Preface

The Ethics of Social Research: Perspectives from the Study of the Middle East & North Africa

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On the first day of classes of the 2024–2025 academic year at Columbia University, protestors on streets outside the campus shouted slogans demanding the university divest from companies doing business with Israel. As the student newspaper, *Columbia Daily Spectator*, reported:

> During the picket, which began at around 9:30 a.m. and ended at roughly 2:30 p.m., protesters handed out flyers explaining the motivations behind the demonstration and reiterating protesters' demands for full divestment from companies with ties to Israel. The flyer read, "As we prepare to begin a new semester, Gazan students have no universities left to which they can return."[1]

Several students poured red paint on the iconic mid-campus statue of Alma Mater; two were arrested for disorderly conduct. The campus itself was accessible only by holders of university-issued IDs; black-clad private security contractors patrolled the gates and surveyed the campus, monitoring the doors of many of the university buildings, while helicopters whirred overhead for hours, giving the impression of a site under siege.

Two weeks later, thousands of pagers and walkie talkies detonated across Lebanon, killing at least thirty people and wounding more than three thousand others, in what proved to be the start of an Israeli military campaign against Hizballah. Before the end of the month, most universities, including the storied American University in Beirut, had suspended operations on the order of the Ministry of Education.[2] In Egypt, the streets and campuses historically known for pro-Palestinian rallies and protests were uncharacteristically quiet thanks to pervasive security controls, while the ubiquitous encrypted chat groups buzzed with news and alarm.

For the guest editors of this volume, who were preparing its final submission from New York, Beirut, and Cairo, this upheaval was a painful and ironic illustration of many of the themes that stimulated the project of which it is an expression. In 2020, shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic upended much of life around the world for several years, the Carnegie Corporation provided funding for a Special Commission on Social Science Research in the Middle East and North Africa, designed to "develop guidelines for the conduct of responsible, ethical and constructive social inquiry" in and on the region. It became known as the project on Research Ethics in the Middle East and North Africa, or REMENA. It was housed at the Middle East Institute at Columbia University, and represented a collaboration of the Columbia Global Centers, the American University in Cairo, the Rabat Social Studies Institute, and the Arab Council for the Social Sciences in Beirut.

REMENA was intended to animate an interdisciplinary network of scholars to assess the landscape of social science research conducted largely in the Arab world, particularly some of the ethical, political, and economic challenges to conducting such research responsibly. It reflected many ongoing discussions, frustrations, and initiatives by MENA scholars in the region as well as in Europe and North America. The aim was twofold. First, the commission sought to raise awareness about the structural contexts of social science research in the Middle East and North Africa. Then, working with academics, researchers, and practitioners, the commission set out to develop responses and remedies for the deficiencies identified, and to develop ethical standards to improve the quality and strengthen the communities of social science research on, and in, the Middle East and North Africa.

Among our earliest debates was the perennial terminological question that bedevils the field: What (and where) is the Middle East? Clearly a legacy of the European imperial era, the term is the only such geopolitical designation still in use, the "Far East" having long ago graduated to East Asia, the "Indian subcontinent" now South Asia, and the "Near East" (originally employed to designate western portions of the Ottoman Empire) fallen into disuse. That fact alone suggests that the shadow of foreign interests is long and dark in the region, extending even to its very definition. For this volume, we default to the consensus of our academic colleagues that "the Middle East is a complicated and changing region, with often conflicting definitions, usages, and impacts," and merely note that while most, but not all, of our work is focused on research in Arabic-speaking lands and peoples, the time approaches when the region to which we refer will be known as Southwest Asia and North Africa.[3]

