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## Field Notes: Middle East Studies

This newsletter's edition of Field Notes features a discussion about how institutions of higher education have been approaching Fall 2021 reopening plans and anticipated welcoming back of students to campus.

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## A Year of Research and Writing from my Bedroom

This past year has been difficult for many, both personally and professionally. Mostafa Minawi reflects on how COVID-19 has compelled an adjustment in how academics think about their research.

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## Middle East Studies Pedagogy Initiative Developments

The Middle East Studies Pedagogy Initiative has produced phenomenal new materials as contributions to the Ten Years On project, which seeks to reflect on the Arab uprisings.

## Field Notes:

### COVID-19 and the Supposed Horizon for Higher Education

by Ziad Abu-Rish

As the 2020-21 academic year ends, many of those colleges and universities that have survived the pandemic (however you define that verb) are anticipating relief in the form of a return to pre-pandemic forms of research, teaching, and campus life. Herein, I outline three areas in which those committed to navigating this return in as inclusive and equal a manner as possible have been discussing as of late.

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Hopes of a return to “normal” campus life largely hinge on the question of vaccination rollout and the potential for new COVID-19 variants resistant to it. Yet equally important is the reality that vaccination progress is a very country-specific dynamic which is simultaneously bound up with more global structural dynamics of wealth, infrastructure, and intellectual property—to name a few. While many US colleges and universities consider requiring vaccination for all returning students, faculty, and staff, they have largely been able to rely on federal, state, and local authorities to facilitate access to vaccines. In many countries in the Middle East and North Africa, government-led vaccine rollout is significantly behind US and European rates—with little indication they will reach the required benchmarks for a “safe” return in the fall. Relatedly, some private colleges and universities, such as those in Lebanon, are attempting secure the permission and ability to make the vaccine directly available to their campus communities (though we are yet to know the full terms of such an arrangement). This is to say

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nothing of how those private and most public institutions of higher education will respond to the pressures of “re-opening.” All this is to say that the upcoming fall semester and its aftermath appear set to reflect persistent structural inequalities in global higher education than they do some shared and collective global sight of relief vis-a-vis the COVID-19 pandemic.

The fate of international students enrolled in the US colleges and universities is another aspect of this dynamic. While many are relieved by the end of the Trump presidency and its attendant

immigration and visa policies, they are equally unclear on where the Biden administration will come down on international students. Will they be required to be vaccinated in order to obtain a visa, board a US-bound flight, or be granted entry at a US international airport? If so, then such policies risk intensifying forms of discrimination. If not, will unvaccinated international students have access to free vaccinations once they arrive into the United States or at their campuses? While such discussions have occupied admissions and other school officials, there is little sign that such discussions are underway in US government circles, let alone that these conversations have the necessary media coverage to ensure transparency and protection of the interests of international students.

Research is a further element one must consider, and perhaps the element that is manifesting more rapidly. Many researchers in the Global North, who have access to vaccinations faster and cheaper than their Global South counterparts, are already making plans that reflect a type of mobility not allowed or unsafe for their colleagues. Is there any responsibility toward this reality that such researchers must take into consideration? Important coverage has been given to the ways in which the pandemic has unequally affected researchers in terms of their ability to conduct research as well as write up and publish their findings. The years leading up to the pandemic featured important conversation about knowledge production, especially of regions and places in the Global South, and the growing importance of actively including scholars from therein in the terrain of scholarly publications and debates. What might re-centering those conversations in the wake of the pandemic look like?



To read past issues of the Middle East Studies Pedagogy Initiative Newsletter, visit [MESPI.org](https://MESPI.org). There you can find more Field Notes contributions, installments of our Teaching the Middle East in the Middle East series, and more!

# Snippets

The Snippets section highlights the latest in pedagogy and knowledge production from and on the Middle East. The articles below present different perspectives on how the past finds itself in today, whether it be through research, curricula, or personal narratives.

## **How Versailles Still Haunts the World (Public Books)**



“The fate of the Middle East; the treatment of former Ottoman subjects; the triumph of finance over democracy; the weakness of the statesmen rebuilding after the war; the entrenchment of antisemitism across Europe; even the extraordinary renditions of the 21st-century US War on Terror: all this and more flows from the Treaty of Versailles, now just over a century old.”

