The Turkic Languages: a Guidebook to Eurasia?

Kağan Arik

More than 50 geoglyphs were recently discovered in northern Kazakhstan, consisting of geometric shapes, which were created by stacking stones, or by sculpting the ground, and ranging from 90 to 400 meters in size. Archeologists from Kostanay University, Kazakhstan, and Vilnius University, Lithuania, are examining the symbols using ground-penetrating radar, aerial photography, and carbon dating. Remnants of ancient structures and fireplaces suggest that they were the locations of ritual activities. By whom these were built, and for what purpose, remain mysteries for now.

After the discovery of the Tarim Basin “mummies”, and the Siberian Warrior Queen tomb, this recent discovery is yet another installment in the ever-expanding field of Ancient Eurasian archeology. In the past two decades, human geneticists and linguists have been pointing to Central Eurasia as one of the major nodes of anatomically modern humans’ development and global dispersion. Indeed, geneticists opine that some of the major chromosomal haplogroups of Europe, Asia, and even the Americas, initially appeared in Central Eurasia, specifically in an area now comprised within the borders of modern Kazakhstan. Linguists have similarly declared that language families as diverse as Indo-European, Dravidian, Uralic, Altaic, and Sino-Tibetan may have originated in Central Eurasia. Much was published recently regarding the phylogenetic connection between the Yeniseian languages of Siberia and the Na-Dené language family of North America.

This vast area, which may be called Inner Asia, or Central Eurasia, has played an important role in the human heritage for tens of millennia. Though in terms of archeological, linguistic, or anthropological research, only the tip of the iceberg was visible until recently, the geopolitical developments of the past two decades do appear to have opened the door for further investigation. While understanding the role of Central Eurasia in the human venture may progressively become more widespread, those who have been involved in the study of Turkic languages and cultures have had more reason to come to terms with the importance of this area, perhaps well before it was in the limelight. Indeed, when one sets off to explore the ancestry of the Turkic languages, the travel narrative usually begins not so far from where the aforementioned geoglyphs were discovered.

Again not so far from where this discovery was made, in the plains of what is now North East Mongolia, by the Orkhon River where a young Temüjin went fishing five centuries later, sits the 8th century funerary inscription for Prince Köl Tigin of the Kök Türk Ashina imperial clan, commissioned by his elder brother Bilge Kaghan, and composed in the Old Turkic language. It begins with a rather pithy summation of the origins of humankind: “Üze kök tängri, asra yağış yir kilindukda, ekin ara kişi oğlı kilinzīs”, “When the blue sky above and the dark earth below were created, between the two of them was created the child of the human being” (or, the “son of man”, as one might hear more commonly in the gendered English language). Far more detailed and colorful narratives also exist, but they are to be found mostly in the vast body of oral epic poetry that also originates in that same region, rather than in these sober, laconic inscriptions.

Regardless of who they were and whence they came, a certain portion of these “children of human beings” ended up speaking what we now call Turkic languages. Various Turkologists (such as Karl Menges or Nicholas Poppe) have filed this sprawling family of at least 35 related modern languages under several geographical groupings, such as Southwestern, Southeastern, Northwestern, Northeastern, or Central. A significant portion of linguists (the “Altaicists”), also have posited a genetic relationship between these Turkic languages, and other language groupings, such as Mongolic, Manchu-Tungus, Koreanic, and Japanic. Linguists such as Roy Andrew Miller have provided compelling arguments in favor of this Altaic family, which contains languages that display noticeable typological similarities. Other linguists who focus more on language interaction than on genealogy have found it more interesting to examine the exchanges and mutual influencing which occurred between these Turkic languages, and other neighboring languages that belong to families such as Indo-European, Semitic, or Sino-Tibetan.
While the degree of family relationship between the Turkic language family and other language families will no doubt continue to animate the conversations of linguists for some time, the Turkic language family itself presents numerous opportunities for linguistic investigation. The family is distributed quite consistently over the entire expanse of the Eurasian landmass. In far Northwestern Asia, practically bordering the Bering Strait, the Sakha (a.k.a. Yakut) tell tales of their nomadic reindeer-herding ancestors in their Turkic Sakha language. Six thousand miles away, in the far Southwest of Eurasia, in Moldova, the Gagauz speak their Turkic Gagauz language, while tending their vineyards and brandy stills. Interestingly, both of these populations are Orthodox Christian, though some of the Sakha have returned to Shamanism (Tengriism), declaring it as an official religion of their republic. In between these two extreme points lie Turkic languages such as Turkish, Azerbaijani, Tatar, Kazak, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Uyghur, Tuvan, and many more. The populations are as diverse as almost any population on Earth, as are their lifestyles and environments, and their languages are not even necessarily fully mutually intelligible at first glance. Closer examination reveals that they all consist of a Turkic base (though sometimes including a non-Turkic substratum), organically blended with mostly lexical (sometimes also phonological, and occasionally syntactic) elements from other languages, resulting in these contemporary vernaculars, which are now used by over 200 million people.

