

## Uncovering 80 Years of Research into the Near and Middle East at IAS

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The Institute for Advanced Study, which first opened its doors on October 1, 1933, is a unique institution of its kind—neither a pure research institute nor a university, it has spearheaded scholarship through its permanent faculty and its membership program from the very beginning. It is remarkable, however, that despite its leading role in advancing fundamental research through its initially three, nowadays four schools, little attention has been paid so far to the history of research at the IAS.

Having been appointed some years ago as a permanent faculty member representing Near Eastern Studies, I was eager to learn more about the history of my own field at the Institute, and soon found that the academic disciplines that are concerned in one way or another with scholarship on the Near and Middle East at the IAS throughout its history are extremely variegated and diverse. And while the imminent relevance of the Near and Middle East for the rest of the world—particularly its immediate neighbors, Europe and Russia, but also North America, Asia and Africa—is evident, it is always challenging to explain in a few words what "Near Eastern Studies" in fact stands for.

The disciplines subsumed under the label "Near and Middle Eastern Studies" (1) cover an enormous time span, ranging from Antiquity (esp. Babylonia and Egypt), Late Antiquity, and from the 7th century onwards the Islamic period up until the present time; (2) they touch upon languages such as ancient, premodern and modern Semitic languages ( like Syriac, Hebrew, and Arabic), but also Indo-European languages such as the various linguistic stages of Persian, as well as a variety of Turkic languages, to name but the most important ones; (3) they are concerned with an enormous denominational spectrum, Islam, Eastern Christianity, and Judaism, as well as the wide array of Iranian religions, such as Zoroastrianism, Mithraism, Manichaeism, Mazdakism etc.; and (4) they cover an enormous geographical area, from Islamic Spain, major parts of East-, West- and Central Africa, North Africa, the Arabian peninsula and the Levant, Iraq and Iran, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and parts of East Asia, most importantly Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia, as well as the Western parts of China. In recent years, the scholarly exploration of Islam in the "diaspora", especially North America, Europe, Australia, Russia etc., has also attracted the attention of scholarship.

In terms of methodological approaches, scholars concerned with the study of the Near and Middle East comprise historians and philologists, archaeologists, social scientists, anthropologists and ethnographers, political scientists and economists, historians of art and architecture as well as musicologists—to name only the most important fields.

Both concerns, the quest for the history of my field at the Institute and the desire to open up the discipline of Near and Middle Eastern Studies and its subjects to a wider audience, prompted me to prepare a volume which has now been published—in fact I was initially just thinking of some kind of a modest pamphlet.

Working through the relevant materials that are held by the Shelby White and Leon Levy Archives Center and tracing the development of the field in its widest sense at the Institute has been a fascinating journey into the past, and I was pleasantly surprised by the many gems I found among the archives' holdings, e.g. Oleg Grabar's rich correspondence with colleagues and friends around the world during his time at the Institute, or Otto Neugebauer's correspondence with Edward Kennedy and other close colleagues. The most surprising discovery was the fact that Near Eastern Studies at the IAS dates back to the very beginning of the School of Humanistic Studies, as it was called at the time, namely to 1935, and that this is virtually the only field that has left an impact on all four schools of the IAS, including Math and Natural Sciences.

My work on the archival materials resulted in a the historical survey of Near and Middle Eastern Studies at the IAS which opens the present volume. Moreover, to present the wide spectrum of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, I approached current and former IAS scholars—faculty, members, and visitors—who are engaged in one way or another in this vast field, with the request to contribute to the volume's second part, "Fruits of Scholarship". The overwhelmingly positive response I received was heartwarming and, taken together, the wonderful essays that are brought together in the book provide a lively, engaging, and at the same time enjoyable introduction to the richness of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, from antiquity up until the modern period.

At the same time the volume is yet another demonstration of how enormously important the IAS is for the advancement of scholarship, both through providing ideal conditions for research, for its permanent faculty as well as its temporary members, and through its enormous flexibility over the decades that supported, and continues to support, the exploration of new vistas and methodologies, individual and collaborative work modes, and that provides the liberty to pursue interdisciplinary approaches, none of which could easily be realized at a larger academic institution or university.

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What I plan to do in the following is to read out some excerpts of my historical sketch that introduces the book.

Thereafter, I would like to conclude my presentation with some reflections on the role and significance of the Institute in today's world with respect to Near and Middle Eastern Studies.

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Let me begin reading some excerpts from the "Historical Sketch".

[Selected passages read from S. Schmidtke, "Near and Middle Eastern Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study: A Historical Sketch," *Studying the Near and Middle East at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, 1935-2018*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, pp. xxxi-xcviii <open access version available at <<https://albert.ias.edu/handle/20.500.12111/1024>>]

So far from the text of the "Historical Sketch"—I hope these brief excerpts have made you curious to read more, in which case I would like to refer you to the publisher's table where you may purchase the volume with a considerable discount.

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Please allow me to conclude with some additional thoughts on the Institute's mission and, more specifically, on Near Eastern Studies and my own field of research, the intellectual history of the Islamic world.

Over the course of its history, the IAS has provided through its different schools the most favorable research opportunities to thousands of scholars, circumstances which particularly favor the advancement of fundamental research. In many ways, the Institute facilitates scholarship in areas that can often hardly be pursued elsewhere, be it for economic, political or other reasons. Beyond fundamental research which

is often harder to pursue at universities, interdisciplinarity can be pursued much more easily and spontaneously at the Institute than elsewhere.

