

Perspectives from a Different Beach

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Research ethics is an increasingly important part of social science debates. Among political scientists conducting research in the Americas, much of this discussion focuses on the ethics of experiments with human subjects. The ethical challenges identified by REMENA (Research Ethics in the Middle East and North Africa) scholars clearly overlap with those faced by researchers elsewhere, but they also involve unique issues specific to the MENA region. Broad themes include power and authoritarianism, technocratic versus activist research, ownership of ethicality, and communicating clearly and honestly with vulnerable populations.

Brazilians say “*não é a minha praia*,” or “it’s not my beach,” to signal a lack of familiarity with something.¹ I was privileged to attend the REMENA (Research Ethics in the Middle East and North Africa) conference in January 2024 to learn about the ethics of research in the MENA region. The ethical challenges facing scholars there are clearly “not my beach.” The issues are complex and difficult, and in many ways unique to the local context. However, there are important parallels with the issues that political science researchers grapple with in general, and the debates herein can both inform us of the ethical struggles of social scientists elsewhere as well as offer lessons that apply to other regions and fields. In this essay, I reflect on the ethical questions facing REMENA scholars, connecting them to broader ethical challenges in scholarship. The general themes that I will discuss include research in and on nondemocracies, technocratic versus activist research, vulnerable populations, ethical ownership, and the isolation of scholars.

For the American Political Science Association (APSA), ethics for many years meant professional ethics, and had little to do with research. Indeed, the title of its guide remains *A Guide to Professional Ethics in Political Science*.² Until recently, the guide was almost entirely dedicated to topics such as teaching and mentoring students, political activity by scientists, restrictions on the use of the APSA name, and appropriate procedures for edited volumes and manuscripts. There was only a brief mention of the ethical issues surrounding working with human subjects. Now, in the most recent revision, the guide contains an extensive section on the ethics of human-subject research and a series of recommendations to protect subjects and bystanders. These changes have been mirrored across the discipline, as

research ethics has grown in prominence and is now a part of training, published debates, and some editorial review processes.

Increasing attention to research ethics and human subjects was largely in reaction to a rise in experimental research, but has implications and utility that span other research designs and approaches. As several scholars have shown, there has been a rapid increase in the number of experimental studies conducted by political scientists using human subjects.³ In addition, where researchers previously limited experiments to simple laboratory studies, they are now intervening broadly in economic, health, and political aspects of societies that they are studying.

Scholars have identified a number of ethical challenges posed by this experimental revolution in social science. These challenges include violations of respect for subjects, the risks of broad social impacts, legal questions when conducting international research, and issues associated with scholars conducting research in unfamiliar domestic or international contexts.⁴

To address these concerns, key institutions have taken a number of important steps. Some departments have incorporated ethical considerations into their graduate training. Journals are asking authors for information about ethics and ethical review, and are beginning to publish comments of concern discussing these issues. Most importantly, APSA approved and adopted a set of principles for human subjects research for political scientists.⁵ These principles address ethical issues involving power and vulnerability, respect for subjects' autonomy and informed consent, legality of interventions, as well as spillovers and broader social impacts of research.

The questions raised by REMENA overlap with these issues but span a broader set of themes, many of which do not directly involve human subjects. I focus herein on four themes that are, in my opinion, especially prominent and important. The first involves the diverse ethical problems that arise when conducting research in nondemocracies. The second theme is that of research imperialism. The third issue involves research with vulnerable subjects. The last theme is that of responsibility and ownership.

Social science has a complex relationship with government. A significant part of the discipline involves examining governmental strategy, performance, and outcomes. Indeed, criticism of the performance and behavior of powerful actors is generally considered to be a responsibility as well as a legitimate line of inquiry for social scientists. There are a number of odd tensions in this relationship between academic researchers and governments, due to the powerful position occupied by governments. If we were to adopt the language of medical studies, we might conclude that in many social science studies, the government is both the patient and the disease. Regimes or governments and their policies may be the subjects or objects of studies, and their personnel, policies, or institutions

may be the central problem facing their population. I am reminded of a *New Yorker* cartoon in which a peasant appears before a king with some request; the king responds, “I can’t solve your problem. I *am* the problem.”⁶

This naturally creates tension between the scholar and the subject of study: the government being studied may control research funding, academic appointments, and even personal freedom of academics. Critical research on repression, corruption, discrimination, and even candidate emergence can be controversial, and most government officials would prefer not to be the objects of study. No government welcomes negative press, but critical research in democracies is expected, rarely viewed as a threat, and unlikely to be punished. In contrast, in non-democracies, critical research may be viewed as a threat and punished as such. Nondemocracies generally have lower survival rates than democracies, and regime failures can be sudden and violent. Tolerance of criticism in authoritarian regimes may spark other criticisms, protest, and even insurrection. For these reasons, authoritarian governments generally do not hesitate to punish threatening academics.