The Southwestern Turkic group, which includes Turkish, Azeri, Turkmen, and the above-mentioned Gagauz, has the highest number of speakers. Turkish alone accounts for some 75 million of these, and is thus the most widely spoken Turkic language, as well as the most widely studied. The Southeastern Turkic group includes Uzbek and Uyghur, spoken by over 35 million people. Volga Tatar and Bashkir, both in the Northwestern branch (which also includes the language of the Judaic Karaim), total over 10 million speakers. The majority of these languages contain varying amounts of a common Perso-Arabic vocabulary associated with elements of Islamic civilization, reflecting the heritages of Islamicate literary languages such as Ottoman Turkish, Chagatai, and Kyrgyz. Süleyman the Magnificent, Babur, Timur, or Togtamush Khan would have written in one these languages, as would have Ulughbek, inventor of the astronomical observatory, or his compatriot Alisher Navoi, the poet whom the Uzbekhs celebrate above all others, while they also revere the medieval Islamic philosophers Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Al-Biruni as their illustrious forebears from a bygone Golden Age, regardless of linguistic affiliation.

Kazakh and its other Central Turkic relatives Kyrgyz, Karakalpak and Noghai have over 15 million speakers. The bards and epic poets of the Kazakh steppe and the Khan Tengri Mountains sang (and still sing) their heroic epics, such as Manas and Alpamys, for days and nights on end, in these highly alliterative tongues which are equally comfortable expressing the impermanence of the world as seen by a Sufi dervish, or the song of bravery of an iron-clad mounted steppe warrior. The Northeastern branch, including languages such as Altai, Tuvan, and Khakas, stands somewhat apart, and conserves many features of the ancient Turkic languages. It distinguishes itself from the other branches of Turkic languages by its near-total absence of loanwords from Arabic or Persian. The vocabulary associated with ancestral Turkic Tengriism and shamanism is alive and well in these Siberian languages, and sits beside the Sanskrit and Tibetan vocabulary associated with Buddhism. Meanwhile, the international lexicon associated with modernity has now entered all of these languages, via
French, English, Italian and German in the case of Turkish, or via Russian in the case of most of the Turkic languages of the former Soviet Union.

The Turkic language family as a whole displays certain fundamental characteristics that often contrast with those of neighboring languages, and this often is the case despite extended linguistic contact. Besides their somewhat flexible SOV syntax, Turkic languages are highly agglutinative (with right-branching suffixes), postpositional, completely ungendered, display vowel harmony, do not use relative clauses, do not have a verb “to have”, do not use articles, and make extensive use of evidentiality. For the nonlinguist, this means that all vocabulary items have the same gender, that is to say, none, that the verb always comes at the end and contains all the information about who did what in what manner and when, and also lets your listener know whether you saw it happen or not, whether you heard about it, and if so, whether your source was reliable or not, and if so, to what extent. Vowel harmony has an impact on how you breathe, and the lack of relative clauses means that the description of something tends to precede the thing itself in any given narrative. Agglutination means that you can create single words that convey an amount of information that would require a whole sentence in a non-agglutinative language. For example, it is theoretically possible to say: “Are you one of those whom we were not able to Americanize?” in a single word, in the Turkish language (of course, it is a rather long word). As an aside, we see that the Ottoman and Seljuq ancestors of the Turks of Turkey were avid students of foreign languages, particularly Persian and Arabic, especially when it came to composing poetry!

The Turkic languages reflect, among other processes, a process of migration of peoples across the Eurasian continent. This process of migration is evidenced on the one hand by the non-Turkic loanwords gleaned en route. Turkish, for example, contains some remaining words of Chinese, Sanskrit and Mongolian origin, in addition to the Arabic, Persian, Greek, Armenian, South Slavic, Italian, Spanish, French, English and German loanwords which are more familiar to the student of Modern Turkish and/or Ottoman Turkish. On the other hand, many of the above-mentioned languages have loanwords from a Turkic language.

Given that language and culture are intimately related, studying the Turkic languages, and the processes that have shaped their evolution, could help elucidate some of the more mysterious areas of the history of Eurasia. In a sense, by virtue of its wide East to West and North to South dispersion, and by virtue of its interactions with virtually all other language families in Eurasia, the Turkic language family may contain evidence of certain linguistic and cultural links between areas of Eurasia that would otherwise seem disparate and remote from each other. While we may never know who fashioned the geoglyphs recently discovered in Kazakhstan, we are now fully equipped to dig deeper into the linguistic substrate of the Turkic languages.

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**Dear Friends and Colleagues,**

I am pleased to greet you as the Center’s new Director. My term began in July after five years of able leadership by Professor Fred Donner. This is an exciting time for CMES, and I would like to share some of our latest achievements and initiatives.

