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## Teaching Abroad in the Age of American Empire

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In *Islam from the Edge* (1994), Richard Bulliet argues that the 7<sup>th</sup> century Arab conquest of the Persian Empire led to the diffusion of Persian scholarship across the Middle East and Central Asia. He contends that after the Islamization of modern-day Iran, a Persian diaspora bore the responsibility of proselytizing and spreading Arabic, the language of Islam. Paradoxically, through the medium of Arabic, Persian imperial decline enabled the spread of Persian civilization. Though I hesitate to make predictions about the decline of American power, the recession has engendered a contentious debate on the inevitability and consequences of imperial decline. While many of the arguments contending that America is in decline are both premature, and, more importantly, outside the scope of this article, there is one dimension of American power that is uncontested. America's leading universities and its system of higher education have a global reputation that is unrivaled. And, much like Persia in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, due to the expansive growth in American-affiliated universities overseas scholars trained in American institutions are in demand. This article describes my personal experience teaching abroad and discusses both the virtues and pitfalls of working abroad.

While completing my dissertation in 2005, I confronted an anemic job market that was inhospitable to my areas of specialization: historical sociology and Central Asian Studies. Given the narrow field of choices, I decided to also send a few applications to universities outside the US, mainly in the Middle East. Though I did not realize this at the time, the Middle East was on the cusp of a boom in higher education. When the American University of Sharjah opened in 1997, it was the only institution of its kind in the United Arab Emirates and one of only a handful of American-style universities in the Middle East. Since then, the number of American institutions and those that purport to deliver an American-style education in the region has proliferated. They now include Georgetown University in Qatar, the American University of Kuwait, the American University of Dubai, NYU Abu Dhabi, Zayed University, Carnegie Mellon, Texas A&M, Cornell University, and many others. From the newly minted Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan to the American University of Kabul in Afghanistan, this pattern of growth is also visible outside the Middle East.

The rapid growth in American HEIs ((Higher Education Institution) has been complemented by a parallel growth in the number of American military bases in the region. In his book *Sorrows of Empire* Chalmers Johnson (2004) contends that what principally differentiates the structure and reach of American empire from earlier empires is our reliance on foreign military outposts. From Iraq to Qatar, there are American military installations in each of the countries that now host an American-affiliated HEI. Though America's heavy military footprint in the region was embraced by our allies in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, local populations have been less enthusiastic about this large

military presence. Paradoxically, in contrast to the tepid support for our military presence, the local appetite for American HEIs remains high. These universities represent an important dimension of American soft power that social science has not adequately theorized (Noori 2012; Bertelsen 2012). As such it is important to note that given America's global military buildup, teaching at an American-affiliated HEI has political ramifications. The faculty at these institutions, regardless of their political views, understand that they are indeed de facto representatives of American empire.

This new generation of universities and colleges in the Middle East and elsewhere fit into three categories: First, there are institutions that serve as branch campuses of institutions based in the US. With a student population of 311, NYU Abu Dhabi is good example of this model. Aside from NYU Abu Dhabi, many of the branch campuses are clustered in compounds, and, as such, are small, resembling a store in a shopping mall rather than a stand-alone campus with diverse curricular offerings. Education City in Qatar hosts the following branch campus programs: a fine arts program administered by Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), a Cornell University administered medical school, engineering programs under the auspices of Texas A&M, and a division of Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. For purposes of comparison, Georgetown's branch campus enrolls 145 students, while VCU Qatar has approximately 214 students. Dubai's Academic City housed the now defunct Michigan State University's branch campus; it is now home to Boston-based Hult International Business School and a number of British, Australian, and South Asian branch campuses. Second, there are hybrid universities or joint ventures in which an international university will partner with an HEI in the Middle East. Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan partnered with the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Carnegie Mellon, and Duke University. In the near future, Duke University will form a joint-venture with Wuhan University in Kunshan, China to be named Duke-Kunshan University. Third, there are independent stand-alone universities, locally rooted and locally financed, that offer an American-style of education. With approximately 4,800 students, the American University of Sharjah is an example of this institutional format. Because of their comparative size and the English language support services that they offer, American-style universities have historically drawn more students from both the host country and the region itself. NYU Abu Dhabi, by comparison, because it's required to adhere to the more stringent admissions standards of its New York affiliate seeks to attract a global student body. American-style universities typically adhere to American curricular standards; embrace the liberal arts model; they use textbooks published in the US; most faculty members are trained in the US; and, they encourage faculty to use "American" pedagogical techniques. The American University of Cairo and the American University of Beirut, both

founded by American missionaries more than a century ago and referred to as the Harvard and Yale of the Middle East, are older exemplars of this model.

