CHAPTER IV

The Social Science Approach: MESA Experts on the Arab World and Islam

The Early Phase

The field of Middle East studies in the American academy was from the start based in the social sciences. During the early years, however, Orientalism had a sway on the social science approach. Social scientists proved vulnerable to the influence of Orientalism. This was due in part to the theoretical proximity and epistemological connection between the modernization theory—which was adopted by the social scientists—and the classical Orientalist tradition. Although the pioneering social scientist-experts on the Arab world adopted some of the Orientalist paradigms, they generally distanced themselves from what they considered an old-fashioned discipline that contradicted their underlying vision of modernization.

Whereas the Orientalists continued to draw heavily on textual and philological analysis, the social scientists considered religion and tradition of no import in the study of the Arab world, notwithstanding their incorporation of other essentializing and fossilized aspects of Orientalism such as culture, psyche and mindset. Thus, while the two trends parted on many issues, they ultimately converged in the quality of knowledge they produced. Both trends shared a common bias towards their subject of study and shared more or less the same orientation; i.e. they proceeded from an unquestioned assumption of Western values which, they felt, were a universal law that other nations could not but follow. In other words, they treated their subject matter from an exclusively logocentric American vantage point. Views and attitudes that have passed for conventional wisdom were endorsed unquestionably, especially
in matters relating to politics, American dominance, cultural stereotypes and epistemological logocentrism.

The Middle East Studies Association (MESA) was established in 1966 to bring the academic Middle East studies centers together. Its members included both social scientists and Orientalists, including the founders of the field. In its first phase, MESA continued in the same direction of approaching the Arab world. The same paradigms, approaches, views and attitudes continued unaltered. The increasing funding of the field by the government and corporations tied the scholarly interests and research to the agenda of the government. The American interests in the region had crystallized to maintaining stability, securing access to the Persian Gulf oil resources, and increasingly the protection of Israel. This phase witnessed a remarkable unquestioned collaboration with security agencies, political agenda and corporation (Hajjar & Niva, 1997: 3). Thus, the field of Middle East studies during this phase lacked any formative roles and seemed content with functioning in the government’s orbit; its agendas were those of the government, corporations and security apparatus and the priorities of these were also its priorities. In short, social science paradigms were hemmed in to the ideology of modernization.

Reform was first introduced from outside the field. Many factors exacerbated the urge for reform. These included the persistence of the fledgling Middle East Studies Association (MESA) in the same course of presenting matters from an exclusively hegemonic position; the lack of transparent, even-handed and balanced treatment of conflicts and developments in the region, especially the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; and the unquestionable endorsement of American policy towards the Arab world and Israel by the media and academia. These factors led some leftist
activists, such as Joel Beinin, Joe Stork and Peter Johnson who had spent some time in the region as church and Peace Corps volunteers to consider establishing an alternative channel of covering the region in a more balanced way with emphasis on empowering the underprivileged. The Middle East Report and Information Project (MERIP) was thus established in late 1970 with a few members and very restricted resources. Despite the difficulties, MERIP managed to survive and soon expanded its interests and gained more attention in the United States and Britain. Those activists started a journal, MERIP Reports (later renamed Middle East Report) that focused primarily on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and represented the Arab point of view which was completely absent until then in the United States. According to Johnson and Stork (1981) “without question, the issue of Palestine and Israel was central to the urgency behind MERIP’s formation” (p. 51).

MERIP soon expanded its reach to enjoin professional expertise on the Arab world. Academic leftists from Britain like Fred Halliday and Roger Owen as well as some Arab scholars in the United States became regular contributors to MERIP Reports. Although its focus was primarily placed on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, MERIP—motivated by the outspoken anti-imperialist attitudes of its members and contributors—expanded the issues and topics covered in MERIP Reports to include criticism of U.S. policy in the region as well as highlighting various developments in the region.

Another challenge to the semi-orthodox status of the field came from within its ranks. During the 1977 MESA meeting, a number of leftist scholars dissented from MESA and established the Alternative Middle East Studies Seminar (AMESS). These scholars were critical of the pervasiveness of Orientalism and the pro-capitalist bias
of the mainstream scholarship in Middle East studies. They were also critical of the scholars’ silence or complicity in government and corporate policies towards the region. They sought to introduce new channels of research by drawing attention to women, peasants, the urban poor and other marginalized groups, and restructuring the treatment of political issues, especially the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

AMESS was short-lived, however. It lasted only for a few years. This was not due to inner factors. Rather, the field of Middle East studies as represented by MESA was rapidly changing. Many scholars (women and scholars of Arab and Iranian origin) as well as other critical scholars were joining the field. These were critical of Orientalism and modernization theory, as well as of U.S. policy towards the Arab world and Israel. These scholars introduced new perspectives to the field (Hajjar & Niva, 1997: 4). The mounting critiques of Orientalism, coupled with developments in the region further contributed to the reshaping of the field.

**MESA Scholarship in Flux**

The MESA-based study of the Arab world has been in a constant process of transformation over the last three decades. The seclusion of the discipline from developments in other fields that marked the 1940s through the late 1970s gave way to a constant and steadfast application of diverse theoretical approaches and paradigms, as well as opening up to developments in other fields. “Arab exceptionalism” was for the most part challenged. While some scholars—together with the Orientalists discussed in the previous chapter—continued to produce what they assumed was theory-free knowledge based on the amalgamation of facts, which supposedly speak for themselves and rely on their personal judgment, the majority of research was based in social science theory. Theoretical approaches multiplied as did
the range of the arenas of research. The introduction of new paradigms (especially gender studies, postcolonial theory and the neo-Marxist political economy) challenged the stereotypical views that had dominated the earlier phase.

The 1990s witnessed further developments related to theory such as the introduction of the civil society paradigms in the study of Arab politics. This paradigm was introduced by Richard Norton in the mid-1990s. Norton edited a two-volume book, *Civil Society in the Middle East*, in which the contributors challenged one of the most persistent areas of “Arab exceptionalism,” with a large measure of success as subsequent work by scholars using this approach demonstrated. The book even traced the emergence of civil society to the medieval Islamic era and criticized the canonization of concepts. Eickleman (1996) wrote in the forward to the book:

> It would be misleading to see the emergence of “civil society” in the last few decades as without precedent. The Middle East presents a complex web of social “institutions” which sustain order when central governments are ineffective or oppressive. If by “civil society” we mean the emergence of institutions autonomous from the state which facilitate orderly economic, social, and political activity, then there are many precedents. They have, for the most part, been overlooked by observers intent on seeking exact correspondence with the formal institutions of “Western” civil society. (p. x)

Norton (1996) challenges conventional wisdom in this regard. According to Norton, the persistent argument of Arab exceptionalism in relation to civil society is “a shibboleth of Orientalism” (p. 5). Furthermore,

there is a tendency either to idealize civil society, or to impute to it a teleology. At times, civil society is described in such rarefied, ideal-typical terms that “sightings” of civil society are dismissed as spurious. Often, one has the sense that civil society is so pristinely defined that it could not possibly exist anywhere. Civil society is a social phenomenon and to presume that it is broadly representative, self-regulating or a beacon of unmitigated virtue is unjustified on the evidence. (p. 5)
The feminist influence on the study of Muslim women has contributed a great deal to undermining the stereotypical assumptions held about Muslim women such as the images of harems and oppression of women. Several feminist studies present a picture of vibrant diversity and participation of Muslim women in the public life in both the Muslim-majority countries and in the West. Haddad, Smith & Moore (2006) challenge the stereotypical canonized image of Muslim women in Western scholarship. The authors observe that “Muslim women increasingly are full and active participants in American society and play major roles in virtually all aspects of professional life” (p. 13). Y. Haddad stands remarkably in this respect. Her many contributions on this topos proved formative in the study of Muslim women and challenged Orientalist stereotypes in this regard.

As far as MESA is concerned, facile misrepresentations and stereotyping that had characterized the early period and the works of the Orientalists and neo-Orientalists, largely disappeared in relation to many aspects, such as the status of women, intrinsic violence, fatalism, inherent despotism, lack of progress, the medieval tint, and the insurmountable inability to change. Although the Iranian revolution and the rise of Islamist activism revived interest in Islam that had been absent in the modernization theory, generally Islam emerged as a single factor among many others in the discourse of MESA experts. In this particular issue, however, susceptibility to generalizations and outright misrepresentations were to be found in the works of some scholars. On the whole, the various developments were contextualized in political, social and economic circumstances rather than attributed to an essence or a set of unchanging cultural traits. The social scientists, in fact, set to counter the reductionist images and caricatures rampant in the Orientalist discourse, the media and popular culture. Their overriding concern was to go beyond the
simplistic assertions and to trace the various factors that account for a specific phenomenon.

The broadening and opening up of the field gave rise to revision of the American role in the region. Many scholars became increasingly critical of the U.S. government policies towards the Arab world. MESA defined the limits to which knowledge might be put; thus, rejecting funding from the CIA and other intelligence agencies. This became the official position of MESA in 1982 as the association stipulated that its members disclose the source of funding for their research or projects. The scandal that broke in the mid-1980s over Nadav Safran’s acceptance of funding from the CIA to finance an international conference organized by the Middle East Center at Harvard—of which Safran was director—without disclosing the source of funding was condemned by MESA as a violation of its 1982 resolution (Lockman, 2004a: 244-245).

This issue became a major concern for MESA. Subsequent MESA presidents revisited the question within the scope of academic integrity and the “search for truth”. Brand (2005) relates expertise to the government agenda and the way scholars should deal with this situation. “No longer are the preferred foci development and modernization [of the Cold War era] in order to fight counterinsurgency, but rather studies of modernization, political Islam and terrorism to serve as the (often pseudo-) intellectual underpinning of the newest march to battle” (p. 7). According to Brand, for all of MESA scholars who have or have thought of engaging in studies falling into such categories it is worth pondering who is in fact setting the agenda and framing the questions, and to what use [their] work may be put. … Inequality and exploitation and the myriad research questions they suggest have largely receded from the agenda. … The Cold War has ended, the respite was short, and we are now again, according to state discourse and
practice, an empire at war, with many of the same implications for which questions are given priority. (Ibid., p. 7)

Moreover, Brand chastises the government for using science and knowledge “in dishonest ways” (Ibid., p. 12). Hence, according to Brand, it is the moral responsibility of scholars to preserve the integrity of their profession, and not to yield to government pressure. Lockman (2008) revisited this idea; he states that MESA experts “as scholars and intellectuals … have an obligation to speak truth to power.” He maintains that MESA members “must insist” that their research conforms to the highest academic standards and the dictates of their conscience, rather than to the demands of the state and the kind of knowledge it considers useful (p. 7).