We are proud to announce that CMES has been awarded Title VI National Resource Center (NRC) and Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) grants for 2014-2018. This funding is essential for our continued growth and ongoing improvement. Title VI funds will ensure that the University of Chicago remains a national leader in the teaching of Middle Eastern languages, providing direct support for Armenian, Hebrew, Persian, Turkish and Uzbek. Title VI funds will also support our ambitious academic and outreach programming.

The CMES MA program is thriving, averaging 25 new students in recent years. In addition, CMES now offers a new ancient track MA that draws on the University’s singular strengths in the study of the ancient Near East. MA program graduates continue to find success in a variety of fields. Recent graduates are currently pursuing Ph.D.s at some of the nation’s top universities, while others are active in private, non-profit, and government sectors.

There are many new opportunities to stay in touch with CMES through social media. Follow us on Facebook or Twitter and reconnect with our current students as alumni career mentors. We look forward to hearing from you!
CMES MA Program Continues to Grow, Offers MA degree in Ancient and Modern Middle Eastern Studies

Paul Walker and Alexander Barna

The Center’s Master of Arts program continues to thrive and in recent years expand, reaching now more than fifty-five students, divided into two cohorts of first and second years. In addition to an MA degree in modern Middle Eastern Studies, the program now offers an ancient track MA. Prospective students were able to apply directly to the ancient track this year, and we anticipate that the number of students in the program will grow significantly in 2015-16.

Modern track students concentrate on living languages of the Middle East – Arabic, Armenian, modern Hebrew, Persian, Turkish, or the Turkic languages of Central Asia – whereas those in the ancient track are required to master ancient Middle Eastern languages like Akkadian, Biblical Hebrew, or Egyptian. Areas of primary interest likewise divide into the ancient pre-Islamic Middle East versus any period from the rise of Islam to the present, including topics that address contemporary political and social issues. Those focused on the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries form about two-thirds of the modern Middle East group.

The elite status of the MA program has earned it an excellent reputation both within the University of Chicago community and outside, and it increasingly attracts applications from all over the world. Among the current group of first-years are students from Japan, Russia, Poland, Armenia, Switzerland, Lebanon, Norway, Pakistan, and the UK. Another key marker of success is that nearly all current second-year students are now supported with full-tuition Divisional scholarships as a result of an excellent academic record. Eight students also hold Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) fellowships funded by the US Department of Education. For the 2015-16 academic year, the Center will offer the possibility of a dual degree program in which undergraduates in the College can earn a four year BA in a departmental discipline and add an MA in Middle Eastern Studies after a fifth year.

The contributions the Center’s students make to the intellectual life of the University are too numerous to mention, but a few examples are worth noting. The principal student organization, the Middle Eastern Studies Students’ Association (MESSA) annually maintains and supports a variety of co-curricular programs and public events. In the autumn of 2011, MESSA began publishing a quarterly journal titled Lights. Now in its fourth year, each issue of Lights features academic articles and book reviews composed exclusively by graduate students; the lead article is typically an MA thesis of special note from the previous year. Lights has already expanded beyond Chicago and regularly receives submissions from graduate students at other universities. It has also garnered attention from established scholars. As background for his PBS program, “Finding Your Roots,” Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. cited a Lights article by Emily Silkaitis (MA 2013). Yet another indication of superior accomplishment by the MA students is the frequency with which they have had their work accepted for presentation at national scholarly meetings of the Middle East Studies Association, the American Oriental Society, and other academic organizations. Many MA students also present papers at the annual Middle East History and Theory conference held at the University of Chicago.

As the Center expands its academic programs to include a wider range of specialties, fields, and areas of interest, the Center’s Fazlur Rahman Common Room continues to be a vital social and intellectual space where novel and provocative thoughts about the Middle East – and an incredible variety of other topics – are regularly put forward and discussed. It not only serves as the hub of student life but also fosters a unique brand of interdisciplinary collegiality among our students, regular faculty, and visiting professors and researchers.

Paul Walker is the CMES Deputy Director for Academic Programs; Alexander Barna is the CMES Outreach Coordinator.

Expelled, Enslaved, Exterminated: The Campaign to Ethnically Cleanse the Yazidi Minority of Iraq

Matthew Barber

On August 3rd, 2014, the group calling itself the Islamic State (IS) attacked the Yazidi homeland of Sinjar in northwestern Iraq, displacing several hundred thousand people (almost the entire population of Sinjar), killing many, and abducting several thousand women and girls.

Those fleeing the violence streamed into Kurdistan Province, clogging the roads of the Dohuk governorate with endless convoys of vehicles exceeding their capacities for passengers. The backs of small trucks were crammed with families packed in like livestock and each passenger car had several people squeezed into its trunk, legs hanging out.

As I visited sites receiving the displaced throughout the governorate, I began to piece together several themes from the survivor accounts. The first was that Yazidis felt betrayed and abandoned by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). No one had helped them escape the mountain safely. When the attack first occurred, the Kurdish Peshmerga forces fled Sinjar before the IS jihadists even reached it. Had they stayed to defend for even one day, Yazidis might have evacuated safely and we wouldn’t be facing the kidnapping crisis that now confronts us. After the initial wave of displaced people, many other families remained trapped on top of the mountain for a week or more. Eventually, they began to escape and enter Kurdistan, after Syrian Kurdish fighters punched a conduit through IS forces through which the captives could be rescued. Many people told me, “If it weren’t for the YPG [Syrian Kurdish
militias affiliated with the PKK, we would have died on the mountain. No one else came to help us.”

