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AMERICAN DIPLOMACY AT WORK: AN AMERICAN STUDIES CONFERENCE IN BEIRUT

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I would like to share with the IASA community my candid impressions of an 'American studies' conference I attended during the past academic year (18–21 December 2005), in Beirut, Lebanon, a city that has recently been tragically at the forefront of the news. The conference was entitled 'America in the Middle East/The Middle East in America' and took place at a point in time when, after a period of recovery from the ravages of the quarter-of-a-century-long Civil War (1975–2000), Beirut had again plunged into a kind of torpor with the assassination, first of Rafik Hariri (1944–2005), the former prime minister (1992–1998 and 2000–2004) who had literally rebuilt Beirut after the Civil War, and then of journalist and member of parliament Gibran Tuani, the son of a well-known personality in Lebanon. This last murder happened just a few days before the conference was to start, and the organizers had to coax the participants to attend, reassuring them (through e-mail messages) that there was no risk. Indeed there was none, but in the meantime Beirut had become a pallid imitation of what it once was.

The rationale of the conference, as stated in the call for papers, was that '[t]he September 11 attacks and the Iraq War have thrust the people of the Middle East and North America into direct and intense contact. The goal of this conference is to explore these current encounters through contextualizing and questioning'. What I remember especially about the conference is the fact that its participants were not the usual ASA–EAAS–IASA crowd; and that it was, more than anything else, a subtle American diplomatic endeavor, although perhaps consciously not so devised by its organizers, which showed once more to what extent American studies is enmeshed in international politics—still, a quarter of a century after the end of the Cold War.

The conference took place at AUB, as it is called, the anagram standing for 'American University of Beirut', a 'private, independent' institution of higher education. Once back in Turkey after the conference, to my surprise I found out that the way I pronounced the name of the university sounded to my compatriots like *Eyyoubi*, a word familiar to them, and they found it natural that there should be such



a university in that area.¹ It must sound that way also to many in the region, for whom the word is even more familiar, thus allowing the university to blend smoothly into the life of the land. In fact, AUB was initially a college founded by US missionaries in the second half of the nineteenth century when Beirut was one of the major cities of the Ottoman empire.² Alongside AUC (the American University in Cairo) and AUCA (the American University in Central Asia located in Bishkek, founded after the demise of the Soviet Union), AUB is now one of the showcases of American culture outside the USA. The institution seems to emanate the same atmosphere as the Salzburg Seminar: there is this eerie, surreal feeling that some upper-class New England establishment has been transplanted on alien soil.

The conference was the first major activity of a center that had opened in 2004 at AUB: CASAR, the Center for American Studies and Research, run by an able and hardworking group of American scholars headed by Patrick McGreevy, professor of geography on leave from Clarion University in the USA. What is noteworthy about this center is that the Saudi prince, Alwaleed bin Talal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, whose gift of \$10 million after 9/11 to NYC was turned down by Mayor Rudolf Giuliani, has donated \$5.5 million of that amount to AUB for the establishment of CASAR.³ One recurrent question during coffee breaks at the conference was why the Prince, after having been snubbed by Americans,⁴ would want to give money to a new center of American Studies in Beirut rather than to one of the local institutions in the region, which often lack sufficient financial means. The conference that had convened in 2003 in Beirut to discuss the planning of the center had assembled an international group of American studies scholars, such as officials of major international American studies associations like the EAAS, and for instance Kousar J. Azam of Hyderabad (plenary speaker at the IASA conference in Leiden), who does not mince her words when she wishes to criticize the USA. This had given the impression that, just like EAAS membership is on principle composed of non-Americans, the center would on principle be operated by non-Americans.

The participants of the conference constituted four distinct groups: the first and largest group consisted of American studies scholars from Arab countries such as Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, who usually do not have the financial means to attend American studies conferences in the West; second, there were some European scholars whose research touched upon matters taken up at the conference; the third group comprised a number of American studies scholars from the USA

¹ The Eyyoubi state (1171–1348) was founded by Saladdin Eyyoubi (1138–1193), known in history as having been victorious over the Crusaders. Eyyoub is also a common boy's name.

² At that point, it was called the Syrian Protestant College. At the time of its establishment in 1866, it was the second American institution of higher learning outside the USA, Robert College—which opened in 1863 in Constantinople, the then capital of the Ottoman empire (today Istanbul)—being the first. It became the University of Beirut in 1920 and is today one of the best universities in the region.

³ He gave the remainder to AUC for the establishment of a similar center.

