

The Middle East Scholars Barometer

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When Hamas shocked Israel with a brutal attack across the security perimeter on October 7, 2023, the repercussions were felt deeply across Middle East political science academic communities. Campuses polarized quickly, as the media and external advocacy groups focused special attention on new challenges facing higher education communities, especially students. But on campus, the lived experience of faculty and students seemed considerably different, especially for those faculty whose work addresses the Middle East. Through the grapevine, stories proliferated of faculty who had been silenced or disciplined by their administrations, excluded from public panel discussions, or had their own events canceled. Some incidents percolated up to the headlines: stories of professors banished from the classroom or campus, removed from departmental websites, or attacked for secret recordings of their class discussions.

How prevalent were such experiences? How were they impacting Middle East political scientists and other academics? We thought it was important to find out. So, from November 10-17, 2023, we fielded the sixth wave of the Middle East Scholars Barometer (MESB) (Telhami and Lynch 2023). The MESB, first launched in spring 2021, invited a comprehensive list of academic scholars of the region to complete a short survey about political events or controversies in the region or in the profession. Previous surveys had focused on issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Iranian nuclear program, and the stability of regional countries a decade after the Arab uprisings. This time, we focused our questions on the campus climate after October 7. Unlike earlier waves of the MESB, this time we included a textbox for short open-ended responses for people to describe their experiences.

The results, which we ultimately published in a widely-read essay for the Chronicle of Higher Education, were both shocking and utterly in line with our lived experience (Lynch and Telhami 2023). We found that 82 percent of US-based respondents to the survey self-censored when discussing Israeli-Palestinian issues in a professional capacity – and 72 percent said it had gotten worse since October 7. That tracked with the results

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of a similar question asked one year earlier, when 57 percent said they felt need to self-censor when discussing Middle East issues. Virtually all graduate students (95 percent) and assistant (untenured) professors (98 percent) said they self-censored. So did almost 90 percent of tenured associate professors. Eighty-one percent of US-based respondents who self-censored said that they felt the need to hold back views that are critical of Israel, while 11 percent self-censored criticism of Palestinians, and only 2 percent self-censored criticism of US policy. When asked why they self-censored, almost 60 percent mentioned campus climate or fear of offending students, while 53 percent mentioned external advocacy groups. Over 40 percent cited concerns about being disciplined by their own university administrations, which have overwhelmingly failed to protect their faculty from attacks on their academic freedoms.

The numbers only hint at the scale and scope

of the problem. Respondents to the survey flooded the open-ended text boxes with appalling accounts of external groups trying to get them fired and college administrators silencing and disrespecting them. Fear was the pervasive sentiment, with an undercurrent of despair at not only the failure of administrations to come to their defense but often their active participation in repression.

Our article reporting the responses to the MESB survey helped to draw national attention to a crisis of academic freedom which to that point had largely been ignored or minimized. The Middle East Scholars Barometer began well before October 7, 2023, though, and had a much broader mission: to find out and communicate what Middle East scholarly experts really thought about some of the most controversial and difficult issues facing the region and the profession.

The Middle East Scholars Barometer

The Middle East Scholars Barometer launched in spring 2021, when we fielded the first of what would become a unique biannual survey of Middle East scholars.¹ It represented a collaboration between the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), directed by Lynch, and the Critical Issues Poll at the University of Maryland, directed by Telhami. Our goal was straightforward. We wanted to discover what academic experts and especially political scientists, who have spent their careers studying the Middle East, think about contested issues related to their region, and in turn communicate those findings in a way that could influence and guide public debate. Our intuition was that we did

¹ All of the survey results referenced in this essay can be found in entirety on the Middle East Scholar Barometer website: <https://criticalissues.umd.edu/middle-east-scholar-barometer>.

not definitively know what our peers thought about these issues, and that it could be useful to track how those collective attitudes changed over time.