The escalating American involvement in the region in the post-Cold War era and the interventionist policy were met to some extent by criticism from some MESA scholars, especially in the aftermath of the occupation of Iraq. They were critical of what they deemed failed policies that would alienate the Arab peoples and hence endanger American interests. Unconditional American support for the dictatorial regimes, while at the same time alienating the masses, is viewed as a perilous path that would arouse and sharpen anti-American feelings in the Arab world.

Democratization becomes one of the central themes in the study of Arab politics. The debate over democratization in the Arab world, which has sharpened over the last two decades, and the views espoused by many MESA scholars in favor of democratization show the extent of alienation between the government and MESA experts. Their views have not found an attentive ear in the subsequent administrations in regard to practical policies since the end of the Cold War, though at the level of rhetoric the successive administrations have adopted their parlance. The academics are in agreement with the declared American values and ideals supposedly espoused
by the American government such as democracy, human rights and so on, which often overlap with American interests in the region that were categorically summarized by Pelletreau:

a just and lasting peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors, Israel's security and well-being, a security framework in the Gulf that assures access to its energy resources upon which we and other industrial nations continue to be dependent, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, control of destabilizing arms transfers, promotion of political participation, and respect for basic human rights, ending state-supported and other forms of terrorism, promotion of economic and social development through privatization and market economies, encouragement of American business and investment opportunities. (Pelletreau, Pipes & Esposito, 1994: 1)

However, the government’s failure to live up to the ideals of democracy, pluralism and even-handed compromise between Israelis and Palestinians has aroused criticism of the American government among the academics. The treatment of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has gained considerable attention in the works of MESA scholars. The grievances of the Palestinian people could no longer be ignored, despite the scholars’ supportive position of Israel. Many points that had passed unquestionably for decades were challenged by a few scholars, especially scholars of Jewish origin in the field of Middle East studies. Joel Beinin (2003b), for instance, problematizes the term “terrorism” in the Palestinian-Israeli context, maintaining that it is inadequate in that context and is used in self-serving ways by Israel, which is not innocent of terrorist practices, according to Beinin, both in the past and the present.

Many among the academics view Islamist activism as a diverse phenomenon, and criticize the media for projecting it in the image of Ayatollah Khomeini or bin Laden. This distinction has policy suggestions that involve acceptance of what they see as moderate Islamists as a fait accompli. The mainstream Islamists present a challenge to the academics. They speak the language of democracy, pluralism and
human rights, the rule of law and opposition to authoritarianism which are at the core of the American ideal. They are not rejected of hand as fanatics. Their political behavior and functioning within the system intensify the ambivalence of the MESA academics. This is coupled with the repressive policies of the Arab governments, which receive American support, a case which makes the position of many academics even more difficult. As Khan (1998) puts it, “these movements function in Muslim societies as social and political forces providing social services and enhancing political awareness. Labeling them as extremist has justified violent and indiscriminate repression of many of these popular and moderate Islamic movements” (p. 452). This concern is further intensified by the fear that such repression may lead to radicalization of the Islamists and thus increase anti-Americanism and even endanger American interests in the long run. The MESA academics maintain that violence and terrorism are the acts of a small minority retaliating against state repression, American policies towards the region, and Israeli excesses in Palestine and Lebanon. They also argue that the West shall not give up its ideals if the Islamists came to power. Where they are allowed to participate, they are co-opted into the system and the West shall encourage dialogue rather than rejection. Esposito even condemns “secular fundamentalism,” the assumption that secularism is a prerequisite of a good government, and is a universal value to be embraced by all people regardless of their beliefs. MESA scholars also stress the long-term interests of the United States, which are at odds with the private interests of the policy-makers who also think of short-term interests that support their re-election.

As MESA became more critical of U.S. policy, it distanced itself from the government. While the government adopted the views of the Orientalists, the media
were dominated by “instant experts” (as MESA academics designate the journalists and non-specialist claimants to expertise on the Arab world, Iran and Israel, who dominate the think tanks). Indeed, the think tank industry in the United States and the spread of think tanks with interests in the region functioned as a competitor, even as an alternative at times, to MESA. Think tank experts tend to focus exclusively on policy-oriented research, in the form of curtailed, largely uninformed, policy briefs.

Interests and agendas multiply so considerably in the field of Middle East studies, as do approaches and viewpoints, that any attempt to summarize the field as following a unified orthodoxy runs the risk of being reductionist. However, a host of issues can be discerned as more persistent than others. These include the rise of Islamist activism, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, women and gender studies, and democratization. Middle East studies as represented by MESA have presented a counterview to the discourse of the Orientalists and neo-Orientalists. The expertise of MESA scholars examines the dynamic and diverse nature in Arab and Muslim societies. Rather than sticking to fossilized notions to explain social and political behavior in the Arab and Muslim worlds, their scholarship fathoms the deep and complicated realities based on immediate observation and interaction with those societies. Drawing on empirical data, Esposito and Mogahed (2008) find out that the Muslim world is characterized by great diversity and that the prevalent reductionist representations of Muslims in the American media are completely at odds with reality. They further find out that the majority of Muslims (93%) do not have hostile attitudes towards the United States.

The MESA experts treat the Islamist movements and groups in the Arab and Muslim worlds as socio-political constructs rather than simply reactionary
movements. Beinin and Stork (1997), Beinin (2005) and Esposito (1999) reflect this approach. Esposito and Voll have written extensively on this topic. Their works show that the Islamist parties are responses to modern concerns and that they are conditioned by the contexts in which they operate.

However, some scholars sometimes fall into the trap of essentialization. Cole (2006a) depicts a biased image of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, using such words as “radical,” “extreme,” “assassins,” “fundamentalist” and “terrorist” throughout the article to describe this movement. The crackdown on the Brothers by the Nasser regime in the 1960s is, in Cole’s view, justified. Even brutal torture and violations of basic human rights of those arrested are played down, since “one person [Cole] knew personally” told him something to that effect! A double standard is at play here also. The criminal actions of the regime against those arrested are out of question: they are justified after all, and those people (women included), it seems, do not have any human rights. No differences are drawn between the various groups and the ideologies they adopted. To Cole, they are one and the same, whether they are violent groups or “integrists”—a designation he rejected out of hand as inappropriate. “While many Muslim fundamentalists in contemporary Egypt are willing to avoid violence and to work for their goals civilly [the implication is that essentially they are violent; they renounce violence, perhaps temporarily, only to secure political gains], their ultimate aim nevertheless includes the imposition of their interpretation of Islamic law on the whole society and the establishment of an Islamic state that is unlikely to have democratic contours” (p. 284). Mere assertions unsupported by evidence are emphatically offered as the whole evidence. Moreover, such prognostication and bare unsupported anticipation of events are surely no sound ground for drawing conclusions in research.
Moreover, Cole argues that those peaceful movements are not forces of pluralism and shall not be seen as such. The “radical fundamentalists, in so far as they have a significant but minority social base, and in so far as they have repeatedly attempted to overthrow the state, have certainly contributed to greater authoritarianism on the part of the governmental elite” (Ibid., p. 284). They do not constitute a seed of democracy and opposition to autocratic regimes, since “Nativism and xenophobia of an unexamined sort seem to be more important as key issues to fundamentalists than lack of democracy. Their ideal “Islamic” state would not be a parliamentary democracy, in any case” (Ibid., p. 283). That they contribute to civil society is a myth: the “attempt to put these groups under the sign of “civil society” and to set up a match called “civil society versus the authoritarian state,” … is to commit a significant category error. It conjures a false dawn of hope, that from intolerance and authoritarian discourse democracy may emerge” (p. 280). Apart from the rhetoric and tropes, a hostile attitude is prevalent. Indeed, Cole (2009) admits his “deep personal dislike of Middle Eastern fundamentalisms” including those which “are not necessarily violent” (2009: 4). This is not to object to Cole’s like or dislike of certain movements for that is a personal matter. The problem, however, is when that dislike determines the discourse and is projected into the analysis of supposedly objective research. Cole feels obliged to remind his readers that his call for engagement “signals not an agreement with [the Islamists] but a pragmatic conviction that as citizens of a single globe, we have to settle our conflicts through dialogue” (Ibid., p. 4).

None of those movements, according to Cole, is a political movement, but rather groupings of religious fanatics seeking to impose a reign of fear through imposing their interpretation of Islam. They have disturbed the regimes whose
authoritarian rule is justified since “no leader of a civil state wishes to face the fate met by the Pahlavi elite in 1979” (2006a: 284). In short, in Cole’s account, Islamist activists are cultist terrorists and fanatics, forces of disruption and disorder. Government repression is an adequate answer to them (Ibid., p. 282). To justify all these premises, government accounts, he argues, must be considered accurate accounts of these movements (his main focus is the mainstream Muslim Brotherhood), while the movement’s account of itself shall be disregarded and discarded. (Ibid., pp. 275, 283). Since this is contrary to social science which rejects demonization and purely prejudicial representations—as Cole denies the Islamists to represent themselves and even assumes the role of a Mufti to declare them a devious sect within Islam (Ibid., p. 283), the answer, he elucidates, lies in Orientalism in its Weberian manifestation that sees the world in binary polarities of good and evil, modern and traditional, developed and backward, rational and irrational, and above all, speaks for the ‘other’ and denies them self-representation. Cole refers to this Weberian model as “very fruitful in the study of modern Muslim movements,” but—it hardly needs adding—not other fundamentalisms (Ibid., p. 284).

Viewed from a broader perspective, all the points made by Cole are, in fact, a reversion of course, a return to the Orientalist tradition as espoused by its earlier adherents and an effort to establish a norm by reintroducing an outmoded methodology for the study of Islamist activism, based on the idea of ‘exceptionalism’. It is also an expression of rejection, reversal of course of the work done by many academics such as Esposito and Augustus Norton, who view Islamist activism as a “reformation” movement within Islam.

Among the most influential academics in the field is John Esposito. An outsider to the field by training, Esposito was able to secure a central position within
the ranks of Middle Eastern studies. Esposito focuses his attention on the politics of the Muslim world, and especially Islamist activism therein. Since the beginning of his career, he rejects the Orientalist view of Islam and the Muslim world. His approach combines both textual and empirical analysis. However, unlike the essentialist textuality of the Orientalists, Esposito’s textual analysis is framed within its immediate contexts.

