Greetings! We open this newsletter with a joint message, which encapsulates the transitional nature of this year, as I, Esther, balance my time between Middle Eastern Studies (MES) and my duties as Associate Dean in charge of Special Projects, and I, Kristen, assume the positions of Associate Chair and Graduate Studies Advisor, devoting my attention primarily to curricular issues, advising graduate students, and mentoring junior faculty.

As we write, the College of Liberal Arts is struggling with one of the most difficult financial periods in its history, as millions of dollars must be cut from the budget over the next five years. We in MES are confident that we can meet this challenge while preserving and even enhancing the quality of our programs, and can emerge from the lean years successful and strong. We now have four large grants that support our instructional mission. In addition, we continue to seek out new sources of support, and many of our faculty are engaged in massive grant writing efforts. Some of these proposals are for projects involving student research funds that will help us sustain the excellence of our graduate program. We will also teach an increased number of Signature Courses for the School of Undergraduate Studies—these courses start UT students’ academic experience with top faculty teaching intellectually rigorous classes—and our participation will give us an opportunity to attract new students to our programs, and will provide a steady stream of revenue for graduate student and faculty support.

Our biggest curricular development this year will be the adoption of intensive language instruction for all our modern languages, allowing students to reach Intermediate proficiency and fulfill their language requirement in one year. This model has been developed by the Arabic program and has resulted in a phenomenal number of high proficiency scores across the board. The curricular shift will allow us to channel more resources to advanced and specialized language and culture courses that will target majors, honors students, and other highly motivated students, further enhancing the quality and reputation of the programs.

2008–2009 was an excellent recruitment year for MES. Jo Ann Hackett and John Huwsnergard arrived from Harvard, and, together with our own Na’ama Pat-El, are developing programs in Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Hope Fitzgerald returned to her alma mater as Arabic Lecturer. We also hosted many international scholars: two Schusterman Scholars in Israel Studies, Elisha Rosman-Stollman and Eran Zadishe; a Fulbright scholar from Turkey, Songül Ata; five Fulbright Language Teaching Assistants (in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Yoruba); and four visiting scholars in Arabic, Mohamed Abdelslam, Dina Hossni, Dina Naim, and NaHa El-Senousy.

Over the past year we have also increased the number of students in our programs: between the Department and the Center, we now have 158 undergraduate majors and 62 graduate students, which positions us as one of the largest area studies units on campus. In other student news, twenty MES graduate students presented papers at national and international conferences, which is a strong indication of the quality of our student body.

MES’s Arabic Flagship Program has had a productive year as well. This June it inaugurated the Summer Institute, with first-, second-, and third-year classes. We plan to build on the success of this program next summer with a Modern Hebrew Institute and an Advanced Persian Institute.

As we look ahead, we are confident that the instructional models we develop for our languages will draw national interest as institutions of higher education struggle with budget cuts and seek new ways of delivering foreign language instruction. We will continue our rigorous graduate training, and look forward to a new generation of students assuming high-profile academic positions and joining our faculty in leadership roles in their fields.

MES will be moving to the new Liberal Arts Building, which is slated to open in 2013. The building, which will host a number of humanities and social science departments in the College, will create synergies that are expected to bring multi-disciplinary collaboration to new levels, with MES right in the center of the action—where we belong!
The MES community was deeply saddened by the death of Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, Professor Emerita of Comparative Literature and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, on December 2, 2008, after a long illness. Known as “BJ” to friends and family, Mrs. Fernea’s interest in and passion about the Middle East, especially with regard to women’s issues, was clear to anyone who had the opportunity to work with her during her forty-year career as a writer, lecturer, professor, and filmmaker. She served as an energetic, enthusiastic champion of the Middle Eastern Studies program at UT for many decades.

The Fernea’s arrived in Austin in 1966, when Robert assumed the directorship of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES) at the University of Chicago, the couple moved to Cairo, where two of their children were born.

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A graduate of Reed College in Oregon, BJ’s initial exposure to the Middle East came through trial by fire when she accompanied her husband on his doctoral field study to the village of al-Nahra in southern Iraq from 1956 to 1958. In her bestselling ethnographic memoir, Guests of the Sheik: An Ethnography of an Iraqi Village (1965), she described the spheres of the village women, areas where her husband was unable to go. After Robert Fernea obtained his doctorate from the University of Chicago, the couple moved to Cairo, where two of their children were born.

The Fernea’s arrived in Austin in 1966, when Robert assumed the directorship of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES) at the University of Texas. BJ was hired as a Senior Lecturer in 1975 in both the Comparative Literature Program of the English department and the Center for Middle Eastern Studies. She was later promoted to full Professorship in 1990. While BJ retired from teaching in the spring of 1999, she continued to be active as Professor Emerita for the rest of her life. During her long career, BJ was the recipient of numerous grants, awards, and honors, and also served as president of the Middle East Studies Association of North America from 1985 to 1986.

