Conducting Fieldwork in the Middle East

Report of a workshop held at the University of Edinburgh, 12 February 2007

Yasir Suleiman and Paul Anderson

University of Edinburgh

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Foreword

The purpose of this workshop was to explore the practice of fieldwork in the Middle East. It aimed to consider the methods and techniques used by scholars, the obstacles and opportunities encountered in the field, and the way that these influenced the research product. The workshop also asked to what extent, if any, these features of conducting fieldwork were particular to the Middle East.

The workshop examined these issues from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, including anthropology, political science, history and literature. It brought together selected scholars who had conducted fieldwork in a range of countries across the Middle East. The resulting discussion considered both practical issues such as negotiating access to sources, developing networks of contacts, and the effect of censorship; as well as theoretical questions such as the positionality of the researcher; the relationship between "the field" and theory; and the ways in which the Middle East as a region challenged the assumptions of some academic disciplines.

The day was split into five sessions. The first three sessions considered the perspectives of scholars in political science, anthropology, and culture respectively. The fourth session considered some fieldwork experiences in specific countries: Syria, Palestine, Iraq and Iran. The final session considered the perspectives of scholars born in Middle Eastern countries, and in particular the different ways in which categories of "insiders" and "outsiders" could be constructed. Each session opened with presentations by a selection of panellists, followed by a free discussion from the floor. The discussions were centred on but not limited to a number of questions which are annexed on page 28.

The event was an exploratory workshop based on informal presentations, and this report seeks to represent the range of views expressed during the day. Since the discussion was held under 'Edinburgh Conversation Rules', no attributions are made to named speakers. Therefore neither we, nor any individual participant in the discussion, should be identified with any of the specific views reproduced here.

The workshop was sponsored by the Edinburgh Institute for the Study of the Arab World and Islam, and the Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World. The latter is a joint venture between Edinburgh, Manchester and Durham Universities.

Professor Yasir Suleiman
University of Edinburgh

Paul Anderson
University of Edinburgh

Executive Summary

The workshop considered a range of practical and theoretical issues connected to the conduct of fieldwork in the Middle East. It noted at the outset that there was comparatively little scholarship on the opportunities and obstacles faced by researchers in the region.

On the practical side, the workshop revealed the importance of building networks of personal contacts within the region both before and after arrival in the field, in order to gain access to information and institutions. Those conducting interviews and other forms of ethnographic research especially needed to build trust with key members of the local community. Where the topic of research could be deemed sensitive, these figures could act as sponsors and middlemen – endorsing the research and the researcher, and opening doors to new contacts and other sources of information. Similarly, those conducting archival research found access to resources often guarded by "gatekeepers" within institutions who could either assist or obstruct their research.

Relations between researchers and their contacts raised a number of personal and ethical issues, for which it was important to be prepared. A number of questions were discussed, including how to respond to requests for favours from one's contacts, and how to participate in local practices of gift exchange in order to enter social networks and gain access to resources. Participants also considered whether the presence of the researcher could unintentionally lend legitimacy to the policies and practices that were the subject of research.

A number of speakers reported that their research had been frustrated by political circumstances and censorship in parts of the Middle East. Even the search for literary and cinematic sources could be hampered by political sensitivities in the region. However, it was important not to prejudge what counted as "sensitive" in the Arab world, as the answer could often prove surprising and revealing. At the same time, it was suggested that fieldwork could fall foul of a growing ethical discourse in the West that increasingly sought to limit the topics and methods of research.

This discourse posed particular difficulties for anthropological fieldwork with its focus on the everyday, which was often poorly understood and poorly regarded by official circles in the West and the Middle East. It was also noted that, although the ethnographic method had traditionally been described as "participant observation", there were strict limits on the extent to which ethnographic researchers could participate in the life around them. The objective of such research was not to identify with the subject or community being studied, but to build a body of knowledge. Research should therefore always been driven by a particular "angle" or epistemological position. However, methodology was not a question of following detailed rules. Research was, while constrained by an overall theoretical framework, characterised by unpredictability in the field. This tension between the theoretical framework and the unpredictability of events constituted the challenge of fieldwork, and could be compared to a collaborative musical improvisation.

One dynamic of this tension was the fact that the field produced its own concepts and understandings, which should not be ignored or "chopped to fit" existing made-in-the-

Academy theories and categories. It was misleading to view Europe as the site of theory with the rest of the world providing the empirical experience to refine these theories. Nonetheless, it was suggested that westesrn academic discourse on the Middle East was often dominated by postcolonial and postmodernist theories which were produced outside the region and which often did not make the best sense of trends on the ground. There was a certain professional pressure to conform to this discourse, for example by seeking examples of people in the Middle East "liberating" themselves from the "constraints" of tradition – regardless of the conflicting data available in the field. Similarly, some (though not all) argued that research on the Middle East was still dominated by a small number of fashionable topics such as sexuality and hybridity. It was suggested that this focus was disproportionate and resulted in the neglect of other important areas such as gift exchange.

There was some disagreement over whether it was fair to characterise the Middle East as a unique region in which to conduct research. Some speakers argued that each part of the Middle East had its distinct history, and that it was not possible to draw broad parallels across the region. Others held that everyday life across the Middle East was exceptional in exhibiting an unusual awareness of etiquette and politeness, with social relationships across the region characterised by multiple layers of privacy which determined what could and could not be said in different settings.

Another recurrent theme was the position of the researcher in relation to the subject of study. It was generally agreed that the researcher was always situated in a particular political and cultural position: no-one went into the field as a blank slate. The practice of fieldwork was also affected by the ways in which the researcher was perceived. Discussion revealed that it was not uncommon for the academic researcher to be seen either as a spy, or as a potential messenger who could mediate and improve the image of a particular community in the outside world. But it was suggested that, rather than being lamented as barriers to effective research, these perceptions could in themselves be used to diagnose existing power relationships.

The final session of the workshop explored the ways that scholars born in the Middle East were perceived and the different ways that they related to their fields of study. The notion that scholars fell into fixed categories of "insider" and "outsider" was generally rejected. Any absolute distinction between the two was considered problematic in the same way as the distinction between "the field" and "home". It was also argued that national identity did not in itself always designate the researcher as an "insider" or "outsider" – concepts of belonging were not always reducible to national identity. Finally, it was suggested that national identity itself was not seen in the Middle East as a fixed and given category. Particularly for scholars who had emigrated and then returned to the Middle East, nationality was an attribute that had to be continually performed and re-earned.

