

THREE ATIYEH PRIZE ESSAYS

Middle Eastern Librarianship: The State of the Art

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At conferences some time is spent discussing what is going well, but the lion's share of the time is spent on problems, in MELA's case, disturbances in library land. Hard-working Middle East librarians across the United States, and the world, attend the MELA meeting each year to discuss changing methods and new challenges. At the November 2001 Middle East Studies Association meeting in San Francisco, the Monday panel of Dona Straley of Ohio State University, James Weinberger of Princeton University, Jere Bacharach of the University of Washington in Seattle, and George Fawzi of Leila Books in Cairo, Egypt, discussed the continuing obstacles to the easy flow of and reliable access to Middle Eastern materials. My own experiences as a former Arabic and Persian cataloger at Princeton University and The University of Arizona blend with their remarks in this essay. It is my hope that this amalgamation of data, viewpoints, and concerns will enlighten readers on the present state of the "art" of Area Studies Librarianship, specifically that of the Middle East.

Just a note on the title: though some of you may have read "State of the Art" in the hi-fi stereo, top-end home appliance sort of way, what follows should prove that interpretation indefensible. Rather, I mean by this phrase the condition of the field of Middle Eastern Librarianship at the present time as is discernable from the issues and some solutions raised by several of the field's most respected professionals.

[†] Editor's Note: Although the author was awarded the 2001 Middle East Librarians Association George Atiyeh Prize, she was unable actually to accept the award. MELA requests that recipients of the award submit an essay on a topic inspired by their interaction and communication with librarians and scholars during the MELA and MESA meetings. This essay nevertheless certainly could have fulfilled MELA's request and offers some interesting perceptions on the challenges of Middle East collection librarianship.

Some problems are faced by all librarians and libraries, and others are special to the Middle East Collections Librarian. Common problems faced by all librarians include (i) budgetary constraints, (ii) space constraints, and (iii) lack of personnel with the necessary qualifications.

As the saying goes, money is everything. This is true in the world of libraries today. There is less of it for materials and payroll and expansion. Librarians of Middle East collections are especially hurting in those institutions where Middle East Studies has not enjoyed a long and revered history but has rather just been one among many other fields served by the library. Dona Straley explained that a lot of her time is spent explaining the significance of all of those “books filled with squiggles” to her student helpers and her seasoned co-workers alike.

As time passes, collection grow and available shelf space decreases. Though English language materials may now arrive in diverse formats, Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, and Turkish language materials are still largely print materials. Dona Straley related how the Ohio State University administration had only two concerns about the renovation in their library: These were only that the older façade be retained and that there be abundant of seating. Little or no concern for the crisis regarding space for books was expressed. It is the challenge of Dona and the other OSU librarians to function in a public institution that gets less than 25% of its funding from the state, while still satisfying so many constituents. OSU’s Middle East Collection is only one of two of any consequence in the state. It is stretched to the limits to continue to supply materials to those on the Columbus campus, as well as across the state within a consortium of state universities and colleges. At the same time, the consortium might be a blessing, because if all the books were to be held in the Columbus building, they would have to be stacked in the aisles for lack of shelf space.

If finding and attracting and retaining qualified personnel is a problem at Princeton University, which has an endowment of 3.5 billion dollars, it is almost certainly a problem everywhere. James Weinberger, the Middle East Librarian at Princeton, says that staff are simply not offered enough in salary to come from distant places, so recruitment is restricted to what local markets have to offer. Moreover, individuals who have or gain special skills, such as languages or cataloging experience, rarely receive significant pay increase. Base increases each year are around 3% regardless of extraordinary skills. When pay rate is adjusted for inflation, any increase is in effect negligible.

Furthermore, the Provost and the Regents at Princeton — in most other universities — seem to take the library for granted. They fail to see the library as an essential, constantly developing and essential part of academic life. Thus, it is frequently a target for cut backs or zero budget increases. Princeton’s Middle East collections rely heavily on departmental funding shared with the library, alumni contributions, and faculty direction of acquisitions. Accordingly, money is spent on the essential acquisitions rather than on less important items. Princeton’s Middle East Collection benefits from the “tradition” of Princeton as a major Middle East Studies center; without the traditional support, the collection would probably be subjected to the same stresses as other less important parts of the library.

The core of the problem as Weinberger sees it, is that the people making the decisions in libraries and in administrations are not avid readers. They do not see a need for a library because they do not use it. Neither are they made to appreciate the library’s crucial role in the astounding research and discoveries accomplished on campus.

