




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

MERIP as a Model for Politically Committed Knowledge Production in Middle East Studies

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Abstract

While MERIP's offered incisive critiques of the power relations that defined the existing field of Middle East studies, this essay explores how it also represents an alternative model of knowledge production, built outside academia, that has helped reshape scholarship and teaching about the Middle East and North Africa and more broadly about the US relationship to the region. The essay also introduces the other contributions in this forum including an edited transcript of 2020 MESA roundtable on the impact of MERIP on Middle East studies, a historical account that traces the origins of the MERIP collective and three essays exploring the evolution of MERIP's approach addressing, in turn, contributions and innovations within the areas of critical political economy, gender studies, and the politics of culture. Finally, drawing on these contributions as well as Middle East Report issue no. 300 that reviews how MERIP covered various topics, the essay concludes by highlighting the continuing value of MERIP as a teaching resource that allows students and others to understand the transformations across the region over the past half century as well as shifting approaches and theories that have come to help define Middle East studies as an academic field.

Keywords: Middle East and North Africa; scholarship; political economy; gender studies; culture pedagogy

In the final pages of *Orientalism*, Edward Said poses the question of alternatives to Orientalism.¹ Admitting to not have engaged in a sustained exploration of alternative forms of knowledge production, he provides, in the last footnote of the book, a short list of examples including “the work done by the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP).”² By the time *Orientalism* was released in November 1978, *MERIP Reports* had already published 72 near-

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 325.

² Said, *Orientalism*, 350.

monthly issues, including a detailed exposé and critique of what it called the “Middle East studies network.” That report, cited by Said, mapped how the production of Middle East studies scholarship was connected to U.S. government and business interests in the Middle East and “functions as an instrument of imperialism.”³ The lasting contribution of MERIP to Middle East studies, however, goes beyond its critiques of existing knowledge about the Middle East. It includes the example it offered of an alternative model of knowledge production, built outside academia, that has helped reshape scholarship and teaching about the Middle East and North Africa and more broadly about the U.S. relationship to the region.

MERIP was initially established in 1971 by young anti-war activists and others shaped by the anti-war movement in order to encourage the New Left to engage the Middle East through the paradigms that had proven powerful in understanding anti-colonial struggles from Latin America to South East Asia.⁴ MERIP’s founders, from both within and outside of academia, sought to circulate the information and analysis needed to make that possible.⁵ MERIP defined its mission as seeking “to present research and information about the role of the United States in the Middle East, revolutionary struggles in the area, and the Palestine problem.”⁶ Its monthly newsletter written by and for activists evolved into a quarterly magazine offering essays informed by academic scholarship and field research. MERIP also offered unique resources for teaching about the politics and culture of the contemporary Middle East. In its early decades, MERIP provided an outlet for reporting, scholarship, and commentary from voices and perspectives marginalized by mainstream academic publications and popular media, including scholars, activists, and political figures from the region. Eventually, many of those voices and perspectives have found space in mainstream outlets, publications, and new media. In the process, MERIP’s publications (*Middle East Report*, edited books, online publications, etc.) and the authors associated with the MERIP collective have played a critical role in the transformation of the academic field of Middle East Studies in the United States by advancing critical political economy approaches, documenting popular struggles across the region, and articulating opposition to U.S. foreign policies that have contributed to political instability and human devastation in

³ Peter Johnson and Judith Tucker, “Middle East Studies Network in the United States,” *MERIP Reports* (hereafter *MERIP*) 38 (1975): 20. Co-author Judith Tucker would go on to become a leading scholar in the field of Middle East studies and was elected in 2017 to serve as president of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA). At that time she wrote “I think this might be a good exercise for anyone embarking on graduate study: begin by writing an exposé of your chosen field.” See “Biographical Sketch: Judith E. Tucker,” available at: <https://mesana.org/annual-meeting/biography-of-mesa-president-judith-e.-tucker>

⁴ Lisa Hajjar and Steve Niva, “(Re)Made in the USA: Middle East Studies in the Global Era,” *MERIP* 205 (Oct. - Dec. 1997): 4.

⁵ Peter Johnson and Joe Stork, “MERIP: The First Decade,” *MERIP* 100/101 (Oct. - Dec. 1981): 50–2.

