

Studying Islam, Strengthening The Nation

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Tuesday, April 12, 2005; Page A21

It remains painfully true, more than three years after Sept. 11, that even highly educated Americans know little about the Arab Middle East. And it is embarrassing how little our universities have changed to educate our nation and train experts on the wider Middle East.

For believers in a good liberal arts education, it has long been a source of consternation that faculties in political science, history, economics and sociology lack scholars who know Arabic or Persian and understand Islam. Since Sept. 11 it has become clear that this abdication of responsibility is more than an educational problem: It also poses a threat to our national security.

The case for bolstering faculty and curriculum resources devoted to the Muslim Middle East is, of course, obvious from an educational perspective. The region is vast. Islam represents one of the world's great religions and provides not only an intellectual feast for comparative study in the social sciences and humanities but also an indispensable comparison and contrast for more familiar religions and ways of life. Particularly in the era of globalization and the information revolution, there is little excuse for universities' continuing to betray the liberal ideal of educating students in the ways of all people.

Our national security interest in this area should also be obvious. As in the Cold War, the war against Islamic extremism will not be won in months or years but in decades. And as in the Cold War, the non-military components of the war will play a crucial role.

To fight the decades-long battle against communism, the United States invested billions in education and intelligence. The U.S. government sponsored centers of Soviet studies, provided foreign-language scholarships in Russian and Eastern European languages, and offered dual-competency grants to enable graduate students to acquire expertise both in security issues and in Russian culture.

In the early days of the Cold War, a mere handful of Soviet experts dominated scholarship and policy debates. Not coincidentally, this was the time when we made some of our greatest mistakes, such as treating the communist world as a monolithic bloc and considering all communist regimes to have the same degree of internal dissent. By the end of the Cold War, however, the effort to "know the enemy" had resulted in the training of tens of thousands of professors, government analysts and policymakers. Every interpretation of Soviet society or Kremlin behavior triggered an informed and exhaustive debate.

Today, there is not one tenured professor in the departments of political science at Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, Chicago or Yale universities who specializes in the politics of the wider Middle East. Some scholars do study Islam and the languages and countries of the people who profess it. Programs in and outside of universities aimed at comprehending and combating Islamic extremism also exist, but they are woefully underdeveloped and changing at a snail's pace. Everyone now recognizes that we lack "human intelligence" -- covert agents, spies and informants -- in the Middle East. But we also suffer from shortages of NSA linguists, academic scholars, and senior policymakers trained in the languages, cultures, politics and economics of the wider Middle East.

It is time to recognize our ignorance and address it. Universities, working in tandem with government and foundations, should take immediate steps. And in doing so, they should resist the temptation to simply amend existing faculties with programs in Middle Eastern studies centers that are not rooted firmly in the established faculties of the university. Programs set up this way promote a kind of intellectual ghettoization because of the misguided assumption from which they and the multitude of special-interest programs that have sprung up around the university derive: that in each area of human affairs there is a methodology distinctive to it.

Universities should encourage the study of Islam from within the various social sciences and humanities, the better to promote truly interdisciplinary conversation. And they should avoid concentrating resources on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The disproportionate weight it is often given in Middle East studies programs reflects the poisonous political proposition that Israel is the root source of all the ills that beset the Muslim world. Teaching and inquiry in the university must remain, to the extent possible, nonpolitical.

Universities need to make a priority of teaching Arabic, Persian and Turkish, and it should be done not by part-time adjunct faculty but by tenured professors. The study of language opens doors to culture, history and politics. It disciplines the mind, and allows people to reach out to foreigners by showing them the respect that inheres in addressing them in their mother tongue.

It will not be easy to find the necessary faculty. During the Cold War, universities could draw on a pool of extraordinary European émigrés. But in educating scholars of the Muslim Middle East, we must start almost from scratch. We can provide incentives to bring PhD candidates from the region to study at U.S. universities, but we must understand that filling the large gaps in our universities is the work of a generation.

As for government, it should immediately foster a dramatic expansion of fellowships for graduate students to study Arabic, Persian and Turkish. And the government ought to provide grants to universities to fund undergraduate education in Islam. These investments would be a drop in the bucket of the federal budget and would bring huge rewards.

Major foundations can play their role, too, by, for example, creating mid-career fellowships for senior faculty in the social sciences and humanities to obtain new competencies in the study of the Islamic world. They could also use their financial leverage to endow new chairs in the study of the wider Middle East.

Dramatically increasing opportunities for the study of Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Islam in our universities is the right thing to do, to advance the cause of learning and America's interest in training people who can contribute to the spread of liberty abroad. We owe it to our universities to demand that they live up to their responsibility.

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