

**THE PROGRAM FOR
CONTEMPORARY MIDDLE EAST STUDIES**

THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM

Report of the Review Committee

2-5 January 2005

Presented to Prof. Haim D. Rabinowitch, Rector

30 January 2005

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

REVIEW COMMITTEE
of the

M.A. Program in Contemporary Middle East Studies

(5.1.05)
Executive Summary

The M.A. Program in Contemporary Middle East Studies, hereinafter called "the Program," was established in 1998. The Rector of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem appointed a review committee to advise the University on ways "to improve the program and develop it, or, if need be to change or terminate it." The members of the review committee were Dale F. Eickelman (Dartmouth College); Haggai Erlich (Tel-Aviv University); Gudrun Kraemer (Free University of Berlin); Sarah Stroumsa (Vice-Rector, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, chair of the review committee). Gabriel Ben-Dor (Haifa University) was unable to attend.

The review committee convened for four days (January 2-5, 2005). It read and discussed material prepared by the Program director, Dr. Avraham Sela. The committee met with him, members of the Program's academic committee, the deans of the faculties of Social Sciences and Humanities, the chairs of relevant departments and institutes, the Rector, and the President. The committee also met separately with the Program's students, graduates, and students who are not currently active or who have left the Program to pursue a different degree.

From an early stage, it became clear that the Program review had to entail a comprehensive discussion of the current scope and approach of other M.A. degree programs relevant to Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies in the University.

The Program draws heavily on the courses and personnel of the Department of Middle East and Islamic Studies. These two M.A. programs significantly overlap.

This is recognized by both the departmental faculty and the Program director. The department, which has been a part of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem since its foundation, is itself facing a critical transitional period. The faculty members of the Program's academic committee, the majority of whom are drawn from the department, raised the issue of their recent loss of several senior faculty positions and the need to restructure their M.A. program.

A distinctive feature of the Program is to introduce students to the methods and approaches of both the social sciences and the humanities. The Program core courses are intended to give substance to this multidisciplinary approach. They include a methodological course taught by the Program director. For most other courses, the Program depends on adjunct external teachers. Many of these courses are also electives in the departmental M.A. program.

The Program makes a valuable conceptual and substantive contribution to both the social sciences and the humanities. The Faculty of Social Sciences supports the Program financially, but does not give it adequate intellectual support.

Recommendations:

1. The committee urges the University to engage in strategic thinking about Middle Eastern and Islamic studies in all its programs and departments. We recommend that the University initiate in the near future concurrent reviews of the other relevant M.A. programs. The present committee's report should be submitted to those concerned with the subsequent deliberations.

2. We believe that all students of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies should benefit from the interdisciplinary approach presented by this Program. However, we see no curricular or structural justification at this time for continuing the Program in the Faculty of Social Sciences.

3. We recommend integrating the Program core courses into the M.A. program of the Department of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies. This can be achieved by creating a track within the existing departmental M.A. program, or, as we would urge, by offering the Program core courses as a recommended option for all its students.

4. Our recommendation is to create through new appointments a critical mass of regular faculty concerned with advancing the Program's central goals, integrating the Program's multidisciplinary approach with the study of the region, past and present, and renewing the Hebrew University's earlier prominence in contemporary Middle Eastern studies. These appointments should meet the needs of the Department at large as well as the interdisciplinary orientation of the Program.

THE COMMITTEE'S REPORT

The M.A. Program in Contemporary Middle East Studies, hereinafter "the Program," was established in 1998. The Rector of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem appointed a review committee to advise the University on ways "to improve the program and develop it, or, if need be to change or terminate it." The members of the review committee were Dale F. Eickelman (Dartmouth College); Haggai Erlich (Tel-Aviv University); Gudrun Kraemer (Free University of Berlin); Sarah Stroumsa (Vice-Rector, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, chair of the review committee). Gabriel Ben-Dor (Haifa University) was unable to attend (see Appendix A for resumés of the committee members).

The review committee convened for four days (January 2-5, 2005). It read and discussed material prepared by the Program director, Dr. Avraham Sela. Although helpful, this material was not always clear or complete. The Interim Summary articulated the frustrations involved in running a Program without a suitable infrastructure. It did not, however, adequately discuss the possible academic shortcomings of the program.

Our evaluation of the Program is based on the material provided by the Program director, and complemented by a number of interviews. The committee met with the Program director, members of the Program's academic committee, the deans of the faculties of social sciences and humanities, the chairs of relevant departments and institutes, the Rector, and the President. The committee also met separately with the Program's students, graduates, and students who are not currently active or who have left the Program to pursue a different degree (see Appendix B for a list of people interviewed).