⁶ *MERIP* 2 (August 1971): 1. The wording of the MERIP mission shifted overtime. This is the formulation that was used until 1977, when the reference to the United States was replaced by “the role of imperialism.” Beginning in 1981, the mission was narrowed to “the political economy of the contemporary Middle East and popular struggles in the region,” though coverage of the U.S. role in the region continued.

the region. Meanwhile, several members of the MERIP collective, who joined as graduate students and junior scholars, have emerged to become leading figures within Middle East studies, including several past presidents of the Middle East Studies Association.

This forum, together with a recent issue of *Middle East Report*,⁷ look back at the fifty-year history of MERIP to explore its model of knowledge production, how it came to be, and how it evolved. At the center of this effort is an edited transcript of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) roundtable on “MERIP’s Impact on Middle East Studies” held online (due to the COVID-19 pandemic) in October 2020. It brought together founding editor Joe Stork with editorial committee members across the decades (Judith Tucker, Zachary Lockman, Ted Swedenburg, Norma Claire Moruzzi, Jacob Mundy, and Stacey Philbrick Yadav) to explore how MERIP’s contributions have changed Middle East Studies scholarship. Drawing from the roundtable, this essay outlines some key features of MERIP’s model of knowledge production and suggests its lasting relevance. The other essays collected in the forum begin with Michael Fischbach’s historical account that traces the origins of the MERIP collective. The next three contributions explore the evolution of MERIP’s approach to understanding the Middle East and North Africa. Joel Beinín surveys MERIP’s contributions and innovations within the areas of critical political economy, Judith Tucker traces MERIP’s coverage of women and gender studies, while Paul Silverstein and Ted Swedenburg discuss the politics of MERIP’s approach to culture. Finally, I conclude this essay by drawing on these contributions as well as a series of brief online reviews in *Middle East Report* issue no. 300 that address how MERIP covered various topics, to highlight the continuing value of MERIP and its vast archive as a teaching resource that allows students and others to understand the transformations across the region over the past half century as well as shifting approaches and theories that have come to help define Middle East studies as an academic field.

A Model for Knowledge Production

In a memo prepared for the 2020 MESA roundtable, Stacey Philbrick Yadav identifies the critical importance of MERIP’s “commitment to laying bare the false distinction between academic research and political engagement.” Reflecting the sentiment of many, she notes “MERIP makes it possible for us to write and to read from a place of political commitment.” The unique impact of MERIP on Middle East studies can best be understood as rooted in this politically engaged approach to knowledge production that allows scholars to conduct research driven by political motivations such as solidarity with Palestinians, those struggling, whether be it for revolution or democracy, and the many impacted by U.S. policies and military actions. MERIP supported research and scholarship that might have only been able to be developed outside the professional, political, and financial limitation posed by the “Middle East studies network.” MERIP’s founders faced considerable challenges. In

⁷ MERIP, “MERIP at 50,” 300 (Fall 2021) available at: <https://merip.org/magazine/300/>.

the early 1970s, “there was... no identifiable grouping of progressive writers and scholars knowledgeable about the Middle East,”⁸ while the broader academic field of Middle East studies was closely aligned with U.S. geopolitical and business interests in the region.⁹ Meanwhile, major sources of institutional support and funding for scholarship on the Middle East were specifically directed to efforts that were expected to serve U.S. interests and goals in the region. By being established outside of academia and remaining at its margins during its early years, MERIP was able to build a space for scholars to develop a critical, alternative approach, which over time came to influence – some might say, transform – much of the academic field of Middle East studies.

In her essay for this forum, Judith Tucker recounts how the integration of academic research and political engagement came about for a generation of future scholars who had become politicized following early travel to the Middle East and/or involvement in the anti-war movement. In the early 1970s, she and other graduate students had developed radical political commitments such as to the Palestinian movement and the struggle for women’s rights in the Middle East but also sought to pursue their intellectual and professional goals by entering what was then the relatively conservative world of the professional study of history. MERIP offered a way to pursue both.¹⁰ Political commitments to popular struggles and anti-imperialism, often combined with academic training and field research in the region, led MERIP to develop an alternative approach that, at the same time, did not adhere to an ideological agenda or party line, such as those offered by existing New or Old Left organizations and their publications. As Stork explains, “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 I think they wanted to move in a similar direction as MERIP.” In a sense, MERIP came to operate as an autonomous space adjacent to the academy. It offered scholars, as Zachary Lockman notes, an “alternative home that often the universities and the institutions we were in and certainly MESA did not provide.” In the process, MERIP helped these young scholars pursue innovative intellectual agenda that at the time did not earn support from within the academy but soon helped transform it as these scholars, beyond their MERIP work, would go on to publish academic articles and scholarly books across history, anthropology, political science, and other fields. In the end, both MERIP and the academy benefited from this arrangement.