Session One: Politics

The first session examined the fieldwork experiences of political science researchers in the Middle East. Discussion focused on a number of practical and theoretical issues. Practical issues included the availability of sources and how to obtain access to them, the different fieldwork methods used by researchers, and the issues involved in developing networks of contacts in the field. The theoretical issues included the extent to which the Middle East could be seen as an exceptional region in which to conduct fieldwork, the relationship between the "field" and the production of theory, and the position of the researcher in relation to the subject of study.

The Practical Issues

a) Sources

- Documentary sources were available at a range of locations, such as archives, national libraries, university and research libraries, bookshops - including second hand bookshops - and private collections.

- The libraries at the American University of Cairo and the American University of Beirut were well organised and often good points of departure.

- Cairo University library, although poorly organised, was an excellent source of Egyptian PhD and Masters theses, which often contained good data and contacts.

- Non-documentary sources should also be considered, such as interviews and public buildings and spaces.

b) Access

- It was usually necessary to apply for access well in advance. Letters of introduction, and contacts with local academics or other relevant figures, were helpful. It was usually helpful to be sponsored by a local research institution.

- Obtaining access to institutions was usually considerably more difficult and time-consuming than expected. In one case, permission to access archives in Egypt was granted only after several months of vetting by the Ministry of Education, followed by a year-long period of security vetting. This period could sometimes be shortened by using local connections, and knowing whom to lobby directly. Generally it was important to prepare as much as possible in advance, and to remain flexible and patient.

- It was also prudent to define the topic of research as broadly as possible when applying for access, especially if the topic was sensitive.

- In many countries it was impossible to access recent or contemporary official sources – such as Egyptian material post 1952 - without excellent local connections.

- Once inside the library or archive, access to resources such as documents, indexes and photocopying facilities was often guarded by “gatekeepers”. They could either assist or obstruct the research, so it was important to establish good relations with them, especially if official procedures were laborious (in one case, it had taken one year to receive permission to photocopy). The way to do this was in some cases by participating in networks of gift exchange. Here it was important to observe the correct etiquette, such as ensuring that the value of the gift was appropriate to the gatekeeper’s status within the organisation’s hierarchy, and the gift was given on an appropriate occasion.

- In general, there was little scholarship, and no firm set of rules, on how to negotiate access to resources within archives. It was important to read each situation and work within it.

- There was a variety of experiences that differed from place to place. Researchers who had worked in archives in Morocco, for example, reported that access procedures were quick and easy to negotiate, and the material well organised.

- For ethnographers, access to contacts in communities was also often facilitated by gatekeeper figures. These gatekeepers could be official or self-appointed, and needed to be approached in different ways. In one case of ethnographic research in a popular quarter of Cairo, the researcher’s entry into the community had been facilitated by a friend, who approached a local butcher, whose sister in turn arranged an introduction to a group of local women. This “snowballing” method was a common and effective way of expanding one’s networks of contacts.

c) Methods

- Methods varied according to the research project. As well as documentary research in archives, methods, especially for ethnographic research, included targeted interviews with individuals and organisations. Interviews could be directed or open-ended.

- Interviews by their nature were particularly subjective, especially when people were talking about their personal experiences, so it was important not to rely on a narrow sample of interviewees.

- Tape-recording encouraged some interviewees to be expansive, but others to be more cautious, so it was important to read the situation as far as possible at the time. It was also interesting to consider why microphones had such an influence and a differential effect on people.

- An interviewing technique that was useful in some contexts was to ask for explanations of what seemed obvious to the interviewee. Asking about the obvious could elicit the categories which the interviewees took for granted, and could yield surprising results. For example, a researcher asking for a definition of "backwardness" had discovered that some rural Syrians considered children in urban Aleppo to be "backward" because they spent their time playing computer games and using the internet rather than concentrating on work and formal education.

- There was discussion about whether "participant observation" accurately described the ethnographic method. It was argued that ethnographic research did not involve observation as such, and there were strict limits on the extent to which researchers could participate in the life around them. Researchers were in the field for at most two years, so still needed a leap of the imagination to appreciate the long-term constraints within which people lived their lives.

- Even researchers fluent in the local dialect or who had been born in the community they were studying who had subsequently emigrated were seen as outsiders. Full participation, in the sense of identifying with and immersing oneself in the community, was not possible – there were always levels of estrangement.

- The objective of ethnographic research was not to identify with one's community or achieve an "authentic" experience; it was to build knowledge, and it therefore involved an exclusive and coercive epistemological method.

- Ethnography, traditionally the method of anthropologists, was now being adopted as a method by some political scientists working outside anthropology. Political ethnography was not yet a fully developed field but a good example outside the Middle East was Jean-Francois Bayart, who worked on Africa.

d) Contacts and relationships

- It was often helpful to contact local academics working on the subject in question. They were a useful source of information and further contacts, and were usually generous with their time and knowledge despite working under challenging conditions.

- Building trust was the key to developing effective relationships with ethnographic informants. It was sometimes prudent not to be fully explicit about the subject of research before this trust had been built up, in order not to alarm informants, especially where the topic could be deemed sensitive. It was not uncommon for informants to suspect that a researcher might be spying against them, and to question the motives behind the research. At the same time it was important to recognise that informants often had different ideas from researchers about what constituted a "sensitive" subject.

- Trust could be gained by establishing links with popular figures in community, and having them endorse the research. It was equally important to learn the norms of propriety expected from researcher, such as the type of dress, and the social relations and events in which one was expected to participate.

- Informants sometimes expected the researcher to show loyalty by spending substantial time with them regularly. As this could prevent the researcher from developing other contacts, it was often necessary to break the bond, although this could be awkward. Informants sometimes saw the researcher as a status symbol, at least initially, or as someone who could help them access power within their own society, or resources such as visas and work.

- One useful contact could lead to others. This snowballing technique was one of the most effective in developing networks of informants. Non-governmental organisations could be helpful in establishing such contacts.

- The researcher generally had an ethical responsibility to shield their contacts from direct representation in the research product.