The second theme was the many reports of family members calling and informing relatives that they were captured and imprisoned or inside besieged villages, and had been told that they would be killed if they did not convert to Islam within a given time period. I obtained the phone numbers for some of these families and began to check daily on their status, until at one point a large massacre did occur in the village of Kocho and those with whom I had been in contact were presumably killed.

The third pattern that began to emerge fairly early was that many families were claiming that their female members had been kidnapped and carried off. In some cases, even men and entire families were abducted. A traumatized woman received a call from a friend who said that she was calling from inside a truck full of women being carried to an unknown location. A man told me that his daughter and her husband, and their five children, had all been snatched up. She had been able to call and inform him of their kidnapping, but he lost contact thereafter. Other kidnapped women kept their cellphones hidden and maintained contact with their families for long periods.

In time, I began working with others on the kidnapping problem and a clearer picture emerged. Many women reported that they were being used sexually by IS fighters. Some that were rescued reported that they had been “acquired” by a fighter who placed them in his home, told them that they were his property as spoils of war, but not to worry because they would have the same roles as “his women.” Among the duties expected of the new “concubines” were cooking, cleaning, and providing sex when requested.

Initially, jihadist voices online that support IS denied that Yazidi women were being targeted by IS for enslavement as concubines. Those of us that were reporting on this problem were accused of lying to malign IS. But around two months later, IS themselves released a manifesto fully disclosing the slavery revival project. The article, entitled “The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour,” in the 4th issue of IS’ English-language publication Dabiq, proudly announced that slavery is a spiritually advantageous institution, as it helps men maintain sexual purity by providing them with permissible sexual alternatives to their wives. In the absence of the concubine option—so goes the logic—men will be tempted to fall into sin by sleeping with their hired maids or other women.

IS also explained that they were targeting the Yazidi community not as kuffar (infidels), but as mushrikeen (polytheists). Though IS expelled Mosul’s entire Christian community in July, dispossessing them of all that they owned, they didn’t massacre them or conduct a widespread female enslavement project. IS’ approach to Yazidis has been different. They believe that as a non Ahl al-Kitaab (“people of the book”) minority, Yazidis should not exist in “Muslim lands.” They went so far as to say that God will judge Muslims for having allowed Yazidis to exist for this long.

In the cases where entire families have been captured, the pattern is that men are offered the choice to convert or be killed. Men who agree to convert are kept with their families but not released. A program to force “converted” Yazidis to study the Qur’an and learn to perform Islamic prayers is being conducted, to ensure the sincerity of the conversion. Women whose husbands refuse to convert have often been taken as slaves rather than executed.

Forms of economic slavery and human trafficking persist in our time, but are less visible than the slavery of the past. IS, however, seeks to resurrect formalized slavery as a public institution and embed it into the social framework they are constructing. They base their slavery project on their interpretation of early Islamic slavery norms. For IS, the slavery program is linked to their program of forced conversions, as they have stated that taking slaves is an effective way of bringing people into Islam.

Many have suggested that IS’ theology and conduct are very new, with no connection to historical Islamic practices. This may be true for a number of issues, but it should be noted that the Yazidi minority was similarly targeted by the Ottomans during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, where the community experienced multiple instances of pogrom-like violence. The Yazidis were a thorn in the side of the Ottoman authorities due to their practice of raiding caravans that passed by Sinjar. Military operations against them, however, were still justified on the basis of their designation as “heretics” or “polytheists,” and massacres, forced conversion, and forced prayer-learning all occurred, sanctioned by fatwas from Ottoman muftis. Enslavement of female Yazidis was also not uncommon, and the women and girls were sold in such places as the Mardin slave market.

Ultimately, the picture for Yazidis under the Ottomans was sometimes not so dissimilar from their experience at the hands of IS today, though the scale of IS destruction and enslavement has been more comprehensive.

Following the summer’s climax of anti-Yazidi violence, I began working with a small team of Yazidis who were attempting to respond to the enslavement crisis. Calling ourselves the Sinjar Crisis Management Team, we have endeavored to develop as clear a picture as possible of the numbers, locations, and status of kidnapped Yazidis. We believe that between 6,000 and 7,000 Yazidis have been abducted and imprisoned. Our goal has been to promote public awareness of this situation and find a means of rescue for at least a large number of these.

Responding to this catastrophe, Yazidi leaders also assembled an official delegation to Washington, consisting
of members of the Yazidi High Spiritual Council (the clerical leadership of the Yazidi faith), tribal leaders from Sinjar, and others. This marks the first time in history that Yazidi religious figures have visited the US. Since we had already been working with Washington officials for several months, the delegation joined with Sinjar Crisis Management and was largely dependent on us to organize the week of meetings. We also benefited greatly from the assistance of State Department officials who helped make higher-level meetings possible.