It was the efforts of Stork, Tucker, Lockman, and many others of the early generations of MERIP that helped build a model of knowledge production that brought together academic research and political engagement. MERIP was not an alternative academic institution; rather, it operated outside them, helping to connect a range of graduate students and scholars as they were beginning to

⁸ Johnson and Stork, “MERIP: The First Decade,” 53.

⁹ Johnson and Tucker, “Middle East Studies Network in the United States.”

¹⁰ Judith Tucker served on the MERIP editorial committee from issue No. 31 (in 1974) to No. 149 (1987), spanning her time as a graduate student at Harvard University into her early years teaching history at Georgetown University.

enter the academy. What made such a dynamic possible was the ability of MERIP to forge an intellectual community, editorial process, and viable print publication and then sustain these forces over several decades. Key features of this model of knowledge production include a supportive collective, with shared political goals, that met periodically to exchange ideas and views as part of the effort to put out the magazine.

By 1980, MERIP's organizational structure was formalized. The volunteer work of two small, informal collectives in Washington and Boston were replaced by professional staff. Joe Stork became executive editor of the magazine (a role he would maintain until 1995¹¹) working out of a Washington, D.C., office (supported for many years by Martha Wenger as assistant editor). The position of publisher was created (later redefined as executive director) to carry out other functions for the publication and the organization of MERIP as a whole. Jim Paul served in this role until 1989 (working out of a New York office). Meanwhile, the editorial direction and content of the magazine would be governed by a broader "editorial committee" (which includes the staff) through which a generation of mostly junior scholars would rotate in the 1980s and 1990s, and then overtime incorporate and train new generations to continue the effort.¹²

In reflections collected for the fiftieth anniversary issues of *Middle East Report*,¹³ past members often recall the periodic editorial committee meetings as workshops of debate and places to be exposed to new ideas and long-lasting friendships – as well as a few disputes. As a group with common values and politics, it often functioned as a sort of family, but "the good kind," as Lockman adds. Within the group, a range of different political commitments and theoretical approaches associated with scholars on the Left was tolerated. *Middle East Report* was known to publish critical reviews of books by editorial collective members and commission essays that responded to other ones they published. For editors and contributors, this MERIP community offered a space to test and think out ideas. Scholars would often first process their fieldwork or archival research by writing for *Middle East Report* before later publishing their work in academic journals or books. As Norma Moruzzi explains, such writing would need to be pitched to a general audience concerned about popular struggles in the Middle East and aware of the lived experiences and political aspirations of the peoples of the region. MERIP writers could not

¹¹ Stork would serve as deputy director of Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa division from 1995 to 2017.

¹² The editorial committee "is the working committee" of MERIP which meets three times a year and who "in consultation with the [executive] editor" work to "conceptualize and shape" issues of the magazine as well as contribute content and evaluate submissions. The members serve up to two 3-year terms and collectively elect new members. See "Middle East Report: Editorial Committee Organization and Responsibility," unpublished memo circulated to new editorial committee members in 2009.

¹³ See Chris Toensing, "Remembering Fifty Years of Community Challenges and Change," MERIP 300 (Fall 2021) available at: <https://merip.org/2021/11/remembering-fifty-years-of-community-challenges-and-change/> and "Archiving MERIP Project" available at: <https://forms.gle/kSiQreW5WqH2mxWX9> [last accessed September 19, 2021].

rely on theoretical jargon and the conventions of narrow disciplinary silos. Moreover, as Jacob Mundy notes, manuscripts for *Middle East Report* are exposed to rounds of often-rigorous peer review and are always carefully edited. Many MERIP authors have recalled the thorough editing they encountered from Stork, Chris Toensing, and other editors who could convert their still-academic writing into clear, accessible prose as one of the best lessons in writing they were ever able to benefit from. Such training, often hard to find within graduate programs, helped many scholars become writers.