Theoretical Issues

a) Exceptionalism

- Some argued that while the configuration of features that characterised any place was always particular and specific, there was no reason to see the Middle East as an exceptional region. Every part of the Middle East had a particular history, and it was not always easy to draw parallels across the region. Furthermore, the Middle East and Europe were not distinct categories separated by ethnicity or religion, but were tied together by a history of connections.

b) Relationship between the field and theory

- Researchers were not "blank slates", but rather went into the field with assumptions, hopes and desires. In one case, a researcher had hoped to find the seeds of revolutionary resistance, but had not. Another researcher had chosen to study a group that appeared not to be engaged in resistance, but had found that they were in fact resisting according to their own model. It was also noted that while researchers often looked for resistance[1], the reality was more complicated: action did not always fall into the categories of compliance or resistance.

- The field therefore produced its own categories and understandings, and it was vital that research took account of these. Data gathered in the field generated

[1] As noted in Lila Abu-Lughod, 1990 "The romance of resistance: tracing transformations of power through Bedouin women", *American Ethnologist* 17 (1): 41-55.

its own analytical categories. One researcher working in Egypt discovered that different concepts of the state were current in the field, and had reflected these in the research product. However, powerful relations existed between parent disciplines such as political science, and area studies disciplines. There was a tendency as a result for the findings of field research to be "chopped to fit" into an existing theory, or otherwise to be ignored. For example, there was strong evidence to suggest that in the Arab world, poetry was more important than the novel in the forming of national identity, but wider academic debate had not yet picked up this insight and treated it seriously.

- It was suggested that it was wrong to see Europe as the site of theory production, and the rest of the world as the source of empirical experience which researchers could use to develop and refine their theories. A useful work in this area was *Local histories/global designs: coloniality, subaltern knowledges and border thinking* by Walter Mignolo[2].

c) Positionality

- Generally it was important for the researcher to be aware of their own position in relation to the subject of research. No one went into field as a blank slate, and everyone was inevitably perceived in particular ways. Researchers were part of the contexts in which they worked – they were not outside of it.

- Pierre Bourdieu had drawn a distinction between sciences which tried to efface the observer and to approach reality in an objectivist, positivist way, and sciences – which he favoured - which recognised and took account of the position of the observer. Interviewing clearly fell into the latter category[3]. This meant that it was important, when going into the field, to have a particular "angle": a set of working assumptions about the goals and methods of research, and not simply to enter the field expecting it to produce its own revelations.

- For example, one researcher had conducted a number of interviews with Syrian intellectuals, public figures and government ministers on the subject of Syrian workers in Lebanon. This was a politically sensitive issue, and the challenge was to work out the position of the interviewees, as well as the researcher's own position, in relation to the issue, and how these positions shaped the dynamics of the encounter. One way to diagnose positions was to ask how people interpreted significant events in the past.

- Seen in this light, issues which could otherwise be interpreted as obstacles to fieldwork – such as the perception of the researcher as spy – became revealing in themselves. For example, by asking who is and is not perceived to be a spy, power relationships of imperialism and interventionism can be diagnosed. Other relevant perceptions included the notion of the researcher as a messenger who could improve the "image of the Arabs" in the West.

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[2] Walter Mignolo, *Local histories/global designs: coloniality, subaltern knowledges and border thinking,* Princeton University Press, 2000

[3] Pierre Bourdieu, *The weight of the world: social suffering in contemporary society*, Polity Press, 1999

Session Two: Anthropology

The second session focused on the experiences and perspectives of anthropologists working in the region. The discussion considered the nature of anthropological fieldwork, and then asked what, if anything, was exceptional about the Middle East as a region in which to conduct fieldwork. The speakers explored a number of topics including the difference between the "official" and the "everyday", and the importance of this distinction to anthropology of the Middle East. Finally, participants considered whether and to what extent current anthropological discourse was dominated by particular subjects and theoretical frameworks.

Nature of fieldwork

- It was natural that fieldwork should change the initial direction of anthropological research. There was a sense in which research proposals were "works of fiction", particularly in anthropology where research aimed to elicit the categories that were used by people locally and that underlay local life. The fieldworker inevitably brought sets of assumptions to the field, where they engaged with others with different assumptions. In particular, it was important for researchers not to assume they knew what was "sensitive". What researchers deemed "sensitive" was often not seen as sensitive locally, and vice-versa. Fieldwork was about bringing to light both sets of assumptions.

Exceptionalism

- There were senses in which the Middle East could claim to be different from other areas as a region in which to conduct anthropological fieldwork. Everyday life in the Middle East was particular in being "self-consciously complex". Compared to other regions, the Middle East generally exhibited a greater awareness of etiquette and politeness. There were more layers of what could and could not be said in different contexts, and greater attention was paid to boundaries which should not be crossed in particular situations. Broadly speaking, in the Middle East there were more, and more important, levels of privacy than elsewhere.

- Crucially, these levels of privacy, which meant for example that only an official version of events could be offered to strangers, were not an obstacle to research. They were a central part of what anthropologists were trying to understand. For example, it was relatively difficult in the Gulf states to establish friendly relations with people in which the "official version" of events could be dispensed with. This was partly because Gulf citizens rarely visited informal public spaces such as coffee shops. (By contrast, the opportunity for shared physical work in the Yemen meant that is was easier to establish rapport with local people.) But rather than regarding the difficulties in the Gulf simply as a barrier to research, the researcher could ask what they revealed in themselves about the nature of sociality in those countries.

- The “self-conscious complexity” of life in the Middle East posed challenges for the discipline of anthropology as a whole. Analysts including anthropologists often came to the field with particular political desires. The current fashion was to seek examples of people “liberating” themselves from the “constraints” of tradition, authority, and mutually exclusive categories of identity. The prevailing aesthetic in the Middle East, however, was not to blur and transgress boundaries, but rather to enact them; it was not to resent discipline but to value it. More respect should be accorded to aesthetics of the community that was being studied.

- A practical implication of this was that anthropologists conducting fieldwork needed to remain settled with one community. Attempting to be “global” or “universal” by moving backwards and forwards across boundaries of communities to meet as many different people as possible meant that the researcher risked losing their perceived worth within the primary community they were studying. One researcher who had worked in the West Bank described the process of fieldwork as one of “artful bias” – settling with one family, allowing them to lead the researcher into their particular biases. This was the only way to see life more deeply from their perspective.