Esposito’s studies of Islamist politics are characterized by a remarkable presence of ambivalence and indecisiveness in passing judgments regarding Islamist activism, a feature that is reflected in the “or-paradigm”—i.e. the interrogative “or” that permeates many of the headings and titles in his writings—and question marks that come at the end of titles of his books, chapters, sub-sections and articles. While he often abstains from passing flat judgments, his ambivalence often takes the course of suspicion—often justified in the light of evidence—of the Islamists. More often than not, he does not provide concrete answers, and the final decision is left to the reader. The ambivalence set forward in the titles and headings is carried throughout and persists to the end of his books. He struggles to bring the various factors making up a certain issue, yet he is often constrained by the policy issues and the concern for American hegemony. This concern functions as the ultimate point of reference in his evaluations of the Islamists. Understandably there is a degree of sympathy and awareness of reality as opposed to textuality-based essentialist analysis. In the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001 events, this seems to be reversed, however. A proportionate level of objectivity is achieved, yet it is subdued in the end to political considerations.
Esposito always seizes the opportunity to explain the weakness of the Orientalist notion of Arab/Muslim exceptionalism. By framing the Muslim experience within a global context, Esposito shows that Islam is not unique or exceptional as the Orientalists maintain. He emphasizes the realities of the Muslim world in their postcolonial settings, and whatever failings there might be are recognized as throes of an “Islam in transition”. Esposito and Voll (1996) write,

[p]eople who formally and publicly oppose democracy or who are willing to describe their programs as nondemocratic usually represent a marginal sect or group on the extreme of the religio-political spectrum, such as the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, or some of the ultra-orthodox Jewish groups in Israel. There are other, more mainstream groups that reject the term “democracy” as a foreign term that is not applicable within their tradition or society because there are other more appropriate, indigenous conceptualizations for describing the rights of popular participation and freedom. However, most politically conscious people around the globe express their aspirations for political participation, freedom, and equality in terms of “democracy.”… Recent democratization occurs in the context of globalization of most significant aspects of human life. … Even the world of radical extremists committed to distinctive and parochial causes is cosmopolitan in its connections and interactions. (pp. 11-12)

The sum of this argument is that while Muslim-majority countries have some specificity, they are on the whole part of the global context and can be understood within this framework.

Esposito and Donohue’s (2007), *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives*, offers insight into how Esposito’s thought is formulated and explains his textual inclinations. Those writings—especially of idealist writers such as Maududi and Qutb—can scarcely be considered as the ideological base of the current line adopted by the mainstream Islamists. They do account to some extent for the actions of some deviant violent groups that interpreted them in a certain manner and resorted to violence. Similarly, the role of the Iranian revolution is exaggerated. “Sunni as well as Shii activist organizations, extending from Egypt (the moderate Muslim
Brotherhood and radical al-Jihad) to Malaysia (ABIM, or the Malaysian Youth Movement, and the militant PAS) drew inspiration from the example of Iran” (p. 18). Moreover, Esposito and Donohue attach a prominent role for the notion of *hegira*. They explain that the “importance of the hijra (hegira), the emigration of Muhammad and his companions from Mecca to Medina, cannot be overestimated” (Ibid., p. 27). Esposito returns to the notion of *hegira* in 2002 and assigns it a central position in the analysis of the emergence of various peaceful as well as violent movements in the Muslim world. Esposito’s textuality embroils him in texts and sometimes threatens to underestimate context. To many scholars the failure of all predictability of the Iranian revolution translates into confident prediction. Unpredictability of politics in the Muslim world soon shifts to strong predictability that falls sometimes to essentialism.

At any rate, the facile generalizations of Orientalism are avoided by the social scientists. While, for instance, the essentialists lump the various trends in the Arab and Muslim worlds together, often anachronistically, stamping them with an essence accrued to Islam, MESA scholars differentiate between the disparate groups and contextualize their orientations in the milieus in which they function and in broader contexts. Consequently, MESA scholars do not attribute religious resurgence in the Muslim world to “Muslim exceptionalism”. Rather, they view it as part of a larger global religious resurgence that exempts none of the world’s great religions including Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. This goes in complete opposition to the discourse of the essentialists who view fundamentalism as especially Islamic, fed ostensibly by a fanatical religion.

The same applies to other social and political developments. Case studies inform much of the research done by MESA scholars on various topics. The move towards accuracy and specificity is reflected in the increasing orientation of many
scholars towards expertise on specific countries and particular thematic domains, instead of the claims to comprehensive knowledge on the Arab and Muslim affairs. Distinctions within the Islamic world are emphasized in the discourse of the MESA scholars. Referring to the American occupation of Iraq, Cole (2009) writes, “Islam Anxiety is so powerful [among the political elite] that it obliterates the distinctions between secular and religious, between Sunni and Shiite, and between Iraqi Salafis or Sunni revivalists and al-Qaeda” (p. 116). Similarly, Esposito (1982) observes that the tendency to cluster all Islamist organizations under a single rubric “creates a false picture of a single united movement and fails to distinguish between relatively separate organizations whose agendas are conditioned by their divergent experiences” (p. 420).

Esposito’s article (1982) reflects the fact that Esposito was from the start discontented with the traditional Orientalist legacy. Since the beginning of his career, he was concerned with the adequate approach to study Islam and Muslim politics. Sociological case studies occupy a central position in his writings. Esposito combines case studies with an examination of the role of religion as a factor among many others in shaping people’s consciousness. The article sheds light on Esposito’s obsession of understanding Muslim politics in its social, political, economic and, to a lesser extent, cultural contexts. Esposito’s approach combines both textual analysis and contemporary circumstances and how these come to bear on the various and diverse interpretations of Islam, or looking into “text and context”. However, Esposito (2002) draws so heavily on textual analysis that this seems to go away with the contexts and real-world developments, and even fossilize Islam.

Some scholars have criticized Esposito for the essentialization of Islam. Burke (1998) remarks that Esposito’s The Islamic Threat “counterposes the Islamist current
as oppositional to modernity, rather than viewing it as a manifestation of an alternate form of modernity” and that “it mislocates the actual historical relationship of Islamism to nationalism and modernization.” Moreover, in spite of its intentions, The Islamic Threat “accepts the civilizationist premises of the Weberian model and thereby ends up replicating the weaknesses of previous analysts” (p. 498). Ismail (2006) argues that many studies of contemporary Islamist activism “take the history of Islam as a point of departure” and construct that history in a particular way. Furthermore, this construction functions as “a methodological objective”. It enables scholars to slot the Islamist movement “into a known chronological narrative” (p. 4). She cites Esposito, Voll, and, to a larger extent, Yvonne Haddad as examples of this approach. She criticizes Esposito for basing his analysis in a “unitary understanding of the religion”. She also remarks that although Esposito “acknowledges the specificity of the socio-political contexts in which [Islamist] movements emerged, his underlying premise is a totality called Islam explained as the basic beliefs of Muslims and the ideas they all share” (Ibid., pp. 4-5). Moreover, Esposito’s explanations assign religious beliefs a primary role in guiding the individual and collective actions of Muslims. Hence, according to Ismail, Esposito misses altogether the way beliefs interact with the social occurrences of everyday life in disparate contexts (p. 5). Although the charge that Esposito bases his explanation in a “unitary understanding” of Islam is somewhat exaggerated, Ismail’s points do pinpoint the textual sway in Esposito’s analysis. Indeed, by focusing on religious beliefs and assigning them disproportionate primacy, Esposito borders on depicting an essentialist portrait of Islam. This is especially true of (2002a) into which much of the personal reaction to the events of 9/11 is projected.
MESA scholars have been vociferously critical of U.S. policy toward the Arab world and Iran. They outline the dangers of American imperial intervention in the region, and counterpose the argument of those scholars who dismiss the record of American policy as irrelevant. Haddad (1991) draws attention to the disingenuity of Lewis’s argument of a unilateral massive “Muslim rage”. She explains that dismissing the various factors of anti-Americanism—such as the unconditional American support for Israel, support of authoritarian regimes while at the same time displaying oblivious disregard for the aspirations of the peoples, and the hegemonic American intervention since the 1940s— is both “disingenuous” and “irresponsible” (pp. 5-6). Esposito repeatedly criticizes the American officials for failing to “walk the way [they] talk,” especially with regard to such issues as democratization, human rights, and upholding pluralism. He also criticizes the American tendency towards an exclusive use of force to counteract the violent acts committed by some Muslims as that would only result, in his view, in further radicalization of moderate elements in Muslim societies (2002a: 160).

Haddad (2004a) views the domestic measures enjoined by the American government in response to 9/11 as “anti-Muslim rather than anti-terrorism” (Ibid., p. 43). She remarks that the PATRIOT (Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism) Act is a violation of human rights since it “in essence lifted all legal protection of liberty for Muslims and Arabs in the United States” and “sanctions the monitoring of individuals, organizations, and institutions without notification” (Ibid., p. 42). According to Haddad, the provisions in security measures amounted to “a declared war on a Muslim definition of the role of women in society”; the establishment of a bureau in the department of State specifically
engaged in liberating Muslim women appears to be indulged in liberating Muslim women from “Islam and its values” (Ibid., p. 43). Haddad draws attention to the hegemonic policies of the United States in the Arab world. Such excessive policies include the monitoring of curricula in Arab and Muslim countries by U.S. embassies “for anti-Western, anti-American, or anti-Israeli content”. Haddad comments that it “appears to many that the only “Islam” that can be taught is one approved by the CIA” (Ibid., p. 43). Furthermore, American policies towards the Arab and Muslim countries since the 1960s have been antagonizing of the Arabs and Muslims, and “continue to trouble and alienate” the majority of U.S. Muslim citizens and Muslims elsewhere. She lays the blame on the American policy-makers who, in spite of the “dramatic acceleration of interaction between American society and the Muslim world, failed to draw a “significant positive” image of Muslims, and continue to ignore Muslim sensibilities especially in regard to such things as American support for the state of Israel, despite the latter’s violation of the civil, political and human rights of its Christian and Muslim citizens … Proclamation by the State Department of its advocacy of human rights, pluralism and minority rights as an important foundation of American policy in the world are increasingly viewed by Muslims as hypocritical. (Haddad, 2000: 24)

The double standards of American policy toward the Arab and Muslim worlds are viewed by many MESA experts as having a damaging influence on the image of the U.S. in the Arab and Muslim worlds. The lead-up to the invasion of Iraq and the fake evidence in its justification as well as the violations that emerged in the aftermath of the occupation were met by denunciation from many in MESA. Their attitude crystallized at times to an anti-imperialist position. Brand (2005), for example, proclaims that all of those “shameful, deplorable and/or illegal episodes were made possible by the empire’s creation of an atmosphere in which inconvenient information is suppressed, evidence to support lies and crimes is manufactured, and
the outcome is redefined as patriotic policy” (p. 11). Similarly, Cole (2009) outlines the dangers of antagonizing Muslims: the “American right wing invokes Islam Anxiety to ensure that the United States does not depart Iraq, and have discovered that nothing inspires greater Islamophobia than mentioning al-Qaeda” (p. 115). The opposition to American policy in the Arab world becomes more vociferously outspoken in the aftermath of the invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq.