Introduction: Cross-Disciplinary Communication in Middle Eastern Studies

In most disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences, the ability to frame questions and to communicate across disciplinary lines is a sign of excellence. For Middle Eastern studies as elsewhere, issues such as the future of democracy and civil society, the idea of freedom, the prospects for regional cooperation, the future of the nation-state, and the re-imagining of territorial and national identities are not proprietary to any discipline. The understanding of such issues achieves greater authority when based on multidisciplinary work combined with the analysis of historical, political, and social contexts.

In the specific case of Middle Eastern Studies, the issues of textuality, orality, and literacy, for example, offer a major intellectual challenge across disciplinary lines and historical periods; specifically, they suggest one way in which faculty must bridge more effectively the ancient, classical, and modern Middle East in the curriculum. The multidisciplinary approach applied to earlier historical periods enables students to address issues such as community leadership in Mamluk Egypt, representations of authority in the medieval and modern Middle East as physically expressed through architecture, coinage, burial practices, and the organization of domestic space. The same is true for the development of nationalistic myths for the modern era and the complex ways in which history and poetry have been used in different eras to mark collective and personal identities.

The Program's Goals and Their Implementation:

The Program's self-study or "Interim Summary" describes the Program's initial objective as "modernizing" Middle Eastern Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem by bringing "social theory, conceptualization and comparative perspectives into the field and encouraging a multi-disciplinary approach" (see Appendix E, Background Material prepared by the Program Director). This goal was to be achieved through three related innovations. The first was to introduce social theory into the study of the region's history, culture, religions, and languages. This was accomplished through a mandatory core course on "Approaches and Methods" in the study of the Middle East as well as other courses described as "mandatory/elective."

Second, the Program annually designates existing courses in the faculties of the social sciences and the humanities as electives for the purpose of the Program. These electives can then be combined according to student interests to achieve a multidisciplinary approach. The self-study notes as one of the Program's distinctive features the fact that it incorporates courses on Jews in the Middle East, Zionism, and Israel. On occasion, the Program has introduced and paid for new elective courses, such as "Religious and Cultural Interrelations between the Middle East and Southeast Asia," and "Nationalism and Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus."

Third, the Program offers a "research workshop" that meets 8-10 times annually and brings in guest scholars who address appropriate themes. Students are assigned readings to prepare for the seminar sessions with guest lecturers. Past topics have included such themes as women and gender, text books, and popular culture.

The Program has sought to promote collaborative, multidisciplinary research on critical issues related to the Middle East. Issues of concern in the past five years have included religious and ethnic conflict in the Middle East, gender and society, the idea of

nation and community in post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus, health and healing, and the political and social stability of the states of the region.

The original decision to create a joint program between the faculties of humanities and social sciences seemed at the time most appropriate for the Program's goals. In practice, however, the joint position did not promote the high-quality interdisciplinarity it was meant to foster. A tension seems to exist in the Faculty of Social Sciences between the disciplinary concerns and the interdisciplinary skills stressed by the Program. As a general rule, one can place at one end of the spectrum economics, where area-based knowledge is regarded as peripheral to the discipline's main concerns. At the other end are social anthropology and sociology, where the assimilation of non-Western languages, regional history, and culture is often regarded as essential to seminal disciplinary work. The Faculty of Social Sciences supports the Program financially, but does not give it adequate intellectual support.

Tensions exist also in the Program's relationship with the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, which is part of the Faculty of Humanities. Unlike many universities, where history is included in the social sciences, it is part of the faculty of humanities at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Consequently, the incorporation of methodologies of the social sciences into the curriculum of the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem is at best in an incipient stage. In the committee's interviews with the faculty of the Department and the Program, their mutual wariness regarding questions of methodology was evident. The relationship between the Program and the Department remains ambiguous and is compounded by a lack of communication concerning long-term plans, faculty replacements within the Department, and possible future appointments in the field of contemporary Middle Eastern Studies.

The Academic Committee's role is to set, together with the director, the Program's academic policy and to monitor its implementation. This may have been the case at the outset, but at present the committee meets only once or twice a year, and is less involved in running the Program. The composition of the committee is meant to reflect the multidisciplinary orientation of the Program. In reality, we had the impression that it reflected the disciplinary differences summarized above.