- It was essential to recognise that anthropological fieldwork was not an observation of life, it was part of life. The notion of an ethnographer armed with a voyeuristic gaze perpetuating an unequal power relationship did not appear to be supported by the experience of fieldwork. The fieldworker was engaged, not detached; fieldwork differed from everyday life only in that the researcher was keeping track of it.

- If power relationships were at play, they did not always operate in a single direction. While the ethnographer might first be seen as a status symbol or as another foreign observer who could access networks of influence and correct the community’s image in the outside world, after a period of months the ethnographer could be seen differently. Becoming an adoptive daughter, she might be used to do the shopping, or to find out information from her host’s neighbours and to report back.

The official and the everyday

- Because it interested itself in everyday life rather than official life, anthropological fieldwork was regarded with some suspicion within official circles. Political scientists could often study sensitive areas with relative impunity, because they were able to explain their interest in terms familiar to officialdom. It was not uncommon for anthropologists to be arrested because their work could not be described in the same terms.

- The Gulf was a difficult place in which to do fieldwork because access to the field was closely guarded by official gatekeepers such as government-sponsored centres for strategic studies. Official state discourse about Gulf identity was structured around notions of authenticity and modernity, and condemned the everyday by describing it as folkloric, ignorant and full of

error. The publishing industry also had an interest in perpetuating a romantic image of "traditional" desert life which sat oddly with the reality which anthropologists were trying to describe.

- Anthropological fieldwork ran foul of officialdom also in the West. There was a growing ethical discourse in the UK and the US about what it was possible to ask people in the field and how it should be done. This ethical discourse held that only the official version of what people said and did was permissible. As a result, nothing could be said that was not either the official discourse or its opposite.

- For example, the official discourse in Britain constructed Islam either as a peaceful religion or as a violent one. The reality which lay in the middle was rendered invisible. Similarly, violent rural confrontations in the Arab world were often for political reasons constructed as clashes between the Government and al-Qaida terrorists; the more complex reality – that such incidents might be more often to do with local land rights, for example – was obscured. Anthropologists were usually interested in the more complex unofficial reality; Governments and other proponents of the official discourse therefore had their own reasons to obstruct anthropologists' access to the field.

- The official ethical discourse was dehumanising and led to an unethical view of human beings. It excluded the unofficial and the everyday by constructing it as irresponsible. In the academic sphere, this discourse required the professionalisation and bureaucratisation of fieldwork. Anthropological fieldwork fell foul of the official discourse precisely because its interest was in the unofficial and everyday. Its method – simply spending time with people – was made to feel irresponsible; everyday life was made to appear unreal. In practical terms, access to the field was being made more difficult by ethics committees and by the requirements of travel insurance.

Langue and Parole

- The anthropology of Islam often assumed that customary religious practices were a counterpart to dominant forms of official religion. However, it was possible to conceive of the relationship not as one of opposition, but as one of mutual construction. As Talal Asad had suggested, there was a discursive relationship between the symbolic capital of Islam (the "official" Islam, embodied in religious and literary texts) and the actual practices of society, which appropriated and extended this symbolic capital. An example was the way rural women in parts of Egypt extended the Islamic purity code, in which male circumcision is an expression of the original form of Islam, to cover the practice of female genital mutilation, which they identified as a key element of a girl's religious identity.

- In Saussurean terms, the symbolic capital of Islam was the equivalent of *langue* (formal structures and possibilities of usage) whereas the actual practice was the equivalent of *parole* (the actual use and development of possibilities). The challenge for anthropology was to elucidate the connections

and discursive relationship between the two, using both ethnographic and textual sources to do so.

Disproportionate subjects

- There was a discussion about whether some subjects received disproportionate attention in academic writings. It was argued that some subjects exercised a strange fascination over academics and wider readership in the West. An example was sexuality, possession and violence in North Africa. Another was homosexuality as well as other issues such as transgender in the Arab world.

- It was suggested that these Western preoccupations were a legacy of Orientalism, and had influenced in particular those trying to write against Orientalism. While these subjects were valid and interesting in themselves, the proportion of scholarly attention directed at them meant that important areas such as gift exchange were neglected. It was also suggested that the interest in gender and sexuality was driven by a post-modern interest in anything that could be termed "transgressive", "hybrid" or representing a "multiplicity of identities". These were political fashions that did not always make the best sense of trends in the region.

- Others argued that academic work on gender and sexuality was important and reflected the interest among young Arabs in these issues. The use of new internet and mobile technologies was changing on a large scale the way that romantic and sexual relationships developed in the Arab world. This was a mass phenomenon and it was not inappropriate to study it. Furthermore, academic fashions were not uniform: some prominent academic institutions in the UK still did not regard gender-related studies as worthy of serious attention.

- Others noted that gender was an area in which two sets of interests overlapped. Contemporary Arab social and political movements on the one hand, and Western academics on the other, were both interested in gender but from different perspectives and for different reasons. Western academics should therefore ask why and how gender was important within the Arab world. In particular, they should consider the possibility that gender was not an end in itself, but was being used as a technology for something else.

Disproportionate paradigms

- The discussion also considered the effect of dominant paradigms in academic discourse. It was argued that post-modern and post-structuralist frameworks were disproportionately represented in academic writing. These frameworks did not always make best sense of the data and when applied indiscriminately could stifle a sense of what was happening on the ground.

- The influence of these frameworks was related to the professionalisation of academia. Publishers of books and journals favoured the dominant

frameworks, and jobs and promotions were awarded to those who had published extensively. The frameworks favoured by publishers therefore tended to shape the fieldwork questions that researchers chose at the outset. Rather than writing about subaltern resistance, academics should engage in their own form of resistance by letting their fieldwork experiences shape the theoretical frameworks they chose. The sacrifice this required was publishing works of a higher quality but less frequently or quickly.

- It was not only publishers and funding bodies who perpetuated dominant frameworks and stereotypes. Scholars and activists from the Middle East sometimes also reinforced stereotypes even while claiming to argue against them – for example by using stereotypical images of the Middle East to market their products.

- It was suggested that the first step to getting beyond the dominant frameworks of post-modernism and post-colonialism was to take them seriously. This meant recognising that they expressed an appealing liberatory project. But while people did have multiple identities, these did not constitute an array of options from which people could pick and choose at will. Rather, their different categories of identity overlapped and reinforced one another. A critique of the notion of multiple identities would perhaps involve a study of the political economy of late consumer capitalism.