In the MENA region, this tension distorts the research enterprise in a number of ways. First, the risk of government repression shapes research agendas, encouraging technocratic impact evaluations and discouraging critical analysis of government performance. Technocratic evaluations of policy impacts through RCTs (randomized controlled trials) are often compatible with the goals of nondemocratic regimes. They can improve service provision, are often required by development agencies, and can bring legitimacy to the regime through partnerships with established international institutions. However, by conducting technocratic research and avoiding more critical topics, scholars may be strengthening the authoritarian regime, potentially making this type of research unethical.

In contrast, critical analysis of regime performance may be desperately needed but often avoided because of potential repercussions from hostile regimes. In his essay in this volume, Marc Owen Jones reminds us of the risks that domestic and international scholars face when perceived as hostile to a regime.⁷ The most important and most needed research is likely to be illegal and subject to punishment. Fear of reprisals effectively censors scholars into limiting themselves to allowable research topics that are compatible with the regime’s goals. In authoritarian regimes, research that is ethical is often illegal, and research that is legal (and strengthens the regime) may be unethical.

Based on my own experiences conducting research in a variety of contexts, I hypothesize that the risks to scholars and the research agenda distortions are greater in the MENA region than in some of the contexts with which I am more familiar, due to differing degrees of stability and strength of the authoritarian states. Among nondemocracies, one-party autocracies have higher survival rates and regime consolidation than military and personal autocracies.⁸ Single-party

autocracies may be slightly more tolerant of some types of criticism and channel it into nonthreatening spaces, with fewer stories like those shared in this collection. This does not mean that scholars in places like Cuba, China, and Vietnam face no constraints; it means that the consequences for transgressions may be swifter and more severe in authoritarian regimes of the MENA region.

Several authors in this volume note aspects of research imperialism: the imposition of paradigms from other parts of the world on scholarship in the MENA region. These include widespread use of RCTs, a lack of citations and references to the work of scholars based in the region, attempts to impose one region's constructs of race and identity on another, and efforts to define or force definitions of key constructs (through legal means and political pressure).⁹

For example, on the question of identity, Hisham Aidi criticizes the aggressive exporting of Western concepts of identity. He notes how American scholars are applying definitions of race and identity onto diverse populations in North Africa, although these approaches are often seen as colonial impositions. Regarding RCTs, Rabab El-Mahdi and Samer Atallah point out flaws in the randomista paradigm. Scholars and practitioners in other parts of the world have similar concerns. Development specialists in Asia, for example, have told me of distorting their programs beyond recognition in order to accommodate RCTs because funders and governments are demanding such evaluations. However, in many cases, RCTs do not provide generalizable results given the many contextual differences between programs.¹⁰ RCTs also may not capture general equilibrium effects, instead reflecting novelty effects that fade with increased exposure.¹¹

Another form of research imperialism is international scholars' lack of acknowledgement and citation of MENA region scholarship. Richard A. Nielsen and Annie Yiwen Zhou describe an isolation of research with limited cross-citations. While this isolation may reflect a lack of exchange or a form of research imperialism, it may also reflect the nature of scholarship in and on authoritarian regimes. Democracies generate many regularities and highly visible patterns of political competition: elections, legislation, court cases, and more. Furthermore, these "data" are highly observable and often easily accessed via transparency or sunshine laws. These data and their regularity facilitate incremental research that naturally connects scholarship. In nondemocracies, scholars face an ongoing paucity of information about politics and behavior. There are fewer public opinion surveys, limited regular competitive elections, and perhaps limited transparency laws. Rules regarding what is legal or allowable research may change suddenly and arbitrarily for no apparent reason. Thus, the lack of citations that Nielsen and Zhou acknowledge may partly reflect a form of research imperialism, but it may also reflect an intellectual isolation imposed by the metaphorical castle walls that restrict scholars' access to political phenomena that are usually more easily observed in democracies.

Also striking are the cases of vulnerable subjects described in Cathrine Brun's essay on research in Lebanon, as well as Dima M. Toukan's essay on research in Jordan.¹² Particularly notable is the frustration of refugees being interviewed who were asked similar questions in multiple surveys and still saw no improvements in their lives. Their complaints are an important reminder about both their vulnerability and our power and perspective in the research process. Refugees in a camp are clearly highly vulnerable. Their rights of movement, employment, and economic activity are severely restricted. They are dependent on and constrained in a fixed space. In many ways, they are more vulnerable than prisoners. Complaints about their situation during interviews could lead to mistreatment. Clearly scholars should recognize these vulnerabilities and their own power, and take steps to protect subjects.

