



Middle Eastern Studies Librarians: An Ambivalent Professional Identity[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate the ambivalent identity of librarians supporting Middle Eastern studies in North America (Canada and the United States), and Western Europe (France, Germany and the United Kingdom), as well as in North American and European institutions located in the Middle East (such as the Library of Congress, American Universities Libraries, or French Research Institutes) in 2014. To do so, the article focuses first on the emergence and evolution of the profession, then on the demographics, training and competencies of the professional community, and last on their perceptions of both characteristics of, and challenges faced by the profession. This research is based on the collection and analysis of primary and secondary sources. After a thorough review of the existing literature on Middle Eastern studies libraries, librarians¹ and librarianship, a survey was conducted among librarians working in North America, Western Europe and the Middle East between June 9 and July 6, 2014. Through an analysis of the survey answers, I sought to glean a better understanding of professionals active in this field in 2014.

Middle Eastern studies librarianship, in spite of fundamental differences inherent to each area studies specialization, shares many similarities with specialized librarianship on other geographic areas. This paper could therefore be used as a model for research on librarians serving the teaching and research community on other areas, or as a base to compare Middle Eastern studies librarianship with other area studies librarianship.

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This article investigates the professional identity of Middle Eastern studies library specialists working in North America (Canada and the United States), and Western Europe (France, Germany and the United Kingdom), as well as in North American and European institutions located in the Middle East (such as the Library of Congress, American Universities Libraries, or French Research Institutes) in 2014.

A recent survey of area studies in North America touched lightly on the challenges facing libraries (Adams, 2014, p. 11) that support teaching and research programs in the field, such as those serving the research community in Middle Eastern studies. These challenges range from the decrease in funding affecting collection development to the lack of appropriately trained librarians to replace retiring professionals. Existing writings on Middle Eastern studies librarianship focus on an older model of a rapidly evolving profession (Auchterlonie, 1982; Dykgraaf, 2003; Luther, 1974; Partington, 1981, 1990; Pollock, 1974; Sable, 1973; Smith, 1965, 1974; Straley, 1988), essentially in the United States, looking at daily tasks (Straley, 1988), the Middle Eastern studies librarian's role and place (Auchterlonie, 1982; Luther, 1974; Pollock, 1974; Smith, 1965, 1974), or work methods (Dykgraaf, 2003). The present paper is innovative in three respects: first, it investigates

contemporary Middle Eastern studies librarianship, second, it compares the profession in three different settings – North America, Western Europe and the Middle East – and third, it aims to look at different facets of Middle Eastern studies librarianship than the ones covered in the published literature such as the Middle Eastern studies librarian's training, work experience, and perceptions of the characteristics and challenges of their profession. Last, this paper, which is a follow-up to a study exploring the intricacies of Middle Eastern studies librarianship, presented in May 2014 at the annual MELCom international conference,² intends to fill a gap in the professional literature.

This research is based on the collection and analysis of primary and secondary sources. First, I thoroughly examined the scientific and professional literature on Middle Eastern studies libraries, librarians and librarianship. Then, between June 9 and July 6, 2014, I conducted a survey among librarians working in North America, Western Europe and the Middle East (employed in North American and European institutions). The bilingual questionnaire³ (French and English) was created with SurveyMonkey, and consisted of eight demographic questions (gender, current position, education and competencies), and two open-ended questions about the characteristics of, and challenges faced by Middle

[☆] Taking full responsibility for the content of this article, the author warmly thanks the known and anonymous reviewers who helped to enhance this text.

¹ Although the terminology commonly accepted in the professional community is "Middle East librarians", for the purpose of this paper I prefer "Middle Eastern studies librarians".

² The program of the 2014 annual MELCom International (Middle East Librarians Committee) meeting, held in Istanbul in May (26–28), can be found here: http://www.melcominternational.org/wp-content/content/past_conf/2014/2014_programme.pdf (accessed 19 May 2015).

³ The survey instrument can be found in Appendix 1.

Eastern studies librarianship. The survey instrument was designed to guarantee the anonymity of respondents, and to encourage responses (i.e., short) while providing participants with as many opportunities as possible to comment, or add information seen as relevant. The questionnaire was distributed via three professional mailing lists to a total of 964 email addresses: 430 MELANET subscribers,⁴ 288 JISCMail LIS-Middle East subscribers,⁵ and 246 Auteurs Arabes subscribers.⁶ This number of email addresses doesn't reflect either the number of individuals, or the number of library professionals reached,⁷ but since all existing professional mailing lists have been exploited, it was circulated the most widely possible within the professional community. At the end of the survey period, 78 people had responded, of whom two were excluded because they work outside the region studied: this study is therefore based on the responses of 76 professionals. As an active member of this community for over 15 years – in North America, Europe and the Middle East – I estimate the number of Middle Eastern studies librarians active in those areas in 2014 to be approximately 250 individuals, which leads to the conclusion that the cohort who answered the survey on a voluntary basis represent more than one quarter of the profession. This is a significant response rate.

