

Congress and installed Pipes as a member of the USIP board by means of a recess appointment, valid until the Congressional session ended in January 2005.

### **Critique from the right**

Daniel Pipes was not alone in seeing academic Middle East studies as a cesspool of error, fuzzy thinking and anti-Americanism. Soon after the September 11 attacks the Washington Institute for Near East Policy published a book by Martin Kramer titled *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*.<sup>47</sup> Whereas Pipes's Campus Watch specialized in attacking scholars and academic institutions, Kramer's book claimed to offer a detailed and comprehensive critique of US Middle East studies from the right and therefore merits serious discussion.

After receiving his doctorate from Princeton University, Martin Kramer moved to Israel where he served as a research associate at Tel Aviv University's Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, and then as the center's associate director (1987–95) and director (1995–2001). The Dayan Center, which describes itself as "an interdisciplinary research center devoted to the study of the modern history and contemporary affairs of the Middle East," is of course named after the famous Israeli general and politician, but it incorporated and superseded an older institution, the Shiloah Institute, named after Reuven Shiloah, the founder of Israel's intelligence and security apparatus. Both the old and new names reflect the Center's ongoing role as not merely a scholarly institution (though there have certainly been some serious scholars associated with it) but also a key site where senior Israeli military, foreign policy and intelligence officials can interact with academics working on policy-relevant issues.<sup>48</sup> It would seem that the Dayan Center provided Martin Kramer with his ideal model of the proper relationship between the world of scholarship and the world of policymaking, for the main complaint Kramer voiced in *Ivory Towers* was that US-based scholars of the Middle East had failed, or refused, to meet the US government's need for useful knowledge and accurate predictions about the region.

Kramer's basic argument was that Middle East studies is, to put it simply, a miserable failure. "America's academics have," he asserted, "failed to predict or explain the major evolutions of Middle Eastern politics and society over the past two decades. Time and again, academics have been taken by surprise by their subjects; time and again, their paradigms have been swept away by events. Repeated failures have depleted the credibility of scholarship among influential publics. In Washington, the mere mention of academic Middle Eastern studies often causes eyes to roll."<sup>49</sup>

To explain how this came about, Kramer offered his interpretation of the development of Middle East studies in America, portrayed as a fall from (relative) grace largely attributable to the pernicious influence of one bad doctrine and its chief propagator, Edward W. Said.

Kramer began by briefly recounting the origins and early history of Middle East studies in the United States. Despite promising beginnings, things did not go well. Too many scholars were in the grip of overly optimistic notions like modernization theory, which posited that the entire world (including the Middle East) could and would be remade in the image of the United States of the 1950s. In the 1970s the Lebanese civil war and then the Iranian revolution shattered this illusion, revealing the field's intellectual bankruptcy and leaving it without a dominant paradigm. Even worse, scholarly standards were appallingly low, which allowed "tenured incompetents" to secure many of the all too scarce academic positions, breeding resentment among new graduates and graduate students. Government and foundation funding dropped, exacerbating the sense of crisis in the field.

For Kramer it was this crisis which accounted for the success of Said's *Orientalism* and the transformation it almost single-handedly wrought in US Middle East studies. Despite that book's grave flaws, it served perfectly as a weapon in the hands of insurgents pushing a radical political and theoretical agenda. By delegitimizing established scholars and scholarship and providing an alternative theory and politics, it helped the academic left – and especially the Arabs and Muslims among them – achieve intellectual and institutional hegemony in US Middle East studies. Kramer attributed what he saw as the abject failure of most scholars to resist the onslaught of Said and his acolytes to a loss of self-confidence, stemming from the failure of the models in which they had earlier put so much faith.

The damage *Orientalism* wreaked on US Middle East studies was considerable, in Kramer's assessment: "*Orientalism* made it acceptable, even expected, for scholars to spell out their own political commitments as a preface to anything they wrote or did. More than that, it enshrined an acceptable hierarchy of political commitments, with Palestine at the top, followed by the Arab nation and the Islamic world. They were the long-suffering victims of Western racism, American imperialism, and Israeli Zionism – the three legs of the orientalist stool."<sup>50</sup> Said's *Orientalism* also allegedly licensed political and ethnic tests for admission to the field: one had to be a leftist or, even better, an Arab or Muslim, whose numbers now increased dramatically. However, despite their pretensions to intellectual superiority, Said's acolytes who seized control of US Middle East studies in the 1980s failed to do any better than their discredited

predecessors in predicting or explaining the dynamics of Middle Eastern politics, precisely because their predictions were driven by their radical politics and trendy postmodernist theorizing, not by careful observation of the real world.