Program Faculty:

The committee was presented with the curricula vitae of five of the program's adjunct teaching staff. All five are qualified academics with doctorates, but the only tenured member is the Program director, who teaches the core course. His formal training is as an historian but he has spent most of his career as a scholar of International Relations. Of the four adjunct teachers, one obtained his doctorate in International Relations. The rest have trained in Middle Eastern History and are all at relatively early stages of their careers. These four have all published several articles in academic journals abroad, but none has produced a refereed monograph. Of the five teaching faculty, two completed their studies abroad and three were trained at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Two are relatively young and the profile of the remaining three is having served decades in Israel's army and security services before beginning a second career in academia.

Our general impression is that in many ways the Program rests mostly on the shoulders of the director. He is the only staff member authorized to guide and evaluate M.A. theses. Consequently, we cannot escape the conclusion that in terms of teaching staff, the program falls short of accepted criteria for guiding and supervising students in a M.A. program.

Program Curriculum:

The curriculum distinguishes between courses offered within the Program itself (16 credits), and elective courses (16 credits in the research track and 24 in the regular track). These are to be chosen from offerings of the faculties of Social Sciences and Humanities, highlighting the Program's dependency on close cooperation with these faculties. The mandatory course, "Approaches and Methods in Contemporary Middle East" (four credits) - very broad ranging in scope - met with high student approval.

There was general agreement among the faculty, students, and the review committee that serious study of Middle Eastern society, culture and politics past and present requires advanced skills in the relevant Middle Eastern languages. For most students, this is Arabic. For students of modern Turkey, it is Turkish; students of modern Iran may choose Persian. English is the only international language required by the Program; only a few students claim to have a working knowledge of French, Spanish, or German.

The Program requires that candidates have a basic level of Arabic, Persian or Turkish equivalent to two or three years of training. The Program itself offers no language instruction. Advanced language skills therefore have to be acquired outside the Program in the relevant institutes and departments. Students who joined the Program with a B.A. degree in Middle Eastern or Arabic Studies strongly complained about the inadequate level of language instruction in Arabic, and spoken Arabic in particular, at both the B.A. and M.A. levels. These complaints were seconded by the Program director. Students also complained about the limited use made of Arabic textual and audiovisual materials in Program courses. These included some of those marked as textual courses in the first and second years of their study. The one noted exception is a

reading course in Arabic, which focuses on a selection of representative texts from Islamic political movements since the 1920s.

The situation is even more serious with regard to students accepted into the Program without prior knowledge of any Middle Eastern language other than Hebrew. They are required to take complementary courses equivalent to three years in the case of Arabic, and two years in the case of Persian and Turkish. This places a heavy burden on them. Except for the most talented linguists, they will be unable to use the relevant language for their M.A. studies. It would therefore appear that language skills are not taught in the intensity befitting a program dealing with the contemporary Middle East.

Possibly related to the limited number of courses covering modern Turkey and Iran, it appears that only a very small number of students opted for Turkish rather than Arabic, and even fewer for Persian. The self-study is not clear on this point. At least in the first year, no reading or textual courses in either of these languages were offered. Thus, in spite of a declared aim to broaden the focus and to cover Iran, Turkey, and the Central Asian republics, the Program remains largely focused on the Arab world and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Program Students:

The threshold grade for entering the Program is 80, a threshold common to many M.A. programs in the humanities (in the non-research track) and in the social sciences at the Hebrew University. In the five years of its existence, ninety-five students have enrolled in the program, out of whom twenty-two have completed their degree (eight with distinction), and eighteen have dropped out of the Program. Three have received the Rector's Scholarship for Excellence (see Appendix D).

Four student papers were presented to the committee. These papers amply show the distinctive value of the Program in teaching the students to use sophisticated, interdisciplinary methods. They show originality of thought and reflect curious and alert minds. At the same time, these papers also reflect the shortcomings of the Program, which does not require that all analysis be firmly grounded in the historical context and in an examination of the original source material. While the Program director himself clearly appreciates the importance of these requirements, they are not always reflected in the student papers.

The meetings with the students corroborated this impression. Those we met were enthusiastic about the Program and eager to get an up-to-date understanding of the contemporary Middle East as well as new methodologies for its study. They expressed their lack of interest in the classical, region-based and text-based fare offered by the Department. The Program seems to fill a gap in the study of the contemporary region, and to answer the students' needs by giving them a fresh approach not offered elsewhere.