–Joanne Randa Nucho

## **To Be Syrian and Write a Coherent Story (Medium)**

“I chose to write about the history of Syrian migrants because I saw a little bit of myself in the project. But for those reasons, I’ve also found it difficult to fully invest in a topic that is so meaningful to me, to research and write with professional detachment.”

–Dr. Reem Bailony, Agnes Scott College

## **Iraq’s Maritime Heritage Finds a Haven in the Classroom (Al-Fanar Media)**

“When he first glided through the Euphrates as a child in his grandfather’s “tarada,” a traditional Mesopotamian boat, Jaafar Jotheri had no way of knowing that nearly four decades later he would wind up working to bring knowledge of Iraq’s maritime heritage to a new generation of university students.”

–Kira Walker

# A Year of Research and Writing from My Bedroom

by Mostafa Minawi

For so long we have been in a state of quotidian existential anxiety, the kind that does not encourage reminiscing or introspection because that would mean facing much of what we have or have not been doing. Whether it was applying for grants or research trips we were supposed to take in order to write that article, that book chapter, or that book. What we had to do was put much of our “before” ways of working and, by extension, the “before” ways of living, on hold.

My anxiety about looking too closely at the year that has passed is less about facing the things I missed and more about facing things I actually did not really miss about my before life. That field meeting I was supposed to go to. That workshop I would have felt compelled to attend. That archival research I was

certain had to happen before I started writing. How much of an impact would they have really had on my work?

Looking back on a year in the pandemic forced me to examine my life as a scholar and how my scholarship has been consumed so far. The pandemic has been many tragic things: sickness, depression, death, unemployment. For many of us, this past year was also a chance to stop long enough to reconsider what we were doing with our scholarship and the next ten or twenty years that we have left in our productive careers to make an impact on the world as humanists.

For some, this has meant a creative push towards extending their reach beyond the conference circuits and the echo chamber of academia, and into “the public.” How do I reach, not just my students at the university, but also their communities? How do I reach communities abroad, those we have for so long ignored, even

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though our research depends on their knowledge?

How did my inability to go to a conference or an archive feel? The frustration I felt must be how so many of my colleagues in many of the countries in the global south have experienced all their careers for having the wrong-colored passport or because they were born into a country with the wrong official language. How do I reach them? More importantly perhaps, how do I ensure they can reach me?

Why are most conferences held exclusively in English with no simultaneous translation available, when we spend thousands of euros flying big names to the conference for keynote addresses but would not spend one thousand to make the conference accessible to colleagues that are more comfortable in other languages to be part of the conversation? We have always had the money and the technology; this past year has shown us that. Our institutions have just not made the opportunity to reach across the world

a priority. Now we have no excuses. I have no excuses.

In a year when we had to examine the relevance of our work, we sometimes had to return to the drawing board and rethink what we always thought the humanities were about. For scholars who were lucky enough to stay healthy and continue to have an income, this year has meant an opportunity to rethink their purpose. Though many will go back to the way things used to be in the before times, many will realize that they do not want to or cannot afford to ignore the questions they asked of themselves during the year when they had to do research and writing from the solitary confinement of their bedrooms.

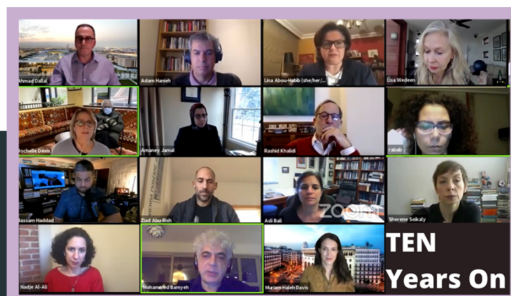
*This article is an excerpt from a larger piece that will appear in the 2021 Pedagogy JadMag. To read Mostafa Minawi's full piece, visit [TadweenPublishing.com](http://TadweenPublishing.com) this summer.*

**Mostafa Minawi** is an associate professor of history and the director of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Initiative at Cornell University.

## Ten Years On: Mass Protests and Uprisings in the Arab World

Organized by the Arab Studies Institute, Princeton's Arab Barometer, and George Mason's Middle East and Islamic Studies Project, with co-sponsors from across the globe, this year-long project takes a critical eye to the Arab uprisings. The initiative reflects on the uprisings through articles, such as Muriam Haleh Davis and Thomas Serres' Essential Reading on the Hiraak in Algeria, as well as monthly signature panels. Featuring a wide-array of engaged scholars, recent panels have addressed the role of archives during the uprisings and since, teaching the Arab uprisings, and the place for art and journalism in narrating the uprisings.

