



IN FOCUS

## ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND THE MIDDLE EAST

*In the Oct AN AAA Committee for Human Rights Members Kamran Ali and Susan Slyomovics introduced this series on Anthropologists and the Middle East with the comment "the focus of anthropology is more often than not on individuals and groups rather than states, while international legal norms, geopolitical concerns and actors usually dictate the study of key human rights issues. The study of nationalisms, state actors, large scale migrations, refugee populations, wars, conflict and sectarian strife within the framework of global and local relationships has, however, shaped anthropology's more recent*

*attention to studying communities and people at risk in different parts of the globe." This month AN offers two commentaries on what anthropologists and anthropologists do and what insights they could contribute to help better understand the transnational and international conflicts of the Middle East.*

## Anthropologists Must Enter the News About the Middle East and Expand Its Limits

AM AHL BISHARA  
U CHICAGO

International news in US media is all but saturated with items about the Middle East. Yet this steady media coverage tends to exclude anthropological perspectives.

Insisting that anthropologists have a place in public discussions about the Middle East is essential to cultivating a responsible, informed and critical US public that can thoughtfully address questions of US involvement in the Middle East.

Anthropologists' contributions can come in two major forms. First, anthropologists of the Middle East can analyze and document the relationship between the Middle East and the US by focusing on how knowledge is produced and circulated between the two. Second, these multi-sited projects must be complemented by anthropological work seated in the Middle East.

In carrying out these projects, anthropologists must not only continue to develop ethnographic methods in relation to contemporary theory. They must also employ novel techniques that expand anthropology's reach on this thorny terrain.

### COMMENTARY

#### Studying Media in Formation

Anthropological research and teaching about the Middle East almost necessarily have a dialogical relationship with pervasive US news and entertainment media about the region, because our students—and we too—consume these media. However, these media genres have predictable limits.

In the news media, US audiences often read about violent acts and "extremist" views. Because the news media focus on the most spectacular events, they often do little to highlight diversity within Middle Eastern societies, or to explain the political and social processes that lead up to events. This ossification of social and political processes produces contemporary forms of Orientalism. Today, rather than offering only textual analysis of these cultural forms, anthro-

For example, the tendency of news media to narrate novel happenings in relation to older stories and in terms of frameworks familiar to the newsreaders—as opposed to reporting from the perspectives of those at the center of news stories—relates to the institutional processes and values of news production.

#### Connections Obscured and Traced

A practice-based approach to media also helps trace the connec-

judgments of intellectual versus physical work, Palestinians' journalistic labor is not systematically recognized in the news. An instance of connection that bridges a polarizing political geography is thus publicly obscured.

This dynamic of Arab journalists contributing to US news is even more dramatic in Iraq, where Iraqi journalists offer unparalleled access and local skills to US media institutions. Many of these journalists have perished doing this work: According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 125 journalists have been killed in Iraq since March 2003, 103 of them Iraqis, many of whom were working for international organizations. These journalists nourish US debates about Iraq, discussions that could hardly be more critical to the health of US democracy. Yet these journalists also usually lack recognition.

While I was able to conduct research on US journalism in the West Bank, similar research in Iraq would be perilous. This brings us to a challenge familiar to anthropologists of the Middle East, our own problems of access. Between states that erect barriers to researchers, and issues of safety in sites of conflict, anthropologists' access to the Middle East is spotty at best.

For US anthropologists to make our work as relevant as possible, we must overcome problems of access by building on ethnographic research with other innovative methodologies, such as drawing upon the research of human rights organizations, NGOs, journalists and of course, Middle Eastern anthropologists.

#### Analyzing the Everyday

Focusing on the locations of connection between the US and the Middle East is crucial, but it is not sufficient. Anthropologists must also study cultural processes primar-



Barrier construction in Al-Ram, Jerusalem, before an anti-barrier demonstration.

Photo courtesy of Amahl Bishara

pologists have the tools to describe how these forms are produced and circulated in original ways.

This is one reason that a key direction of anthropological research on the Middle East is analysis of media viewed widely as authoritative, be they related to scientific research, feature films or human rights reports. Anthropological studies of science and media, along with anthropology's history of reflexivity about its own epistemological processes, provide the means with which to analyze how forms of knowledge are the product of institutional and cultural norms.

tions between the US and the Arab world. In my own research on the production of US news about Palestinians, I have found it particularly illustrative that Palestinians do not only "make headlines" as bombers or victims, but they also produce the news as reporters, photojournalists, guides and translators.

In these ways, Palestinian journalists contribute to the diversity of information about the world available in the US. Yet because of the structures of US media companies, notions of professionalism and objectivity, and long-standing

ily internal to the Middle East. We have the opportunity to study underneath, behind and around the stories that make the headlines: to glimpse the stories that fall to the cutting room floor, to examine the local context of events that US audiences otherwise tend to understand in relation to US history. While terrorism and religion have dominated US concern with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for instance, anthropologists know many Arabs would view this conflict in terms of colonialism or liberation struggle.