The REMENA initiative was intended to address a variety of challenges facing the increasing globalized field of social science research, especially in inhospitable circumstances or under duress. It had a broad and ambitious charge: to examine questions of how, when, and where social scientists do and should collaborate and how it should be acknowledged; how social scientists interact with research sub-

jects ; what standards of candor and transparency should be observed ; and how research should be disseminated. In addition, it aimed to address the challenges to the scholarly research enterprise in the region represented by the rise of nonacademic consultants who provide bespoke research for governments, international organizations, and private enterprises ; disciplinary standards and literatures that reflected imperial legacies ; power differentials among international and local research communities ; popular skepticism about the research enterprise ; and impediments to research imposed by autocratic governments, civil unrest, and violence. Specifically, the project was designed to :

a. Identify institutional, economic, political, and sociological impediments to the conduct of social science research in the region today ;

b. Propose long-term strategies for addressing such impediments and promoting and sustaining social science research in the MENA region ;

c. Recommend mechanisms for greater cooperation among social science communities within and beyond the Arab Middle East and North Africa to strengthen research designed and conducted by local scholars ;

d. Develop guidelines for the ethical conduct of research in and on communities under duress in circumstances of disparate power relations ;

e. Foster shared perceptions of the value of social science research and of the circumstances that advance it, within the region and beyond, so as to nurture regional and international audiences for such research in the future.

The project organizers recognized from the outset that many of the issues they identified in the Middle East and North Africa were also present in other parts of the social science enterprise. Debates about how to prepare students in doctoral programs for "nonacademic employment" reflected the growing influence of social science methods and technologies in think tanks, consultancies, and international organizations around the world. Extractive research methods, particularly among vulnerable populations, have produced skepticism and hostility everywhere. Concerns about tensions between "scientific" norms of transparency and political and cultural demands for discretion and judgment animated debates across methodological traditions. Thus, insofar as this project was intended to enhance the circumstances of research in the Middle East and North Africa, it was to have a similar, if not identical, positive impact on the research enterprise more broadly, as well as serve to promote and advance work outside the privileged precincts of Europe and North America.

The REMENA project began during the pandemic as a series of online consultations. By 2022, in a collaboration with the American Political Science Association, the first in-person workshop was held in Amman, Jordan.[4] Since

then, workshops have been held in Cairo (co-sponsored by the American University in Cairo), Tunis (Centre d'Etudes Maghrébines à Tunis), Doha (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies), and London (School of Oriental and African Studies), with panel sessions hosted at conferences of the Middle East Studies Association, the American Political Science Association, and elsewhere.[5] The REMENA network grew to include several hundred people, from doctoral students to senior faculty, university-based academics to private consultants, anthropologists to economists.

Most of the essays in this volume are based on papers originally prepared for regional workshops. They illustrate the variety of issues and approaches that the REMENA project has addressed: some are quite technical treatments of patterns across funding sources, research methods, and research dissemination, while others are more personal reflections on institutional incentives and political constraints. The extent to which the debates in the region have washed up on the shores of Europe and North America in the aftermath of the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent Israeli invasion of Gaza – widely believed in and beyond the region to be effectively genocidal – as well as its subsequent incursions into Lebanon, Syria, and the West Bank, has obviously shaped the personal and professional lives of the REMENA collaborators, including many of the contributors to this volume, and has surfaced troubling issues that were in the background of the original REMENA remit.

This volume is not a report of the commission deliberations but rather a series of sometimes very personal reflections drawing from the extraordinary collaborations of a disparate collection of colleagues: early career and senior scholars, based in universities, think tanks, and consultancies in dozens of countries from New Zealand to Sweden, the United States to Türkiye and across the Arab world, representing disciplines ranging from anthropology to statistics including, for reasons that become obvious in the discussion of funding, a substantial number of political scientists. These social science researchers all care deeply about the quality, integrity, and impact of their work and have been willing to share their experience, concerns, and satisfaction in the furtherance of this collective endeavor.