## REFLECTIONS ON MASS PROTESTS & UPRISINGS IN THE ARAB WORLD



WWW.THEARABUPRISINGS.ORG

# MESPI Developments

The Middle East Studies Pedagogy Initiative is excited to contribute to Ten Years On: Mass Protests and Uprisings in the Arab World. How the uprisings are taught and approached in the classroom and in research has evolved over the past decade since the beginning to the 2011 uprisings. In keeping with the MESPI mission to provide nuanced knowledge on the Middle East, each of MESPI's modules is producing exciting content that reflects upon the Arab uprisings. To keep abreast of all the new materials, visit [MESPI.org](http://MESPI.org) and [TheArabUprisings.org](http://TheArabUprisings.org).



## Engaging Books

Following the uprisings came a surge of texts contending with the events, players, and consequences of the uprisings. In collaboration with several publishing houses, Jonathan Adler, the editor of the Engaging Books module, put together several installments of Engaging Books that highlight several of these texts.



## Essential Readings

Several of the Essential Readings initial installments dealt with the 2011 uprisings. As part of the Ten Years On project, Jacob Bessen, the Essential Readings editor, has collected updated iterations of our past Essential Readings pieces on this theme, including those from John Chalcraft and Asef Bayat. Additional installments are forthcoming and pay particular attention to the relationships seen between the uprisings and Islam, gender, the environment, and diasporas.

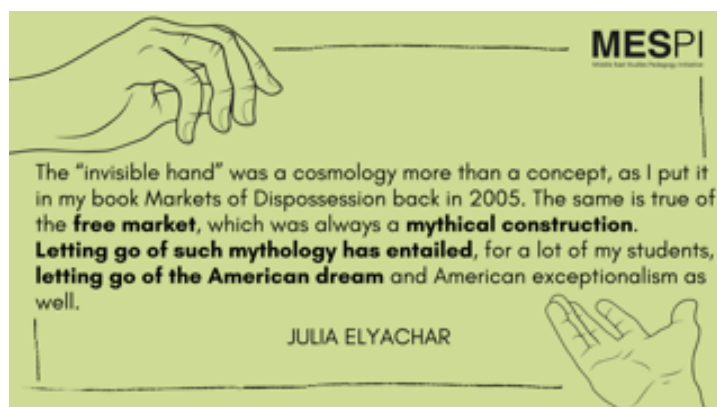


## Peer-Reviewed Articles Review

Under the leadership of Shakeela Omar, the Peer-Reviewed Articles Review team has curated selections of articles on the Arab uprisings that have been published in peer-reviewed academic journals between 2010-2020. These forthcoming bouquets will look at cultural production related to the uprisings, as well as how the uprisings have been discussed vis-a-vis gender and sexuality.

# Pedagogy JadMag

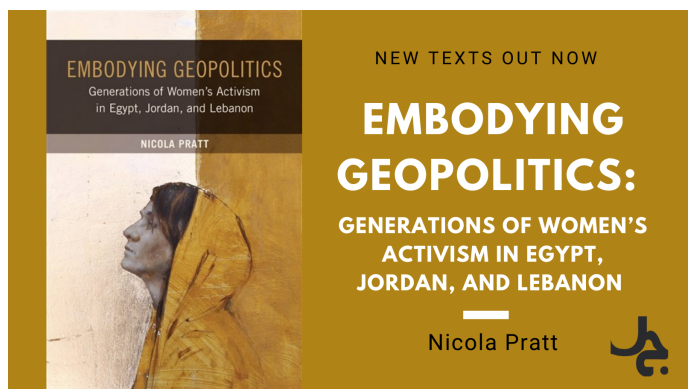
Over the past year, the MESPI team has worked hard to solicit, collect, and select articles to include in the annual Pedagogy JadMag. One of the highlights from last year's edition of the Pedagogy JadMag was an interview with Lila Abu-Lughod on teaching gender and the Middle East, and this year, we decided to double the number of interviews included in the JadMag. Jacob Bessen interviewed Julia Clancy-Smith and Julia Elyachar about their approaches to teaching the region from the perspectives of migration and political anthropology, respectively. In addition to these phenomenal interviews, Ahlam Muhtaseb wrote about the challenges of teaching Palestine through film. Mostafa Minawai wrote an expanded version of his article, "A Year of Research and Writing from my Bedroom," included in this newsletter on page 3. You will not want to miss this superb collection of articles. To stay updated visit [TadweenPublishing.org](http://TadweenPublishing.org).