For example, Kramer argued, the Saidian left utterly failed to anticipate or account for the rise of Islamism; all they could manage were denunciations of purported American bias against Islam and Muslims. In the 1990s, liberals like John Esposito who understood that Said's message and tone were too radical and off-putting for the American mainstream developed an accessible, upbeat, softened image of Islam and Islamism, downplaying their violent and threatening dimensions. Esposito and others seized on a string of would-be "Muslim Luthers" who could be touted as the forerunners of an imminent Islamic "reformation," all the while failing to notice the ways in which authoritarian Arab states were successfully promoting secularization and blocking the Islamist challenge. Similarly, because they were convinced that the Arab regimes were fragile and lacked legitimacy and social roots, liberal and leftist scholars had grossly underestimated those regimes' durability; all the scholarly attention and foundation funding devoted to the study of "civil society" in the Arab world were thus based on vain illusions and missed what was really going on in the region. Overall, Kramer charged, US Middle East scholars, misled by their political agenda and arcane theories, had failed to take the real history and culture of the region into account. As a result, their prognoses were mistaken and of decreasing interest to policymakers.

Kramer went on to attack the Social Science Research Council for its alleged failure – even refusal – to use the government funding it received to support policy-relevant research, and the Middle East Studies Association for its rejection of the National Security Education Program. The "new mandarins" who had assumed leadership of the field lost the confidence of official Washington because of their haughty disdain for policymakers and their squandering of public funds on empty theorizing and worthless research projects. "In the centers of policy, defense, and intelligence," Kramer asserted, "consensus held that little could be learned from academics – not because they knew nothing, but because they deliberately withheld their knowledge from government, or organized it on the basis of arcane priorities or conflicting loyalties."<sup>51</sup>

The self-inflicted crisis of academic Middle East studies was further manifested, Kramer argued, in the growing recourse that government and the media had to Middle East experts based in think tanks rather than those in academia. It was, Kramer claimed, the "intolerant climate" in academia that had led many talented people to gravitate to the think

tanks, where their work “often surpassed university-based research in clarity, style, thoroughness, and cogency.” Even within universities, however, Middle East studies was in decline, since all the resources invested in it over the decades had yielded little worthwhile knowledge, making deans and departments reluctant to replace retiring faculty in this field, much less hire new faculty and expand programs.

“What will it take to heal Middle Eastern studies,” Kramer asked in his conclusion, “if they can be healed at all?” Here Kramer explicitly counterposed the theorizing in which too many academics had indulged to the empirical study of “the Middle East itself,” while also advocating renewed attention to “the very rich patrimony of scholarly orientalism.” “Orientalism had heroes,” Kramer continued. “Middle Eastern studies have none, and they never will, unless and until scholars of the Middle East restore some continuity with the great tradition,” a continuity ruptured by the foolish social-science models of the 1950s and 1960s and then by the destruction wrought by Said and his postmodernist devotees. In the longer run, despite the resistance of the radical mandarins and the inertia of the SSRC and the foundations, “breakthroughs will come from individual scholars, often laboring on the margins. As the dominant paradigms grow ever more elaborate, inefficient, and insufficient, they will begin to shift. There will be more confessions [of failure] by senior scholars, and more defections by their young protégés.”<sup>52</sup>

To hasten this process, Kramer suggested that the federal government reform the process it used to decide which Title VI-funded national resource centers, including centers for Middle East studies, received funding, by including government officials in the review process and encouraging more attention to public outreach activities. More broadly, Congress should hold hearings “on the contribution of Middle Eastern studies to American public policy,” with testimony not only from academics but from government officials, directors of think tanks and others as well. While such steps might help, Kramer concluded, ultimately the field would have to heal itself by overcoming its irrelevance and its intolerance of intellectual and political diversity. Its new leaders would have to forge a different kind of relationship with “the world beyond the campus,” based on the principle that “the United States plays an essentially beneficent role in the world.”

