المجلس العربي
للعلوم الاجتماعية
Arab Council
for the Social Sciences
Conseil Arabe
pour les Sciences Sociales

TEACHING IN UNSAFE SPACES: THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE ACADEMY: IT WAS NEVER EASY

SUAD JOSEPH
University of California, Davis

September 2026[1]

[1] This paper was first presented at a panel on 'Navigating (Un)/Safe Spaces: Academic Research in the Diaspora' at the Arab Council for the Social Sciences (ACSS) Conference on Safeguarding Knowledge: Silencing and Academic Freedom in the Arab Region held in Istanbul, Turkey, in October 2024.

I came of age academically in the 1960s, in the context of the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, the Student Movement, the Free Speech Movement, and the Second Wave of the Women's Movement. Looking at over fifty years of tumult in the academy, several key historical moments entangle scholars of the Middle East. Identifying these moments shows that it was never easy being in Middle East Studies in the Academy. I have advised rising scholars that, when going into Middle East studies, they must know that they are going into a field on fire. It has been on fire for the entire five decades of my work in Middle East Studies. **It is certainly hard now, but it was never easy.** To track some of the significant moments that I encountered over these five decades and a small glimpse into how I encountered them, I have selectively assembled a few moments.

Compelling Moments in the Academy:

1967 War - ending in UN Security Council Resolution 242, the "land for peace" formula, the Israeli occupation of Gaza 1967-2007, and finally, the Camp David Accords in 1978. I started graduate school at the University of Pittsburgh in 1966. Coming from an apolitical, socially conservative, working-class immigrant family, I knew little about American or Middle East politics. Just days after the 1967 War, a fellow Jewish graduate student told me pointedly that she was wearing her victory shoes. I did not know why she directed that comment to me. I was not in Middle East studies at the time, nor did I particularly identify with regional politics or any specific politics.

1967-75: Columbia Years - I transferred from Pittsburgh to Columbia University in 1967, in time for the student strikes. This was my awakening to class politics, state politics, and global politics. After returning from two years of fieldwork in Lebanon (1971-1973), I stood talking to an Anthropology Professor in the Anthropology office at Columbia when one of the secretaries loudly challenged the professor: "Why are you talking with her? She is an Arab." Both the professor and I were speechless.

1978: Congress enacted the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) - allowing the government to spy on American citizens or legal residents, without notifying them, if they were suspected of working as foreign agents (the "suspicion" was liberally interpreted). Arab and Muslim Americans became targets, including Arab and Muslim American academics. Friends and I start noticing clicks on our phones. We joked about Big Brother listening. We knew it was terror tactics.

1975-1990: The Civil War in Lebanon - ending with the Taif Agreement, with the Tell il-Zaatar massacre and the siege of Jisr il-Basha. I defended my dissertation at Columbia University in April 1975, just as the "Civil" war broke out. A group of students in one of my classes at Hofstra University saw me in a protest demonstration and collectively decided to harass me the whole semester. I could not get the class to jell even after consulting the chair of the department. At the end of the semester, a Puerto Rican student told me that a group of pro-Israeli students had decided to make the class difficult for me after seeing me at the protest on TV. I had completed doctoral fieldwork in Lebanon, completed my PhD, and had become an active political critic of right-wing tactics and policies in the Middle East and elsewhere. Visibility attracted harassment.

1980-1988: Iran-Iraq War - I had begun a collaborative field project in Iraq. My focus in the collaborative project was on the General Federation of Iraqi Women. As a result of the war, the project derailed and terminated.

1982: Israeli Invasion of Lebanon - The occupation of South Lebanon by Israel for eighteen years (1982-2000) gave rise to Hezbollah. The period included the siege of Beirut and the Sabra and Shatila massacres. By 1976, I was teaching at the University of California, Davis UCD). I spoke out publicly against the invasion of Lebanon. Parents of Jewish students at UC Davis left threatening messages on my home phone. By 1984, I found myself on a "blacklist" because of a talk I gave for the American Friends Service chronicling the Civil War in Lebanon. I led a successful effort to get the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) of North America to condemn the blacklisting of academics. However, it was the last time MESA allowed referendums to be submitted from the floor (1984, San Francisco).

1987-1993: The First Intifada - ending with the Oslo Accords and including the founding of Hamas in 1987. I was added to another blacklist for trying to explain the events at a public forum.

2001: 9/11, September 11 - Attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The War on Terror, Osama Bin Laden. My daughter's high school teacher singled her out as a "Muslim" in front of her class. My blond, blue-eyed adopted daughter was wearing a cross necklace at the time. We had just returned from living in Cairo for two years.