The everyday can be the location of the most urgent politics—a point researchers studying checkpoints in the Occupied Territories or poverty almost anywhere will appreciate. Yet it is precisely this level of politics that is regularly obscured in US media about the Middle East. Audiences must not

assume that basic issues of daily life, from family to education, are either basically the same or incomparably different than in their own lives. Anthropological research can help challenge assumptions of what is “normal” and what is utterly incomprehensible.

Anthropologists should likewise consider which voices are excluded from US media. Whether through ethnographic writing or documentary video, anthropologists should continue to bring forward these perspectives. This may not be a new idea, but it remains somewhat radical in today’s political climate.

#### Public Education Is Needed

Even in studying cultural processes internal to Middle Eastern societies, anthropologists contribute to analysis of contemporary issues in US society. Not coincidentally,

the Middle East and the US are currently wrestling with some of the same hot topics. Debate about secularism and religion are fierce in both regions. Anthropology can help students and the public critically think through these issues. Anthropological analyses and ethnographic documentation can help shed light on the social, historical and political processes that have formed certain divisions and connections between the religious, the secular and the political.

Anthropologists today have a great responsibility to help students and members of the larger public think critically, imaginatively and with concern about the Middle East. Our research can reveal unexpected connections between the US and the Middle East, transport the voices of under-represented groups and individuals, and attend to barely vis-

ible cultural processes that have surprising import in political life.

It is important that anthropologists do not become consumed by popular media about the Middle East. Anthropologists should not uncritically allow the news and the institutions that produce the news to set the limits of our research. It is our own creativity that will provide the theoretical and methodological insights to study future movements and crises. ■



*Amahl Bishara is a Mellon Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of Chicago's Department of Anthropology. Some of her research on the Palestinian role in the production of US news in the West Bank was recently published in an Ethnography article, "Local Hands, International News."*

## It Is a Privilege to Conduct Research in the Middle East

STEVEN ROUSSO-SCHINDLER  
U SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

**D**uring my fieldwork in West Jerusalem at an *ulpan* class—an Israeli course designed to teach Hebrew to new Israeli immigrants—I was asked to make a presentation about my anthropological research. Following an explanation of my interests in national narratives and social suffering, I concluded by telling the new Israeli immigrant students and Palestinian students (who were also taking the course to learn Hebrew) that I was planning to continue my research on Palestinian social suffering experiences in Ramallah in the near future.

### COMMENTARY

#### Questioning Safety

This comment provoked a combination of puzzled looks and giggles from the students. It seemed like a hopelessly naïve sentiment for a Jew to want to go to Ramallah to conduct research. Everyone knew this was something that was just not done by a Jew. After class was over, one of the Jewish students was so concerned he pulled me aside and asked, “haven’t you

heard how many Jews have been murdered there?”

No doubt, it was a difficult time for a Jew to go to Ramallah because it was only a few months after Ariel Sharon went to the al-Aqsa mosque compound, sparking off the second *intifadah*. Israeli security measures were so severe in the West Bank that virtually no one was allowed in or out of Ramallah for months. Although two of my Palestinian friends did offer to take me, they told me that I needed to be patient until tensions simmered to a degree where they felt it was safe for me to go. Unfortunately tensions didn’t simmer down before my fieldwork in West Jerusalem had to end. With both Jews and Palestinians telling me how dangerous Ramallah would be for me, I started to reconsider continuing my research there.

A year and a half passed, and so did my perspective on research in the Middle East. Two events influenced my final decision to go to Ramallah. First, I had a brief conversation with Avram Bornstein at the AAA meeting in Chicago in 2003. As a Jew who had lived and worked in Palestine for many years, he advised me to go study Arabic at Bir Zeit University. This would be a good way to understand Palestinian culture, he suggested. Second, my

closest Palestinian friend named Amahl told me to come, but instead of coming as a Jew, she suggested I come as an American. An American would be safer and be able to travel more easily. The notion that I should strategically deploy different identity markers seemed to be a sensible solution that gave me the confidence to go and begin my research.

#### Strategically Deploying Identity

Arriving in Ramallah in the summer of 2004, I soon began to feel

as though the greatest threat to me was not a Palestinian finding out that I was Jewish but rather an Israeli soldier. Each weekend when I traveled between cities in the West Bank, there were often several direct interactions with Israeli soldiers. Every time they asked to look at my passport, I was convinced they would pull me out of the car and take me to be interrogated. I was worried I would get kicked out of Palestine/Israel or, even worse, the soldiers would write down my passport number and submit it to an Israeli authority who would ensure I never entered the country again. To ease my fears, I purposefully avoided

See *Privileged Research* on page 10



A road for Palestinians on the left and a road for Israelis only on the right. Being in the West Bank, it is impossible for me to cross the barbed-wire fence into Israel here. However, while Palestinians are never allowed on the Israeli side of this fence, foreigners can almost always move freely between the West Bank and Israel at designated checkpoints. Photo courtesy of Steven Roussou-Schindler