This discussion raises an important point about the impact of research. Some subjects wanted – and desperately needed – to see some of their basic needs addressed, not respond narrowly to an academic or NGO-sponsored questionnaire. The desperation of respondents is a substantial part of their vulnerability, and unfortunately it creates space for unethical researchers to exploit them. A famous example of this is described by physician and ethicist Henry K. Beecher.¹³ In his telling, a researcher convinced the mother of a cancer patient to participate in a study in which she was given a melanoma transplant. The researcher conveyed that the research might contribute to knowledge about cancer, and the desperate mother agreed to participate in hopes of saving her daughter. The result? Both mother and daughter died, and the researcher published the result.

The point is that refugees may not fully understand the likely impact and intent of a research study. They also may not be fully autonomous, with a choice to participate or not in the research. In this context, a simple informed consent advisory is clearly inadequate. Researchers should be especially transparent about the limitations of their study and its potential impact on refugees. In many cases, the only impact of a publication will be to help a scholar get tenure. Evasive statements typical of consent forms about how research “may contribute to solutions” should be avoided, and researchers should assure that their participants fully understand the limitations of the study. In addition, where refugees are confined to a camp or community, additional precautions to avoid coercion of unwilling research participation are needed.

There is a tendency to regard ethical review and guidelines as a legal process to be overcome, rather than a time of reflection and learning. In this sense, the thoughtful piece by Sarah E. Parkinson captures a problem that all scholars face.¹⁴ Our strongest incentives are to publish, advance, be cited, get tenure and promotion, and so on. Typically, ethical review is a barrier to research. The process of review can be timely and burdensome. Revisions to our research

may make the design more expensive and difficult, if not impossible. No wonder political scientist Jesse Driscoll describes the institutional review board (IRB) process as a “game of chicken.”¹⁵

A consequence of this is that some scholars “outsource” the ethics of their work to IRB approval. A leading experimentalist once told me regarding a problematic study, “Well, it got through the IRB.” Scholars often treat the IRB as the ethical equivalent of a Catholic priest that can absolve them of sin and set them free. The truth is that the IRB is merely a bureaucracy meant to protect the institution and ensure (in the United States) that federal grant dollars keep flowing; the IRB does *not* protect or absolve the scholar of responsibility for the consequences of a study.

For these reasons, I would encourage REMENA not to seek solutions to ethical challenges in rules and bureaucracies. Instead, I encourage my colleagues to promote ownership of the ethics of research: scholars taking responsibility rather than treating IRB approval as absolution from all research harms. This type of cultural change can be promoted by associations, in graduate training, and in other institutional reforms. For example, associations might require authors to discuss the ethics of their work in publications and presentations, and to be transparent about the choices they have made. Such responsibility may further be promoted by editors giving journal space for notes addressing ethical issues and commenting on previously published studies’ designs.¹⁶ The IRB process may also promote researcher responsibility by emphasizing the limited implications of their review and, ironically, by reducing oversight in some areas to emphasize researchers’ responsibilities.¹⁷