MERIP sustained a collective-based organization for research and publishing across five decades while lacking the support of the research institutions, foundation grants, or government funding that help foster many academic fields and intellectual trends across the American academy.¹⁴ By 1981, the magazine was selling over 3,000 copies of each issue (total circulation would reach over 6,000 a decade later) and for many years would sustain institutional subscriptions from more than 700 libraries and research institutes around the world.¹⁵ MERIP would also raise funds and earn foundations grants for a few special projects. Nevertheless, what Johnston and Stork noted in 1981 would always be true, that “funds available have rarely been adequate to MERIP’s needs.”¹⁶ The main resources that kept MERIP in operation would remain individual donations and volunteer efforts from its unpaid authors and editorial committee members. The impact of the academic scholarship published by leading members of the MERIP collective on the field of Middle East studies is reflected in surveys of the field¹⁷ as well as the essays in this forum addressing political economy, women’s studies, and the politics of culture. Beyond these specific contributions, we can also note how MERIP as a publication was often decades ahead of trends that would later ripple through academia. Ted Swedenburg reflects on how in the mid 1970s, “It was very hard to get an academic job... if you worked on Palestine.” He notes “your advisers told you not to touch it. But you could write about Palestine in MERIP.” Driven by its political commitments, MERIP fostered scholarship and debate on Palestine (as well as critiques of Israeli policies) long before it was an acceptable, and later highly popular, topic for academic research.

Moreover, long before the academic trends of global history, postcolonialism, transnationalism, and multilocation-archive research projects, MERIP recognized

¹⁴ While *MERIP* has periodically received grants, often for particular research publications and outreach projects, for most of the life of the print publication (which ended in 2019) it was sustained by subscriptions (most notably, institutional subscriptions from libraries) and donations. On the role of private foundation funding in the development of Middle East Studies, see Zachary Lockman, *Field Notes: The Making of Middle East Studies in the United States* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

¹⁵ “Statement of Ownership, Management and Circulation,” *MERIP* 102 (Jan. 1982): 31; “Statement of Ownership, Management and Circulation,” *MERIP* 179 (Nov.-Dec. 1992): 47; JSTOR, “Journal Info: Middle East Report,” available at: https://www.jstor.org/journal/middleeastreport?item_view=journal_info.

¹⁶ Johnson and Stork, “MERIP: The First Decade,” 53.

¹⁷ See, Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chapter 5.

that to understand the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, or the condition of women in rural Egypt, or struggles of Arab migrant workers in France, one needed to understand these issues within a broader context, such as global capitalism or imperial interests, that traditional area studies and disciplinary approaches often ignored. The evolving MERIP collective thus produced a consistent outlet for new approaches to understand how the Middle East is interconnected to other parts of the world. For example, it was only after 9/11 and prolonged U.S. occupation of Iraq following the 2003 invasion that many scholars within Middle East studies came to realize that understanding the role of the U.S. in the region was essential to efforts to address traditional area studies and disciplinary questions about political change, economic development, religious ideology, culture, and history. Exploring the U.S. role in the region could not be left to foreign policy and international relations experts. MERIP had begun tracing the ever-expanding role of the U.S. in the region in the early 1970s with a focus on arms sales and the migration of counter-insurgency strategy from Indochina. In 1980, writing about the Carter Doctrine and the mapping structure of US military bases across the Mediterranean and Middle East, MERIP warned the “US political leadership” would be impelled “to seize upon the notion of military intervention as a ‘fix’” but such efforts would fail to address the crises.¹⁸ MERIP writers came to these topics not because they were issues addressed by existing academic research agendas, but from their own experience and connections with activists and movements in the region and out of their efforts to research and report information based on their political commitments, which opposed imperialistic U.S. policies and supported popular struggles such as the Dhofar rebellion and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman.¹⁹ MERIP was able to evade the constraints of existing knowledge production dynamics while promoting (relatively) broad public dissemination by being dedicated to research that was fieldwork based, interdisciplinary, and theoretically engaged. As a result, MERIP’s 50-year archive, now made open access at merip.org, offers one of the most deeply rich resources for understanding the politics, culture, and history of the region and a valuable tool for teaching at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Most critical, it offers a model of scholarship that is both informed and engaged.