The rejection of research priorities as defined by the government has been a frequent question in MESA over the last two decades. This position reached a climax in the wake of the events of 9/11/2001. Beinin (2003c) complains that the “holders of state power have always tried to impose an intellectual agenda compatible with their interests” (p. 14). Brand (2005) readdressed this issue: “contemporary evidence suggests that the empire today is less inclined to listen to academics than in the past” (p. 15). In a similar vein, Anderson (2004) emphasized the “responsibilities imposed by an academic life” especially in times of “deeply divisive debate and conflict” (p. 2). She explains that scholarly responsibility is a crucial factor for the health of the American society and the world as a whole. Anderson insists that MESA scholars “must remain faithful” to the “search for truth … even, perhaps especially, as policymakers seem distracted or disinterested” (p. 14). The restructuring of priorities is embedded in the MESA scholars’ sense of intellectual integrity and academic responsibility, which transcend the agenda of the government and go beyond the simplistic assertions and facile explanations rampant in the Orientalist discourse and the media. This is not a purely intellectual endeavor, however. Rather, it is coupled with a sense of duty to U.S. hegemony and the protection of American interests in the long run. Anderson (2003) argues that ‘truth’ and ‘power’ are inseparable, and that
“the state does not stand as the sole proxy for power”. Rather, social scientists should act as manufacturers of power, too (p. 107).

It needs to be asserted that Said’s critique of the trilateral corporate institutionalization of a unified discourse on Arabs and Islam—with the government, the media and the experts as its pillars—has undergone change as MESA broke away from the corporate alliance in the way Said presented it. A meticulous effort to pursue empirically valid knowledge on the Arab and Muslim worlds has characterized the work of MESA scholars since the early 1980s. As that “search for truth”—as Anderson (2004: 14) and Haddad (1991a: 4) call it—crystallizes into a body of knowledge incompatible with the expansionist role the U.S. plays in the Arab world, the government shows ever decreasing enthusiasm for the MESA expertise and declined to take these scholars’ views as a guide to American policy towards the region.

The alienation of MESA is further enforced by the emergence of the think tanks which rival it in the media and policy circles. Early on, Haddad (1991) reflects upon this issue:

the press has its list of accredited authorities from research institutions independent of the academic structure, not only to provide expertise on the area but also to contextualize and define reality, generating the “spin” as to what are the legitimate questions to ask when interpreting events in the Middle East. Researchers from within Washington beltway think tanks and former security officers have acquired a certain legitimacy in the eyes of the media as the experts on the Middle East[.] (Haddad, 1991: 4)

She poses the question, “Can we abandon the search for truth in order to be admitted to the hallowed halls of the opinion shapers and the decision makers?” (Ibid., p. 4). Evidently this question seems to identify “search for truth” as the reason for exclusion of the MESA academics from the media and government circles. It also shows that
American media and policy-makers prefer those who uphold partisan views conforming to the agenda of the government unquestionably.

Brand (2005) expresses a similar view. She argues that the government seeks advice “not from a range of experts, but rather from the likeminded, so as to reinforce the argumentation or rationale for a policy line already selected”. Those scholars are consulted by the policy-makers “precisely because of their ideological orientation” (p. 15). Likewise, Khalidi (1995) expresses concern over the future of the field in the globalization era and questions the wisdom of continuing on a path of alienation from the government in a changing world. According to Khalidi, at least “during the Cold War, it was possible to reject outright the priorities of the policy-makers, and still find a receptive hearing among foundations and other possible sources of research support. It may be that this will be less possible in the future” (p. 2). Khalidi’s plea reflects a deep sense of crisis in MESA that is also felt by other scholars.

The marginalization of MESA by the American government lies ultimately in varying epistemological approaches to power rather than in teleological divergences. Whereas the successive U.S. administrations tend to view power as an almost exclusive exercise of force, the social scientists draw attention to the subtleties of power, enriched by an understanding of the complex realities of the Arab world and the risks involved in pursuing an aggressive line of policy based mainly on the systematic use of force. In the MESA scholars’ view, a broadening of perspectives and adopting a mediocre position that rests on accommodation is also necessary for the preservation of American long-term interests in the region. Even the “war on terrorism” is not just a military battle to be won by dropping huge amounts of bombs, but also a battle for the hearts and minds of Muslims (Esposito and Mogahed 2008a: 184)
This particular side of it can be won only by balanced diplomacy and living up to the American ideals. Esposito and Mogahed (2008b) maintain that the victory of the U.S. in the war on terrorism depends upon diplomacy.

Hence, the accusations leveled at MESA scholars by the of being apologists for terrorism and Islamist activism, and of adopting anti-American positions polemical in nature. MESA experts remain at the heart of U.S. power concentration and have not departed from that line. Nonetheless, their empirically informed analyses and explanations tend to accommodate the ‘other’ in a constructive way beneficial to the American interests in the first place. The epistemological approach they espouse is squarely placed in contemporary reality rather than anachronistically transplanted in a distant past with all its travesties with the present. It is also anchored in their awareness that the projection of past experiences into present circumstances is risky and antithetical to the spirit of the modern world which has become so intricately intertwined and interdependent that it cannot be easily controlled by sole reliance on “hard power”.

The transformation of MESA over the last three decades into an empirical field seeking empirically valid knowledge has had its limitations, challenges and setbacks. But the opening up of the field to the ‘other’ in terms of appreciating the other’s aspirations and concerns have also brought a sea change in the status of the field and the quality of knowledge it proliferates. Serious and gigantic steps were achieved concerning the perception and representation of the Arabs/Muslims and Islam. More importantly, candid self-criticism has been a remarkable feature in the field, not merely regarding current issues and concerns, but in viewing the past as well. Haddad (1991a), for example, observes that the American scholars’ “knowledge
and depiction of Islam have been colored by religious as well as political and cultural motivations and presuppositions. Ideas and attitudes have crept into much of [their] scholarship that have tended to distort rather than to enlighten” (p. 5).

Esposito is especially vocal in expressing the need to transcend bias and cultural prejudices that creep into the study of other societies and experiences. He stresses this need especially in relation to the study of Islamist activism in particular and Muslim politics in general. Esposito (1990) sketches the obstacles that still persist in the study of Islam and Islamist activism. These include the secular presuppositions and expectations which are embedded in the modernization theory, and based in the secular American worldview. Besides, the study of Muslim politics is constrained by focus on the Westernized elites and the concomitant result of viewing Arab and Muslim societies through a Western prism. As a result, scholarship on Islam tended to be “narrow and myopic” as it associates secularization with modernization and religion with backwardness, and links modernization and Westernization as inseparable twin historical processes (Ibid., pp. 2-3).

Bulliet (2004a) puts forth a similar argument, observing that the American government, experts and the media have been involved in a constant search for individuals and groups who shared Western views and ideals, ignoring the wider reality, especially as those “men-on-the-move” proved marginal or unpopular. The question, according to Bulliet, is whether American government, experts and media alike “are willing to jettison the assumptions of the 1950s” or whether they “will forever be on the lookout for men-on-the-move” who can recreate the American experience in the Muslim world. He observes that American scholars are still
reluctant to conced[e] an alternative vision of modernity that represents the Muslim rather than the Western perspective (p. 115).

MESA scholars appreciate the diversity of Muslim societies and the fact that such diversity is the norm rather than the exception. Hence, the argument that the Muslim world and Muslim behavior are governed by a unitary unchanging essence is completely dispensed with. Many scholars have challenged the conception that the whole Muslim world is moved by a siren’s call from a certain legendary figure presumed to be the speaker for Islam. Bulliet (2004a) shows that empirically there are as many Islams as there are specific cultures and contexts (pp. 141-143). He rightly observes that, rather than being a fixed closed inert system, Islam is really constructed by those who uphold it as a faith depending on the cultural context in question. He shows how Indonesian Islam is tinted with the local cultural norms and customs that often date back to a distant past. Similarly, Indian Islam, Bulliet opines, is peculiarly Indian. Bulliet (1994) offers a complementary reading of Islamic history (p. 203ff) that grasps the multiple voices emerging from a relatively peripheral position in Muslim societies and moving steadily towards the center and relates this situation to the current Islamist activism. This dynamic movement towards the center has always been a factor introducing a “process of change” (p. 188). Haddad and Smith demonstrate the variety and rich diversity of the Muslim communities in the United States. They opine that there are as many Islams as there are Muslim ethnic groups in the U.S. (1994: xx-xxi). Moreover, they show how the American context has stamped the practices of American Muslims, including migrants. Haddad (1991b) states that American Muslims’ understanding of Islam has been “shaped and reshaped in the
American Milieu‖ (p. 4), and that American Muslims constitute a plethora of orientations rather than a monolithic bloc (p. 5).

The study of Islam by the MESA scholars has also challenged the cultural stereotypes and the Orientalist legacy. These scholars revoke the Orientalist assumption that an Islamic essence ostensibly accounts for the series of absences they identify in the Muslim world such as the absence of democracy, the absence of civil society, the absence of good governance, the absence of institutions, etc. The majority of MESA scholars views Islam from the broader perspective of comparative religion and places it on a par with other religious traditions. Esposito and Voll (1996) observe that like “all of the major worldviews and religious traditions, Islam has a full spectrum of potential symbols and concepts for support of absolutism and hierarchy, as well as foundations for liberty and equality” (p. 7). The various movements are largely placed in their contexts, and their ideas are examined with a large measure of detachment instead of outright demonization that is typical of the discourse of the Orientalists and the neo-Orientalists. Esposito and Voll continue,

it is important to examine the conceptual resources within Islam for democratization. These include both the ideas and concepts of egalitarian participation and concepts of legitimate opposition. Without a relatively thorough discussion of these ideas and ideals, it is difficult to understand the programs and aspirations of the Islamic movements in the contemporary world. (Ibid., p. 7)

The “clash of civilizations” thesis is rejected by the MESA academics. Many of these scholars were quick to disentangle the wily net weaved by the Orientalists and neo-Orientalists. Leading scholars within Middle East studies rebutted the arguments of the clash theorists, brought out the other side of the civilizational encounter as well as the constructive roles and dynamic interactions between the Muslim world and the West. In a series of publications and public statements,
scholars such as Yvonne Haddad, John Esposito, Richard Bulliet, Roy Muttahedeh, Zachary Lockman, John Voll, Rashid Khalidi, and Joel Beinin outlined the shortcomings and fallacies of the clash model.

