



Letter from the Editor

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If the world is burning, how do we ensure that our scholarship still matters? As we prepare to return to classrooms full of students beset by entangled environmental, structural, economic, and social crises, how do we re-center MENA studies as part of a shared global narrative? I have been asking questions like these since assuming the role of *RoMES* Editor. Often, I look back on my application full of idealistic sentiments about “bridging divides” and wonder if an academic publication can, indeed, help to transform the world we live and work in. I suspect many of us have revisited our own academic trajectories in the past few years and asked similar questions while contemplating a narrowing profession and a world lurching from one crisis to the next.

When facing a crisis, however, perspective is everything. By simply shifting our vantage point, geographically and chronologically, we are reminded to step back from the brink via the tools of our trade: analysis and the transmission of knowledge. Still, even with these tools at our disposal, all too often academics focus on analytic details, on the genealogical specificities of our disciplines, and on the specialized audiences key to promotion rubrics. In doing so, we renege on a core component of our profession – a commitment to public discourse. There are likely good reasons that we shy away from this commitment. Promotion and tenure committees traditionally look askance at trade presses, op-eds, and articles in “popular” magazines or periodicals. Further, in an environment of tenure scarcity and precarity, academic risk-taking is increasingly rare and often met with condemnation and/or vicious critique. And, so, we continue on, despite threats to the humanities and social sciences, and hold ever tighter to institutionalized structures that endorse events like an international conference panel with three people in a cavernous room. Yet there is perhaps an even more subtle and troubling logic at work in our hesitancy to embrace a scholarly ethos engaged in the debates of the present: the rigorously guarded boundary between academic labor and the label of “activism.”

Thankfully, we have guides from the past to help us chart a path forward. This issue of *RoMES* showcases a project born out of another period of sustained global crises (academic, social, political, economic) in the 1970s: The Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP). Titled “MERIP and the Politics of Knowledge Production in MENA Studies,” this Special Focus roundtable begins with an edited transcript of the virtual 2020 MESA session commemorating

MERIP's 50 years as a publication dedicated to an innovative model for academic publishing that defined "research and information" as necessarily conjoined values. Moderated by Waleed Hazbun, participants Joe Stork, Judith Tucker, Zachary Lockman, Ted Swedenburg, Norma Claire Moruzzi, Jacob Mundy, and Stacey Philbrick Yadav answer a series of questions that tease out the instigating mission of MERIP and the impact of the organization on the broader field of MENA studies. Their responses weave personal anecdote, professional commitment, and political anxiety together into a powerful and poignant narrative of something rather daring – the courage and the will to embrace knowledge production as a cause and a movement for change.

Here at the *Review of Middle East Studies* we are honored to present reflective essays on how MERIP's mission evolved over the past 50 years. Waleed Hazbun, Michael R. Fischbach, Paul A. Silverstein and Ted Swedenburg, Judith Tucker, and Joel Beinin provide models for engaged scholarship, for publishing that seeks to intervene in a public discourse that flattens rather than expands knowledge about the MENA, and for daring to commit to a movement for change. Through their eyes, we see a field transformed through action. But there is more. While re-reading these contributors once again during the proof phase, I was also profoundly moved by the transparency and honesty contained in their words. The pages of this issue of *RoMES* contains a journey that takes us from the idealistic ignorance of graduate school to years of professional frustration and fear, and finally to incisive critique of the mechanisms by which or methodologies and conceptual framings reinforce rather than subvert problematic narratives of the Middle East and North Africa. It is my hope that we can take this journey into the future.

This issue of *RoMES* also sustains a thematic focus on engaged scholarship in our "Curator's Corner," written by Ali Kassem (University of Edinburgh). Kassem's "On Academic Research, Legitimacy, and Fieldwork in Times of Crisis" expressly takes up some of the questions posed by the contributors to the MERIP section as he analyzes the methodological, political, and contextual shifts faced during two distinct research trips to Lebanon in 2018 and 2020. Kassem offers a master class in how to confront crisis and change and how, ideally, a scholar should engage in the difficult task of re-thinking assumptions and re-framing a practice of engaged participation in the world around us. Finally, while this issue is spare on book reviews (perhaps one of the most difficult elements of academic publishing in the time of COVID), James Toth's *unsparing* book review essay of three post-Mubarak "popular" portraits of Egypt also models the overall thematic scope of honest critique and engaged scholarship. Toth reminds us that when engaging in public discourse our work must both be distinct from popularizing and candid about the subterranean assumptions that all too often skew the commentary of "experts."

And, speaking of expertise, the editorial team at *RoMES* is also undergoing its own transformation. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Ken Cuno (Associate Editor for Egypt and North Africa and Executive Committee Member) for his steadfast dedication to *RoMES* in the transition from Rich Martin's guiding hand to my own stumbling editorial efforts. Without his leadership, stamina, and frankly awesome ability to cajole potential reviewers into

submitting materials, *RoMES* would surely not have been able to sustain its vision. The same is true of Karl Barbir (Associate Editor of History), who genially committed to wrangling and guiding content during a period when we were deluged by a seemingly endless supply of books in the discipline of history. Academic publishing requires selfless, and often unrecognized, service and *RoMES* is so grateful for yours.

We look forward to a year of engaged action, and to seeing some of you at MESA in November as we reaffirm our commitments to honest critique and to transformative “research and information projects.”