We built our initial invitation list from a combination of the POMEPS list-serv, the membership of the American Political Science Association's organized section on MENA Politics (then also directed by Lynch), and the membership of the Middle East Studies Association. In later rounds, we added members of the American Historical Association, who indicated a Middle East area of research, but given the overlaps in membership this (and our exploration of other professional associations) did not substantially change the overall composition of the survey. As we are political scientists, and were guided by an advisory committee of five other political scientists, we especially sought other political scientists; our questions more often than not concerned political issues facing the region, as well as American foreign policy. Nonetheless, we thought it useful, at least for comparison, to include respondents who are not political scientists.

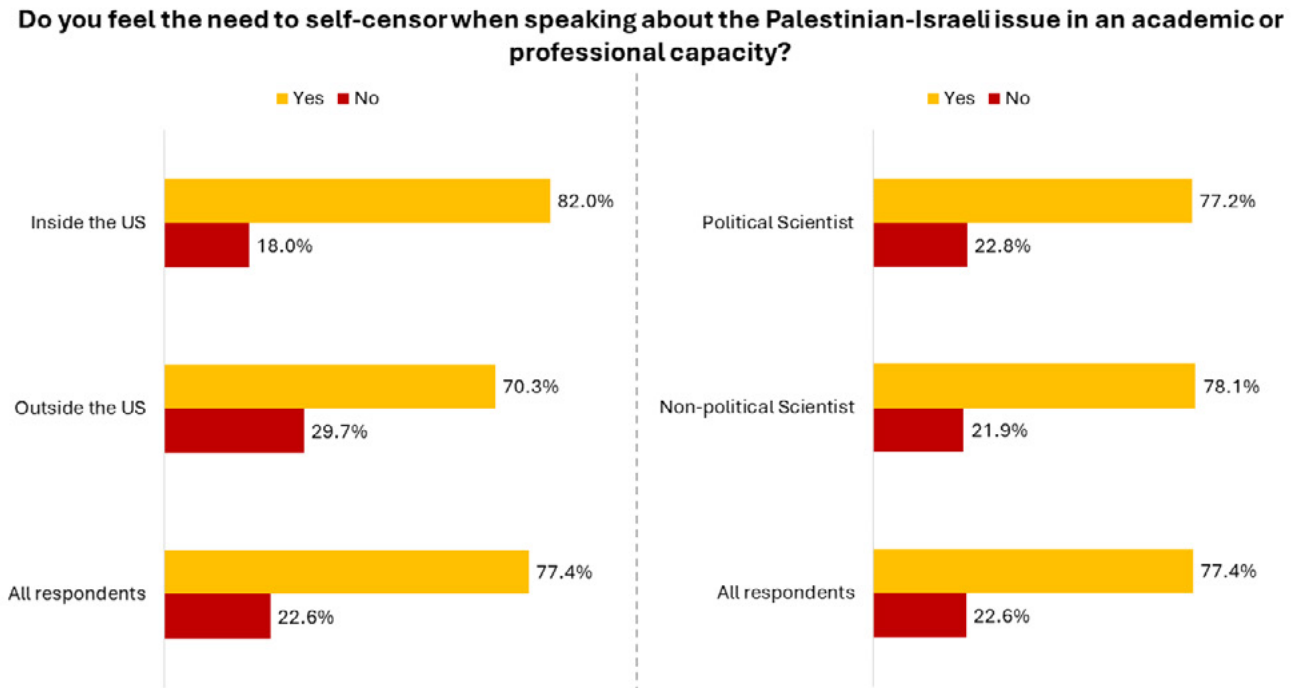
We decided to run the survey twice a year, repeating some questions in order to track changes over time and adding some new questions in response to events, requests from survey participants, or suggestions from our board of advisers. Beginning in 2022, we began devoting one survey a year to professional issues such as the impact of COVID, research ethics and fieldwork concerns, and self-censorship. The results of each survey were made publicly available, and also reported in the *Washington Post's* Monkey Cage (until it ceased publication in 2023), the Brookings Institution's blog, and (in fall 2023) in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Some methodological concerns about the survey are worth addressing here. First, the survey's respondents are not a random representative sample; they are self-selected respondents drawn from as close as we could get to the full universe of potential respondents. It is possible that respondents are more likely to be drawn from scholars sympathetic with one political trend, disciplinary position, or identity. This concern became especially important to us after the Israel Studies Association severed ties with MESA following its adoption of an academic boycott resolution. But members who were on our list before the breakup remained on the list of those polled. Most of our respondents came from the POMEPS and APSA lists, though, inevitably, there is overlap.