Voll (1994b) discusses the notion of the “clash of civilizations” and “civilization” as an analytical framework. He maintains that both are misleading, even outright erratic. Voll opines that the world cannot even be classified into such hard self-conscious compartments as civilizations since these do not exist in the world of reality. Such approach, Voll maintains, arouses difficulties and blurs understanding. Whereas that may have been useful in the analysis of pre-modern times (and even in that case the world was not divided into separate units each forming a separate civilization), it is no more applicable to modern and current circumstances. “If premodern, large-scale, complex societies were “civilizations,” then it might be better not to use that same term for modern complex societies since definitions of distinguishing characteristics will inevitably lead to anomalies like the exclusion of Greece from “The West.”” Furthermore, “civilizations” and “civilizational forms” are a phase of world history which we have now gone past. The interaction between the Muslim world and the West cannot be understood in terms of civilizational analysis “because neither are “civilizations” in terms of the definitions of the discussion.” Such a difficulty, according to Voll, doubles in the present context of globalization (p. 19).

Bulliet (2004a) offers a completely antithetical view to that of the clash theorists. He argues that the clash thesis is reductionist, and instead proposes a case for “Islamo-Christian civilization”. Obviously to Bulliet, as his title The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization suggests, the two civilizations meet and merge on many
issues, and the nature of their interaction has been a dynamic one characterized by hybridity and fusion besides conflict, and even at times within the frame of conflict itself. In Bulliet’s view, the conceptualization of the clash theorists is the last link in a long tradition of “fourteen centuries of fear and polemic” (2004a: 13), and an extension of what he calls the “Islamophobic froth” (Ibid., p. 8). It is a continuation of the centuries-long Orientalist polemic that saw in Islam a threat to Christianity and the West. The “civilizational litmus tests … are intended as rhetorical devices for finding Islam wanting rather than as serious questions” (Ibid., p. 12). Bulliet further opines that the Muslim world and the West are “historical twins whose resemblance did not cease when their paths parted” (Ibid., p. 43).

In most of his books and public appearances, Esposito lays bare the dangers of seeing the world through the “clash of civilizations” hypothesis. He also actively participates in symposiums of dialogue and constructive mutual understanding that seek to develop alternative channels of viewing civilizational encounters.

The relations between the Muslim world and the West over the past fourteen centuries are not viewed through the solely conflictual prism of the Orientalists. Here, too, one gets a mosaic picture well summarized by Yvonne Haddad (1991a):

> [t]he encounter between Islam and the West dates back to the formative period of Islam, providing a variety of perspectives honed over centuries of conflict and cooperation, diatribe and dialogue, hatred and tolerance, community hostility and personal friendships. In a sense, both communities are hostages to their collective memories and terrorized by those who dabble in revisionist history, selectively ransacking fifteen centuries of encounter in ways that often enhance feelings of fear and hatred[.] (p. 5)

Esposito underscores the fact that the similarities between the Muslim world and the West outweigh their differences, as he emphasizes the common roots of Islam and
Christianity as Abrahamic monotheistic religions (2002b: 70-71). This is demonstrated in what he refers to as the “Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition” (Ibid., pp. xiii, xv).

Bulliet (2004a) demonstrates a protracted case for an “Islamo-Christian civilization,” based on the rich historical encounters between the Muslim world and the West, which he sees as “historical twins” (p. 43). Bulliet (2007) criticizes the confrontationalist approach and the way it is constructed. According to him, Western historians focus on the violence motif in the relations of the Muslim world to the West, while omitting the violence perpetrated by the West. He remarks, “today’s ideologues concoct a myth of unending and merciless hostility between Islam and the West. But even the military tale is selectively told”.

Esposito and Voll pay considerable attention to the voices of dialogue in the Muslim world, while at the same time emphasizing the voices of exclusion in the fringes of Muslim societies. This latter category is not presented as the sole representative of Islam and Muslims. Exclusionists in the Muslim world are presented as voices among many others, not the only voices to be found. Esposito and Voll (2001) reflect this amalgamation of diverse voices as influential in the construction of Muslim consciousness in the contemporary world. They present a myriad of voices, conditioned in current circumstances, motivated by present concerns and envisioning future hopes. Similarly, Esposito and Voll (2000) draw attention to the voices of dialogue in the Muslim world. Besides Ayatollah Khomeini there is Mohammed Khatami, against Osama bin Laden stands Anwar Ibrahim, and countering the myopic and exclusionist rhetoric of Mullah Omar is the calm participatory tone of Abdur-Rahman Wahid. However, focus is placed on the religious, political and intellectual
discourses in the Muslim world. Although those voices are presented in their varied orientations and approaches in the works of Esposito, Voll and other scholars, the role of the more popular reformers—intellectuals and others—such as Amr Khalid in the Arab world and Tariq Ramadan in Europe as well as many others in various countries went completely unnoticed till Esposito (2010) draws attention to these influential voices. The focus of reformers in this latter category on the media has gained them a wide audience in the Muslim communities.

This approach, however, is far from the idealistic situation in the ranks of MESA. It is restricted to the works of a few scholars while the majority of scholars continue to focus their attention on the voices of the extremist trends. This obsession with the exclusionist and violent trends is not meant solely to demean and demonize Muslims, even though it has this unintended consequence. Rather, it is rooted in the preoccupation with what they see erroneously as a deeply rooted and popular trend in the Muslim world; an aggravating problem that has to be resolved. Hunter (2009) remarks that Western scholarship on Islam over the last three decades has been preoccupied with the extremist fringe within the broader revivalist movement (p. xix). This preoccupation intensified after the events of September 11, 2001. The competing discourses have been underestimated due to this focus on radical discourse. This is reinforced by the lack of recognition of the fact that the extremists are incapable of dominating the intellectual and operational spheres in the Muslim world. Hunter draws attention to the thought of “reformers” in the Arab world, Iran and elsewhere (p. xx), who fit the category of what Olivier Roy (2004) calls “post-Islamism” (p. 2).

However, MESA scholars’ contributions in this regard remain within the bounds of intellectual and scholarly enquiry. Despite the excesses that penetrate their writings, they are not engulfed by the newly-constructed field of terrorology that
dominates the research agenda in the think tanks. Terrorism emerges as a theme—usually exaggerated, it is true—but it is contextualized in a broader perspective of competing views in the Muslim world. The somewhat balanced focus on terrorism leads the right wing pundits to attack MESA scholars as apologists for terrorism. While some scholars in MESA view the contemporary situation in the Muslim world as “Islam in evolution” (Esposito and Voll, 1996:7), others, focusing mainly on the violent trends, see the current scene as “Islam in revolution”. The impact of the Iranian revolution on the latter category proves enduring.

The overarching category in the work of some MESA experts on the so-called revivalist movement is that the Muslim world is going through a transition that would eventually lead to an “Islamic Reformation”. This has often led to confusion since it is determined by preconceptions and expectations. Cole (2006b) provides a good example of this in the context of democracy in Iraq. Although he does capture the context in which the urge for democratization emerges in the discourse of the Ayatollahs, he is quick to jump to the conclusion that an “Islamic Enlightenment” is taking place, ignoring the evident motivations and consequences of that supposed “enlightenment”. His expectations are mirrored in his sanguine tone. He compares the Ayatollahs’ democratic convictions to those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, commenting that:

something new is clearly being born in Iraq that does not in the least resemble the theocratic systems of Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr or Ayatollah Khomeini. It is being born of Iraqi history and thought, and as much in reaction against the US as in cooperation with it… [The Ayatollahs’] democratic thinking is a manifestation of “post-Islamism,” and very possibly the beginning of the Islamic Enlightenment[.] (p. 26; emphasis added)
Certain social actors are identified as the agents of that “Reformation” and then dropped in favor of other actors who are deemed more ‘moderate’ and more secular-minded. This is the case with Esposito in much of his writings, and Hunter (2009). To these, Islam is seen in need of a “Reformation” in the European model, and that the West has a role to play in accelerating that “Reformation,” especially through encouraging and accommodating its agents. Other MESA scholars deal with the competing discourses and trends in the Muslim world pragmatically without much concern for ‘reform’ as such; they deal with the emerging trends as merely a problem to be resolved—perhaps through accommodation—from the vantage point of American interests. A measure of distrust is present in both views. Voll (1994a) views the current Islamist activism solely in the light of the Muslim encounter with the West which, he maintains, has been dominated by conflict and confrontation. Voll opines that the Muslim world has gone through successive stages of revival and resistance, response and rejection, which eventually took the form of the present resurgence. Hence, according to Voll, potential confrontation against this resurgence is likely to continue (p. 380). Voll’s view places Islamist activism in the context of the continuities of history, a sheer reaction to the West, and emanating from a combative position.

The proponents of “Reformation” view the intellectual and political stirrings in the Muslim world as a gradual move towards an “Islamic Reformation” that may end in an “Islamic Enlightenment,” and hence secularization of Islam. Nonetheless, the projection of ideas and historical, political and religious experiences that took place in a definite context tends to distort and obscure rather than clarify the unfolding scene in the Muslim world, as it ignores the peculiarities of both experiences and the contexts in which each of them emerged. The American
discourse on “Reformation” has moved to center stage as a group of Muslim intellectuals in the United States are engaged in defining the contours of an “Islamic Reformation”. These include academics, researchers and activists; and their work is produced in collaboration with influential MESA academics such as John Esposito. This trend offers a revisionist reading of the Arab and Muslim intellectuals from within the “Reformation” framework, and seeks to provide its own interpretation of Islam. Muqtedar Khan—one of Esposito’s students—(2003), for instance, draws a comparison between Sayyed Qutb and John Locke, seeing Qutb as the “John Locke of the Islamic World”. Hashemi (2009) points out the inadequacy of projecting the French experience of the Enlightenment to the Muslim experience, emphasizing instead the affinities of the Muslim experience to the English one. Other such scholars include the late Ismail Faruki, Syed Hussein Vali Nasr, Ziauddin Sardar, Mohammed Ayyub, Asgher Ali Engineer, Khalid Abu el-Fadl, and many others.