## New Texts Out Now

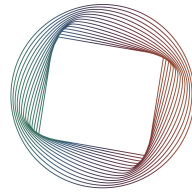
New Texts Out Now (NEWTON) is a weekly feature in which authors and editors of new publications are given the space to discuss the motivations, arguments, methods, and challenges associated with writing, researching, and teaching their text. Bringing new publications to the attention of our broad and varied audience, NEWTON serves as a resource for scholars, students, and teachers across the globe.

If you have a recent book publication that you would like featured, contact Lizzy Galliver, the NEWTON editor, at [lizzy@jadaliyya.com](mailto:lizzy@jadaliyya.com).



## Knowledge Production Project Announces its Complete Redesign and Search Upgrade!

We have been hard at work along with our sister project, KnowledgeProduction.com, seeking to redesign the entire search and data visualization platform that was announced at MESA in 2016. The new design and search function will provide a superior data visualization interface, a formidable search function, and, best of all, will allow for the integration of MESPI's own knowledge production as an option for those who seek specific recommendations, procured by our community of scholars. Stay tuned for what's to come this summer!



KNOWLEDGE  
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Status/الوضع audiovisual podcast just released issue 8.1, which touches upon a variety of topics ranging from the [Kurdish struggle for self-determination in Iran to France's "Islamist Separatism" bill](#). More at [StatusHour.com](#).



On Earth Day 2021, we celebrated the [Jadaliyya Environment Page's one-year anniversary](#). Environment team co-editors have been soliciting and producing pedagogic resources to facilitate learning about environmental issues in the region.

## Grad Corner

*The Grad Corner of MESPI's newsletter directs you to language and study abroad programs, research organizations, news, and research all relevant to graduate students studying the Middle East. Current events often open the space for reflection on past discussions and scholarship; below, MESPI has selected a few articles that unpack the past as its resurfaced into conversations more recently.*

### **Revisiting MERIP Coverage of the Arab Uprisings**

"Whether writing about the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the first Palestinian Intifada, or less visible everyday struggles, we have sought to balance appreciation for what came before with honesty and solidarity for those who fight to change their world now. MERIP writers continue to appreciate the enormity of those political struggles, while at the same time emphasizing their unfinished and indeterminate paths." –MERIP Editors

### **Rest in Power: Nawal El Saadawi, Intersectional Egyptian Feminist**

"Looking back, we are grateful that Nawal El Saadawi provided us with a framework for challenging capitalist patriarchy and the impact of US global domination on women in the Arab world...Yet she also left us to struggle over how to celebrate a feminist legend whose commitment to social justice was incomplete."

–Nadine Naber and Therese Saliba

### **The Toll and Toil it Took to Cleave the Suez Canal through the Egyptian Desert**

"For a little over a week the world's attention zeroed in on the Suez Canal, an artificial channel connecting the Mediterranean and the Red seas across Egyptian territory...While the economic benefits of the canal are readily apparent, its history of technical mishaps and failed ambitions is mostly buried.

–Lucia Carminati, Texas Tech Univ.

## Join the MESPI Community

As MESPI works to produce and highlight nuanced materials on the Middle East, we are looking for new people to join our team! In addition to the Peer-Reviewed Articles Review, Engaging Books, Essential Readings, and NEWTON Module mentioned throughout this newsletter, we also have other projects in development. If you are interested in films, documentaries, and novels on the Middle East, email MESPI's managing editor, Mekarem Eljamal, at [mekarem@MESPI.org](mailto:mekarem@MESPI.org). For Essential readings, email Jacob Bessen at [jacob@MESPI.org](mailto:jacob@MESPI.org); for Engaging Books, email Jonathan Adler at [jonathan@MESPI.org](mailto:jonathan@MESPI.org); for Peer-Reviewed Articles Review, email Shakeela Omar at [shakeela@MESPI.org](mailto:shakeela@MESPI.org).

MESPI also invites graduate students and faculty to submit to its quarterly newsletter. Have you taught courses in the Middle East? Contribute to our "Teaching the Middle East in the Middle East" section! If you have thoughts about the state of Middle East studies, contribute to the "Field Notes" section. Contact us at [newsletter@MESPI.org](mailto:newsletter@MESPI.org).

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