As we deliberated, it became clear that the issues we confront exist at different epistemological levels or ranges of responsibility. It has been useful to disaggregate these even though they do not necessarily nest neatly from lowest or narrowest to highest or broadest, nor are they reflected precisely in the contributions that follow.[6] In the first instance, however, we have a responsibility to ourselves. We cannot complete the projects to which we have committed ourselves if we cannot ensure our own health and safety. This may be obvious, but it is a nontrivial consideration for those of us who conduct research in countries where skepticism about the research enterprise runs deep. Often this is for good reason historically: much of the world's best anthropology, for example, was undertaken on behalf of the world's great imperial powers, and much highly regarded political science has

been devoted to explaining and justifying U.S. hegemony in the world. The danger to researchers is heightened where violence – whether state-sponsored torture, militia-based combat, criminal gang violence, or outright war – is widespread or where disease and trauma are endemic, as in many humanitarian crises and impoverished communities. In this, unfortunately, we share some of these preoccupations with colleagues who work in other parts of the world, but there has been surprisingly little systematic work about researcher safety and security.[7]

If we have effectively discharged our responsibility to keep ourselves healthy and safe, we then need to consider our responsibilities to our institutional sponsors and supporters. To some extent, academic institutions – and more and more often, development organizations, funders, and even publishers – have mechanisms to protect themselves from claims that they have allowed, promoted, funded, or published work that was conducted unscrupulously or irresponsibly. This commitment to ethical research is certainly to be applauded. Nonetheless, implementation of these kinds of institutional reviews typically reduces full-throated advocacy of ethical norms to institutional compliance in the face of government regulation and institutional protection in the event of researcher misconduct. Institutions manage risk, not ethics, and cannot be relied on to provide adequate ethical oversight. Nonetheless, we have to recognize our ethical responsibilities as researchers to these institutions as the facilitators of our work. Failure to clearly and honestly characterize our research processes, procedures, and purposes to institutional review boards or to publishers is an insult, not only to our colleagues who are university administrators or journal editors, but also to the research enterprise as a whole.

This is in part because we have responsibilities that go beyond our institutions. Most often, we think of these as obligations to our research subjects – the human subjects that many of the institutional mechanisms were originally designed to protect. Our research should not harm those we study. But harm is, as we know, difficult to avoid where the standards of transparency and confidentiality often collide and the terrain is changing rapidly. Many parts of the research landscape in which we work are crowded with competing teams jostling for access to field sites and informants. The methods by which we conduct research have been adopted and adapted by organizations not governed by the norms of the academy.[8] Academics should not ignore the work of international organizations, private consultants, development agencies, and humanitarian and rights advocates. After all, many of those conducting such research are the products of the very same disciplinary training as university-based researchers: these are the "nonacademic jobs" that doctoral students are increasingly encouraged to seek after graduation. They are, in other words, a part of the larger research enterprise to which we all belong.

Yet, driven by career imperatives to conduct and publish research for whose novelty we will be recognized, we too rarely consider collaborating with organiza-

tions conducting parallel studies or developing common training programs, data-sets, and even publication protocols. If we understood better how such work is organized, funded, and recognized, we might contribute to relieving our research subjects of some of the burden of serving as our de facto research gatekeepers, shuttling between uncoordinated research teams mindlessly replicating redundant – and wearisome – projects. Such recognition of the wider field would also contribute to acknowledging all those collaborators, research assistants, data analysts, translators, and interview arrangers who go unnamed, but without whom much of our research could not happen. Far too often, the resources of the privileged – the time and money afforded to researchers based in wealthy universities in the Global North – accumulate while those who make their work possible languish on the margins of our supposedly collective enterprise.

Moreover, today's research enterprise is driven by the same attention economy as much of the rest of human activity. Some issues are the academic version of clickbait: hot topics (and sometimes methods) that are more likely to be approved, funded, and published (and so their authors are more likely to be invited to conferences, flown in for job talks, hired, and promoted) than work that seems not to speak to the existing (already self-referential) literature or draws on data from unfamiliar or, worse still, exotic places. Yet it may be that, as responsible participants in a common research enterprise, as we foster research on pressing issues of the moment, we also need to recognize and encourage research whose audiences are not defined by the academic equivalent of algorithms – H-indices – or headline proxies like Google Scholar alerts.