On the whole, although a comparative framework might offer some insights into the unfolding panorama in the Muslim world, it does not offer the whole explanation; and when it is carried too far, it runs the risk of blurring the peculiar dynamics of the emerging movements as a consequence of ignoring vital factors specific to these movements. The least among those problems of projection is its anachronistic nature as well as the plethora of historical and global factors in the contemporary setting. In other words, these movements are a response to internal and external developments and challenges, whereas the European experience was in response to exclusively internal challenges and developments. The determining factor remains the political concerns of the scholars, which set limits to the accommodationist approach. The argument for the engagement of the Muslim world is discarded when it is deemed to influence American interests. Even the advocates of
democratization and liberalization of the political systems in the Arab world are restrained by a prevalent sense of ambivalence and agnosticism as it might bring to power undesired forces. Such a tendency is reflected in the swaggering tones in their writings. In examining the issue of the “Islamic threat”, Esposito (1999) tends to construct a middle position shifting grounds between “threat” and “challenge” with a sense of agnosticism, especially where the Islamist activism and democratization are concerned.

**Strictures and Limitations: The Western Weltanschauung and the Study of Islam**

Despite the considerable progress that has been achieved in the study of Islam and Arab/Muslim societies by the MESA scholars, some obstacles still persist to varying degrees in the works of these scholars. These have to do with epistemological and teleological views and attitudes; and are fanned by developments in the Arab and Muslim worlds, especially the Islamist resurgence in its various manifestations. The historical relations between the Muslim world and the West remain in the background of the conceptualizations by some scholars of the nature of interaction between the two sides. Undeniably, conflict has been a significant factor in the West-Muslim world encounter, and Islam has long been regarded as a problem by the West (Hourani, 1980: 20), sometimes to be feared, sometimes to be subdued and quite often to be dealt with and a problem to be resolved. As Hourani (1980) puts it, it “is very easy to see the historical relationship of Christians and Muslims in terms of holy war, of Crusade and jihad, and there is some historical justification for it” (p. 4). It is this “historical justification,” valid and indisputable in its own right, that—when carried too far or brought solely to account for the present—distorts the larger reality in today’s world. Those historical confrontations, according to Hourani, do not constitute the whole fabric of that encounter; yet they have “created and maintained
an attitude of suspicion and hostility on both sides, and still provide, if not a reason
for enmity, at least a language in which it can express itself”. Nevertheless,

Crusade and jihad do not cover the whole reality of political relations
between Christendom and the world of Islam, and still less do they explain
the attitude of Christians to Islam and of Muslims to Christianity. The
communities which profess the two religions have faced each other across
the Mediterranean for more than a thousand years; with hostility, it is true,
but with a look of uneasy recognition in their eyes. (p. 4)

The trimmings of that historical legacy returned with vigor after three decades
of dismissal as religion was deemed by the modernization theory approach as part of
tradition that was doomed to vanish from the scene sooner or later. The Iranian
revolution and the subsequent rapid developments in the Arab countries and
elsewhere left their mark on the study of the Arab and Muslim worlds. The rise of
Islamically-oriented parties as a political force in many Arab countries since the late
1980s, the emergence of militant groups in Egypt in the 1980s and of the so-called al-
Qaeda in the 1990s seemed to confirm to many that Islam is back in revolution.
Subsequently, the neglect of Islam by the pioneer social scientists in Middle East
studies was made up for with a vengeance. Now the problem is no more the neglect
of Islam but the excesses that penetrate the scholarship of the social scientists. Such
excesses take various forms: the language in which those developments are
expressed, the dominant thematic that command attention, the politics that govern
analysis which turns at times to indictment rather than a quest for understanding, the
blurring of boundaries dictated by a sense of urgency, and the projection of personal
antipathy into the analysis.

At the level of language, arbitrary terminology that is often confusing is
constantly applied to describe various phenomena. It goes without saying that such
labels as “Christian fundamentalism,” “Jewish fundamentalism” or any other
“fundamentalism” attributed to religion for that matter is excluded out of question, as unacceptable and offensive. Yet, it is completely acceptable to refer to “Islamic fundamentalism,” “Islamic terrorism,” “Middle Eastern [Arab, that is] terrorism,” “Islamic militancy,” “Muslim terrorists,” “Muslim terrorism,” and so on. The last two designations are considered by some scholars (e.g. Cole 2009) as objective designations, yet of course not “Christian terrorists,” or “Christian terrorism” as Cole was careful to avoid these labels. While Cole speaks of “Muslim terrorism,” and “Muslim terrorists” with an air of normalcy, he completely avoids “Christian fundamentalists” when referring to the Oklahoma City bombing that was committed by religiously-inspired extremists, blaming the act on personal rather than religious motives (pp. 71-74). The association of terrorism with Islam and Muslims at least in the terminology is an acceptable practice in Middle East studies. For the average Western reader, with little knowledge of Islam and Muslims, the impression that is likely to develop is that terrorism is indeed inspired by an uncompromising spirit of fanaticism in the religion and is deeply entrenched in the Muslim psyche.

Dwelling disproportionately on the extreme fringes of the Muslim societies is a rampant phenomenon. The words of Khomeini labeling America as the “great Satan” and the words of Sadat’s assassin “I have killed the Pharaoh, and I do not fear death” are quoted incessantly and appear as epigraphs, introducing chapters and sections in books. Even categorically rhetorical strategies of appealing to religious passions by secularist dictators are taken beyond their proportions and transformed into signs of a reemerging danger that has to be dealt with. Saddam’s call for jihad during the first Gulf War reiterates constantly in these writings as a sign of resurgent jihadist spirit. The Islamism of Sudan is similarly exaggerated. In this case actually the regime’s behavior is akin to that of other Arab regimes, and there is not much
special about it, except that it is not in good terms with the United States. This fact blinds scholars to the nature of the regime; they constantly depict it as an especially fundamentalist regime, an Islamic state. Had they examined it objectively, they would have found out that it is the same as all other Arab regimes in orientation. Yet, it seems that the designation of a regime as Islamic is a successful indictment strategy. The Sudan is forcibly treated as an Islamic republic, notwithstanding the oddity of such depiction with reality. The same applies to the Iranian context. Scholars incessantly dwell on the “Islamic” republic. In this they share the inflammatory discourse of the Ayatollahs. Beneath that discourse lies a different reality. The eminent Iranologist, Sami Zubaida, (1997) has admirably debunked the myth of the “Islamic republic” in the discourse of the Ayatollahs and Western scholars alike.

However, more basically, why so much obsession with Islamists in power, granting the validity of the representations, statements and conclusions of the American scholars in MESA and beyond? Why are Muslims singled out as a “threat” and/or “challenge” if they make claims to Islam in politics, while others are not? At least scholars are silent about experiences in Western countries. Is not Israel a demonstrably “Jewish state”? And is it not referred to as such by the founders of Zionism and by the Israeli statesmen themselves? In a similar vein, is not the Pope—the leader of all the Catholic communities in the world—the head of the Vatican state? Furthermore, American presidents actually appeal considerably to religion and some of them, such as Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, refer to themselves as “born-again” Christians. Yet, no one takes their explicit religious remarks seriously. One cannot but be struck by the intense religious parlance and sentiment in Jimmy Carter’s *Palestine: Peace, Not Apartheid* (2006) and in his other books. In fact, Carter is engulfed by religious feelings as he refers to Palestine/Israel constantly as the
“Holy Land”; yet, no scholar would designate him as a devout Christian leader. Obviously, piety is a personal matter, but the question here involves the double standards. When Bush referred to the “war on terrorism” as a Crusade, justifications for that blunder by the leader of the most secular state in the world were sought, or at least scholars remained silent about it. Why are Muslims judged by one peculiar harsh standard and others by a benign one? The answer to this question has to be sought in the wider framework of ideology and/or worldview that makes such distinctions possible. Esposito (1999) observes that a “combination of ignorance and stereotyping, history and experience as well as religiocultural chauvinism often blind even the best intentioned when dealing with the Arab and Muslim world” (p. 215).

Since its inception in the post-World War II, the field of Middle East studies—and this also applies to Middle East studies in Europe—has been concerned with the secularization of the Muslim world. Modernization and Westernization are still even today treated as synonymous. The idea of religiously-oriented parties is mostly deemed as reactionary—only as far as the Muslim world is concerned, but not beyond it—or at least demonstrating zealotry. Needless to say, this phenomenon is by no means restricted to the Arab or Muslim worlds. Indeed, many such parties flourish in Europe and the United States, and some of them have seized power in the European countries (Bulliet, 2004a: 126). Religious personalities compete for the highest office in the United States as is the case with the famous American televangelist Pat Robertson in the 1988 elections. It may be worth mentioning that this Robertson has defamed Islam and Prophet Mohammed in the wake of 9/11 events, describing the Prophet as “demon-possessed” and a “pedophile” (Ibid., p. 15).

Nor are Arabs or Muslims alone in showing attachment to religion. Indeed, recent surveys show that 95% of Americans believe in God, including 91% of those
who define themselves as liberal (Ali, 2006: 53-54). Similarly, belief in the Book of Revelation and Armageddon is so widespread that a third of Americans believe in them (Harvey, 2003: 191). Such figures do undermine the claims that the United States is a completely secular country with no role for religion. Sha’ban (2005) provides a detailed account of the role of religion in the American politics and the way Americans see their country in relation to the outside world. “Civil religion” as it is known in the United States demonstrates this clearly. Yet, such facts are completely subverted by the American experts who single out Muslims as especially inclined towards religiosity. Likewise, the fiery rhetoric of religiously-oriented Israeli leaders is ignored. No scholar quoting Khomeini and bin Laden would in the same way quote, say, Rabbi Meir Kahane, the leader of the Kach movement, who electrified the masses in one of his election campaigns by proclaiming: “Give me the power to take care of them [the Arabs] once and for all” which moved the rally to shout “Death to the Arabs and their [Jewish] Leftist friends”. Nor do such hate statements by Kahane figure in their writings:

The Arabs are cancer, cancer, cancer in the midst of us. But there is not a single man who is willing to stand up and say it … I am telling you what each of you thinks deep in his heart: there is only one solution, no other, no partial solution: the Arabs are out! out! … Do not ask me how. Let me become defence minister for two months and you will not have a single cockroach around here! I promise you a clean Eretz Israel! Give me the power to take care of them! (As quoted in Halliday 2003: 190-191; emphasis in the original)

While Hamas and Hizbullah are labeled “terrorist” organizations with impunity, Kahane’s “Kach” is not. By the way, ‘kach’ is a Hebrew word which means “in this manner” or “like this,” indicating the emblem of the movement which shows a hand holding the Jewish Bible and another holding the sword and beneath them is written ‘kach’; i.e. the way for achieving the Zionist ideal.
American scholars and policy-makers have been obsessed with an insatiable search for people who share the Western worldview. As Bulliet (2004a) puts it, the “search for Middle Easterners we could like—because they were like us—put blinders on the Middle East Studies enterprise from the very outset” (p. 111; emphasis in the original). Even in the liberal trend this proved an insurmountable barrier. Beinin and Stork (1997), for instance, write,

To argue for understanding, and for a spirit of dialogic engagement, is not in any way to endorse or favor the trends of Islamist politics. We acknowledge that our personal and collective bonds have been with political forces and individuals in the region who have promoted secularist and universalist approaches to the rights of women and minorities, to egalitarian social and economic development, and to issues of democracy and civil rights. (p. 22; emphasis added)

Such search results in a wild geese chase as focus on change is sought to be imposed from the top down, not vice versa. Norton’s introduction of the civil society paradigm balances this tendency to some extent. The disenchantment of the Arab and Iranian public with change on the American model was not due to an “Islam in revolution” or an exceptional religious fanaticism, but to frustrations with the military juntas which are supported by the United States. The public’s dissatisfaction with the corrupt elites translates into seeking other channels of change; first nationalism and as that waned after the 1967 Six Day War, Islamist activism. It may be noted that the supporters of Islamists do not necessarily share their outlook. Indeed, those representing Islamist activism are a small minority in the Arab and Muslim worlds, not exceeding 15% according to widely accepted estimates even among MESA scholars and Orientalists.

