions with them concerning how we define what is peer review and what is scholarship.

Waleed Hazbun: I want to go back to pick up Stacy's point about how MERIP has responded to changes in technology and media. One issue is the format, such as the recent moving to online only, which is of course, a financial issue. The print magazine was developed in the 70s and as with any print media, there is now a different environment.

Norma Claire Moruzzi: I think it's noticeable that everybody sort of got really quiet about the question of the future of MERIP and that's, you know, a practical problem. It's always been this shoestring operation. And the transition from print to being online and in print, and then to being entirely online, and then to contrast that to something like the Jadaliyya model. But that is the tension. It's both the strength of MERIP and the tension within MERIP. And it's an open question if the MERIP model can be maintained, that is, a collaborative model with strong editing. It's not an academic journal, but it has more editing, both of the individual pieces and of what gets published in the issues, than Jadaliyya does. So MERIP is not as inclusive, but it also means it isn't a question of just uploading something. Its collective structure has been part of why MERIP has been such a sustained and continually vibrant project. But it's really hard to do that. This is not an organization with deep pockets. It's not a vanity project. There have been discussions over the years about whether or not to be housed in a university, but there are issues with that. I think it's a daunting question. Everybody here presumably values what we've gotten out of MERIP as a contributor, as a student, and from other people's writing. But how to make that continue in an age that's very different, with different kinds of pressures, including different practical pressures. There have been struggles, major meetings at MESA with the entire community to try to figure this out. It's an ongoing question.

Waleed Hazbun: We can also note that there's uncertainty more broadly about the future of scholars and scholarship. There are economic concerns and concerns about the future of the academic jobs that basically fund MERIP in the sense that a lot of the labor MERIP relies on is from people who are paid by universities. And without the ability to fund a full-time editor, it really puts limits on MERIP's editorial capacity. And it's a problem trying to ask for more labor from academics who are already more burdened with more work. So I think these are structural factors that really do have an impact on MERIP. Another way to think about the future of MERIP is to ask: What's the current political mission? Is it evolving? Is it changing? What role does MERIP want to play?

[21] Jacob Mundy "The Globalized Unmaking of the Libyan State," *MERIP* 290 (Spring 2019).

https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2022.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Stacey Philbrick Yadav: I think we can do more than one thing. I know that when we were editing the Yemen issue a couple of years ago, one of the riskier moves we made was running a piece about what American activists were doing with regard to anti-war activism, specifically with regard to trying to get the U.S. to stop supporting the Saudi-led coalition. By including something on domestic U.S. politics, we were speaking about something that wasn't within our expertise as scholars of Yemen. But I think it was super important to be able to do. It seems to me part of the transnational nature of our engagement. Are there past analogies for that, for MERIP trying to map the kind of policy work that's happening in Congress, for example, in relation to military engagement in the Middle East or other forms of engagement in the Middle East?

Joe Stork: I think this is an area that Middle East studies academics are not engaged in. That's one of the reasons that we have this very intricate interface between the magazine, the political project, and the world of the academy. We made efforts at various stages. Initially, of course, in the early 1970s and mid 70s, there was a political movement in the U.S. that one could talk about. There were periodic mobilizations, demonstrations, and marches and so on. I mean, there still are, but they're not often focused on the Middle East and U.S. engagement there. So that marginalizes us a bit. We tried in the late 80s and early 90s to have what we called columns and we had a Washington column. I did some of them, various members of the Editorial Committee did some of them. We even got people like Christopher Hitchens, before he went over to the dark side, to do some of them. But it was very hard to sustain due to MERIP's inability to pay authors and the overall precarity of our finances.[22] Meanwhile, you had to keep your eye on that world. I'm not sure to what extent it's been a priority to focus on Washington politics. Do we want that? And if we want that, how do we get it? For instance, to talk about the stuff that's happening on the Hill, just to take the example of Yemen and the campaign against arms sales to Saudi Arabia, is very important but also requires, as Stacey noted, different expertise.

Stacey Philbrick Yadav: So that was specifically the issue I was thinking of. And we did do it. We ran a piece by Danny Postel, who had been involved in crafting the Democratic Socialist of America position on U.S. involvement in the Yemen war.[23] He mapped out all of the congressional lobbying and we also did a roundtable with some Yemeni and Yemeni-American activists, people who were really instrumental in organizing the bodega strike against the Muslim ban as well. Its artificial to say the Middle East is "there" when there are things happening "here" that are also directly engaging networks that link people across borders. And yet you can't be everything for everyone.

[22] These concerns are perennial. At a celebration of MERIP's fifteenth anniversary, frequent contributor Eqbal Ahmad told the gathering "MERIP remains a modest and austere outfit, limited in its outreach by the meagerness of its resources, blocked from experimenting by what appears to be a perennial financial handicap." Cited in "From the Editors," *Middle East Report* 140 (May/June 1986).

[23] Danny Postel "Progressive Surge Propels Turning Point in US Policy on Yemen," *MERIP* 289 (Winter 2018).

https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2022.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Jacob Mundy: I do find the mood of the American republic is incredibly insular right now. And I think about the formative movements I was involved in with the anti-globalization movement, the second intifada, International Solidarity Movement in Palestine, the Iraq war in 2003, and then other things that were going on. It seems like I grew up in a very international milieu. In recent years, it seems activism has become very much just about the United States and our internal dysfunctions. And so I think *Middle East Report* has a really important role to play in terms of keeping our eye on these trends but also showing how these domestic concerns are connected to developments in the region.

Norma Claire Moruzzi: In any effort to consider MERIP's future or its mission, I think it's useful to be reminded of MERIP's origins and the collective. MERIP has always been a collaborative project. But also what Ted brought up. I mean, the word he uses is friendship. And that's not something we tend to think about or talk about as scholars. But it's really important because it's part of solidarity and it's part of trust. And there's a political commitment to measure up. But there's also a sense that this is a network you can rely on in some of these formal and informal ways, professionally but also intellectually and politically. And that may be what is most important. And it's crossing generations. And this leads to other things we can't always predict and that are not always directly related. Maintaining the quality of that engagement and trust is how we try to figure out as a community how this project might continue.

Waleed Hazbun: Joe, I wanted to know if you have any more thoughts. We really appreciate you coming on to be part of this roundtable and giving us some of this history and perspective on things.

Joe Stork: In terms of MERIP and the academy, MERIP and Middle East studies, in a sense, as you noted, a number of MESA presidents have come out of the MERIP collective, have been MERIP authors. I don't want to say we conquered the field, but we certainly very much helped change the field. We succeeded in that. But at the same time, there was another dynamic at work in which the field of Middle East Studies itself has been marginalized. So why aren't we on that podcast? The fact is, you won't see people, not just from MERIP, but you won't see acknowledged scholars of the Middle East brought on to the talk shows, the TV shows, into the media. Instead, you've got this world of so-called think tanks. So it's a different world out there. And we've just been talking about a small piece of it, in a sense, but it's that larger piece that's the problem. We started MERIP to change U.S. policy and, you know, dammit, U.S. policy changed. But certainly, in very much the wrong direction. So there's still a need for MERIP. There's still a need for all of you.

Cite this article: Hazbun W (2022). MERIP's Impact on Middle East Studies: Showcasing a MESA Roundtable. *Review of Middle East Studies* **55**, 214–229. https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2022.2

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