Some of the criticisms of US Middle East studies which Kramer set forth in *Ivory Towers* may seem to resonate with those set forth in this book. For example, Kramer depicted modernization theory as flawed, though he ignored the Cold War context which produced it and explained its popularity in psychological terms, as the product of Americans’ missionary zeal and naïve optimism. Some of the prognoses offered by

scholars in the early and mid-1990s about the moderation and fading away of Islamism were indeed overly broad, though it is also worth noting that in some countries (Turkey, for example) Islamist parties did in fact evolve in a democratic and moderate direction. And Kramer was correct to note that both mainstream and political economy-oriented Middle East scholars generally failed to anticipate the rise of Islamist movements in the 1970s, though he ignored the sophisticated analyses subsequently advanced by scholars.

As a history of Middle East studies as a scholarly field, however, Kramer's approach was deeply flawed. Kramer simplistically blamed Edward Said and *Orientalism* for everything that he believed had gone wrong with Middle East studies from the late 1970s onward, utterly ignoring both the extensive critiques of modernization theory and Orientalism that preceded the publication of that book (see Chapter 5) and the complex and often critical ways in which Said's intervention was received (see Chapter 6). As *Ivory Towers* tells the story, every scholar in Middle East studies either lost his or her critical faculties and slavishly embraced every pronouncement that fell from the lips of Edward W. Said, or else cringed in terror and kept silent. This is clearly a caricature: as we saw, for the most part scholars in the field did not simply swallow Said's take on Orientalism hook, line and sinker but engaged with it critically, accepting what seemed useful and rejecting, recasting or developing other aspects. And Kramer's psychologizing account of why so many scholars and students in Middle East studies were receptive to critiques of the field's hitherto dominant paradigms was shallow and inadequate, as well as tendentious.

All too often Kramer resorted to cheap shots and epithets instead of serious analysis. For example, it was no doubt good fun for Kramer to characterize the scholars of the Middle East and Islam at my own institution, New York University, as "post-orientalist fashion designers," but this does not really tell us much about what actually goes on there. More broadly, as Juan Cole of the University of Michigan has shown, such right-wing attacks on Middle East scholars as "postmodernist, leftist, anti-American terrorist-coddlers" have little basis in reality. By way of example Cole pointed out that of the fourteen senior professors of Middle East political science teaching at federally funded national resource centers as of early 2003, only one could plausibly be characterized as a postmodernist, few would define themselves as leftists, and none could reasonably be called anti-American (whatever that means) or apologists for terrorism.<sup>53</sup>

Kramer claimed in *Ivory Towers* that US Middle East scholars had repeatedly made predictions that did not come true. In some instances

his accusations were on-target; in others he took quotations out of context or misconstrued them. But he was also rather selective: for example, in *Ivory Towers* we do not find Kramer taking his colleague Daniel Pipes to task for inaccurately predicting in the early 1980s that Islamist activism would decline as oil prices fell, nor is it likely that he would see fit to criticize mentors like Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami for predicting that virtually all Iraqis would welcome invading US forces and happily accept American occupation.<sup>54</sup> Nor has Kramer's long-time institutional base, the Dayan Center in Tel Aviv, been especially successful at predicting significant developments, for example the outbreak of the first Palestinian *intifada* against Israeli occupation in 1987.

More broadly, however, Kramer's fixation on accurate prediction as the chief (or even sole) gauge of good scholarship is itself highly questionable. Most scholars do not in fact seek to predict the future or think they can do so; they try to interpret the past, discern and explain contemporary trends and, at most, tentatively suggest what *might* happen in the future if present trends continue, which they very often do not. Of course, governments want accurate predictions in order to shape and implement effective policies, but Kramer's insistence that the primary goal of scholarship should be the satisfaction of that desire tells us a great deal about his conception of intellectual life and of the proper relationship between scholars and the state.

As I suggested earlier, Kramer's model of what US Middle East studies should be seems to be based on the institution with which he was affiliated for some two decades, the Dayan Center. Just as many (though by no means all) of the Israeli scholars associated with the Dayan Center have seen themselves as producing knowledge that will serve the security and foreign policy needs of Israel, so American scholars of the Middle East should, Kramer suggested, shape their research agendas to provide the kinds of knowledge the US government will find most useful. His book demonstrated no interest whatsoever in the uses to which such knowledge might be put or in the question of the responsibility of intellectuals to maintain their independence and "speak truth to power," or indeed in what scholarship and intellectual life should really be about. His real complaint was that US Middle East studies had failed to produce knowledge useful to the state. Yet by ignoring larger political and institutional contexts, Kramer could not understand or explain why so many scholars had grown less than enthusiastic about producing the kind of knowledge about the Middle East the government wanted – or conversely, why it was that the government and the media now routinely turned to analysts based in think tanks, along with former military and intelligence personnel, for policy-relevant knowledge rooted in the official consensus

about what constitutes America's "national interest" in the Middle East.