The idea of “Islam” in politics is frightening to the majority of scholars, especially when the sharia is mentioned. Ramadan (2004) observes that in the West “the idea of Sharia calls up all the darkest images of Islam: repression of women,
physical punishments, stoning, and all other such things” (p. 31). This fear can be traced easily in the works of many scholars. Esposito and Voll (1996) express the fear that Islamists “employ Islamic rhetoric and symbols, call for an Islamic solution and the implementation of the Sharia” (p. 197). Cole (2009) modifies his call for engaging the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt due to the fact that they have not given up the slogan “Islam is the answer” (p.78).

The Western secular outlook which is based on the ideal of the separation of church and state—in reality the supposedly complete divorce of religion from politics is questionable, at least as far as American policy towards the Arab and Muslim worlds is concerned—regards the wedding of Islamist rhetoric and practice to politics uncompromisingly as “fundamentalist”. A deeper look, however, would reveal the secularization of Islamist activism as a result of that very process of politicizing it, as Roy (2005/2007) has argued. Although a few scholars—notably Esposito (1999), Esposito and Voll (1996), Khan (2006), and Hashemi (2009)—have paid attention to this fact, seeing it as a transitional stage towards reformation and ultimate secularization, the majority of scholars have not paid enough attention to it.

MESA scholars’ understanding is blurred by their “secular bias” which is “a form of secular fundamentalism” as Esposito (2000: 9; 1999: 258) puts it. Esposito (1993) further opines that many “scholars, who are otherwise thoughtful, fail to realize that their analysis of Muslim societies is strongly influenced, if not directed, by their secular worldview. Because their own research is tinted by the secular outlook, they fail to understand the nature and motivations of religious movements that challenge [American] world views and preconceptions” (p. A44). This leads to the conclusion that “Islam equals Islamic fundamentalism equals radical extremism”
This secular bias becomes more formidable as it turns into a faith, creed, and doctrine, conceived of as competing with a different worldview emanating from a religious tradition or drawing on religious parlance. In this case, secularism “is not an option but a political dogma or doctrine, not an alternative but an imperative”.

Therefore, if “secularism is normative and the rational imperative, then to depart from the norm is seen as abnormal” (Esposito, 2000: 9). Hence, secularism becomes a worldview, and as is the case with any worldview, it could not escape the iron cage of rejectionism. Manzoor (2000) argues that as “the praxis of statecraft, secularism claims universal sovereignty, and as the theoria of history, it subordinates all religious and moral claims to its own vision of the truth”. It has become an “ideological axiom” (p. 81). Therefore, secularism as a full-fledged epistemological and ontological system is not value-neutral. Its ideological system has come to challenge the very premises that gave rise to it; namely, pluralism and diversity. As Manzoor remarks, the advocacy of the secularization thesis “stems from an ideological commitment rather than from any fidelity to the scientific method” (Ibid., p. 82). The idea of secularization as a process has been superseded by secularism as a doctrine, and hence secularism is “sacralized” (Ibid., p. 84). Davutoglu (2000) puts forth a similar argument: “secular religions and totalist secular ideologies became as militant as pre-secular Christianity” (p. 183).

The failure of the majority of American scholars to comprehend the current scene in the Muslim world and accept it as a reality and an attempt to tackle the dilemma of Muslim societies at present is conditioned in the secular ontology itself and its conception of history as following a single line of progress in man’s search for the earthly paradise. It is this view of history, according to Davutoglu (2000), which
gives rise to “several theories of endism” with Fukuyama’s “end of history” as the latest expression of such endisms (p. 192). This dilemma, in Davutoglu’s view, can be resolved only by tracing the “interconnections among ontology, epistemology, axiology, and politics. The origins of the problem should be sought in the root paradigms of two alternative Weltanschauungs.” (Davutoglu, 1994: 194).

By clutching to a secular worldview, scholars retain an uncompromising logocentric approach that views change as feasible only when it follows the Western model. This is the embodiment of what Fukuyama (1992) refers to as the “end of history”. In this sense, history ends with the Western experience and the Western man becomes “the last man”. Any attempt to develop another course is, therefore, deemed as backward and reactionary. Islam is subjected to a test to examine whether it is compatible or incompatible with modernity. This in itself is a legitimate scholarly inquiry. However, the problem arises when certain notions and ideas that are gleaned from the Western outlook and context are abstracted and applied in the test, usually in the context of fundamentalism. If that fundamentalism passes the test, then Islam is modern; if it is found lacking, then Islam is backward and anti-modern. The process involved here is double-faceted, a combination of logocentrism and reductionism. Western concepts are deemed to be the only valid yardsticks for judging modernity or the lack thereof. Mahmood observes that Western scholarship on fundamentalism “utilizes European history as a privileged referent to social and political developments in the non-Western world,” whereas “secularism is rarely problematized as a universal ideal” (1994: 29). Turner opines that such projection involves technical problems of misrepresentation, bias and distortion, in addition to the more serious questions of ethnocentrism, ideology and relativism “which calls
into question the whole basis of comparative analysis” (1997: 20). Islamist activism and Islam are treated as synonymous. Islam is definitely not Islamist activism. Islam is a religion and Islamist activism is an ideological and sociopolitical movement that appeals to Islam for a variety of purposes, particularly indoctrination. Nor is Islamist activism the sole speaker for Islam. It is merely a trend among many, and an interpretation of Islam competing with so many others ranging from conservative to liberal. However, in most analyses, one gets the impression that Islam is almost the same as Islamist activism. Esposito and Mogahed’s study (2008) is a remarkable exception in this regard.

Despite the substantial literature produced on Islam and the increasing interest in Islam and politics, the available literature remains for the most part superficial and marked by a sense of urgency. Bulliet (1999) observes, “the ways in which Islam is today being portrayed in its moment of global reassertion still seem short-sighted.” American scholars’ understanding of Islam and its role, according to Bulliet, “lags almost as far behind its evolving reality as it did” in the late 1970s (p. 190). Similarly, Bill (1996) remarks that American experts on the Arab world “have learned disturbingly little after fifty years of heavy exertion,” and that “little of the sediment of understanding necessary to successful explanation and prediction of the region’s political processes” has been developed (p. 501). This is due to the politicization of the field; every issue is seen through the prism of politics.

Esposito (2000) argues that “secular presuppositions … have been a major obstacle to understanding and analyzing Islamic politics”. They have facilitated the reduction of Islam to “fundamentalism and extremism (p. 9). This tendency derives from the ethnocentric self-validating worldview with universal claims that emerged in
the post-Enlightenment period. It relegates religion to the private domain. According to Esposito, this projection hampers the Western scholars’ ability to “understand the nature of Islam”. Furthermore, it “has artificially compartmentalized religion, doing violence to its nature, and has reinforced a static reified conception of religious traditions, rather than revealed their inner dynamic nature”. In such a state of affairs, religion is viewed as a retrogressive force and hence a potential threat (p. 11).

What is so distinctive about the study of Islam is the double standard approach: the application of a severe standard for Islam and a benign one for other religious traditions at the center of politics. Here the historical legacy of fear and polemic, together with concerns for power play an important role. Turner (1997) remarks that “the structure of power politics is profoundly influential in shaping the content and direction of social science research” and that imperial politics has been very decisive in the construction of images of Islam in the West (p. 20). The way out of this impasse of ethnocentrism is turning inwards and inspecting the conventional wisdom and views that buttress the ethnocentric worldview; the inspection of cultural norms and values as well as the epistemological vision. It also requires what Turner calls “secular ecumenicalism” (1997: 102).

The historical legacy and its twin, obsession with power, result in dealing with Islam as an urgent concern rather than undertaking a patient intellectual inquiry that transcends the descriptive and prescriptive ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ which are meant for enlightening the policy-makers. This involves studying Islam and Muslim societies for the sake of studying them rather than for the aim of drawing political implications and recommendations. It requires avoiding the violent projections of concepts, categories, and experiences that cannot fully grasp the inner dynamics of Islam and
Muslim societies. Khan (2006) observes that comparisons are selectively employed; the Western present is compared to a caricature of the Muslim present, or the comparison of Western ideals with negative manifestations in the Muslim world such as Taliban and al-Qaeda (p. 149). Among the projections that are forcibly imposed and which tend to inspire fear and hatred are the linguistic ones such as the incessant reference to jihad as ‘holy war’. ‘Holy war’ is in fact a term that was used by the Popes during the Crusades in the Medieval Ages, and designating the war as ‘holy’ has no equivalent in Islamic traditions. The designation of jihad as ‘holy war’ has acquired such a maximum degree of normality that even scholars who explain the meaning of jihad in its full sense do not refrain from using the qualifier ‘holy’.