The intensive portion of our meetings spanned the week of October 26. With the delegates from Germany and Iraq and participating members of Sinjar Crisis Management Team, our greater delegation consisted of about 14 members. The purpose of the delegation was to push for several forms of action, including:

1) Appropriate use of the airstrike program that President Obama was already conducting to target specific locations that can enable Yazidi fighters to perform rescue operations for the kidnapped Yazidis. (The only thing that stopped IS from overrunning the rest of Kurdistan Province last summer was the President’s ordering of the airstrikes. IS had already advanced to within about 15 miles of the city of Dohuk, my location.

2) Immediate assistance for about 3,000 Yazidis of Sinjar who volunteered to pick up weapons and successfully defended parts of the mountain range against IS advances—arming them should be seen as part of an effective counterterrorism strategy, as is the aid given to Syrian Kurds.

3) Humanitarian aid for the displaced Yazidis facing a difficult winter in the Dohuk governorate.

4) Asylum for Yazidis who wish to relocate to Western countries. (This was the sole agenda item with which I did not agree. I believe that retaking Sinjar and making it safe is the only way to ensure a future for the Yazidi people and that mass migration is not a practical or effective solution to the problem. Yazidi leaders seem unanimous in their insistence on pushing this point, however.)

5) A long-term security solution for Yazidis in Sinjar and the Nineveh Plain. This objective involves a request for US or international oversight to empower Yazidis to self-protect in their local areas, since the Iraqi government and KRG have both failed to provide them with protection.

In our meetings with State Department officials, we received a fairly clear message that an airstrike program to relocate internally displaced Iraqi Yazidis would not be on the table. However, traction seemed to be gained on the issue of self-protection as we were told that the forming of a Yazidi component within a new Iraqi national guard system was being considered favorably. In each meeting, genuine sympathy was offered to the delegation regarding the kidnapping and enslavement problem, but only vague statements regarding help were made. That no specific proposals for action to rescue kidnapped women were given is understandable considering the difficulty of the problem.

Throughout our many meetings in Washington, one theme that I saw emerge was the fact that US officials and others seemed unaware of the Yazidi distrust of the KRG that this summer’s events have exacerbated. Though they had the high-ground advantage and superior numbers, the Peshmerga fled the IS attack on Sinjar without a fight. As one member of our delegation put it in several meetings, “They abandoned us without firing a single bullet.” Kurds are important US allies for whom a great level of sympathy exists following their lengthy persecution at the hands of Saddam Hussein. This, combined with the fact that the KRG is an important regional actor in combating militant extremism, blinds some to the reality of the KRG’s own problematic approach to minority populations, including the prioritizing of the defense of oil-rich areas over the homelands of endangered peoples who lack the means to defend themselves. In our meetings, we endeavored to add nuance to the perceptions that officials have of this issue.

Our most important meeting occurred at the White House, where we met with Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes, one of President Obama’s closest Middle East advisers. Being received by the White House imparted a sense of significance to the delegation’s agenda, and though we did not know if it would translate into any tangible action, it demonstrated to the Yazidi community that their voices were being heard and taken seriously, which the White House emphasized in a statement issued afterwards.

In mid-December we saw some fruit born of our labors, as Kurdish Peshmerga launched an offensive to retake Sinjar from IS. Conducted in coordination with US airpower, this operation reflected exactly what we had been requesting—though sadly it was performed too late to save most of the abducted women and girls who had been moved deeper into Iraq and Syria by IS.

Of the thousands abducted, several hundred girls have escaped or been freed by Arabs inside IS areas. I believe a slow trickle of escapees will continue to make their way back to the Kurdistan Province, even into the distant future. It is essential that psychosocial services be in place to respond to the needs of those who survive this trauma. Also, many questions remain about the possibility for Yazidis to return home to Sinjar, where IS has deliberately destroyed many homes and sabotaged infrastructure, and where no guarantee exists that the KRG will not abandon the Yazidis again, should future attacks occur. For now, Yazidis are contending with the greatest crisis in their history—one that has jeopardized their existence as a Near Eastern religious minority. Their future remains less certain than ever.

Matthew Barber is a second-year Ph.D. student in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations. In the summer of 2014, Matthew was conducting research in northern Iraq when IS attacked Sinjar, a primary homeland of the Yazidi religious minority.
Egypt’s Political 360
Colette Salemi

In the aftermath of the most recent post-revolutionary political transition in Egypt and the 2014 elections that ushered former military general Abdel Fatah al-Sisi into the presidency, there is little reason to feel optimistic about the country’s current trajectory. The new administration’s symbolic demonstrations of authority, the regime-controlled media’s Orwellian “war on terror” fear campaign, intensified state efforts to monitor social media, the arbitrary detention and disproportionate sentencing of journalists and activists, the government’s “morality” crusade against Egypt’s underground homosexual community, the banning of political groups like the 6th of April movement, and the national anti-Brotherhood witch-hunt all signal the armed forces’ return as the dominant political force and the abandonment of liberal ideals.