- Another way of getting beyond the dominant framework of post-modernity would be to confront its assumptions with ethnographic data. If postmodernity celebrated the transcending of boundaries, ethnographers should ask what their informants were trying to transcend, and what they were trying to protect.

Session Three: Culture

The third session focused on research into the literature, drama and films of the Middle East. It considered whether the "field" was a relevant notion in the study of culture; the availability of and ease of access to sources; the way in which art could be politically sensitive and the implications of this for the researcher; the role of the researcher's "identity" and the ethical issues this raised.

The "field" and theory

- It was argued that, at least in the study of literature and film, there was no separate empirical space that could be called the "field". There was little to distinguish work done in an archive or research library in the Middle East from research in an archive or university library in the UK. So researchers were either always in the "field", or never in it. It was perhaps better to talk of "research" rather than "fieldwork".

- However, visits to the Arab world were indispensable to researchers interested in contemporary literature and culture. It was important to remain up to date with what was being read and discussed, by visiting bookshops and book fairs in the region, and talking to academic colleagues there. The Cairo bookfair was a key event, showcasing books and other media from all parts of the Arab world.

- It was important to have read western film and literary theory but to be cautious in applying it indiscriminately to material from the Middle East and North Africa. All literary material was produced within a certain context and it was important to be sensitive to this.

Access and availability

- Language was a vitally important key to research. Access to certain types of knowledge was predicated upon the ability to understand a particular language. Familiarity with Modern Standard Arabic, or particular regional dialects, largely determined the type of material which could be researched. Translation was the best way of enabling aspects of the culture to be studied and communicated. It was therefore unfortunate that translation was so poorly valued, in particular within the context of the Research Assessment Exercise.

- The search for literary material in the Middle East could prove frustrating. A researcher looking in Algeria for novels written in French during the pre-nationalist colonial period had found nothing at the national and university libraries, after several days of searching without the aid of catalogues. Continuing the search in bookshops and private collections, the researcher encountered further difficulties: people suggested that books by those who had been "disloyal" to the nation should not be studied, and questioned why the

Algerian-born researcher should be studying in England. Thirdly, the government's policy of Arabisation had chased French texts out of the market.

- Interviews with authors and filmmakers were not always productive. One researcher reported that the Egyptian playwright and author Tawfiq al-Hakim had been particularly unforthcoming. In many cases, direct questioning of authors failed to yield interesting results. A number of literature researchers spent time sitting with authors in cafes. But while authors were often keen to discuss themselves and their own work in these settings, it was unclear how much useful information was gained in the process.

Politics and censorship

- A researcher studying Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian cinema found that many of the films were unavailable and unknown to people in the country because of strict censorship. A number of Algerian filmmakers tackling subjects such as gender and terrorism had migrated to France during the decade of terrorism. Tunisian filmmakers had been exiled for speaking about the effects of tourism on the local population. It was difficult to locate and arrange interviews with those who had remained, despite using networks of friends and local academics. In many cases, the books and films were available in bookshops and libraries in Paris.

- Unpredictable social and political environments made research more difficult. A researcher studying Egyptian theatre had spent nine months in the country but had seen only one production because the censors had closed all the theatres. Drama could only be properly studied by attending performances, but its position in the Arab world was precarious because governments were often suspicious of intellectuals and dramatists.

- Research on literature and culture could itself arouse political suspicion. There was a report that a researcher studying Palestinian cinema had needed to destroy their notes and create new ones in order to be allowed to pass through an Israeli airport.

- Researching literature and cinema could raise ethical questions and it was important to be able to respond to these. An example was whether to uphold cultural boycotts – to refuse to attend cultural events sponsored by groups or governments pursuing policies with which the researcher would not want to be associated. This and similar examples could be identified in several countries across the Middle East.

Positioning the researcher

- Research was often strongly affected by the position of the researcher. This was partly determined by how others reacted to the researcher, which was always unpredictable and often surprising. Research could therefore be understood through the musical metaphor of group improvisation. The

researcher was aiming to create a piece of music through collaboration with others. On the one hand this was a highly structured enterprise, carried out within a social and historical context, and a field of power relations. On the other hand, individual reactions were highly unpredictable. This meant that research was not just a question of following set rules. Rather, the methodology was always being refined and reworked as part of the improvisation.

- One factor in this improvisation was how the researcher's national and ethnic identity was perceived. The reactions varied with political and other circumstances. In 2001 in Egypt for example, popular discourse was pro-Iran, largely by virtue of being anti-US. This meant that an Iranian identity enabled easier access to facilities such as the Dar al-Kutub. But it was not always so. After Egypt had blamed Iran for the terrorist attacks in Luxor an Iranian identity was problematic.

- This raised a number of issues, such as whether the researcher should seek to present their identity in a particular light in order to elicit or avoid a particular reaction. This was an option especially for researchers with dual nationality or for example who had been born in the Middle East but held a US passport. However, the issue was not confined to fieldwork in the Middle East. An ability to speak with a certain accent, for example, could facilitate access to resources in the UK.

Session Four: Country-specific experiences

The fourth session invited speakers and other participants to reflect on their experiences of fieldwork in four specific countries: Palestine, Syria, Iran and Iraq. Speakers were asked to consider the way in which the particular circumstances of the country affected the direction and methods of their research.

Palestine

Palestine was an unusual setting in which to conduct fieldwork. The occupation and political situation had several implications for the researcher:

- Researchers, especially if they were studying sensitive political subjects, could face physical threats, intrusive scrutiny and interrogation. A researcher or journalist planning to meet Hamas leaders, for example, would only be able to do so by fabricating a cover story.

- It was necessary to plan for logistical difficulties, allowing extra time and flexibility to deal with unpredictable delays such as unexpected checkpoints. Researchers should plan in detail where they would go and whom they would meet.

- It was necessary to have a reliable contact who could act as a middleman, and vouch for one's trustworthiness. Without such a recommendation, research became very difficult.

- The situation was politically polarised, with rival organisations deeply suspicious of one another. A journalist needed to appear even-handed by talking to both sides: Fatah as well as Hamas; Israelis as well as Palestinians. However, anthropologists and students were expected by their Palestinian hosts not to cross backwards and forwards across boundaries of communities. Crossing boundaries seemed to increase the legitimacy of journalists but to detract from that of anthropologists.