How It Began

Following the transcript of the roundtable, Michael Fischbach continues the forum with a recounting of how the MERIP collective was born of deep political commitments formed in the era of widescale mobilization against the U.S. war in Vietnam. Among this group were young people who had traveled abroad, to the Middle East and elsewhere, many having served in the U.S. Peace Corps and who later formed the Committee of Returned Volunteers (CRV).²⁰ Many found that even within anti-war circles and the CRV, discussion of the Palestine question was lacking. They sought to change this. Fischbach recounts how, in

¹⁸ Joe Stork, “The Carter Doctrine and US Bases in the Middle East,” *MERIP* 90 (Sept., 1980): 14.

¹⁹ See, for example, “US Strategy in the Gulf,” *MERIP* 36 (April, 1975): 17–28.

²⁰ Johnson and Stork, “MERIP: The First Decade,” 50.

September 1970, a group of seventeen, mostly journalists writing for the alternative underground press, ventured into Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan to visit refugee camps and meet with Palestinian students; a few, including Stork, stayed to work in a medical clinic. They asked a lot of questions and saw the reality on the ground; some even witnessed the outbreak of fighting between Palestinian guerrillas and the Jordanian army. These travelers would write up accounts of their visit in underground papers such as the *Great Speckled Bird* with titles like “One week in Lebanon can blow your mind...” Joe Stork would publish his account, “Palestine is a Revolution,” in the first issue of the CRV journal 2, 3, *Many*.²¹ Soon after, Stork and others established MERIP. As Fischbach concludes, “while it is true that in the decades since its inception MERIP has made a deep and strong impact on the study of the Middle East, it is also true that it was the Middle East that first impacted those who formed MERIP.”

The Evolution of MERIP's Approach

From its first issues, MERIP would always seek to publish reports by writers with direct experience of the region and who drew on field research. As Stork notes in his remarks at the round table, “Our name was quite intentional... this project was about *research* and *information*, about facts and analysis. Our working proposition was that understanding the Israel/Palestine conflict required understanding the political dynamics of the region, and we would contest the prevailing ‘pro-Arab/pro-Israel’ binary by critically assessing existing political regimes without exception.” The magazine was formed when they “realized we would have to generate research and not simply convey information provided by others.” It was this goal of seeking quality research that led the founders, none of whom were academics or on an academic track at the time, to make MERIP their day job while “tapping into the work of the many graduate students among our early readers, who saw MERIP as an outlet for their own work.” In the process, MERIP became both closely tied and reliant on researchers who had academic training and skills but also a commitment to writing for a general audience and with an analytical lens focused on subaltern communities and popular struggles that were ignored or misread by both mainstream scholarship and journalism.

A critical tool in connecting the political project to the development of new scholarship was the development of MERIP's political economy approach. Zachary Lockman recalls that “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. And the two converged.” He explains that “Political economy was the polite term for Marxian approaches. ... It offered an alternative because it wasn't culturally essentialist and it was broadly comparative. ... it's critical of established power and it provides a different way to think about this region and what's happening in this region.”

²¹ Susan Teller, “One Week in Lebanon Can Blow Your Mind,” *Great Speckled Bird*, October 4, 1970, 10–11; Joe Stork, “Palestine is a Revolution,” 2...3...*Many* 1.1 (Winter 1970): 3–8.

Joel Beinin's survey of the work MERIP produced across its first two decades explains how MERIP pursued its political commitments through research and in the process became more informed and sophisticated. For example, he notes "MERIP's first published writing on Palestine/Israel echoed the slogans of the armed Palestinian resistance organizations. But it relatively quickly became a platform for independent views that nonetheless unmistakably supported self-determination for the Palestinian people." As such MERIP did not have a "party line" like many organs of the far left, nor did it adhere to the limitations of many Arab nationalist and leftist outlets in the Middle East. As Beinin notes, "MERIP also promoted an evidence-based understanding of the internal dynamics of Israeli society, economy, and politics that was rare in both Arab and American Zionist circles in the 1970s." And in the early 1980s, MERIP fostered debate about a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by making room for alternative perspectives.²² MERIP pursued these topics and developed approaches, such as a focus on class formation and material conditions, before such approaches were recognized as legitimate within academic Middle East studies.