A second potential critique is that perhaps the political views of MESA members were distorting the results. Fortunately, we asked respondents whether they were political scientists or from another discipline from the start, and later began asking about membership in professional associations. That allowed us to look for any systematic differences between MESA members and APSA members, for instance. For the most part, we did not observe systematic differences across professional associations or disciplines. When such differences did exist, they more often emerged for questions that touched on issues that political scientists study systematically, such as the likelihood of protest recurrence or the stability of autocratic regimes, rather than on the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We also broke down the results by MESA members and non-MESA members, and found only small differences between them.

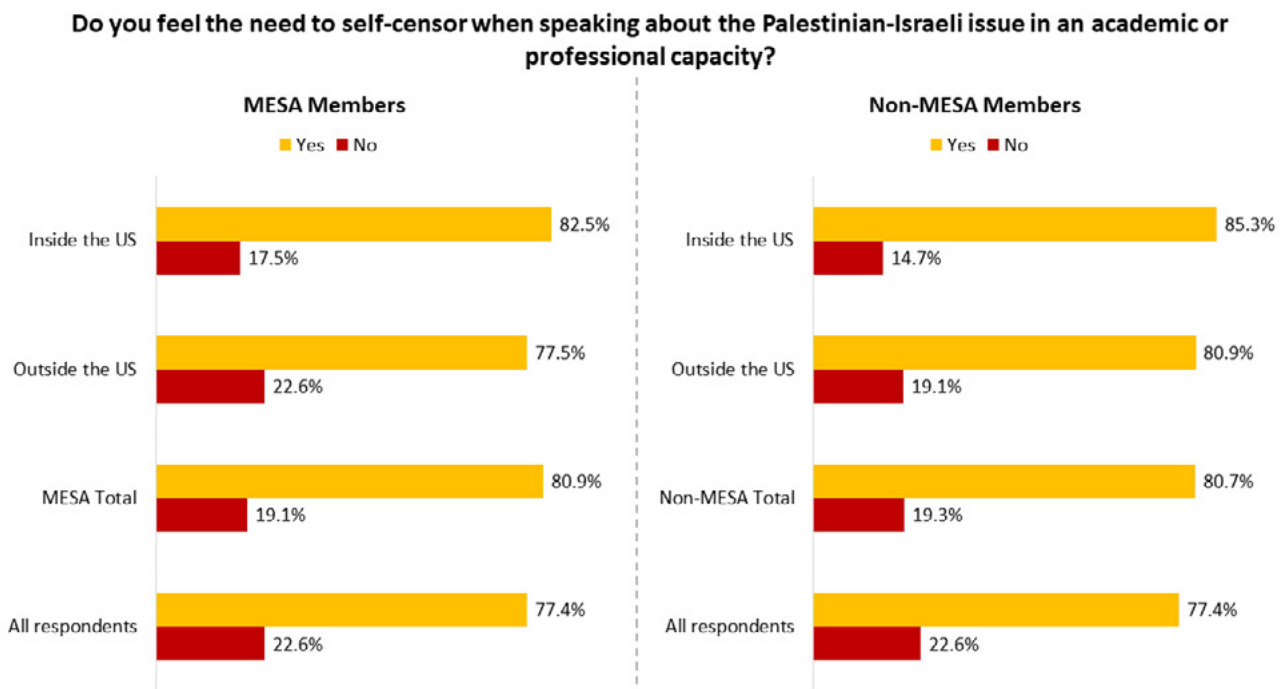
In sum, distinctive trends of opinion hold across discipline, location, and associate membership, as Figures 1 and 2 illustrate.