- In general, the researcher's interviewing style should not be confrontational, as this could be interpreted as support for the interviewee's political opponents. Having published critical writings in the past could also create problems for the interviewer.

- It was useful to maintain contacts on all sides. Business cards from Israeli contacts, for example, could help reassure Israeli border officials.

- While being a known quantity was in some respects helpful, it also had disadvantages. Researchers with friends and family in Palestine, for example, had social obligations to visit them, and this could take up considerable time.

A number of comments were made about the power and position of the researcher:

- Junior researchers often felt that they wanted to appease or please their interviewees, whom they perceived as more knowledgeable and powerful. However, with greater experience and seniority, the balance of power could tilt in the researcher's favour.

- Power was a mixed blessing. Where the interviewer was perceived as powerful or having access to resources, interviewees sometimes sought favours from them, which could put the interviewer in a difficult situation.

- A researcher or journalist could use their position as a potential bridge to the wider world in order to encourage the interviewee to be more open. Since the image of Palestinian authorities in the international community was generally poor, the researcher could argue it could only improve if access was given to original documents and senior figures.

- Superior knowledge of English could be used as a tool of power, especially by Palestinians against Israelis. A Palestinian might, for example, insist on speaking English with an Israeli official who struggled with the language, in order to redress the unequal balance of power, as noted in Y.Suleiman, *A War of Words: Language and Conflict in the Middle East*[4].

[4] Y.Suleiman, *A War of Words: Language and Conflict in the Middle East*, CUP 2004

Syria

Sources

- There were a number of different archival sources on Syria, and their quality varied. In Syria, the Al-Asad Library in Damascus had extensive and well-organised material, and it was easy to arrange access.

- The National Archive, also in Damascus, was useful but the material was fragmented and not well organised. At first, each document had needed to be ordered individually, though after several days the library assistant offered to bring in complete files which made the sifting process easier.

- In France, there were two useful archives on modern Syrian history: the diplomatic archive in Nantes, and the military archive in Paris.

Language and politics

- Although no post-1963 material was available in Syrian archives, there was generally little sensitivity about researching the French mandate period. Younger academics in Damascus in particular were helpful and forthcoming.

- However, the terms and categories used had political connotations and could arouse sensitivities. For example, anti-French rebel bands were called *'isabat* in the literature of the time, but were now commonly referred to as *muqawama* ("resistance"). *'isabat* had acquired the connotation of "criminal gangs" and was not acceptable terminology for some. The foreign researcher needed to learn these connotations and sensitivities, which were not always evident at first.

- Similarly, there was a debate about using the term *'unf*, or "violence" in English. Although it was a commonly used social science term that was applied to state practices, it was not used in the Arabic literature of the time and could be said to carry connotations of illegitimacy. This raised the question of the migration of terms across disciplinary and political boundaries, and the extent to which terms adopted by a particular scientific discipline retained aspects of their original lexical meaning. These issues could affect the way that field contacts responded to the researcher.

Iran

Sources

- Fieldwork in Iran now, on contemporary social and political issues, was becoming more difficult, especially for foreign researchers. It was particularly difficult to research the reform movement. However, it was relatively easy to access sources on nineteenth-century and pre-1979 history.

- Because of the large amount of available material, it was important to narrow one's research question early on. This was particularly true because material was split between a number of different archives. The Revolutionary Guard and military archives contained interesting material, although access was sometimes difficult. The Foreign Ministry archives were also particularly interesting, and dated back to the 17th century.

- A significant amount of archival material had been published, which meant it could be taken out of the country.

- Interviewing in Iran could, until very recently, yield a great deal of material. The challenge was to separate the useful from the less useful information. Interviews were usually best conducted informally, over a meal, or after several hours spent talking about personal issues. It was important not to overestimate what could be achieved in any given time – one interview could easily take up one day.

Access

- Access relied on personal networks, even if there appeared to be official and institutional procedures. Access was always mediated through contacts and everything happened by negotiation. Researchers should develop contacts before arriving in the country. Iranian academics were often keen to maintain their links with the rest of the world.

- It was also helpful to anchor oneself at a research institution in Iran. A particularly well-resourced centre was the Islamic Encyclopedia Project. There was a plethora of research institutes that had been established in Iran over the past twenty years. Most were government funded; some of these were relatively independent, others were run according to particular policy agendas.

- Language training is vitally important, and does determine the type of material to which the researcher has access. Fluency in the colloquial language helps gain the trust of, and provides access to, local people; training in the formal language provides access to documentary sources.

Iraq

An Iraqi-born researcher described returning to Iraq in 2000 after a twenty-year absence in order to study the impact of UN sanctions on Iraqi women.

Access

- Iraq had been generally inaccessible to foreign researchers, who were perceived as foreign agents. The researcher arranged letters of introduction and recommendation which were sent to Baghdad University and other authorities in Iraq, along with a detailed plan of the proposed fieldwork in Baghdad City.

- Because the government was seeking greater international exposure of the anti-humanitarian impact of sanctions, the researcher was granted within two weeks free access to all libraries as well as permission to conduct interviews at will, on the condition that they did not cause political problems.

- Despite this clearance, it was difficult to convince people to talk, because of their fear that what they said would be used as evidence against them.

Method

- The researcher used surveys, open-ended interviews, and case-studies. The surveys were qualitative questionnaires carried out in three residential areas that spanned a variety of income and class categories.

- People were initially suspicious of the questionnaire, which turned out to be of little value in itself. However, it played a key role in opening the door to enable the researcher to conduct ninety open-ended interviews. These came to form the core of the research.

- Most women objected to the use of a tape recorder because it generated a sense of inferiority. Others objected to the researcher taking handwritten notes because they preferred “just to talk”. In general, the open-ended discussion was very useful because it provided the researcher with flexibility to redirect discussion in the most fruitful direction at the time.

Relationships with contacts

- The researcher’s relationship with respondents had generally been good. Most wanted to become friends, to visit and to exchange contacts. Many wanted to know more about the researcher’s personal life than the researcher wanted to know about theirs.

- A number of respondents asked favours of the researcher, such as help in seeking marriage partners. This put the researcher in an awkward position of having to refuse gently, and in some cases invent excuses.