Problems specific to the Middle East Librarianship include: (i) cataloging challenges, (ii) delays in availability of copy cataloging, (iii) work dependent on student labor, (iv) lack of shelf-ready books, (v) limited availability of on-line materials, and (vi) a number of supply problems. Cataloging challenges center around transliteration systems for non-roman alphabet materials, a marked dependency by more and more institutions on copy cataloging, and a shift from relying on expert catalogers to the growing use of ill-trained student workers.

Transliteration standards need to be upheld, but they are not altogether intuitive — especially to a native speaker. Though the very basic rules of transliteration can be taught rather quickly to persons with some knowledge of the language, such as Arabic or Hebrew, the finer nuances might be fully mastered by a select few who are truly dedicated to producing near-perfect bibliographic records. The difficult task is drawing persons with that level of skill and thoroughness to low-paying positions and retaining them. Because creating original records is often tedious and time-consuming and because over the past decades library cataloging departments have grown smaller, most libraries copy-catalog from the major bibliographic databases such as RLIN or OCLC.

Copy-cataloging benefits those libraries that cannot hire full-time foreign language catalogers. This approach to cataloging has the draw-

back of delaying the movement of new materials to the shelves. For example, here in Arizona, I spent a year cataloging Arabic and Persian books. If a matching bibliography of the book in hand was not already on OCLC, policy dictated that I put aside the book for several months and then try again to locate copy. Every manager of library personnel knows that the more an item is handled the more it costs to get it to the shelf. Additionally, a sizable room has been reserved to hold these hundreds of books being held in cataloging limbo. Certainly, if an analysis were undertaken of the costs of the present time- and space-consuming process versus hiring a full time Middle East Cataloger to get the job done at once, it would prove in favor of the latter.

Until analyses are done and accepted, in many libraries, a process highly dependent on students and entry level staff will continue. The University of Arizona has one full time Middle Eastern language librarian, Dr. Midhat Abraham, and one full time assistant, Mr. Saad Dagher. Mr. Dagher's office handles the technical processing, and he manages at any one time one to four part-time students who are paid around \$6.00 an hour to process Arabic, Persian, and Turkish books. They do not generally stay long in the windowless processing room before moving to more lucrative positions, such as flipping burgers and serving tables. Many of the students work there only because their international student visas disallow working off-campus. Much of the real book movement relies solely on the presence and alertness of these students, who are often distracted by their studies, exams, vacation breaks, strife back home, and other issues.

These are issues of concern, because the process sees little hope of immediate amelioration. Nothing in Arabic, Persian, or Turkish arrives cataloged and shelf-ready, and they are not likely to do so very soon. Many academic libraries expect large percentages of books to arrive shelf-ready, indeed, the rate will increase over the next five years until it reaches as high as 75%. Additionally, more and more books and magazines will also arrive only electronically. Library projections, however, largely ignore the realities and problems of foreign language collections and the fact that in the foreign book publishing trade, technical advances and preparation for the shelf do not match the advances in the western European book trade. Middle East librarians (as well as those for European, Slavic, and Asian languages) are challenged every day to remind library administrators of the special needs and realities of the non-Western book and serial business.

This brings us to other issues we encounter in the electronic age, such as the amount of Middle Eastern materials available online and the ease or difficulty in finding them. Whereas transliteration bring some efficiency into producing Marc records for easy database retrievability, too many mistakes in the records are replicated in the copy cataloging process. Moreover, quick and dirty cataloging results in a low level of subject heading assignment, so that the book is found usually under only one or two subject headings, although it may actually need more. The uninitiated library user does not know the transliteration system or the terms chosen by Library of Congress Subject Headings for Middle Eastern topics, with the result that books on the shelves often go undiscovered. Many researchers who would otherwise consider searching for Middle Eastern materials in the catalog are confused by database interfaces that do not properly or fully display familiar diacritic marks in romanized records. Even people who know the transliteration system and apply it in their searching might retrieve few relevant titles or encounter gibberish in records retrieved. Then they must guess at what the strange-appearing marks mean, if anything.

Many of the challenges faced by Middle East librarians arise in the distant lands from which materials come. Book collection and mailing in Middle East, for example, involves a number of challenges, as the Leila Books Representative, Mr. George Fawzi, made clear in his presentation.