Moreover, the Egyptian government’s apparent lack of interest in pursuing much-needed reforms suggests that the very issues that fueled the January 25th 2011 movement will not be addressed in the near future. President Sisi’s 2014 scolding of the national media for covering a child abuse case in a local orphanage instead of focusing all media energies on “dangers to national security” suggests where the new administration’s priorities lie. The newly launched national project to build a small bypass in the Suez Canal, which underwent no prior engineering or environmental review yet is somehow expected to triple the canal’s revenue, looks far more like a political ploy than an actual economic strategy. And recent predictions that Mubarak-era politicians will dominate the upcoming Parliamentary elections are further reason to worry that Egypt’s new government will give limited attention to the poor and marginalized.

Other evidence that the new government is scaling back public assistance programs includes the gradual process of eliminating state subsidies on fuel, bread, and electricity. The first cut, effective July of 2014, lowered the fuel subsidy, resulting in rising prices of diesel, 80-octane gasoline, natural gas for vehicles, and consequently all transported goods. The price increases in commodities, while not radical, are significant, and for the millions of Egyptians living near or below the national poverty line, making ends meet has become increasingly difficult. However, there have been no indications of state efforts to support those hit the hardest or to promote private sector wage increases or worker protection.

Unlike the time period between January 2011 and July 2013, when urban-based Egyptians readily mobilized to demand voice political grievances, the overwhelming majority of citizens have more recently begun submitting to new government measures and suffering in silence. Aside from an extremely brief taxi driver sit-in to protest rising fuel prices, small and scattered Friday pro-Brotherhood demonstrations, several student movements that have been barely visible in the broader metropolitan fold, the militant activity of ISIS affiliate Ansar Beit al Maqdis in Sinai, and a short public outcry against the court’s acquittal of former president Hosni Mubarak in November 2014, large-scale collective efforts to oppose the new regime’s policies have been virtually nonexistent.

It remains unclear precisely why political quiescence is suddenly so widespread. Undoubtedly, the coercive power of the state and the fear of imprisonment and torture have persuaded some to stay silent. But intimidation is not the only mechanism behind the lack of a dissenting civic response; despite its blatantly authoritarian nature and the hardship of the recent austerity measures, a surprising number of citizens actively support the new regime. It is clear that some Egyptians have returned to the old but well-tested mantra that security, not democratic freedoms or social reforms, is the country’s top priority, while others appear to be giving Sisi a sort of grace period. Such Egyptians are weary of political disorder and less willing to run the risks of further destabilizing the country.

There is also reason to suspect that many continue to support the new regime out of an unwillingness to admit that Sisi, the leader who so many apparently embraced as Egypt’s savior, has orchestrated a reversion to the pre-2011 political and economic status quo. Public opinion on the large-scale state violence that ensued after the forced abdication of former president Mohammed Morsi in July 2013 is an instructive example, as many in Cairo still accept the regime’s narrative of the 2013 Rabaa massacre of Morsi supporters. The Sisi government depicted the crackdown as a legitimate and necessary effort to purge the country of a dangerous terrorist threat, yet investigations conducted by
independent journalists as well as Human Rights Watch challenge this narrative and tell a much different story. They claim that state forces made little or no effort to limit Rabaa casualties and opened live fire on protestors, the overwhelming majority of whom were unarmed. While the evidence provided by independent sources appears more convincing and less rhetorical to the outside observer, many nationals continue to promote the government’s account and denounce alternative perspectives as foreign conspiracies to “undermine” Egypt.

While the parroting of the troubling national rhetoric of an absolutist state, at a time hardly distant from the national movement to dismantle the former dictatorship of Mubarak, may seem unexpected, it is likely a defense mechanism and not a symptom of public amnesia. Indeed, it is far easier to accept the state’s actions and stances, despite how illogical or problematic they may be, than to come to terms with many rather ugly realities, such as in the case of Rabaa. It is additionally difficult to envision another revolution, which could leave the country in a worse state than it is in now. Yet the public acceptance of the new government is leading the country back to the very same state of political corruption, public marginalization, and endemic inequality that motivated the 2011 uprisings to begin with.