Session Five: Engaging the Familiar

The final session invited all participants to reflect on the categories on “insider” and “outsider”. The intention was to consider the situation of scholars, from whatever background, who worked on a society or culture that was either their own or personally close to them.

Participants discussed whether there were advantages for the researcher in being positioned as an “outsider” or an “insider”. The following points were made:

- In some cases, those perceived as “insiders” had better access to information, because of social norms that prevented some things being said in front of “outsiders”.
- Those perceived as insiders were sometimes burdened by obligations to participate in certain social events. Outsiders were free of these burdens.
- In general, good research did not depend on the background or position of the researcher. Perceptiveness and intuition were more important. Sensitive outsiders had written ethnographies capturing much that local researchers might have missed.
- An outsider unfamiliar with the local language could build a good rapport with people if their intentions were honest. People were generally quick to sense whether a researcher had honest intentions and an open attitude. If they sensed an open attitude, people were usually generous in providing information.
- Historically, some of the best research on Iran had been done by non-Iranians. Whether a researcher was an “outsider” or an “insider” was less important than whether they were prepared to spend a significant period of time in the field. Long periods of fieldwork were regrettably becoming less common, with the professionalisation of academic life and the pressures this entailed.

The idea that people fell into fixed categories of “insider” and “outsider” was generally rejected. The following points were made:

- Identity was both situated and complex. Someone born in Cairo who had since emigrated might be regarded by Cairenes as a Westerner or an Asian. At the same time, some Cairenes might regard others in a neighbouring quarter as belonging to “another world”. Regardless of apparent ethnic identities, many people considered themselves to be displaced people to some extent.
- Any reified distinction between “insider” and “outsider” was as meaningless as the distinction between “the field” and “home”. People were neither or both, at home in many places and simultaneously homeless. Someone born in Cairo and living in Canada, for example, could not give a simple answer to the question “where is home?”.

- Those who could claim many national identities could to some extent decide which category to operate under. This was an advantage insofar as it provided more opportunities for cross-cultural access. But it was not always easy to predict or control how one was perceived by others. Someone who was Iranian by birth, born in Europe and educated in the UK might be seen as an insider up to a point in Iran, but also recognised as British.

The notion of a "third space" and its implications were explored:

- Some scholars born in the Middle East but who had been educated or who worked outside the region suggested that they occupied a "third space" – identified by others as neither a total insider nor a total outsider. For example, a North African scholar who had worked in Europe for a considerable period had been told, by Maghrebi scholars, that they no longer saw things the same as others who had remained in the country.

- The third space had its own problematic dynamics. Scholars and artists occupying the third space were sometimes accused of exoticising Middle Eastern societies. Tunisian directors making films about homosexuality, for example, had been accused of stereotyping Tunisian society and exposing it to Europe in a harmful way.

- Some felt that intellectuals from the Middle East living in the West could offer constructive criticism to, for example, Palestinian society because they saw and understood the broader international context. This recalled Edward Said's notion of "no solidarity without criticism".

- The third space was therefore not an easy space to occupy. It involved offering constructive criticism, rebutting accusations of Orientalism, and steering a course between Orientalism on the one hand and a romanticising defence of Middle Eastern societies on the other.

Participants discussed ways in which notions of "insider" and "outsider" could be constructed in different circumstances. The following points were made:

- There was some evidence to suggest that nationality in the Middle East was not seen as a reified and given category, but rather something that had to be earned and performed, and could be lost. Especially for those who had emigrated and returned to the country of their childhood, a sense of national identity had to be re-earned. There was a political dimension to this – scholars who had emigrated from Middle Eastern countries had to work at keeping up their identity as an insider in order to avoid being sidelined by their critics.

- For example, a north African scholar who had returned to Algeria to conduct research on the veil had felt like an insider when discussing the issue with her own and her mother's generation. Discussing the same issue with a younger

generation, she had been perceived as an outsider and even as a traitor because she had not remained in the country during the decade of terrorism.

- As identity could be lost, it could also be gained. Some argued that a sense of national belonging could be created through means other than birth. It was possible for people of many nationalities to feel Palestinian through their attachment to a just political cause. Similarly, a journalist born and brought up as a Palestinian in Jordan felt strongly Palestinian when confronting Palestinian leaders and holding them to account – the sense of belonging was reinforced by the sense of fulfilling a national duty. A Palestinian who had lived for some years in Mauretania could feel like an insider in Mauretania, to the extent that they felt offended by Orientalist portrayals of the country.

- Concepts of belonging were not always reducible to national identity. Other factors, such as class and generation, were important too, and could transcend national boundaries.

- Identity was a function not only of they way people presented themselves, but also of the way they were perceived by others. Some argued that they would always remain an outsider in the UK, because of the way that they were perceived by others. This was not to say that people could not be generous and welcoming.

It was generally agreed that scholars should remain aware of their own position in relation to the subject of their research. The following points were made:

- Scholars could feel personally involved and politically sympathetic towards the subject of their research, regardless of whether they were linked to it by nationality.

- A sense of national identity could in some cases encourage scholars to identify with a particular political movement they were studying, and thus to become personally involved in the subject of their research. Some researchers reported going into the field motivated partly by a desire to discover or promote collective political action campaigning for justice or reform. They attributed this partly to identifying with that country. Others found themselves becoming personally involved when friends and colleagues were arrested and imprisoned.

- This sense of personal involvement was not necessarily a bad thing. In some cases it allowed the researcher to communicate their findings more effectively. But it was important for the researcher to be aware of it so that they could still stand back and be critical.

The following points were made about objectivity:

- There was no reason why a Briton studying British history should be considered any more or less objective than a Palestinian studying Palestinian history.

- Objectivity was not automatically a virtue. It might be more important for a researcher confronting intense suffering to witness and empathise than to distance themselves and objectify what they saw.

- Historically, and for political reasons, objectivity had been equated with the distance of the "outsider". Even if scientific objectivity was now generally considered to be unattainable, it remained a valid aspiration. In practice, it meant remaining accountable to one's peers by monitoring oneself and using language deliberately.

- Particular scrutiny was paid to the way "insiders" used language. One Palestinian scholar reported describing the War of 1948 as the "dismemberment of Palestine", and subsequently being criticised for not describing it as the "Israeli war of independence". Another was criticised for referring to "suicide attacks" rather than "terrorist attacks".