Again money is crucial. It stands as one of the first barriers to the efficient and economical supply of library materials. In Egypt, book selectors personally find and bring in books on the “wanted lists” of western libraries. These selectors rely heavily on urban transportation systems. A single taxi ride across town may cost \$56 dollars to pick up an \$8.50 book that simply must be in a particular shipment. Shipping Costs are heavy already, but they are exacerbated by packaging costs. The bags and boxes the books are shipped in are sometimes molested or damaged several times during transport and various inspections.

Censorship is also an issue. Books are censored at publishing, but the censors can change their minds. Once, 500 books were already shipped when the censors changed their minds. They actually wanted Leila Books to bring each one back. In other instances, Leila Books has purchased a large number of books only to be told at the point of shipping inspection that they could not be exported. It is a frustrating reality that each title must be cleared for export by no less than three agencies; the government, al-Azhar leaders, and customs officials. It is

not uncommon for individuals in these offices to request bribes to move the paperwork and books along.

Many Egyptian and other Middle Eastern printers still use old machinery or rush the process of printing and binding. Books with missing pages, blank pages, or loose bindings result. An investigation after a number of complaints from U.S. libraries showed that fully 10% of the books in the study were flawed with blank pages. Another 6% were found to suffer from poor printing: smudged pages, ink too faint, off-center printed pages, etc. Consequently, Leila Books has had to hire a full time page-turner to examine each book.

Leila Books uses ordinary book shops as their suppliers. This presents the challenge of finding sufficient numbers of any one title. There is also generally a lack of understanding the purpose of Leila Books and the seriousness of time constraints. Small numbers of books are not seen as important by often very relaxed store-owners. Even people who have supplied books for years from their stores still ask: "What would anyone in America want with this or that book? It can't be that important that I need to get it quickly." A similar lack of urgency and understanding was encountered when Leila Books needed to create a computer program for their inventory and supply process. This was again not seen as important or urgent. Leila Books' managers had constantly to impress upon the programmer the pressing need for the program to do all they asked it to do and to have it done on time . . . and to have it operate in Arabic and English.

There are some difficulties from the receiving end as well. Each U.S. or European university library has its preferences for subject matter of books in Leila Books' database. Changes in these preferences need to be recorded and made known each time a book collector leaves to gather items. Some libraries change their preferences frequently and expect the very next shipment to reflect the changes, even though there is likely a shipment or two already in progress. More troubling to Leila Books is that many departments have closed over the years. Others are ordering much less than in the past. Most want their books as soon as possible, but then fail to pay invoices regularly. Leila must thus risk much money up front.

One may ask, "If there are so many problems with running a book supply company, why bother?" Well, there are some good reasons Leila continues its work. First, the current situation in the Middle East and the western reaction is sufficient explanation. The West needs to know

what the Middle East is doing, how they are expressing themselves, what they are investigating, worried about, etc. Second, the world also benefits from understanding Islam (the fastest growing religion in the world) and its cultural expressions. Third, our own country's cultural diversity demands that we understand our own citizenship. Fourth, the West continues to have close industrial and business ties to the region. Fifth, our politicians, ambassadors, and educators need to have access to the latest information and knowledge for decision-making purposes.

What is a Middle East Librarian to Do?

In order to better market Middle Eastern collections and support the staff in charge of them, much effort needs to be expended on public relations within libraries and outside. We need to let people know who the Middle East librarian is. The great value of the collection of "squiggly-script languages" needs to be demonstrated to the other library staff, the library administration, and the campus in general. Perhaps this can be done by publicizing widely research based on the collections or making sure that progress within the collection is emphasized in regularly distributed library reports. It is important as well that more staff be hired and gain training in cataloging to keep up with arriving materials and to keep errors to the minimum. Middle Eastern librarians also need to actively cooperate with departments and faculty who have an interest in the collection. Dona Straley suggests that librarians attend the faculty meetings of those departments which rely on the collection. More generally, MELA members should feel challenged to venture outside the library and connect with other campus departments and organizations that might in any way benefit from the collection and thus bring benefit to the library. Faculty should be asked for comments and input. What are their changing needs? If there is time, one could even have professors look over the potential book purchase lists and mark the most and least desired items. This creates a sense of ownership and a desire to care for the collection's development and upkeep. Much is changing after the events of September 11 that will significantly influence Middle Eastern collections. Effective librarians will closely monitor the development of the curriculum. Depending upon local programs, it may pay to set up internships for information studies students so that they get hands-on experience in the creative stages of area studies librarianship. It might even be productive to add a foreign language requirement to MLS degree program.