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Spring 2015 Lectures

April 3
Lara Deeb (Scripps College)
“Anthropology’s Politics: Discipline and Region through the Lens of the Middle East”

April 10
David Nirenberg (University of Chicago)

April 24
Rasheed El-Enany (University of Exeter)
2nd Annual Farouk Mustafa Memorial Lecture

May 15
Diana Allan (Cornell University)
“This Is Not a Politics: Solidarity and Subterfuge in the Palestinian Camps in Lebanon”

Spring 2015 Conferences

April 3-4
Shi’i Studies Symposium: “Practical Authority of the Imams and their Representatives”

April 11
Gulf Cooperation Council Conference

May 1-2
30th Annual Middle East History and Theory (MEHAT) Conference

Visit cmes.uchicago.edu for a complete list of activities and events
Center for Middle Eastern Studies Forms Partnership with the Center for Arabic Language and Culture

Alexander Barna

The renewal of CMES’ Title VI National Resource Center funding for 2014-2018 strengthens the Center’s educational outreach program, the Middle East Education Initiative (MEEI). MEEI is CMES’ most active form of civic engagement, and its principal aim is to take knowledge and critical expertise of North Africa, Western Asia, Central Asia, and the wider Islamic world from the University to audiences outside campus. The Center mainly focuses on supporting K-12 teachers and pre-collegiate students who are interested in learning more about these regions. Through either professional development workshops or special programs organized at local schools, the purpose of the MEEI is to engage these audiences directly to produce more informed and globally minded citizens.

CMES does not succeed in its educational outreach mission on its own and works with a variety of local organizations to meet its goals. In particular, its collaboration with the Center for Arabic Language and Culture (CALC) serves as an institutional model for furthering educational outreach about the Middle East and for developing partnerships between research universities and community non-profits.

The uniqueness of CALC can be attributed to its location at Lindblom Math & Science Academy in the West Englewood neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side, to Alan Mather, Lindblom’s innovative principal, and to Tyler Blackwell, CALC’s Executive Director. While Lindblom was undergoing large-scale renovations from 2003-05, Mather was reimagining Lindblom’s world languages and cultures program. Motivated by the positive impact world language education could have on the West Englewood neighborhood and understanding Asia’s rising geopolitical significance, Mather decided that Lindblom would offer only Arabic and Mandarin rather than the usual slate of languages. This bold experiment has proven to be a remarkable success, and thousands of young Chicagoans at Lindblom are learning these critical global languages. Lindblom has Chicago’s largest Mandarin program and the nation’s largest non-heritage, for-credit Arabic program. Opportunities for cross-cultural engagement and exposure are further enhanced at Lindblom because its student body is 97% minority and approximately 80% low-income. Many Lindblom students are bilingual or heritage Spanish speakers and are now adding Arabic or Mandarin to the mix.

To help grow and sustain Lindblom’s and Chicago Public Schools’ (CPS) Arabic world language program, Mather worked with a variety of community stakeholders, including CMES, to lay the groundwork for CALC. Mather successfully recruited Tyler Blackwell to leave the U.S. Department of State and accept the challenging task of being CALC’s founding Executive Director. CALC’s mission is to coordinate the expansion of Arabic language offerings within CPS and regionally, to create professional development opportunities for both world language and social studies educators to improve their teaching of Arabic and the Arab cultures of North Africa, the Middle East, and the diaspora, and to develop programs for the general public to increase their knowledge and awareness of the cultural unity and diversity across the Arab world.

Blackwell’s status as a CMES alum makes the CMES-CALC partnership particularly special. Under his leadership, and often in collaboration with CMES, CALC has become one of Chicago’s strongest advocates for Arabic language and Arab cultural programs. The unique learning experiences for K-12 students and teachers that Blackwell has developed address problems such as negative stereotypes and misunderstandings and at the same time promote open-mindedness, intellectual curiosity, tolerance, and acceptance. In an economic environment that is often difficult for non-profits, Blackwell has leveraged CALC’s limited resources to build exciting partnerships across the civic landscape not only with the University of Chicago, but also with the Mayor of Chicago’s Office, Northwestern University, Global Nomads, Global Voices, the Oriental Institute, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Illinois Humanities Council, Chicago Public Schools Office of Language and Cultural Education, WorldChicago, and the Qatar Foundation. In recognition of CALC’s work, the Chicago Community Trust has selected it to be part of the 2015 cohort of the SMART Growth program.

CALC’s new initiatives include a citywide Arabic Debate Tournament designed to bring together Arabic students in CPS and suburban school districts. This tournament is a follow-up to the success of CALC’s partnership with the QatarDebate Center, which sent four Lindblom students to Doha, Qatar in March 2014 to compete in the International Schools Arabic Debate Championship. The team from Lindblom, coached and guided by Blackwell, debated against native Arabic speakers and were exemplary student-ambassadors representing both Chicago and the United States. The Lindblom team’s story was covered on the front page of the Chicago Tribune and ABC
The Farouk Friday Lectures
Kay Heikkinen