⁴ The reason his gift was turned down was, as widely reported in the US press in October 2001, because he had said the USA should 'reexamine its policies in the Middle East and adopt a more balanced stand toward the Palestinian cause'.

who had taught in the area in the past and wished to return even if for a short visit; and, finally, there were a number of Americans having little or nothing to do with American studies, but who occupied a post in one of the Arab or other Middle Eastern states. As a result, the conference was as much about the Middle East and its culture as it was about the USA and US culture, since the fourth group wished to know more about the Middle East itself. This was apparent from day one, from the choice of the keynote speaker, Juan Cole, a scholar of Middle Eastern studies at the University of Michigan and the current president of MESA (Middle Eastern Studies Association). Cole, one of the authorities on the region, did not even bother to couch his words within an American studies rhetoric. He spoke on the 'Library of Americana Translation Project', undertaken by the Global Americana Institute of which he is the president. The Institute wishes to have the classics of American thought and history (essays by Thomas Jefferson as well as those of the other founding fathers, Martin Luther King Jr.'s letters and speeches, the works of Susan B. Anthony, etc.) translated into Arabic. We were made to understand that the Institute would realize this project via donations, and Cole spoke with the assurance of a man who seemed to have already obtained substantial contributions.

I should add that, while most participants enjoyed their stay in the luxurious four-star hotel *Le Méridien Commodore*, as well as being wined and dined (those whose plane tickets had been paid by CASAR were especially grateful), all this talk of money going around, while scholars of the region doing American studies work are not getting any, was rather frustrating to listen to.

Despite being a new center, CASAR churned out a full-blown conference, with concurrent sessions that had presentations as good as at any such gathering. McGreevy himself has published a report on the conference in the ASA newsletter of March 2006. All in all, there were more presentations on Arab-Americans and Middle-eastern-Americans in general and on fiction written by these than are found usually at the ASA, IASA, MELUS, or MESEA conferences, and this was one of the pluses of the conference. One session all participants attended was a workshop on 'American Studies in the Middle East', but naturally there were so many participants wishing to express their views on the subject or relate past teaching experiences that each of them could only speak for a few minutes, and not much came out of it. The suggestion that an association of Middle Eastern Americanists (a kind of regional EAAS) should be formed, and which would thus have to contain a considerable Israeli contingency, was met with icy silence by Arab participants who in other instances were voluble and ready to make plans.

The closing speech was given by Melani McAlister (George Washington University), author of *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945–2000* (2001). In the spring of 1998, Melani McAlister, as the writer of one of the best dissertations in American studies at the time, had been selected to present the theme of her dissertation at a seminar Werner Sollors organized at Harvard University. In November 2001, right after 9/11, when the American scholar scheduled to be the keynote speaker at the ASAT (American Studies Association of Tur-



key) convention of that year got cold feet and decided not to fly to Turkey, Melani volunteered—and was the keynote speaker. In short, hers is one of the meteoric careers I have witnessed during the last few years. At the CASAR conference she spoke about the current activities, or as she put it, the ‘global visions’ of the American Evangelists. To one of the questions that were addressed to her afterwards, she made this remark, which I think sums up the main idea of her lecture: ‘Instead of making fun of and/or belittling the Evangelist movement, what you should do is realize that Evangelism is here to stay and that it is what is shaping US foreign policy at present’. After the movie clips she had shown and the facts she had given (which showed the Evangelists as an aggressive, belligerent group that would stop at nothing), these words were like a threat, almost like a slap in the face. For those from the Middle East, it was as if they had been made to assemble at this conference to get the *coup de grâce*, to abandon all hope. I must say that because of this lecture it is with a bitter taste that the conference ended.

Nevertheless, with a day-long trip to Baalbek that was offered the next day by CASAR, which included wine-tasting in a winery run by monks in the Bekaa valley (yes, it is not only Hezbollah’s abode), the conference appeared to me as one of those subtle exercises of American diplomacy—of the kind that is at work, for example, at the Salzburg Seminar. While ostensibly it was the Saudi Prince’s largesse that made the CASAR conference possible, in the end it was a very American affair: smoothly run, it could have taken place on US soil, with all the patrician amenities thereof. The Americans who attended got an impression of the outlooks, the feelings and sensibilities of the inhabitants of the region that were, most of the time, already packaged for them in the scholarly discourse of their colleagues from the various countries in the Middle East.

Were some people already calculating possible future reactions? I would conclude by saying that the intricacies of the Saudi-USA connection need to be probed further than they have been so far.

And today, it is with great sadness that I write these lines, thinking all the while of all the local people I met then, and not knowing what their fate has been. Patrick McGreevy, to whom I wrote when the bombings started, has been sending e-mail dispatches since. Unlike many foreigners who left as soon as it was possible, Patrick and his wife decided to stay, and are there right now, undergoing all the bombings. I would like to end by paying tribute to the courage they have shown.

Çeşme, Turkey, August 2006

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