Figure 1. Self-Censorship and Israel/Palestine—Results from MESB, Based on Location and Discipline.



These results are among 936 respondents, from the Middle East Scholar Barometer fielded November 10 - 17, 2023 online using the University of Maryland's Qualtrics platform.

Figure 2. Self-Censorship and Israel/Palestine—Results from MESB, Based on MESA Membership.



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Israel/Palestine

Prior to the November 2023 study of campus climate, by far the most widely discussed and influential findings of the survey had to do with views of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Here, we tried to differentiate between analytical understandings of the nature of reality and normative preferences over what that reality should be. Because we were involved at the time in a project exploring the nature and prospects of Israel's relationship with Palestine, which would ultimately be published online as a POMEPS Studies collection (POMEPS 2020) as well as an academic book (Barnett et al. 2023), we were particularly keen to ask about this issue.

The MESB so far asked has the same battery of questions four times, beginning in February 2021 and most recently in November 2023. We intend to repeat it in spring 2024. The survey waves span several major events in the conflict: the May-June 2021 flare-up of conflict over settler provocations in East Jerusalem; the emergence of a large-scale pro-democracy Israeli protest movement against an extreme right-wing Israeli government; and the October 7 Hamas attack and subsequent Israeli war in Gaza. We also asked other questions on some of these surveys, such as about the Israeli protest movement and the effects of the Abraham Accords.

In every survey but one, we asked respondents whether the two-state solution was still possible. In February 2021, 52 percent said that it was no longer possible; that increased in each survey, peaking at 63 percent in March 2023 before dropping to 50 percent in November 2023. Only 5 percent in that first survey said it was still possible and likely within the next ten years, remaining relatively constant at 7 percent in the most recent sur-

vey. The rest thought it was still possible but unlikely in the next ten years.

Next, we asked respondents to describe the current reality regarding the two-state solution, regardless of their preferences over what the final status of the conflict should be. The results provided a range of possible descriptions: 60 percent in February 2021 chose "a one state reality akin to apartheid" and 7 percent "a one state reality not akin to apartheid." In November 2023, 61 percent chose "one state reality akin to apartheid," and another 6 percent chose "one state reality not akin to apartheid."

Finally, when asked about the most likely outcome if a two-state solution could not be achieved, over three-quarters responded "a one state reality akin to apartheid" in the February 2021, September 2021, March 2022, and March 2023 polls. Intriguingly, in the March 2022 wave, respondents generally declined to extend the apartheid label to Israel excluding the West Bank and Gaza, with 61 percent describing Israel as a democratic state with deep structural inequality. However, in March 2023, 87 percent said that it was not possible for Israel to have a full democracy for all Israeli citizens while maintaining military rule over Palestinians in the occupied territories.

What did respondents expect to happen? Whereas US and Israeli policymakers optimistically believed that Palestinians could safely be ignored in favor of pursuing Israeli normalization with Arab states, the surveys show that academic scholars have been deeply pessimistic. In March 2022, 66 percent of our respondents considered the collapse of the Palestinian Authority likely within the next five years, 72 percent expected Israeli expulsion of some or all Palestinians from the

occupied territories, 78 percent expected a new Intifada, and 80 percent expected Is-

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raeli annexation of some or all of the West Bank and Gaza. That 74 percent also said they expected to see the status quo with minor changes does raise questions about the relative likelihood ascribed to each possibility, though.

Respondents had more complicated thoughts about the call for an academic boycott of Israeli institutions. While 54 percent supported the resolution boycotting Israeli universities adopted by MESA in 2022, another 36 percent said that they supported some BDS measures but not academic boycotts. Not even six months later, the numbers began trending towards support for some form of sanctions against Israel: 31 percent said that they supported BDS unconditionally, and 50 percent with conditions.