Al-salaamu ‘alaikum! Wa-‘alaikum al-salaamu wa-rahmatu llaahi wa-barakaatu! Ah yes, it was 11:30 on a Monday or a Wednesday or a Friday, and Farouk’s voice was booming down the hall of the second floor of Pick from his classroom (218), his students answering as they had been taught, and his class was under way. High Intermediate Modern Standard Arabic, specifically, or simply third-year Arabic for most students: the class Farouk had developed and honed over his thirty-odd years of teaching and building the Arabic program at the University of Chicago, and one through which many of the CMES master’s students passed. They spent five or six hours a week with Farouk, reading recent news articles aloud (with the case endings, of course), and translating them; puzzling over the nuances of The Connectors; putting up with his bad jokes and bellowed exhortations, when he felt the class energy flagging; fielding his puzzlement, denunciations and attraction to new technology (and being embarrassed, occasionally, when they had ignored his warning not to use it for translation); and discussing life and eternal questions with him, in response to his demands for Arabic conversation. He claimed not to care about students, but no one who had passed through the class really believed that; and privately he referred to teaching and adults within the next calendar year. CMES congratulates Tyler on his accomplishments and is proud that he is a member of our alumni community. We look forward to working with CALC on future projects that continue to expose Chicago to the richness and variety of the Arabic language and Arab culture.

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Channel 7 News, and it led to a meeting with Mayor Rahm Emanuel who offered his unreserved praise for the team’s dedication and accomplishments as well as CPS’ Arabic programs in general. CALC is currently in the process of developing international study abroad opportunities for CPS Arabic students, and hopes to begin offering Arabic courses for children as “Vitamin T” (“and it works for tadriss, too!”), believing it had brought him back to life after he returned, despairing, from a long summer in Egypt in 2011. His happiest evenings started with reflections on a class that had gone especially well, when he sensed that his students were really learning. His spirit still remains in Pick 218, where he seems to watch new students from the bronze plaque placed there in his honor.

Of course Farouk (Abdel Wahab) Mustafa was far more than his third-year class, even within the university. He worked also with graduate students, in “fourth-year Arabic” or Readings in Modern Arabic Literature, and on special projects they brought him, guiding them through obscure medieval texts or initiating them to the skills of literary translation, with all its broad and yet precise demands. He animated the Nadwa ‘arabiyya, the Arabic Circle he had founded years before, demanding real communication in good fushaa, and encouraging students of all levels to attend. In past years he had secured Mellon funding for summer programs, offering up to four levels of Arabic, creating an immersion environment, and symbolizing the program with T-shirts emblazoned with verse of al-Mutanabbi. Earlier still he had developed the University of Chicago’s Arabic program from a single, small section of first year and another of second year to one that allowed students to achieve real mastery of the language, sometimes teaching four or five classes a term as the demand built. Most recently he had overseen the expansion of the program, as sections and language lecturers were added to meet the expanding student demand of the last decade.

Farouk was known far beyond the University of Chicago, as well. He maintained an active literary presence in Cairo, which he visited every summer and where he spent any sabbatical time, keeping up with the latest literary and cultural events through the newspapers he scanned every night. He was also known (as Farouk Abdel Wahab) for his translations from Arabic to English, most notably of Al-Zayni Barakat by Gamal al-Ghitani, as well as translations of two other novels by al-Ghitani, of three each by Ibrahim Abir Maguid and Hala al-Badry, and of one each by Bahaa Taher, Khairy Shalaby and Alaa al-Aswany (not to mention his translations of a number of modern Egyptian plays, his edition of the complete theatrical works of Mikhail Roman, his book-length study of modern Egyptian drama published in Arabic, and his translation into Arabic of Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure and of Pirandello’s Henry IV).

The messages that poured into the university and the center following Farouk’s death in April of 2013 were overwhelming in their number, their eloquence, their generosity, and the number of places from which they came. With all that can be said about Farouk, however, for many CMES students and associates the most enduring memory of him may well be his constant attendance at the CMES Friday lectures, where he would always sit close to the front, and usually be the first person to raise his hand with a question—especially if he had not been pleased by what he heard, and intended to nail the speaker with a pertinent observation. That’s why, when the time came to create some enduring memorial to Farouk’s legacy at the center, it seemed natural to think of the Friday lecture series (someone remarked that we really ought to have the Farouk Memorial Question, but that habit of his seemed impossible to
replicate). Thus, with contributions from all who sent their money and their good wishes after his death, and from some of Farouk’s own savings, we are able to announce the endowment of the Farouk Mustafa Friday Lecture Series, as well as the creation of one lecture, in modern Arabic literature, specifically in memory of him. That tradition began last year, when Farouk’s friend, colleague and fellow translator Marilyn Booth gave the first lecture honoring him, as the keynote at the MEHAT conference; and it will continue this coming spring with a lecture by Dr. Rasheed el-Enany. Before that, however, we plan to hear many other speakers in discussing many various topics of concern to the Middle East—-with some of us imagining Farouk in the front row, and wondering what his question of the speaker would be.

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CMES is proud of its reputation as a national leader in research, education, and outreach on the Middle East. The MA program in Middle Eastern Studies continues to thrive, posting record enrollments in recent years. The center actively supports interdisciplinary research efforts, including a wide variety of conferences and symposia, to advance knowledge of the region. CMES also remains committed to an ambitious and innovative program of educational outreach. In order to maintain our level of excellence in existing activities and future ventures, we depend on the generosity of friends and alumni who value what we do.