THE EMERGENCE OF A SPECIALIZATION

ORIGINS DATING BACK TO THE COLONIAL EXPANSION (17TH CENTURY–1950)

Appearing in Europe in the 17th century, Middle Eastern studies librarianship stemmed primarily from Europe's colonial expansion into the Indian and African continents: it emerged, and developed alongside the field of Orientalism, Islamic and Middle Eastern studies. The *École des jeunes de langues*, the first educational institution devoted exclusively to Oriental studies, was founded in France in 1669. Until 1873 – when the school opened its own library – students used the royal library's Oriental collections.⁸ In Germany, the University of Göttingen established in 1735 had amassed the largest collection of English-language Oriental works in Europe by 1800 (Jefcoate, 1998, 292). In Great Britain, the idea of a school specializing in Oriental studies was first proposed in 1798, in a report by Richard Wellesley, Governor of India, but it wasn't until 1917 that the School of Oriental and African Studies⁹ and its library opened.

Meanwhile, in the Middle East, the European colonial powers established a network of study and research centers with libraries. The French, for instance, founded the Institut Français d'Archéologie du Proche-Orient, the Institut Français d'Études Arabes de Damas (IFEAD, Damascus, Syria) and the Centre d'Étude et de Recherche sur le Moyen-Orient Contemporain (CERMOC, Amman, Jordan) in 1922. This network of public institutions was complemented by a network of private institutions with their own collections. The latter included religious establishments, such as the *École Biblique Archéologique Française de Jérusalem* (Palestine) opened in 1890, or the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies (Cairo, Egypt) officially founded in 1953

(Avon, 2005, p. 455) but whose library had started being constituted 20 years earlier (Avon, 2005, p. 177). Private institutions also included secular establishments, such as the American Universities of Beirut and Cairo, established respectively in 1866 and 1922. In North America, a few institutions established Middle Eastern programs and libraries as soon as the end of the 19th century: the Yale University Arabic and Islamic Studies program was created in 1841, along with the Near East collection. But for the most part, although a great number universities have offered area studies programs “since approximately World War I” (Sable, 1973, p. v), it is not until the end of World War II that they started developing their own specialized documentation centers:

“Indeed, it became fashionable in the 1950s to think that our ‘national interest’ required all sorts of studies of the area [Middle East], and this assumption led in turn to the rapid development of very large collections of Middle Eastern books and serials at several university libraries” (Partington, 1980, p. 154).

In 1945, the Library of Congress created a “Near East” section,¹⁰ later merged with the African section and the Hebraic section into the African and Middle Eastern Division (AMED) (Gray, 2001). In Canada, McGill University opened an Islamic Studies Library in 1952,¹¹ and from the mid-fifties on, several American universities followed suit, including Harvard University¹² (1954), the University of California in Los Angeles¹³ (1957), and the University of Chicago¹⁴ (1965) among others. Historically, Middle Eastern studies collections are mainly found in academic and research libraries. The rapid growth of area studies collections in the West led to the emergence of specialized librarianship – including Middle Eastern studies librarianship – as a profession, when prior to this, library professionals were often scholars “more concerned with protecting and preserving collections under their guardianship than with expanding them or with facilitating their use” (Partington, 1980, p. 154).

THE ERA OF PROFESSIONALIZATION (1960–1980)

The 1960s witnessed a veritable institutionalization of Middle Eastern studies librarianship in Western Europe and the United States thanks to the creation of professional associations that generated a community and network for skills exchange through annual conferences and specialized publications. The two main associations are the Middle East Librarians Association (MELA), founded in 1972 and based in North America, and the Middle East Librarians Committee International (MELCom International), founded in 1979 and based in Europe. A third professional association, the Association of Orientalist Librarians (IAOL) gathering information professionals specializing on all “area studies” defined in North America as “Oriental” (i.e., Middle-East librarianship, East-Asian librarianship, Indian librarianship, etc.)—created in 1961, seems to be currently dormant, if not dissolved, since no information on recent activities could be located. MELA defines the Middle East librarian as “anyone who is employed by an institution to service Middle East library materials in a professional capacity.”¹⁵ The respective numbers of members of both associations fluctuate between 53 and 103 depending on the year for MELA, and between 273 and 296 for MELCom; and it is possible that some professionals might not be members of any

⁴ MELANET is the Middle East Librarians Association listserv: <http://mela.us/melanet.html> (accessed 29 May 2015).

⁵ JISCMail LIS-Middle-East listserv is based in the United Kingdom (<https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?AO=LIS-MIDDLE-EAST>; accessed 29 May 2015).

⁶ Auteurs Arabes is based in France (<http://liste.cines.fr/info/auteursarabes>; accessed 29 May 2015).

⁷ It is likely that a number of professionals subscribe to more than one list, or subscribe several times to the same list with different email addresses, as well as it is probable that non-librarians such as booksellers and publishers subscribe to these lists.

⁸ Now called “Bibliothèque Nationale de France” (BNF). See: http://www.bnf.fr/en/tools/a.welcome_to_the_bnf.html (accessed 29 May 2015).

⁹ See: http://www.bnf.fr/en/tools/a.welcome_to_the_bnf.html (accessed 29 May 2015).

¹⁰ See: <http://www.loc.gov/rr/amed/> (accessed 24 May 2015).

¹¹ See: <http://www.mcgill.ca/library/branches/islamic> (accessed 24 May 2015).

¹² See: <http://hcl.harvard.edu/libraries/widener/collections/mideast.cfm> (accessed 24 May 2015).

¹³ See: <http://guides.library.ucla.edu/content.php?pid=22907&sid=275980> (accessed 24 May 2015).

¹⁴ See: <https://cmes.uchicago.edu/page/library-resources> (accessed 24 May 2015).

¹⁵ See: <http://www.mela.us/> (accessed 15 May 2015).

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