As I began the application process, I struggled with three major concerns. First, I worried that taking a job overseas would hurt future academic job prospects in the US. Specifically, I worried that taking a job at an overseas HEI with limited name recognition would dampen the enthusiasm of prospective employers. Second, I was also concerned about maintaining and nurturing scholarly networks in the US. I was afraid that I would not be able to attend annual association meetings such as the ASA. I also had concerns about regional security. I feared that the war in Iraq would engulf the rest of the region. And, given regional resentment of American military interventions, I anticipated facing a critical and recalcitrant student body and feared being perceived as the local face of American imperialism. Mitigating these fears was a desire to be geographically closer to my region of expertise. After the fall of the Soviet Union, former Soviet republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia had been reintegrated into regional trade networks and had reestablished ties to important commercial nodes such as Dubai, Mecca, and Istanbul.

In May of 2005, I accepted a job offer at an American-style university in the UAE and later that August I began working at the American University of Sharjah (AUS), which is located in the city-state adjacent to Dubai. Fortunately, my fears proved unfounded. Though many of the students lacked English fluency and were under-prepared for rigorous college-level reading loads and writing requirements, they were respectful, eager, and intelligent. The university was well run; decision-making processes were as transparent as at any other HEI in which I had worked, and the university allocated the additional funding needed to help faculty maintain scholarly contacts in the US. Finally, even as conditions in Iraq worsened, my security fears waned. The UAE's rulers proved adept at courting American guarantees of security, while maintaining cordial relations with the opposing forces in the so-called war on terror. Moreover, as the financial capital of the region, the UAE has evolved into a regional center for illicit financial services for organizations as varied as the Nigerian Mafia to the Taleban. Mike Davis (2006) notoriously referred to Dubai as the Switzerland of Dubai (the Middle East), noting that "...so far Dubai is one of the few cities in the region to have entirely avoided car-bombings and attacks on Western tourists: eloquent testament, one might suppose, to the city-state's continuing role as a money laundry and upscale hideout, like Tangiers in the 1940s or Macao in the 1960s. Dubai's burgeoning black economy is its insurance policy against the car-bombers and airplane hijackers" (p.58).

While in the UAE, many of my colleagues chose to attend conferences in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Within a two year span, one intrepid philosopher in my department attended conferences in Italy, India, and Iran.

Though less adventurous, I too presented research papers in inter-disciplinary conference venues outside the US, mainly in Europe and in the UAE. And, as a result, I like many of my colleagues, developed professional contacts outside the US. Also, out of necessity and convenience, many of the faculty at AUS developed international research agendas typically focused on issues closer to our new home. Though my interest in the Middle East predated my tenure at AUS, my presence in the region enabled me to develop new research agendas. I was able to conduct research on a paper dealing with Iranian veterans of the Iran-Iraq war. And, later, I wrote a series of articles on the social and political consequences of the spread of American HEIs to the Middle East. For social scientists with research interests in a particular region, being able to live and work so near to one's research site is a luxury. Geographical distance is one reason why so many anthropologists and sociologists are forced to give up ethnographic research so early in their careers.

As I alluded to earlier, teaching at the American University of Sharjah posed a series of challenges. First, because so many students lacked fluency in English, I had to develop a more relaxed approach to grammatical errors in student papers. As such, I focused more on content than verbal expression. Second, academic dishonesty proved to be a common problem that I had not anticipated. Most of the cases I encountered resulted from language deficiencies. Insecure about their command of the English language, students would commit plagiarism. And, since the majority of students came from wealthy backgrounds, they could afford to hire outside help in writing research papers. These issues were compounded by the fact that many students were socialized in academic cultures that encouraged collective approaches to classroom assignments as opposed to the individualistic ethos that serves as the backbone for the Western academic tradition. Mirroring current public and scholarly debates on the merits of cultural relativism, faculty often had heated arguments about how to tackle academic dishonesty. Some professors argued for a zero-tolerance approach, while others, citing cultural factors, advocated a less punitive response that emphasized educating students on what constituted plagiarism. Third, due to limits on academic freedom, we were collectively wary about broaching sensitive subjects in the classroom. Most American-style campuses such as mine do not have a tenure system. In lieu of tenure, faculty who meet the standards set by their department and the university, earn what is called a rolling contract. Once they have a rolling contract, every four years they go through a perfunctory evaluation and their contracts are reset for an additional four year term. The absence of tenure, combined with an authoritarian political system and the knowledge that the country's ruler is also the university's founder and principle patron, creates a climate of anxiety, particularly for new professors. This is not to say that there is active system of surveillance or that the environment is hostile to

academic freedom.

