

The World Humanities Report

Case Study: Arab Studies Institute

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Case Study: Arab Studies Institute

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The Arab Studies Institute (ASI), founded in 1992, advances understanding and research of the Arab region in the world. They focus on intraregional relations and the region's links to other countries and peoples. On the World Humanities Report survey, they explained, "Our work is critical in that it creates a space for the investigation, discussion, and publication of research that exists outside of contemporary Orientalist interests. Our work generally critiques the militaristic lens through which the region is viewed."¹

From their offices in the United States and Lebanon, the ASI established five subsidiaries: *Arab Studies Journal*,² *Jadaliyya*,³ Quilting Point,⁴ Forum on Arab and Muslim Affairs,⁵ and Tadween Publishing.⁶

Arab Studies Journal (ASJ), an English-language, peer-reviewed journal, was first published in 1993. It focuses on the regions, peoples, and communities of the Middle East and North Africa. The journal publishes articles on relevant materials, histories, and events starting in the seventh century, a historical moment of the rise of Islam.

The Forum on Arab and Muslim Affairs is ASI's main research arm. The associated Knowledge Production Project provides researchers with access to six databases of mostly English-language, peer-reviewed articles, writings, and audiovisual material. Their catalogued works date back to 1979 and include films, documentaries, books, and articles. Their website offers access to data visualization tools for less technologically savvy researchers, allowing for graphical presentation of the collected information.

Tadween Publishing—*tadween* means "to document" in Arabic—strives to make knowledge more inclusive. Their support of nontraditional scholarship involves rigorous peer-review processes and efforts to engage digital tools and technologies for more innovative production and consumption practices. In

¹ *Arab Studies Journal*, responses to the Humanities Initiative online survey by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences / World Humanities Report, 2020.

² See <https://www.arabstudiesjournal.org/>.

³ See <https://www.jadaliyya.com/>.

⁴ See <http://www.quiltingpoint.com/>.

⁵ See <https://www.arabandmuslimaffairs.org/>.

⁶ See <https://tadweenpublishing.com/>.

addition to producing classroom-friendly texts with Tadween Publishing, ASI is behind a Political Economy Summer Institute and the Lebanon Dissertation Summer Institute, cosponsored by the Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies at the American University of Beirut (AUB). Their mission to reorient education and pedagogy related to the region also includes the Middle East Studies Pedagogy Initiative, a “one-stop-shop for course design on the macro level, lesson planning on the micro level, and for scholarship vis-à-vis specific topics, countries, and disciplines.”⁷

Like most of the work done for the ASI, *Jadaliyya* relies mostly on volunteers. *Jadaliyya* is a magazine that provides open-source critical analyses of knowledge, scholarship, and advocacy in English, Arabic, French, and Turkish. ASI first received funding for *Jadaliyya* in 2011 and early 2012, after twenty years of work. To prevent overreliance on external funding, they continue to impose a strict two-to-one ratio of volunteers to paid staff.

Finally, Quilting Point is a production collective that produces and archives films, documentaries, educational material, and other audiovisual content. Their Gaza in Context project “seeks to upend the ahistorical Israeli narrative of exceptionalizing Gaza and removing it from the larger question of Palestine.”⁸ In addition, Quilting Point produces documentaries about how Arabs are seen as terrorists and about situations of conflicts in the region, such as in Baghdad. *Al-wad’* is a Quilting Point podcast that first aired in 2014 featuring interviews with activists, journalists, and citizens.

Quilting Point draws on an expanding network of regional and international collaborators to produce more locally relevant but globally contextualized knowledge. Their partners in the region include the Asfari Institute for Civil Society at AUB,⁹ a research institute that works on topics of equal citizenship, law, governance, and civil societies; the Syrian Center for Policy,¹⁰ a research center for engaging Syrians in public policy-related dialogue; the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies,¹¹ which researches sectarianism, electoral laws, economics, and trade; and Orient XXI,¹² a research center focused on topics such as history, human rights, feminism, minority groups, and terrorism. ASI works with universities in the region and the United States, including AUB,

⁷ Elizabeth Kassab, “Announcing the Second Issue of the Middle East Studies Pedagogy Initiative (MESPI) Newsletter,” *Jadaliyya*, April 2020, <https://jadaliyya.com/Details/41038>.

⁸ “Gaza in Context,” Quilting Point, <http://www.quiltingpoint.com/gaza-in-context>.

⁹ See <https://www.aub.edu.lb/asfari/Pages/default.aspx>.

¹⁰ See <https://www.scpr-syria.org/>.

¹¹ See <https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/>.

¹² See <https://orientxxi.info/>.

Birzeit University in Palestine, and George Mason University and Georgetown University in the United States.

ASI identifies lack of funding as their main challenge. Although the organization applies for four large grants every year, they remain underfunded. A study shows that funding for academic humanities between 1992 and 2002 was relatively low in comparison to the sciences. By that time, the humanities received only 2.1 percent of academic grants, and many of these awards were targeted toward museums and historical research.¹³ This number is particularly relevant to ASI since it was founded in 1992, when these percentages were low. This problem intersects with another major problem that many organizations face. In the survey, ASI explained that they would like to expand their translating team. The main language of production is currently English, however, reaching a total of 23,000 subscribers around the world. ASI is working to publish and translate more works in Arabic because their work is most relevant to Arabic speakers.

ASI also reported that the COVID-19 pandemic allowed them to publicize their work through virtual webinars and conferences. ASI flags this moment as the “online turn,” during which events that had once garnered dozens of attendees began attracting hundreds of them. The work of ASI shows the variety of knowledge production outlets that researchers and nonprofessionals can engage in and contribute to, spreading more knowledge and allowing for an increase in curiosity in and on the Arab world.

¹³ Harriet Zukerman and Ronald G. Ehrenberg, “Recent Trends in Funding for the Academic Humanities and Their Implications,” *Daedalus* 138, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 124–46.

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