2001: Patriot Act - Congress enacted the Patriot Act to obstruct "terrorism." It was used against Arab and Muslim Americans. Many academics felt they had to be selective in their syllabi and in what and how they lectured in class and discussions. I could feel the pressure to monitor speech in the classroom.

2001-2021: The War in Afghanistan - The longest war in American history. I received an email from Lynne Cheney, the wife of Vice President Dick Cheney, asking me to participate in a team effort to help liberate Afghan women. I declined.

2000-2005: The Second Intifada - The Al-Aqsa Intifada, ending in the Sharm El-Sheikh summit. I worked with a small group of faculty and students to found the Middle East/South Asia Studies Program at UC Davis. A Provost initiative at UCD led to the allocation of eight faculty positions for an initiative on Islam, Culture, and Society. A new dean then redirected the faculty positions promised to the Islam Initiative to other programs.

2003-2011: The War on Iraq - The rise of ISIS. We continued building the Middle East/South Asia Studies Program at UC Davis, working closely with the larger Davis/Sacramento Middle East and South Asian community and the UCD students. Much of our funding and support came from the Davis/Sacramento community.

2006: Hezbollah war with Israel (thirty-four days) - ending with UN Security Council Resolution 1701. Resolution 1701 was supposed to disarm Hezbollah and place the Lebanese Army on the border with UNIFIL. I wrote a proposal on behalf of the Middle East/South Asia Studies Program at UC Davis for a Department of Education grant to launch the ME/SA major and Arabic and Hindi/Urdu programs. When we won the grant, colleagues at UC Davis used non-public back channels to get the ME/SA major rejected. We worked six months to turn it around.

2010-2011: Arab Protests - resulting, after a few years, in more authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Tunisia, and triggering the Syrian Civil War. I was elected President of the Middle East Studies Association of North America in 2011. I gave a presidential address in Washington, DC, focusing on the global accumulation of power and wealth among global elites and the impoverishment of larger and larger sections of the world population.

2014: War on Yemen - (I retired – exhausted. It has never been easy).

2016: Trump elected. The Muslim Ban

2019: October Protests in Lebanon - A million Lebanese went to the streets to protest; followed by COVID, followed by the 2020 Beirut Port Explosion, and one of the worst financial collapses of any country in modern history.

2021: Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain severed ties with and boycotted Qatar, pushed by the USA and Israel**.** My edited book, *Arab Family*

Studies: Critical Reviews, was published in 2018, partly funded by a grant from the Family Institute of the Qatar National Research Foundation. A Public Records Act was filed against me for all my records and emails related to the *Arab Family Studies* project—see below.

2023-2026: Hamas attack on Israel, Israel's war on Hamas and Hezbollah - Israel's war on Lebanon. The Israeli genocide in Gaza. Up to 100,000 Palestinians killed. Israeli settlers attacked, killed, and terrorized Palestinians in the West Bank. Ceasefires. Ceasefires ignored. Israel continued attacks on Gaza, Ramallah, and Lebanon. 2025, fall of the Al Asad regime in Syria. Israel invaded Syria. 2026, American and Israeli war on Iran. Israel invaded and occupied South Lebanon again, displacing 1 million Lebanese again. **It was never easy being in Middle East Studies.**

A Half Century of Teaching Middle East Studies:

Since 1966, the start of my graduate training, the half-century has witnessed the rise of surveillance, censorship, silencing, and punishment in the academy around Palestine, Islam, and anything Arab or Muslim. **It was never easy being in Middle East Studies.**

American Jews account for less than 2.5 percent of the American population. The Jerusalem Post reported in 2016 that fifty percent of all funding received by the United States Democratic National Party came from Jews, and Jews contributed twenty-five percent of all funding to the Republican National Party. AIPAC raised the most money for Democrats, according to Politico. In the 2024 election, AIPAC was the biggest source of GOP funds poured into Democratic primaries.

The teaching environment for Middle East studies in the academy over the past fifty years has been shaped by the chronic violence in which the USA and Israel are often central players and by the increased weaponization of financial and legal systems in the US against Palestine and many Arab countries.

How Do We Experience It:

1. **Who Has Our Backs?** A potential donor to the UC Davis Middle East/South Asia Studies Program once asked me, "Who has our backs? Zionists and pro-Israel activists don't fear: There are so many

organizations that have their back." An increasing number of Zionist and pro-Israeli organizations are investing in US politics. To name just a few: AIPAC; ADL; Zachor Legal Institute; Canary Mission; American Jewish Committee; StandWithUS; Jewish Council for Public Affairs; Zionist Organization of America; Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations; Christians United for Israel; American Jewish Congress; Israel Friends of Likud; B'nai B'rith.