Finally, scholars generally did not share the Trump and Biden administration's enthusiasm for the Abraham Accords. In the August 2021 and March 2023 surveys, only 6 percent saw positive effects from these peace treaties on the Israeli/Palestinian peace process. In 2021, only 5 percent thought they would advance democracy and human rights, and 26 percent thought they would improve regional stability. Oddly, in 2021, 41 percent thought they would advance US interests as they understood them – even as very few thought they would improve human rights, promote Israeli-Palestinian peace, or enhance region-

al stability. It would have been interesting to find out what they thought US interests in the region actually were.

The Arab Uprisings and Regional Politics

In several of MESB waves, we asked questions at the core of the scholarship for many political scientists. In particular, we wanted to know how academics viewed the 2011 Arab uprisings and how they assessed the stability of autocratic regimes and states in the Middle East. In the first wave of the survey, almost exactly ten years after the uprisings, we asked about whether that revolutionary wave of upheavals had fundamentally transformed the region. Only 29 percent said that the uprisings had a transformational impact on the region, while 17 percent said that the protests had been a temporary disruption with limited long-term impact. A majority, 54 percent, took a middle stance, that the uprisings had made a significant impact but were not fundamentally transformational.

Asking these questions in slightly different ways produced unexpected results, which we think sheds light on how political scientists think about "outcomes" differently from other communities. Despite the general skepticism about the ten-year product of the uprisings, only 7 percent of the survey respondents agreed that the uprisings were over and unlikely to return. Thirty percent expected them to return in the next decade. But more interestingly, 46 percent believed the uprisings are ongoing, but in different forms. This suggests political scientists are moving away from conceptual binaries that see countries as either immersed in protest and unrest, or either engaged by quiescence and autocratic repression (that is, revolutionary "success" versus "failure").

In projecting the future, the MESB found a combination of skepticism about the prospects for political change. On Iran, where hope for another revolution sprung eternal in Washington, scholars generally downplayed the prospects of change: in the March 2022 survey, only 37 percent expected regime-threatening political instability in the next five years, while a year later only 8 percent said it was likely that protests would overthrow the Islamic Republic in the next two years. Also in the March 2022 survey, almost nobody saw any country as “very unstable,” although a third did see Egypt, Turkey and Iran as somewhat unstable. However, when asked about whether Egypt would face regime-threatening instability in the next five years, 45 percent thought it was somewhat or very likely. (That does not sound very stable.)

Regional Security and Global Order

Iran lay at the center of a number of questions that the MESB has asked concerning regional security and war. For several years, the survey asked whether a return to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) would make it more or less likely that Iran obtains a nuclear weapon in 10 years. Two-thirds of respondents consistently said less. However, scholars were also pessimistic regarding the prospects of restoring the JCPOA framework. In addition, survey respondents across all waves overwhelmingly opposed war with Iran, and remained guardedly optimistic that Saudi-Iranian reconciliation might make such conflict less likely—and that Israeli provocations would not escalate into regional war.

In March 2022, we also asked a series of questions about Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and its effects on the Middle East. Then, 58 percent thought the invasion of Ukraine would

weaken Russia’s influence in the region; a year later, only 46 percent thought so. In 2022, 63 percent thought China’s position would be strengthened; a year later, 76 percent thought so. As for the United States, the scholarly perception of geopolitical fortunes changing was quite dramatic. In 2022, 40 percent thought the crisis would increase US influence in the Middle East, but by spring 2023, only 7 percent still felt that way. In spring 2023, 94 percent of respondents thought that regional states would respond to the Ukraine war based on their self-interests, while only 56 percent thought perceived US hypocrisy on Israel/Palestine would sway their policy choices.

It would be useful to ask this particular question again in light of the ongoing Gaza war. We suspect the effects will be profound. Overall, in February 2021, 75 percent said the US was weaker in the Middle East than ten years ago, and only 38 percent said it remains the dominant power. It is hard to imagine those trends reversing, but after Gaza we certainly intend to ask.