This requires that we acknowledge that we are part of intellectual traditions and communities we may not always realize consciously. Despite our commitment to working in particular times and places – the modern Middle East and North Africa – we assume, largely without question, the conditions of our own social world as universal. Many of us rarely ask whether the Western Enlightenment confidence in progress that shapes our very language is actually universal – what is, after all, the "development" in the Sustainable Development Goals but "progress" by another name? – and whether it adequately encompasses human experience and aspiration. This strongly suggests that those of us who specialize in social research anchored to a location – the Middle East and North Africa – have a responsibility to produce and advocate for the "situated knowledge – knowledge marked by place, time, and circumstance – [that] relies on the excavation of meaning."[9] Merely replicating surveys or experiments designed elsewhere or constructing cases for classifications originating elsewhere contributes neither to better understanding of the place nor to greater refinement of the instrument.

Finally, we must reflect on why, apart from the satisfaction of personal curiosity or the accomplishment of personal career aspirations, we conduct research at all. Failure to consider the intellectual and political contexts in which we work –

the uses to which our findings and interpretations are put – makes them little more than technocratic tools in the hands of those who utilize them for their own purposes. Our purposes may be varied. Many of us are deeply devoted to learning and teaching, to contributing to the education and, perforce, the skill and confidence of generations who will succeed and surpass us. We may also want to improve social service delivery, enhance government accountability, strengthen national power, promote democracy, counter violence, build state capacity, and reform the security sector. Whatever our purposes, we have an ethical responsibility to see that our means are consonant with our ends.

In that spirit, the contributors to this volume offer varied perspectives on what shapes the social science research enterprise in the Middle East and North Africa. The essays start with a brief tour d'horizon by the volume's editors designed to situate the academic study of the Middle East and North Africa in the modern history of higher education, in both North America and the MENA region itself.[10] Ellen Lust and Samuel Tafesse Wakuma then examine the patterns of modest, uneven, opaque, and often parochial funding of social science research in the region – patterns that contribute to distorting both policy initiatives and popular views of the pressing issues in the region.[11] Richard A. Nielsen and Annie Yiwen Zhou examine publication and citation practices, finding that there is little scholarly cross-fertilization among scholars based in the Middle East and publishing in Arabic, and those in Europe and North America writing in English.[12] Meanwhile, Sara Ababneh discusses ways in which educators can promote critical, decolonial thinking when teaching on Middle East politics in universities of the Global North.[13] Sarah E. Parkinson examines perverse incentives that shape advising and mentoring for field research in the region, while Cathrine Brun analyzes the impact of such research practices on what are understood to be vulnerable communities in Lebanon.[14] Marc Owen Jones explores the dangers of relying on digital technologies for research and scholarly communication; and Rabab El-Mahdi and Samer Atallah focus on the Nobel-winning Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL)'s deployment of randomized controlled trials in Egypt and elsewhere in the region to examine the costs and consequences of methodologies that are not site-specific.[15] Jannis Julien Grimm and Lilian Mauthofer look at recent controversies in Germany to explore the challenges of discussing and debating research findings where academic freedom and speech are restricted.[16] Lila Abu-Lughod explores the lessons about ethical research in the context of power differences that Middle East social researchers might learn from Indigenous studies, and Hisham Aidi investigates the temptations and trials of borrowing conceptual frameworks across research terrains in his examination of "race" in North African studies.[17] Dina M. Toukan provides a perspective from the vast world of "nonacademic" social research in a sensitive essay on her work as a development consultant in Jordan.[18] I draw on my experience in academic administration to

critically examine the imperatives of risk management in shaping and limiting permissible research.[19] Scott Desposato draws on both his research in Brazil and his role as a leading advocate of ethical guidelines for political science to provide a salutary "view from afar," helping to outline what is universal in the dilemmas identified by our contributors and what is specific to research in the Middle East and North Africa.[20] Finally, and following Desposato's urging, the REMENA steering committee concludes with a taste of the kinds of recommendations the commission will be making as it completes its work in the coming year.[21]

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

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6 An early version of some of what follows was rehearsed in Lisa Anderson, "Responsible Social Inquiry in the Middle East and North Africa: For Each of Us and All of Us," *APSA MENA POLITICS* 6 (2) (2023), https://apsamena.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/APSA_MENA_Fall-2023-6-2.pdf.

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