2. **Weaponization of the Public Records Act (PRA):** PRA is used against scholars in public universities. Anything on a university computer belongs to the university and can be made public to anyone in the public who requests it. I had a PRA against me by the Zachor Legal Institute that was held over my head for over two years. The university turned over contracts, grants, and some of my emails. The purpose of PRAs is to wear scholars down, take their time away from research and other work. **It has never been easy being in Middle East Studies.**
3. **Blacklists:** Blacklists have been used for decades. Some students are trained to observe faculty and send their names to Zionist organizations. I have been on multiple blacklists. **It has never been easy being in Middle East Studies.**
4. **Pressure to Dialogue:** Universities and communities often call upon scholars of the Middle East to join special dialogue and advisory committees. Talking is important, but when does dialogue become cooptation?
5. **Both Side-ism**: So often, such committees within the academy and their communities insist on representing "both sides." Or we are called upon to represent "both sides" in the classroom. As if an equivalence exists.
6. **Pressure for Consensus:** The effort of academic committees on academic freedom, or specifically on Palestine, is to arrive at a consensus. There can be no consensus that has its roots in both side-ism.
7. **Equation of Critique of Israel with Anti-Semitism**: DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) has been weaponized, so any critique of Israel is seen as discrimination, harassment, making Jewish students feel "unsafe." Complaints against faculty, TAs, researchers, or other students are often made based on a redefinition of antisemitism as criticism of Israel.
8. **Equivalence of Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia**: The attack on Palestine and Lebanon is not Islamophobia. Islamophobia is an attack based on religion or the assumption of religion. The war on Palestine and Lebanon is a war on Arabs.

9. **Demands in the Classroom to condemn October 7 or Hamas or Hezbollah**: As if such a condemnation could explain the history and conditions. As if such a condemnation would neutralize any other critique.
10. **Self-Censorship**: The heavy pressure from above often compels academics to censor themselves. This pressure is especially hard on junior scholars and often leads to what American historian Timothy Synder calls "obeying in advance."
11. **Student Movements:** The 2023-2024 student encampments and student movements in the USA and around the world brought opportunities and challenges for academics. It became critical to support the students; yet for a number of faculty, this came at a cost—suspension, warnings, censorship, PRAs, loss of speaking engagements, and loss of jobs.
12. **New Spaces:** In my fifty years in academia, I have never observed as much censorship, surveillance, and punishment of academics around the Palestine issue. This is the worst in my memory. Yet, paradoxically, at the same time, I have never witnessed as much public space for speaking, for protesting, for negotiating, for passing resolutions. At UC Davis, police came in 2011 and shut down the Occupy Wall Street student encampment with pepper spray. In 2024, there were no police, no pepper spray. The administration engaged in constant conversation and negotiation with the students. The students peacefully protested and closed down the encampment in June 2024 (after approximately five weeks), and they succeeded in winning an FTE for Palestine studies. In 2024-2025, UC Davis Anthropology hired two Palestinians to teach on Palestine and Syria.

During the encampment, the Arab American community in Davis, California, came together to support the students, cooking for them, offering lectures and general historical information, and attending their events. The Davis community created its own events to rebuild the Davis Arab community. In October 2024, the Arab and Arab American UCD and Davis community organized an Arab cultural evening on the quad at UCD—the first ever. I guestimated that 600 people showed up. It has become an annual tradition followed by the establishment of an annual "Beitna" event, displaying the Arab culture. In 2025, 400 people attended the Beitna event in Davis and two Davis community members (myself and Reem Awad-Rashmawi) established an NGO: The Davis Arab Community Diwan, which organizes educational and cultural events for and about Arab culture and society.

New spaces are opening. Students often end up in leadership, creating or organizing in these new spaces. Our job is to recognize the historical moment, to seize it, to jump into it, to join with those who are leading and can lead. The purpose is to step into the spaces that are opening up, widen them, create new spaces, and build an architecture that can resist the next suppressions—that suppression will surely come. Our numbers are larger, our voices are louder, our coalitions are stronger, and we have allies in all sectors of society—and in the world. It was never going to be easy being in Middle East Studies. But we were never going to sit still. We knew or came to know quickly that it was a field on fire. As the Egyptian feminist artist, Huda Lutfi, painted a philosopher's script in a brilliant tableau: when you see a fire, jump into it, or it will burn you.