The scholars of REMENA face a series of difficult ethical issues and are navigating a complex research environment. I imagine that many scholars grapple with these issues, often in isolation, without guidance or support. Based on my experience and observations from other regions, my suggestions may be naive and of limited utility. However, I will conclude with one more: REMENA should consider developing its own ethical principles and guidance to help scholars confronting problems in their own work.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The phrase is also used to signal a lack of preference, roughly, “not my cup of tea.”
- ² *A Guide to Professional Ethics in Political Science* (American Political Science Association, 2022), https://apsanet.org/Portals/54/diversity%20and%20inclusion%20prgms/Ethics/APSA%20Ethics%20Guide%20-%20Final%20-%20February2022_Council%20Approved.pdf?ver=5mQAFYQz3xLhbd4OkQWg6Q%3D%3D.
- ³ Scott Desposato, “Introduction,” in *Ethics and Experiments: Problems and Solutions for Social Scientists and Policy Professionals*, ed. Scott Desposato (Routledge, 2016), 1–22; and James N. Druckman, Donald R. Green, James H. Kuklinski, and Arthur Lupia, “The Growth and Development of Experimental Research in Political Science,” *American Political Science Review* 100 (4) (2006): 627–635.
- ⁴ See, for example, Rebecca Morton and Jonathan Rogers, “Religion, Experiments, and Ethical Concerns,” in *Ethics and Experiments: Problems and Solutions for Social Scientists and Policy Professionals*, ed. Desposato, 66–80; Scott Desposato, “Conclusion,” in *Ethics and Experiments: Problems and Solutions for Social Scientists and Policy Professionals*, ed. Desposato, 267–289; Peter Hatemi and Rose McDermott, “Ethics in Field Experimentation: A Call to Establish New Standards to Protect the Public from Unwanted Manipulation and Real Harms,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 117 (48) (2020); and Jennifer L. Merolla and Raul Madrid Jr., “The Value and Challenges of Using Local Ethical Review in Comparative Politics Experiments,” in *Ethics and Experiments: Problems and Solutions for Social Scientists and Policy Professionals*, ed. Desposato, 99–112.
- ⁵ APSA, American Political Science Association Ad-Hoc Committee on Human Subjects Research, “Principles and Guidance,” April 4, 2020, <https://connect.apsanet.org/hsr/principles-and-guidance>.
- ⁶ Thanks to Lisa Anderson for this reference. See Dana Fradon, “I Can’t Solve Your Problem. I Am the Problem,” *The New Yorker*, March 30, 1981.
- ⁷ See Marc Owen Jones, “Lessons from the Digital Coalface in the Post-Truth Age: Researching the Middle East Amid Authenticity Vacuums, Transnational Repression & Disinformation,” *Daedalus* 154 (2) (Spring 2025): 132–156, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/lessons-digital-coalface-post-truth-age-researching-middle-east-amid-authenticity-vacuums>.
- ⁸ On these points, see Barbara Geddes, “What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999): 115–144.
- ⁹ See Jannis Julien Grimm and Lilian Mauthofer, “Multi-Perspectivity & Ethical Representation in the Context of Gaza & October 7: Addressing the Semantic Void,” *Daedalus* 154 (2) (Spring 2025): 169–188, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/multi-perspectivity-ethical-representation-context-gaza-october-7-addressing-semantic-void>; Richard A. Nielsen and Annie Yiwen Zhou, “Integrating Social Science Research across Languages with Assistance from Artificial Intelligence,” *Daedalus* 154 (2) (Spring 2025): 51–67, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/integrating-social-science-research-across-languages-assistance-artificial-intelligence>; Rabab El-Mahdi and Samer Atallah, “Can Randomized Controlled Trials Be Remedied?” *Daedalus* 154 (2) (Spring 2025): 157–168, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/can-randomized-controlled-trials-be-remedied>; and Hisham Aidi, “Exporting Race: Norms, Categories & ‘The All-American Skin Game,’” *Daedalus* 154

(2) (Spring 2025): 204–228, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/exporting-race-norms-categories-all-american-skin-game>.

- ¹⁰ Of course, these different outcomes themselves may generate knowledge and help identify mediators.
- ¹¹ In a famous example, field experiments with taxis in San Francisco found that adding a third brake light dramatically reduced rear-end collisions by 60 percent. A requirement for third brake lights was promptly imposed. However, the long-term impact of the third brake lights was found to be only a 4.3 percent reduction in rear-end collisions. The strong reaction to the taxis in the first field study presumably reflected the novelty of the light applied to taxi fleets, not the permanent generalizable or universal impact. In the same way, results from a field experiment may not generalize beyond their context, population, or moment. See USDOT, *The Long-Term Effectiveness of Center High Mounted Stop Lamps in Passenger Cars and Light Trucks* (U.S. Department of Transportation: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 1998).
- ¹² Cathrine Brun, “‘Vulnerability’: The Trouble with Categorical Definitions in Institutional Ethical Reviews, Forced Migration Research & Humanitarian Practice,” *Daedalus* 154 (2) (Spring 2025): 114–131, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/vulnerability-trouble-categorical-definitions-institutional-ethical-reviews-forced-migration>; and Dima M. Toukan, “Ethical Dimensions of Nonacademic Research in the Development Sector: A Perspective from Jordan,” *Daedalus* 154 (2) (Spring 2025): 229–242, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/ethical-dimensions-nonacademic-research-development-sector-perspective-jordan>.
- ¹³ Henry K. Beecher, “Ethics and Clinical Research,” *The New England Journal of Medicine* 274 (24) (1966): 1354–1360.
- ¹⁴ Sarah E. Parkinson, “Indiana Jones & the Institutional Review Board: Disciplinary Incentives, Researcher Archetypes & the Pathologies of Knowledge Production,” *Daedalus* 154 (2) (Spring 2025): 93–113, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/indiana-jones-institutional-review-board-disciplinary-incentives-researcher-archetypes-pathologies>.
- ¹⁵ Jesse Driscoll, “Prison States and Games of Chicken,” in *Ethics and Experiments: Problems and Solutions for Social Scientists and Policy Professionals*, ed. Desposato, 81–96.
- ¹⁶ APSA, “Principles and Guidance.”
- ¹⁷ At one institution I visited, the IRB had a simple checklist for scholars. If they checked “no” on every box, they did not even file an IRB application, but the scholars were responsible for the accuracy of the form and any consequences of inaccuracies.