Some general points were made about the final session's discussion as a whole and its critique of the notion of "belonging":

- The discussion had focused on a critique of belonging and not belonging, and had generally assumed that it was possible to escape from this problematic and to produce useful knowledge.

- However, there were a number of universalising methodologies in the social sciences which it was more important to critique. An example was the language of economism and the discourse of the market. This discourse had developed with colonialism, and portrayed countries as sets of exploitable resources. In the study of labour migration, for example, funding had been available for studies of migrants as "manpower" and "human resources".

- The discourse of belonging had its own history; the historical context of how notions of belonging had developed should not be ignored.

Annexe A – List of participants

Dr Ali Ansari (University of St Andrews)

Dr John Chalcraft (London School of Economics)

Professor Paul Dresch (University of Oxford)

Dr Anthony Gorman (University of Edinburgh)

Mr Khaled Hroub (Al Jazeera)

Dr Yasmin Hussein (University of Exeter)

Dr Iris Jean-Klein (University of Edinburgh)

Dr Shuruq Naguib (University of Lancaster)

Mr Daniel Neep (School of Oriental and African Studies)

Dr Kamran Rastegar (University of Edinburgh)

Dr Zahia Salhi (University of Leeds)

Professor Paul Starkey (University of Durham)

Chairs of the panels, all from the University of Edinburgh, included:

Mr Paul Anderson (Organiser)

Dr Andrew Newman

Dr Ayman Shihadeh

Professor Yasir Suleiman (Chair and Organiser)

Secretary of the meeting:

Katy Kalemkerian

Annexe B – Questions for workshop participants[5]

Preparation

- What was your research topic and how did you choose it?
- In which countries did you work and how did you select them?
- How long did you spend in the field?
- How did you prepare for your fieldwork?
- What training did you receive for your fieldwork?
- Are there any aspects of fieldwork in which you think further training would have been useful?

Methods

- What primary sources did you use?
- How many informants / interviewees were involved in your research, and how did you select and initiate contact with them?
- How did you gather your fieldwork data – surveys, interviews?
- If you interviewed people, what techniques did you use, and did you take handwritten notes or use a tape recorder?
- What were the advantages and disadvantages of the data gathering techniques you used?
- If you used a translator, what were the benefits and disadvantages?

Issues in the Field

- What type of difficulties or obstacles did you encounter in the field, and how did you deal with them?
- How did your informants / interviewees respond to you?
- Did you develop friendships with your interviewees and, if so, did this lead to any difficulty?
- What ethical dilemmas, if any, did you face?
- How did you deal with confidentiality issues?
- To what extent do you think the issues you have outlined are particular to the area or country in which you worked?

The Product

- How tightly was your research brief defined before you went into the field?
- Did the scope or direction of your research change significantly once you went into the field?
- If so, why was this?
- How much of your fieldwork informed the research you later produced?
- How were the difficulties or obstacles you encountered reflected in the research you produced?
- Do you think the choices you made once you were in the field (e.g. about which interviewees to choose) significantly altered your final research product?

[5] These questions are partly taken from an article by Janine Clark entitled “Field Research Methods in the Middle East”, *Political Science and Politics*, Vol.39 No.3, July 2006, 416-441

Annexe C – Workshop schedule

9.30
Session One: Politics

The first session examines the fieldwork experiences of political science researchers in the Middle East. It considers a range of issues related to preparation for fieldwork, methodology, what actually happens in the field, and the way that these factors affect the final research product. Possible areas for reflection include the reliability of, and ease of access to, primary sources; the way in which interviews were conducted; the difficulties and obstacles encountered in the field, including any ethical and confidentiality issues; and the extent to which these factors may be said to be particular to the country or region studied.

Chair: Yasir Suleiman
Panel: Salwa Ismail
John Chalcraft
Tony Gorman

10.45
Tea and Coffee

11.00
Session Two: Anthropology

The second session focuses on the experiences and perspectives of anthropologists working in the region. Again it asks what, if anything, distinguishes the Middle East as a region in which to conduct fieldwork. Possible areas for consideration include: what research areas are defined as "sensitive" and why; how research topics are chosen, and whether some topics are studied disproportionately; whether the Middle East presents particular challenges to the anthropological method; and whether the anthropological imperatives of "getting behind appearances" and studying the tenor of "everyday life" still make sense in this region.

Chair: Paul Anderson
Panel: Paul Dresch
Iris Jean-Klein

12.15
Session Three: Culture

This session focuses on research into the literature, films and other art forms of the Middle East. Possible areas to consider include the availability of and ease of access to sources; the way in which art can be a means of political expression; how censorship regimes operate and change, and the implications of this for the researcher; the way in which art can challenge and contest socially taboo subjects, and whether this is characteristic of the Middle East; the different audiences for whom art is produced; and the role that the researcher plays in promoting or in acting as a conduit between the artist and new audiences.

Chair: Andrew Newman
Panel: Kamran Rastegar
Zahia Salhi
Paul Starkey

1.15
Lunch

2.30
Session Four: Country-specific experiences

The third session invites speakers and other participants to reflect on the particular circumstances of the country in which they lived, and the way that these affected the methods and results of fieldwork. Panel speakers will talk about their experiences in Syria, Iran, Palestine/Israel and Iraq, and may also draw broader cross-regional comparisons. Possible issues to consider include the opportunities and obstacles that were encountered, how these were dealt with, whether they significantly altered the scope and direction of research, and the extent to which they were particular to the country or region in question.

Chair: Ayman Shihadeh
Panel: Khaled Hroub
Daniel Neep
Ali Ansari
Yasmin Hussein

3.45
Tea and Coffee

4.00
Session Five: Engaging the Familiar?

The final session invites all participants to reflect on the situation of scholars, from whatever background, who work on a society or culture that is either their own or personally close to them. Areas to consider include whether the way of knowing a society or culture that is "familiar" or personally close is different from the way of

knowing a society that is “other”; whether the “familiar/other” distinction is a useful one; whether the process of claiming authority differs when the subject is “other” rather than “familiar”; and what the advantages and disadvantages are of writing about a personally familiar society or culture.

Chair: Yasir Suleiman
Panel: Salwa Ismail
Ali Ansari
Khaled Hroub
Zahia Salhi
Yasmin Hussein
Kamran Rastegar

5.30
Close