While all this holds true for most areas of scholarship at the Institute, Near Eastern and especially Islamic Studies is perhaps more than any other area affected by political developments. Discussing the cases of Herzfeld and Seyrig I have already shown that the end of the colonial era fundamentally changed the circumstances under which Near Eastern archeologists had worked. In today's world, the rise of sectarianism all over the Islamic world, the ever growing pressure by proponents of a traditional literalist strand to suppress diversity and to silence alternative interpretations of Islam many of which entertain an explicitly rationalist perspective, and the struggle among the most powerful players of the region for hegemony have an immediate impact on how Islamic Studies is perceived in North America and Europe and what is being taught, and where (self-)censorship kicks in.

Let me demonstrate this with respect to Iranian Studies, a discipline that has been largely neglected over the past decades in US academia. Although it covers an enormous time span (close to 2,500 years) and concerns an area of immense cultural significance for most world religions, Iranian Studies is a niche discipline in the US. While the field expanded considerably in the US after World War II and especially during the 1960s and 70s, this trend was reversed as a result of the Iranian revolution of 1979, the Iran hostage crisis, and the ensuing freezing of diplomatic relations between Iran and the US ever since April 1980. The growing sectarianism in the Middle East and the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran for hegemony in the region is an additional aspect that needs to be reckoned with, and it ties in with the funding situation of Islamic and Near/Middle Eastern Studies in the US. While potential Iranian private and governmental donors have been barred by the sanctions over the past decades from funding academic initiatives in the US, Saudi Arabia has evolved since the late 1970s as the largest donor to US universities. Some of the most important US chairs and centers in Islamic Studies are funded by and named after members of the Saudi royal family, in addition to more recent donations by private individuals from the Gulf region, all of whom share a strong anti-Iranian and anti-Shii bias. This not only prompts contemporary US academia to focus on Arabic (to the exclusion of other Islamic languages that are no less important), it also leads to an increasingly narrowed focus on mainstream (that is, Sunni) Islam, to the exclusion of the Shii world in its multifarious forms as well as any other strand that is critiqued by contemporary Salafism— Islamic philosophy, Sufism and mysticism, rational thought in theology and legal theory, occult sciences etc.

In recent years, some US academic institutions have begun to reverse the trend by putting Iranian Studies back on the map, through gifts by Iranian expatriates who left their country for the US either during or after the Islamic Revolution of 1979/80. The animosity harbored by the majority of these donors against the Iranian religious establishment and Islam in general, on the one hand, and their pride in Iranian culture and history which is best reflected, in their view, in pre-Islamic Iranian culture on the other, results in the often exclusive approach to matters Iranian and the ensuing lack of academic structures that allow for naturally bringing together scholarship in Iranian Studies and cognate fields, particularly Islamic Studies. As a result, Iranian Studies in present-day US focus mostly on three areas: pre-Islamic Iran, ancient and premodern Iranian language and literature, and Iranian political and social history during the modern period.

The detachment between Iranian expatriates on the one hand and the socio-intellectual and political reality in Iran after the revolution of 1979 on the other also generates a lack of proper understanding among policy makers, commentators, and consultants in the US of what is going on in Iran itself. While there is no lack of highly qualified commentators in the media and the administration for the Arab world, most of those consulted on Iran are largely unfamiliar with the religious notions in law, legal theory, doctrine, and political doctrine, that constitute the backbone of the political class in present-day Iran whose representatives are all *hawza*-taught (*hawza* being the traditional institutions of learning, with Qum as the main center), and are thus unable to distinguish the different layers and strands among their representatives.

The often exclusive approach to matters Iranian further obscures the fact that Iran was for centuries home to some of the most important centers of Islamic intellectual life and that many of the leading Muslim intellectuals hailed from Iran (for example, famous thinkers such as Fārābī, Avicenna, Ghazālī, or Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, to name but a few), and that scholarship on the intellectual history of the Islamic world cannot be limited to sources that are **either** in Arabic **or** in Persian, to the exclusion of the respective other. The current programs in Iranian Studies largely neglect Iran's intellectual history during the Islamic era, while scholars of Islamic Studies who are concerned with intellectual history often discard primary materials in Persian and the enormous research literature produced by Iranian scholars, restricting themselves to what is readily available. In view of the constantly growing antagonism between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the ever-increasing sectarianism in the Islamic world, it is important to recognize the deep entanglement between the principal Islamic languages and literatures—Arabic and Persian—and between the various religious factions and denominations within Islam—especially Sunnism and Shi'ism in its variegated forms.

The Institute with its commitment to fundamental research and its relative freedom from political pressure of any kind is uniquely positioned to mitigate any such biases in scholarship. Studying the intellectual history of Iran particularly during the Islamic period has been one of the areas of scholarship of my predecessor Patricia Crone and myself. Moreover, the IAS regularly hosts members specializing in Iranian Studies at the School of Historical Studies and the School of Social Science. With respect to salvaging the rational heritage of Islam as it has been preserved especially among the Shiis of the Zaydi branch, the IAS is engaged in bulding a virtual repository to provide access to the rich and yet widely dispersed and endangered Zaydi Manuscript Tradition, a collaborative project together with Hill Museum & Manuscript Library in Minesota. In addition, I have already mentioned the Shii Studies Research Program that is graciously funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and will continue for yet another year.

The liberty to pursue research without political and economic restraints is definitely a privilege, and more than anything else it requires an engaged public audience and donors who believe in the visions and the work of the scholars working at the IAS. Let me end by expressing my gratitude for your belief in me and my colleagues and your ongoing support in us – without the Trustees, the Friends, and other Supporters we would be unable to pursue any of the research we are engaged in and which, so I hope, is a modest contribution to the betterment of mankind.