In fact, over time, I was impressed with the degree to which the institution protected academic freedom. This did not, however, stop most faculty members from policing themselves. Also, the fact that many students lack English fluency leads to the very real fear that statements will misinterpreted. While I taught at AUS, I was never told not to discuss certain sensitive topics in the classroom. However, regional newspapers would occasionally report on instructors at Western universities being fired or publicly reprimanded for what had been said in the classroom. Typically, these rare cases resulted from comments that were deemed to be insulting to Islam. In 2006, a professor at Zayed University, a women's only American-style university in Dubai, was fired for showing her students a copy of the inflammatory cartoons first published in a Danish newspaper depicting the prophet Mohammad in unflattering light. The firing made headline news across the country and sent a chill through all faculty teaching in the region.

Given these constraints on academic freedom, faculty develop strategies over time for broaching sensitive topics. Most of the faculty members to whom I spoke to were constantly pushing the boundaries of free speech and academic freedom. One professor I interviewed at Zayed University's Abu Dhabi campus would criticize human rights violations in neighboring countries, leaving students to independently make connections about similar circumstances at home. Due to the culturally conservative climate of the school, the most challenging topics had to do with sexuality and the social construction of gender. When teaching intro to sociology classes, I would leave out chapters on these subjects.

I did, however, lecture and assign readings on women's rights. In my final year at AUS, one of my students invited Sharla Musabih, an American-born director of a Dubai-based women's shelter to give a talk about her work. Ms. Musabih had been vilified in the local press, so her appearance in our classroom could have invited administrative scrutiny. Several UAE newspapers had accused her of abuse and of exploiting the women under her protection. In her talk, Ms. Musabih delivered a riveting account of her organization's work and the challenges she faced in keeping the shelter open; local authorities had repeatedly tried to shut it down. She also expressed surprise at having been invited to a local university to discuss her work. Local universities in her experience had historically shown no interest in her organization or the types of issues with which it dealt. Ironically, American-affiliated institutions in the U.A.E. often do more to engage communities in a grass-roots way than government-funded academic institutions. For example, the Zayed University professor to whom I referred earlier wanted to develop a service learning program. Originally, her plan was to have her students volunteer at an organization providing services to migrant workers. This initiative faced immediate opposition from the administration, so

she instead developed a project that allowed students to volunteer at a government-run nursing home for UAE citizens, a safer constituency. Her hope was that over time she would be able to expand the program to include organizations providing services to migrant workers. It is indeed rare for state-run universities to engage in this form of public outreach

Finally, the demand for American academics is not limited to the classroom. Increasingly, American consultants are brought in to help countries like the UAE adopt the best practices associated with the American model of higher education. In the UAE, the ministry of education utilizes American academics for the purpose of accrediting Western HEIs, in effect outsourcing the regulatory duty of the ministry. Evidence for the global appeal of the American model for higher education can therefore be seen in the demand for accreditation by American quality assurance programs such as SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools) and NEASC (New England Association of Schools and Colleges). AUS, like many universities that adopt an American-style curriculum, has sought validation from external accreditation agencies, both for the institution as a whole and for particular specialized programs such as business, engineering, or architecture. Though I find these trends worrisome, there is no doubt that as national systems of higher education in countries such as the UAE choose to adopt American standards and practices, new employment opportunities for academics trained in the US will increase. And, as evinced in the previous example, these employment opportunities are not limited to the classroom.

In conclusion, the proliferation of American HEIs along with the globalization of the American model of education has created a demand for faculty trained in the US. Because of the US's expansive global military presence, the very act of teaching at an American-affiliated institution has political significance that affects classroom dynamics. Because academic freedom varies so much across institutions and nations, there are risks, and faculty must modify course content and develop new teaching strategies to account for these risks. However, there are enormous benefits to be reaped from teaching abroad. Aside from the appeal of building intellectual bridges with an international network of scholars, developing a global research agenda, and gaining new cultural understandings, teaching and conducting research abroad can improve our scholarship by giving us a radically different perspective on the effects of American Empire.

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