The students voiced an almost unanimous disappointment with what they saw as the insufficient language instruction in the Department. At the same time, many of them did not seem prepared to invest time and effort in acquiring the necessary proficiency. Other complaints raised by the students were the Program's failure to make use of the surrounding environment (e.g., the many Islamic sites in and around Jerusalem) and the repetitiveness of the material taught (see Appendix C for a summary of meetings with students). For an interdisciplinary program to function well, it must be based on excellence. While some of the students are certainly outstanding, the Program still falls short of reaching this goal.

Program Administration & Budget:

From the outset, the resources allocated to the Program were insufficient, be it in personnel, budget or scholarships. The Program lacks a firm administrative infrastructure. It does not have a separate office, and as the International Relations Department Chair at this time is also the Program director, the secretary of the Department of International Relations currently performs Program functions. In an attempt to create a framework that will secure the Program's academic and administrative independence, the director, Dr. Sela, had drawn a draft proposal for the establishment of a Center for Contemporary Middle East Studies. This proposal, however, never materialized.

The budget of the Program has fluctuated over the years and is currently showing a small surplus. While a balanced budget is generally a major concern for the Hebrew University administration, in this case the fluctuations are such that they can be considered a relatively marginal issue in the evaluation of the Program.

Summary Evaluation:

From an early stage of the Committee's work, it became clear that the Program review had to entail a comprehensive discussion of the current scope and approach of other M.A. degree programs relevant to Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies in the University. This was not part of Committee's original mandate, and the present report does not presume to offer a thorough review of these other programs. Nevertheless, there are several observations that can safely be made on the basis of our review.

The Program draws heavily on the courses and personnel of the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies. The two M.A. programs overlap significantly, as recognized by both the departmental faculty and the Program director. The Hebrew

University thus has two programs which compete on the use of limited resources rather than complement each other. From both the academic and structural point of view, there is no justification for this duplication.

In evaluating the program against its original statement, we note that a distinctive feature of the Program is to introduce students to the methods and approaches of both the social sciences and the humanities. The Program core courses give substance to this multidisciplinary approach. The Program makes a valuable conceptual and substantive contribution to both the social sciences and the humanities.

The driving force behind the existence of the Program, from its inception to this day, is the Program director. The committee was impressed by Dr. Sela's vision and dedication. Nevertheless, for this vision to succeed, the Program must undergo thorough revision.

A satisfactory implementation of the Program's initial goals will entail long-range strategic planning that will involve all faculty associated with Middle Eastern Studies at the Hebrew University. It must articulate for Program participants, the university, and the wider academic community the relevance of area-based knowledge and intensive regional language skills for the early twenty-first century. This can be accomplished through the development of a critical mass of faculty appointments concerned with such issues. These appointments should preferably include an earmarked senior appointment of a person committed to multidisciplinary approaches.

With the strengths of existing faculty in several complementary fields and the additional strategic appointments of faculty strongly committed to a multidisciplinary approach, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem can re-emerge as a leading center in Israel and beyond for the study of the Middle East.

Recommendations:

1. The committee urges the University to engage in strategic thinking about Islamic and Middle Eastern studies in all its programs and departments. We recommend that the University initiate in the near future concurrent reviews of the other relevant M.A. programs. The present committee's report should be submitted to those concerned with the subsequent deliberations.

2. We believe that all students of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies would benefit from the interdisciplinary approach presented by this Program. However, we see no curricular or structural justification at this time for continuing the Program in the Faculty of Social Sciences.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

RESUMES OF VISITING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- 1. Prof. Sarah Stroumsa, Vice-Rector, The Hebrew University (Chair)**
- 2. Prof. Dale F. Eickelman, Dartmouth College**
- 3. Prof. Haggai Erlich, Tel-Aviv University**
- 4. Prof. Gudrun Kraemer, Free University of Berlin**

APPENDIX B

LIST OF PEOPLE INTERVIEWED BY THE COMMITTEE

The President, Prof. Menahem Magidor
The Rector, Prof. Haim Rabinowitch

Director of the Program, Dr. Avraham Sela

Deans:

Prof. Nahman Ben-Yehuda, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences
Prof. Steven Kaplan, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities

Members of the Academic Committee:

Prof. Reuven Amitai – Head of the Committee (Middle Eastern & Islamic Studies)
Dr. Avraham Sela (International Relations)
Prof. Haim Gerber (Middle Eastern & Islamic Studies)
Dr. Eli Podeh (Middle Eastern & Islamic Studies)
Prof. Ruth Kark (Geography)
Dr. Ronnie Ellenblum (Geography)

Adjunct Teacher in the Program:

Dr. Anat Lapidot

Prof. Eyal Ben-Ari, Head of Truman Institute

Students:

Graduate students
Students currently not active
Students currently studying

APPENDIX C

Meeting with Graduate Students (January 3rd, 2005)

The Committee met with seven students, three of whom are continuing in a direct track towards a Ph.D. Six of the seven had received their B.A. from the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies.

