The Middle East in the 1950s – Historical Perspectives:
Israel, the Arab World, and the Great Powers

Northwestern University
April 25-27, 2010

Conference Summary

Overview

What follows is a summary of the recent conference held at Northwestern University from April 25-27, 2010 on The Middle East in the 1950s – Historical Perspectives: Israel, the Arab World, and the Great Powers.

This three day event was sponsored by:

- The Buffett Center for International and Comparative Studies and
- The Crown Family Center for Jewish Studies

In addition, the conference was supported by:

- The Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities,
- The Chabraja Center for Historical Studies,
- The Judd A. and Marjorie Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences
- The Middle East and North Africa Working Group,
- The Northwestern Department of History, and
- The Northwestern University Middle East Forum

Conference Rationale

The events of the 1950s and, by extension, developments leading up the Six Day War of 1967, marked a major transition in the history of the modern Middle East.

During this era, the fall of the old order led to the rise of military-revolutionary regimes in the Arab world. Traditional concepts of Arab nationalism were replaced by more radical, secular-oriented ideologies. The subsequent collapse of these political paradigms eventually created a vacuum that paved the way for strengthening the territorial nation-state and Islamist movements. Parochial loyalties and sectarian identities along with local and ethnic forms of nationalism replaced the all-binding broad notion of a unified Arab world.
Under these changing circumstances, Israel also became a powerful regional actor. The 1948 war and the evolving Arab-Israeli conflict had a significant impact on Israel’s internal and external affairs. Additionally, the USSR emerged as a major player while the United States enhanced its active involvement in Middle East affairs.

The conference aimed at revisiting the past body of research on this period, reassessing its methodologies and findings, discussing the new scholarship, and thus attempted to achieve a more nuanced appreciation of the Middle East, past and present.

**Conference Participants and Lectures**

**Greetings**
- Sarah Mangelsdorf, Dean of WCAS
- Daniel Linzer, Provost

**Keynote Address**
- William Roger Louis, University of Texas

*Historical Perspectives on the 1950s*

**Session One: Ideology: Nasserism, Pan Arabism, Arab Socialism**
- Carl Petry, Northwestern University, Chair
- James Jankowski, University of Colorado

*Egyptian Arab Nationalism and ‘Nasserism’ in Retrospect*
- Adeed Dawisha, Miami University

*The Nationalist Decade: High Expectations, Inconclusive End*
- James Piscatori, Durham University

*The 1950s – Foundations of Islamic Revivalism?*

**Session Two: The Arab World**
- Ruediger Seesemann, Northwestern University, Chair
- Asher Susser, Tel Aviv University

*In Nasser’s Shadow – Jordan, Israel, and the US*
- Orit Bashkin, University of Chicago

*Arab Nationalism - From Nuri Said to Abd al-Karim Qasim*

**Session Three: The Palestinians**
- Wendy Pearlman, Northwestern University, Chair
- Muhammad Muslih, Long Island University

*The National Self-Image of Palestinian Political Elites in the 1950s and 1960s*
The group of internationally acclaimed scholars who participated in the conference brought into sharp focus the assumptions that historians long believed dictated the ideologies, policy decisions, and political actions of the leading players in the 1950s. Armed with new materials including those from recently opened archives, the participants provided a highly nuanced reading of dramatic moments in history as seen from the perspective of the army officers, government officials, intelligence services, and statesmen responsible for establishing policy.
Moving beyond traditional diplomatic and military history, the discussants also focused on public reaction to events under survey. They particularly emphasized the challenges to established authority mounted by traditional religious movements in the Arab world, a forerunner to the Islamic revivalism of today.

Especially noteworthy was the synergy among the participants, all of whom offered carefully crafted presentations. The discussions were well informed and marked by scholarly rather than polemical judgment. Feedback received from the participants was encouraging.

**Attendance**

The conference was well attended. On Sunday evening, the McCormick Tribune Forum at Northwestern was packed to hear the keynote address by Professor William Roger Louis, a renowned historian of the late British Empire. A reception followed at Guild Hall attended by Northwestern faculty, students, and members of the Chicago and Northern Suburban communities.

During the next two days, our venue at Hardin Hall was again filled to capacity. Following the formal close of the conference on Tuesday, a special event was held in Downtown Chicago, hosted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. Here Asher Susser and Emile Sahliyeh discussed new directions in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations moderated by Elie Rekhess. About 100 people were in attendance.

**Student Engagement**

The conference organizers placed special emphasis on the active engagement of Northwestern University’s undergraduate and graduate students who study the Middle East. Student representatives accordingly took part in the organization of the conference from the beginning.

Undergraduates made an effort to garner the support of university officials in charge of in student affairs as well as student groups interested in Middle East issues. Mary Katherine Gleissner, an undergraduate in Middle East Studies and co-director of the Northwestern University Conference on Human Rights, was particularly helpful in this regard.
Among those university officials approached were Bill Banis, Vice President of Student Affairs, Burgwell Howard, Dean of Students, Mary Finn, Weinberg Associate Dean for Undergraduate Academic Affairs, Peter Carroll, Director of the Asian Middle East Studies Program, and Gayla Ruffer, Director of the International Studies Program. They all responded favorably.

Among the student groups invited to participate were Al Bayan, the Associated Student Government, Hillel, Model Arab League, the Muslim-cultural Students Association, the Political Union, Students for Justice in Palestine, Tzedek Hillel, Wildcats for Israel, and Yaala! The latter group organized an informal student discussion following the first day of the conference.

Individual invitations to participate in the conference and several private events were sent to nearly 100 Northwestern students interested in this topic of study. We are proud that at least 40 were able to attend the discussions and related events.

On the evening of the second day of the conference, a special dinner was held for the students. The speakers were joined by many of Northwestern’s undergraduate and graduate students of the Middle East for an intimate meal at the John Evans Alumni Center. This provided the students with a rare opportunity for lively exchange with leading scholars in the field.

**Concluding Remarks**

Altogether, we feel the conference achieved its goals and helped to raise the profile of Middle East Studies at Northwestern. Drawing together the academic output of the conference, we will shortly be updating the NU Middle East Forum website to include the lectures and articles which have followed from the conference proceedings.

*Hendrik Spruyt and Elie Rekhess, conference co-chairs*