But there is a larger issue at stake here. At the very heart of Kramer's approach is a dubious distinction between the trendy, arcane "theorizing" of the scholarship he condemned as at best irrelevant and at worst pernicious, on the one hand, and on the other the purportedly hard-headed, clear-sighted, theory-free observation of, and research on, the "real Middle East" in which he and scholars like him see themselves as engaging. Kramer was not wrong to suggest that there has been some trendy theory-mongering in academia, including Middle East studies. But he went well beyond this by now banal observation, and beyond a rejection of poststructuralism, to imply that all theories, paradigms and models are distorting and useless, because they get in the way of the direct, unmediated, accurate access to reality that he seemed to believe he and those who think like him possess.

This seems to me an extraordinarily naive and unsophisticated understanding of how knowledge is produced, one that few scholars in the humanities and social sciences have taken seriously for a long time. Even among historians, once the most positivist of scholars, few would today argue that the facts "speak for themselves" in any simple sense. Almost all would acknowledge that deciding what should be construed as significant facts for the specific project of historical reconstruction in which they are engaged, choosing which are more relevant and important to the question at hand and which less so, and crafting a story in one particular way rather than another all involve making judgments that are, at bottom, rooted in some sense of how the world works – in short, in some theory or model or paradigm or vision, whether implicit or explicit, whether consciously acknowledged or not. Kramer's inability or refusal to grasp this suggests a grave lack of self-awareness, coupled with an alarming disinterest in some of the most important debates scholars have been having over the past four decades or so.

It is moreover a stance which Kramer did not – indeed, could not – maintain in practice. His assertions throughout the book were in fact based on a certain framework of interpretation, even as he insisted that they were merely the product of his acute and hard-headed powers of observation, analysis and prediction. It is for example striking that at the very end of *Ivory Towers* Kramer explicitly set forth what is obviously a political and moral judgment rooted in his own (theoretical) vision of the world: his insistence that a healthy, reconstructed Middle East studies must accept that the United States "plays an essentially beneficent role in the world." He never explained *why* we should accept this vision of the US role in the world as true, nor did he even acknowledge that it may

be something other than self-evidently true. The assertion nonetheless undermined his avowed epistemological stance and graphically demonstrated its untenability.

Similarly, though this is largely implied rather than clearly asserted, Kramer seemed to regard Bernard Lewis' notion of the "return" of an ever-present, wounded and enraged "Islam" as the best way of explaining Islamism as a sociopolitical phenomenon. Yet it should be obvious that that interpretation can hardly be taken as simple common sense, as the product of empirical observation untainted by theory. It is rather the product of a specific framework of interpretation which one may accept or reject, embrace or question, but which definitely rests upon certain assumptions about the proper category and method of analysis to be used in order to elucidate the phenomenon being studied. So while Kramer had a good time attacking others for their theorizing, he did not seem to realize that he was doing a fair bit of theorizing himself.

I have treated *Ivory Towers Built on Sand* here as if it were a serious intellectual exercise. Yet it was clearly written and published as a politically motivated polemic, an attack on MESA and the "Middle Eastern studies establishment" designed to further Kramer's political agenda. It is noteworthy that in the same year *Ivory Towers* was published, Martin Kramer assumed the post of editor of *Middle East Quarterly*, published by Daniel Pipes' Middle East Forum. From this perspective, Pipes' McCarthyesque assault on mainstream, liberal and leftist scholars of Middle East studies by means of his Campus Watch website and Kramer's intellectually simplistic and tendentious critique of US Middle East studies can be seen as complementary. One might even go so far as to portray Kramer and Pipes as, respectively, the "good cop" and "bad cop" of the far-right end of the Middle East studies spectrum.

### **The Campaign against Middle East Studies**

The attacks which Pipes and Kramer launched on MESA and Middle East studies in the United States after the September 11 attacks were quickly picked up by the conservative and neoconservative media, yielding a spate of articles in such magazines as *National Review* and on right-wing websites. Echoing Pipes and Kramer, right-wing commentators attacked MESA because its annual meeting allegedly featured too many scholarly panels on topics they deemed esoteric and irrelevant, and not enough panels on al-Qa'ida, Palestinian suicide bombings and "anti-American incitement." Such denigration of anything scholars do that does not produce knowledge that is immediately and directly useful to the government suggests a worrisome anti-intellectualism as well as