In her essay for the forum, with a focus on its coverage of issues relating to women and gender, Judith Tucker traces the evolution of MERIP's approach, always driven by political concerns, across several decades. She observes the "political purposes of knowledge production were omnipresent in the minds of authors and editors" as MERIP passed through several phases that reflected intellectual and political trends. Between the first writings addressing issues of women and gender in the mid 1970s until around 1986, Tucker observes that studies were "in accord with the assumptions and approaches of neo-Marxist academics of the time." MERIP served as a critical forum for bringing forms of feminist and class analysis, used largely in the context of the capitalist societies in the west, into the study of the experience of women in the Middle East and North Africa. These studies often focused on labor and work and viewed them in the context of global capitalism. They offered an alternative approach to understanding women's oppression than those offered by the cultural and religious explanations found in Orientalist scholarship and popular media. Between 1986 and 1994, Tucker notes a focus on women's political participation and human rights, while from 1994 until the U.S. invasion of Iraq, MERIP offered a wide range of studies that addressed sociological and cultural issues, aspect of sexuality, and even the queering of the study of the Middle East. Between 2003 and the Arab uprisings, MERIP offered a slower pace of coverage of women and gender but included a shift from sociological issues to a focus on political questions relating to empire, war, and violence against women. In the last decade, following the Arab uprisings, a focus on women's political participation returned, most notably on the role women played in the uprisings and the political struggles that followed.

Finally, Paul Silverstein and Ted Swedenburg offer a detailed study of how MERIP addressed the political aspects of culture and cultural production with

²² 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.

a focus on aesthetic fields including film, music, poetry, and art. Their survey extends the theme of the forum to show how MERIP served as a creative space that encouraged a heterogeneous range of approaches but with a continuing concern to root studies in the everyday-lived experience of peoples across the region. They reflect the liveliness of debate by noting “MERIP was not shy about publishing critical reviews of works written by members of their own editorial collective – sometimes in the same issue where excerpts from those very works were featured.” One of the creative tensions included one between studies firmly rooted in a neo-Marxist materialist approach that read cultural production as reflective of class and power relations and those that highlighted the agency and creativity of cultural expressions, with greater attention to the intersectionality of ethnic, racial, gender, and other identities. They conclude by noting that “To take culture seriously on its own terms – with all its ambiguities, creative play, affective intensities, everyday practices, intersectional terrains, and, yes, political economy – will remain an ongoing challenge for MERIP and critical Middle East studies in their commitments to peace and social justice.”

Teaching MERIP

At its founding, *MERIP Reports* did not seem to focus on, let alone really consider, producing material for classroom use, but as its authors and editors became university professors and its readership included secondary school teachers and outreach coordinators, MERIP evolved into, by many accounts, one of the most critical resources for teaching about the Middle East and North Africa in the United States. In the acknowledgments of *Political Islam: Essays from Middle East Report*, Joel Beinin and Joe Stork thank Salim Nasr and Salim Tamari “who from Cairo and Ramallah respectively, urged us to make available in book form for classroom use some of the best of what appeared in *Middle East Report*.”²³ For similar reasons, MERIP editors have published several edited collections drawing from the vast archive of material appearing in the magazine.²⁴ The increased availability of back issues, due first to JSTOR and then more recently at the open access website merip.org, has opened new opportunities for using MERIP in the classroom. Stacey Philbrick Yadav notes that she put together a syllabus that took pieces from MERIP about

²³ Joel Beinin and Joe Stork, eds., *Political Islam: Essays from Middle East Report* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) x. Two years later, however, Laurie King-Irani reported that after the text was ordered for classroom use at the American University in Cairo, the book became banned in Egypt. See “From the Editor,” *MERIP* 210 (Spring, 1999): 2.