There was unanimous agreement among the students that they did not acquire any new Arabic language skills during their studies at the University, certainly no spoken Arabic. They claimed that their knowledge of Arabic upon entering the University, based on what they had learned in High School, was better than at present.

The students argued that, if languages are to be taught, the instruction should be much more comprehensive. They expressed the wish to have a contemporary Arabic language course using current texts; they also said that secondary literature in Arabic -- books and articles by modern Arab scholars of Islam and the Middle East -- should be included in the syllabus. They also recommended introducing tutorial reading into the Program.

All students agreed that the most important class in the Program was the core course on methodology taught by Dr. Sela which, according to their appreciation, provided a good bridge between International Relations and Middle Eastern Studies. They also stated that this was the only course that has no parallel in the Department. The students also said that they would have liked to have more similar integrative courses.

Most of the students interviewed had chosen the Program because it focused on the contemporary Middle East, and offered a combination of very interesting courses. The Program answered their needs and gave them a fresh approach not offered elsewhere.

The tensions that the Committee detected between the two faculties (i.e., the Humanities and Social Sciences) were much less pronounced among the students, who evidently had a positive attitude to the use of different methodologies.

The students said that the Program lacked some critical courses that could expose them to other perspectives, available in Europe and the U.S. They would like to have a larger variety of courses to choose from, specifically regarding contemporary and current affairs.

All the students interviewed had written their seminar papers under the tutorship of Dr. Sela.

Some claimed that more preparatory courses would have been useful, while others maintained that some of the courses were repetitive. The difference in the students' opinions reflected their different backgrounds (in the faculties of Social Sciences and Humanities respectively).

The students expressed the wish to have more field-based studies.

They also expressed a feeling of isolation in the Ph.D. Program.

Meeting with Students not currently active (January 3rd, 2005)

The Committee met with three students who were not currently active in the Program: two expressed the hope to finish their degree at some point in the future; the third was specializing in a different field.

The latter expressed her high appreciation for the importance of this Program and in her view closing it would be a grave mistake.

All three said that they had chosen this Program over the M.A. program in the Department because it offered more new, exciting and interesting courses and because its contemporary approach appealed to them.

One of the students repeated the complaint that there was no opportunity to learn colloquial Arabic at the University. Like the previous group of students, they also expressed the wish to do field work.

Meeting with students currently studying in the Program (January 4th, 2005)

Present at the meeting were approximately twenty students, the large majority of whom had received their B.A. in International Relations or in the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies.

Many of their comments were similar to those made by the graduates and the non-active students:

- Praise for Dr. Sela's methodological course
- The desire to study the Middle East from the perspective of the social sciences rather than from an historical perspective.
- The desire to have a greater variety of interesting courses
- The desire to focus on the study of the contemporary Middle East
- Complaints of the lack of Arabic proficiency courses
- The wish to be given a choice to study another Western language instead of an "oriental" one.
- The lack of colloquial Arabic. The students expressed the desire to know colloquial Arabic, but showed no desire to invest time in learning it.
- The students expressed their disappointment with the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies: they regard its teaching of history as too traditional, where no new methodologies are introduced. They said that the courses taught in the Department did not address contemporary issues and were too textual. In general, the students regarded this Program as much more interesting. In particular, they were pleased to have interdisciplinary courses.
- They observed that the Program offered no field-based studies.
- When asked to compare the Program to the one offered at the Rothberg School for International students, they expressed their view that their own Program was much more serious academically.

APPENDIX D

List of the Program's Students who received Rector's Scholarship for Excellence

<u>2003</u>	<u>Grade</u>
Shmuel Bachar*	94.82
Orly Lotan**	91.00
<u>2004</u>	<u>Grade</u>
Shmuel Bachar*	95.66
Shmuel Bachar	95.66 (Rector's Prize)
Orly Lotan**	93.62
Maya Shachar**	91.13

* Rector's List (full scholarship).

** Rector's Scholarship for excellent program students. These are additional partial scholarships specifically intended for excellent students of study programs. The number of students in each program who can make the Rector's List (and thus receive the full scholarship) is limited proportionally to the number of students in the program.