**Politization of Knowledge**

The field of Middle East studies in the United States was politically oriented from the very beginning. It was established so as to, *inter alia*, provide policy-makers with useful knowledge on the region. The division of the world into regions or areas suggests a strategy of management. The social science approach reflects the political obsessions of the field. Anderson (2003) argues that the “story of the development of the social sciences is a story of repeated oscillations between the embrace of active, indeed assertive, participation in policymaking, and retreat into the ostensibly neutral posture of scientific objectivity” (p. 3). She maintains that social science is at the heart of power formulation and that truth itself is inseparable from power, and cannot be “safe somewhere in a protected “apolitical” domain”. Moreover, social science shall be understood “to reflect and rely upon the exigencies of public policy.” The social sciences’ “organization of knowledge, choices of problems, selection of analytical tools, definitions of solutions *all represent commitments to politically*
inflected values” (Ibid., p. 107; emphasis added). Similarly, Hajjar and Niva (1997) observe that area studies are “by definition and history, politicized” (p. 8). According to Mitchell (2003), the “genealogy of area studies” is related to the struggle of social science in particular “as a twentieth century political project” which has been closely connected with structuring the global power of the United States (p. 2).

The challenges met by Middle East studies in the United States over the last two decades contributed to a sense of crisis that inhibited scholars from abandoning the politically-oriented and problem-solving approach. The advance of globalization and the related question of the relevance of area studies caused a stir in area studies programs in the 1990s. This was accompanied by other crises in the field such as the alienation from policy-makers and the mounting criticism of Middle East studies as irrelevant to the concerns and priorities of the government. These developments helped consolidate the political orientation of the field and its increasing centralization in political issues. The dominant paradigm becomes one of problem-solving and conflict-management rather than an independent value-free intellectual inquiry.

The determining factor is the American hegemony. Analyses of various issues abound in policy recommendation, even in studies which otherwise can claim an intellectual aura. Esposito and Voll (1996), for example, corrupt their examination of a profound theme (Islam and democracy) by country-wise policy recommendations. The book is also corrupted by the overriding obsession with the regimes and movements in different countries deemed relevant to American foreign policy. The authors are hardly, if ever, able to transcend political exigency. After concluding that the Sudanese regime is a supposedly unique Islamist one—in fact it is a military junta
not different from other authoritarian Arab regimes—they state that under “current conditions, a fully secular political system would have to be imposed by force on Sudan” (p. 101; emphasis added). Thus, the discourse on the Muslim world cannot escape the imperialist ethos which sees the world in its own image and seeks to recast it in a way that guarantees its hegemony. There is a disparity between theory and practice, even when a sympathetic attitude is displayed. In practice, the question of American hegemony is not negotiable. All the fuss on democratization is no more than a discursive strategy whereas in reality the United States supports the authoritarian Arab regimes and maintains silence towards their violation of human rights. Many MESA academics encourage maintaining the status quo.

Little is important outside the political exigency. Apart from the work of leftists and feminists, interest is seldom extended to themes beyond politics and political exigency. Thus, the knowledge/power nexus remains to a large extent true and valid. Even the debates that dominated the field of Middle East studies for the last two decades are political in nature and are confined within the framework of politics, or at best they spell political implications. As Mitchell and Shoeffel (2002) put it, “the terms of political discourse are designed so as to prevent thought” (p. 41).

Political as opposed to epistemological knowledge is transient in nature and loses its value as soon as a political situation changes. This is due to the fact that politically-oriented knowledge tends to focus on a descriptive analysis of what is taking place in a certain situation at a given period of time. As political situations are unstable and prone to change especially in unstable settings where dictatorships rule supreme, outcomes are unpredictable and accuracy of analysis is a rare commodity. Examination of the underlying dynamics of the state-society interactions and relations
without taking sides with one or the other so as to be able to answer the big questions is crucial for epistemologically-oriented knowledge.

The treatment of Islam and Muslim societies is largely superficial, restricted as it is to an accumulative narrative of events with analysis that does not go beyond the political level. This has turned Middle East studies in the United States into a field of fits and starts whether in its Orientalist variety or in the MESA-based scholarship. Heroes—or rather demons—come and go; approaches and models in the social science approach are adopted and dropped as suddenly; and views and attitudes are easily changed. One day scholars exert their efforts in analyzing the Iranian revolution, the other they turn to Islamist activism, and then bin Laden and terrorism. Diabolical heroes rise and fall, and follow one another in a rapid succession: Qaddafi, Arafat, Khomeini, Saddam Hussein, and Osama bin Laden. Virtual saviors who would supposedly bring about breakthroughs in the Muslim world are likewise embraced emotionally and then abandoned, such as the uproar about Mohammed Shahrur, a Syrian civil engineer who happened to write a liberal interpretation of the Qur’an in the early 1990s. MESA brought Shahrur to the U.S., but few were impressed by his ideas and the aura that surrounded his advent to the U.S. ended pathetically.

It is by no means uncommon to come across books that are very much revised when they go through subsequent editions. The reader is told in the prefaces to the new editions “much has happened”, “much has changed,” “many developments have taken place” since the book in question was first published, sometimes in the course of a few months. Therefore, the author is obliged to revise the new edition by adding accumulative descriptive and narrative accounts of developments, while the main
theses and presuppositions are left intact even though they glaringly bespeak their contradiction with reality. Esposito’s *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (1992, 1993 (pbk ed.), 1995, 1999) is an example of this constant revision through accumulation. This process extends to include edited books, e.g. Esposito and Donohue (eds.) *Islam in Transition* (2nd ed. 2007). Some books are virtually rewritten anew such as Lewis’s *Shaping of the Middle East* (first published 1964, republished 1994). Still others become irrelevant and outmoded beyond repair such as Pipes’s *In the Path of God*, first published in 1983. In the preface to the second edition (2003), Pipes acknowledges the eccentric country-wise analysis of “militant Islam” and the irrelevant nature of his book, disclaiming many arguments he made therein, and referring the interested readers to his recent books. One wonders why, apart from the commercial gain, such a book goes through republication at all.

Something more than the mere succession of events, however influential and decisive they may be, is involved; and that has to do with the orientation, politics and teleology of knowledge and knowledge production. This may be justified—and this is restricted to MESA academics—by the claim that the authors are attentive to change in the Muslim world, for the lack of which they have been criticized repeatedly. Rather, seeing the world through political urgency leads to omission and puts political exigency before intellectual dedication to knowledge *per se*. Knowledge is produced with the policy-makers and policy recommendations in mind; prejudice and bias creep in and knowledge is presented through the prism of what is perceived to be successful policy. Consequently, reality is constructed rather than built upon. Whether scholars gain favor or fall out of favor with the policy-makers, this is the norm.
The disinterest of the MESA academics in amending the bleak and distorted image of Islam that is rampant in the United States is an indication of their mainly political preoccupations. Discussions of outreach are often restricted to the well-being of the organization itself as it competes for influencing policy with the Orientalists. Where the image of Islam itself is involved and how it contributes to facilitating a certain “tough” line in policy, this does not arouse their concern and is deemed irrelevant. Khalidi (1995: 1-2) referred to this poor job of outreach merely in the context of preserving the relevance of the field. In other words, doing outreach, as Khalidi recommends, is restricted to improving the image of the organization itself and attracting more students to join Middle East studies at a time when area studies in general are deemed irrelevant and enter a stagnant phase, rather than to rectify the distorted image of Islam and Muslims.

The much focus on the Iranian revolution and Islamist activism and before that pan-Arabism is a testimony to the enduring connection between discourse and hegemony. Careers are dedicated to these issues, conferences are held, countless books and articles are written, projects are set up, and huge financial resources are invested in the study of the current situation in the Muslim world. Such investments can be explained only by reference to hegemony as the ultimate concern and determining factor in that sustained endeavor. Hegemony explains the enduring impact of the Iranian revolution on American experts on politics of the Muslim world until the present day and viewing Islam as a threat and/or challenge to the United States and the West in general. The Orientalist and/or social scientist today is a sentinel watching the Muslim world, and upon noticing the least sign of going beyond
the status quo, she/he rushes in an urgent, sometimes confused, effort to scrutinize the new developments and their implications for U.S. hegemony.

Treatment of the violent trends in the Muslim world for the most part sees American leverage and resort to power—which is actually a form of state terrorism, at once more comprehensive and no less deplorable than dissident group terrorism—as a justified moral obligation to exorcize the world of the Islamic demon. Terrorism is not justified anyway, but equally unjustified is state terrorism which claims innocent lives in a massive scale. State terrorism is dismissed altogether from the analysis, and such issues are left to intellectuals outside the field of Middle East studies. Experts on the Arab and Muslim worlds are content to endorse the use of power against the “terrorists,” who in the least are not affected by those massive bombings as much as those innocent women, men and children who are displaced and killed in supposedly freedom and peace enforcement campaigns.

In conclusion, MESA has witnessed a massive transformation over the last three decades. The stereotypical image and polemic that have characterized the Western discourse on Islam for centuries give way to a meticulous effort towards objective knowledge. New venues of interest such as women’s studies and the neo-Marxist approach helped accelerate the process of transformation. The application of social science methods enforced and invigorated the pursuit of empirically valid knowledge and the search for truth. Research based on empirical data leads to a continued process of disintegration of the simplistic assertions that had dominated Orientalist discourse for centuries. Thus, “Arab exceptionalism,” Arab psyche, civilization, culture, etc. were discarded in favor of empirical data. Diversity rather than a monolithic entity was found as the norm, contextualization replaced broad
generalizations and essentialization, and dynamic societies emerged instead of a fixed reality explicitly revealing itself. This revolutionization of knowledge about the Arab world and Islam has its rewards. MESA scholarship has had a lasting influence on Middle East experts throughout the world. Middle East studies in the U.S. as represented by MESA are a beacon of knowledge emulated in different parts of the world.

Considerations of power have also contributed to the transformation of the field. The concern for power is conditioned in present domestic (American), regional (Arab) and global contexts. Concentration of power is intrinsic to the field of Middle East studies in the United States. Power, therefore, becomes a vital constituent in the process of knowledge production. Focus on power accumulation leads to over-politicization of the field. Certain relapses and shortcomings emerge as a result of politicization. Scholars became obsessed with observing and recording recent developments so much so that supposedly scholarly investigations turned into breathless and long-winded narrative and descriptive accounts. The space for patient analysis is often overwhelmed with narratives and descriptions due to over-politicization and concern for power. More significantly, reaction rather than scholarly detachment stamps the work of scholars on many occasions, especially when developments in the region take a turn other than the one predicted, or rather hoped for, by scholars. A sense of urgency, therefore, is a dominant feature in the discourse of these scholars. The outcome is what might be called disposable knowledge; i.e., urgent prescriptions dominated by the problem-solving and conflict resolution approach. The disagreements between the scholars and the government
regarding many issues are mainly differences on tactics rather than on the end goal: hegemony.

MESA scholars’ discourse is infused with the American spirit of “Manifest Destiny”. The belief that the American experience is global—which has been deeply entrenched in the American tradition—is a feature of MESA discourse. It is modified at times, but not completely transcended.