The Profession

In the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic and other challenges to Middle East studies, we decided to dedicate the October 2022 survey to the professional field. The MESB results were eye-opening. Respondents reported a plethora of new obstacles to fieldwork, with 54 percent saying they had been forced to change or adapt their ongoing research. The barriers they reported were diverse: 68 percent of scholars faced restrictions due to COVID and 26 percent due to ongoing war, while 31 percent mentioned visa denials or other restrictions by the governments or states being studied. It is worth noting that a startling 47 percent of respondents said they

received no mitigation for COVID from their academic institutions; 34 percent received extra time on their tenure clock, but only 3 percent received childcare support.

Safety in the field is another issue that has troubled Middle East studies, given the arrests, intimidation, and other alarming forms of harassment that have befallen scholarly researchers in countries like Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran over the past decade. In the October 2022 survey, we queried on where, in the MENA, it was appropriate to hold a workshop. Surprisingly (to us), 63 percent said Egypt. Of those who disagreed, the reasons were overwhelmingly about safety: 46 percent worried about their personal safety, and 75 percent the safety of participants. By contrast, 48 percent of respondents said Israel was appropriate to hold a workshop; but of those who said no, 94 percent cited principled or ethical concerns. Principled and ethical concerns were also most commonly cited in the Gulf countries, with just under 90 percent of respondents stating that workshops should not be held in the UAE, Saudi Arabia or Qatar. In both Saudi Arabia (57 percent) and the UAE (48 percent), there existed significant concern for the safety of academic participants in such gatherings.

The MESB also explored more positional issues regarding research ethics and exploitative relationships between Western researchers and local communities in the MENA. Such problems have received growing attention by our field, notably from the REMENA project. Though the questions remain delicate, the results appeared better than we expected, all things considered. Only 35 percent of our scholarly respondents have a research partner from the region. Of those, only 5 percent had research funding awarded jointly; only 20 percent planned research

together with the partner; 8 percent said the partner collected data and they analyzed it; 14 percent said they analyzed the data together; 12 percent acknowledge the partner in this capacity, while 19 percent list the partner as a co-author.

Finally, the MESB surveys have not produced a portrait of a scholarly community of Middle East experts obsessed with policy relevance. The October 2022 survey round fielded several questions on this matter. Then, an overwhelming majority, 93 percent, cited their scholarly publications as targeting their academic discipline (such as political science), while 84 percent cited the wider field of Middle East studies. Only 27 percent indicated the government was a target audience, while 43 percent mentioned the broader policy community. Perhaps the Middle East studies field should try harder to influence policy, but it does not seem that doing so is a prevailing concern for most scholars in this academic canon.

Towards the Future

What has the MESB contributed to our understanding of Middle East political science? For one, we are surprised at how widely shared some views turned out to be, and how consistently many trends and patterns are on a variety of critical issues regarding Israel, regional security, US foreign policy, and professional academia. To the extent that understanding about the beliefs of others shape choices, greater public recognition over these shared values could be significant. This could encourage previously reticent scholars to speak up, but it could also generate peer pressure by introducing a self-imposed need to conform. As the survey grows in popularity, there also exists the risk of “gaming” the system: if political scientists know how

their colleagues views on, say, US foreign policy or boycotting Israel will be reported in the prominent media venues, they may feel pressure to give the more politically useful answers.

The MESB could also give an artificial precision to necessarily fluid and amorphous beliefs. Numbers are great, but the patina of science could be misleading. Minor changes in responses to questions – 71 percent to 75 percent, for instance – are likely insignificant in practice and could represent little more than a handful of people not having time to answer the survey. Shifts in the composition of survey respondents could also change results in ways we cannot determine from available data. Indeed, students of public opinion are familiar with how surveys *construct* public opinion as much as they represent it. The latest November 2023 MESB round went beyond the numbers by adding an option for respondents to offer detailed thoughts, and they did so in ways that provided as much contextual insights as their raw responses.

In looking ahead, we invite fellow members of this organized section and other readers of *MENA Politics* to suggest new questions or topics to survey. We find it important to keep surveys short to maximize response rates, but there is always room for new questions regarding pressing issues of wide disciplinary or public interest. Please e-mail us with your ideas and recommendations (marclynhgwu@gmail.com and sadat@umd.edu). ♦

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