²⁴ Zachary Lockman and Joel Beinin (eds.) *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising Against Israeli Occupation* (Boston: South End Press, 1989); Beinin and Stork, eds., *Political Islam*; Suad Joseph and Susan Slyomovics, *Women and Power in the Middle East* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Joel Beinin and Rebecca L. Stein, *The Struggle for Sovereignty: Palestine and Israel, 1993–2005* (Stanford University Press, 2006); Jeannie Sowers and Chris Toensing, *The Journey to Tahrir: Revolution, Protest and Social Change in Egypt* (London: Verso 2012); David McMurray and Amanda Ufheil-Somers, *The Arab Revolts: Dispatches on Militant Democracy in the Middle East* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2013); Sheila Carapico, *Arabia Incognita: Dispatches from Yemen and the Gulf* (Charlottesville, Just World Books, 2016).

Yemen at different moments in its history, “to give students a sense of what did it feel like at the time. ... It’s amazing to have this resource to be able to re-create the intellectual moods that people took to interpreting, at different moments, a particular issue.” As the essays in this forum show, working only with the MERIP archive, students can trace developments across theoretical trends, such as neo-Marxist approaches or the culture turn, and across decades. MERIP is also, to take one example, a critical source for both scholarship about Palestine as well as the political debates ranging from the role of armed struggle and the “two-state solution” to the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement.

This is not to suggest any topic in Middle East studies can be covered exclusively with MERIP material, but the range of approaches and perspectives offered by essays that are generally well written, jargon free, and shorter than academic articles make MERIP an excellent teaching resource. *Middle East Report* no. 300, marking the fiftieth anniversary of MERIP, includes a series of short essays that offer succinct reviews of how MERIP covered developments and trends across the region. With embedded hypertext links to the open-access merip.org website, these essays offer ready-made reading lists for syllabi and review essays.²⁵ For example, Darryl Li explores MERIP’s coverage of the War on Terror, highlighting how since the very first editorial in the wake of the September 11 attacks, MERIP has been “illuminating the historical continuities of imperial violence” with coverage ranging from U.S. counterinsurgency and torture programs to ideological trends within jihadi formations and the politics of representation.²⁶ Pamela Pennock similarly addresses coverage of Arab-American identities and shows how domestic surveillance and discrimination faced by Arabs living in the United States was a longstanding practice before 2001.²⁷ Other essays survey MERIP’s coverage of Palestine, Political Islam, the Iranian revolution, the Lebanese civil war, and labor movements as well as recall MERIP’s effort at media criticism and humor in the form of columns by the mysterious and irreverent Al Miskin.

MERIP’s Unfinished Legacy

At an event in 1986, marking only the fifteenth anniversary of MERIP, the activist and scholar Eqbal Ahmed noted that “MERIP remains a modest and austere outfit, limited in its outreach by the meagerness of its resources,” but also observed “It is by far the most used Middle Eastern journal on American campuses. MERIP editors are teaching at institutions of higher learning; they are undoubtedly producing young scholars of humane outlook and

²⁵ MERIP, “MERIP at 50,” 300 (Fall 2021) available at: <https://merip.org/magazine/300/>.

²⁶ Darryl Li, “Refusing Imperial Amnesia in the War on Terror,” *Middle East Report* 300 (Fall 2021) available at: <https://merip.org/2021/11/refusing-imperial-amnesia-in-the-war-on-terror-300/>.

²⁷ Pamela Pennock “Covering Surveillance, Struggles and Solidarity in the Arab American Community,” *Middle East Report* 300 (Fall 2021) available at: <https://merip.org/2021/11/covering-surveillance-struggles-and-solidarity-in-the-arab-american-community-300/>.

radical inclination.”²⁸ Nearly 35 years later, towards the end of the 2020 MESA Roundtable founding editor Joe Stork recognized that “In terms of MERIP and the academy, MERIP and Middle East studies... I don’t want to say we conquered the field, but we certainly very much helped change the field. We succeeded in that.” But Stork also reminds us that changing the field of Middle East studies was never the primary mission. He mentions “another dynamic at work in which the field of Middle East Studies itself has been marginalized. ... 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.” Thus, the politics of Middle East studies is only “a small piece of it, in a sense, but it’s that larger piece that’s the problem.” Recalling the original mission defined in the 1970s that sought to mobilize a movement against imperialist US policies in the Middle East, Stork concludes the roundtable by noting, “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.”

²⁸ The Editors, “From the Editors,” *MERIP* 140 (May/June 1986):41.

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