Over the course of her forty years in Austin, BJ authored a number of books, some autobiographical—such as A View of the Nile (1970) and A Street in Manarash (1975)—others more scholarly in nature, including the edited volumes Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak (co-edited with Basima Qattan Bezirgan, 1977), The Arab World: Personal Encounters (1985), and Remembering Childhood in the Middle East (2002). She also co-authored two publications with Robert Fernea: The Making of a Muslim: Aghaie said in his welcoming remarks, “We struggled with the fact that BJ herself would have thought a conference all about her was a silly idea.” Instead of assembling panels to extol the virtues of Fernea’s work, the committee asked panelists to speak about the academic areas in which BJ worked—women and gender, film and popular culture, and literature—and to present original pieces of research. In this way, the conference both reflected BJ’s academic interests and honored her work, while helping to move the scholarship forward.

The structure and overall tone of the conference were somewhat challenging for the organizing committee. As CMES Director Kamran Aghaie said in his welcoming remarks, “We struggled with the fact that BJ herself would have thought a conference all about her was a silly idea.” Instead of assembling panels to extol the virtues of Fernea’s work, the committee asked panelists to speak about the academic areas in which BJ worked—women and gender, film and popular culture, and literature—and to present original pieces of research. In this way, the conference both reflected BJ’s academic interests and honored her work, while helping to move the scholarship forward.

The conference opened with a Cairo-themed panel featuring Fernea’s longtime friend Caroline Williams (College of William & Mary), and a keynote address by Samia Mehrz (American University in Cairo). A joint plenary session with the 6th annual Graduate Comparative Literature Symposium, “Postcolonial Actualities Past and Present,” featured Emily Apter (New York University).

A roundtable comprised of Basima Bezirgan, Annes McCann-Baker, and Robert Fernea closed the conference, and the crowd of over 100 people was invited to offer their own reminiscences of Mrs. Fernea. The Robin Beauchamp and Caroline Williams (College of William & Mary) offered remarks about BJ, and Robert Fernea closed the conference, and the crowd of over 100 people was invited to offer their own reminiscences of Mrs. Fernea. We at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies fondly remember Elizabeth Fernea as a friend and colleague who created a warm, dynamic environment for visiting scholars, fostered an open forum for the discussion of Middle Eastern women’s issues, and helped to forge an international reputation for the University of Texas’s Middle Eastern Studies program.
John: We are both excited about undergraduate teaching. Before I went to Harvard, I taught a lot of undergraduates, and we’re looking forward to getting back to that.

We’re both very happy here already, and we can’t wait to get started. 😊
Hoda Barakat

On War and Literature

On March 10–13, 2009, the University of Texas at Austin hosted Lebanese author Hoda Barakat for a series of events including a public lecture, a roundtable discussion with literary scholars, and visits to language and literature classes. Sponsored in part by the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, the Arabic Flagship Program, the Department of Middle Eastern Studies, the Center for Women’s and Gender Studies, the Department of French and Italian, the Program in Comparative Literature, and the Department of English, this event brought together students and faculty from various disciplines across the university, and generated important discussions about such topics as violence, war, exile, and literature.

Winner of the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature and the prestigious Al-Naïd Award, and with works translated into more than fifteen languages, Barakat is one of the most important Arab authors writing today. Her powerful novels, set during or after the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990), include Ḥiṣār al-dhāb [Stone of Laughter] (1990), Ḥāl dawān [Disciples of Passion] (1993), Ḥarīth al-maṣī [Tiller of Waters] (1998), and Sayyidat al-ḥarb [My Master and My Beloved] (2004), and were all translated by Marilyn Booth. Extending the Lebanese narrative to a postwar era in which the war is clearly still playing itself out within the national psyche, Barakat’s novels are a testimony to the vitality of Arabic literature in a time of great upheaval. She is also the author of Rāsiṣ al-ḥanib [The Stranger’s Letters] (2004), a series of philosophical and highly poetic essays on exile and alienation. Barakat’s most recent work is a one-woman play entitled Viva la dama (2009), which will be performed in Beirut in January 2010.

Addressing a packed auditorium at the Harry Ransom Center and speaking in Arabic—the first time she had been invited to do so at an institution outside the Arab World—with simultaneous English translation, Barakat discussed the transformation of the human condition in times of war. She shared her personal experience with the audience, explaining how it informed and shaped her writing. She also discussed the ways in which she pushed the boundaries of narration by internalizing the war in fiction and interrogating the limits of language and its ability to capture violence, madness, and desire.

There were many questions from the audience, eager to learn more about Barakat’s writing and its trajectory. Asked about her use of the first-person male pronoun throughout her works, Barakat suggested that this strategy allows her to complicate gender perceptions and reveal how entwined are sex, violence, and identity.

Hoda Barakat’s visit was inspiring to the UT community on many levels as it made possible a series of important collaborations with faculty in Middle Eastern Studies. Tarek El-Aris, faculty in Arabic Studies, is currently translating a section from The Stranger’s Letters, which will be included in an anthology on modern Arabic fiction to be published by the Center in honor of Elizabeth Fermia. Furthermore, and following her visit to a Second-Year Arabic class while at UT, Barakat is collaborating with language faculty member Laila Familiar on the adaptation of My Master and My Beloved into an easier Arabic that would be accessible to intermediate language learners. This important project situates Arabic literature at the heart of language acquisition in the U.S. today.
Launching the Arabic Flagship Program, in conjunction with Middle Eastern Studies, launched the first ever Arabic Language Summer Institute on the University of Texas campus. The ten-week program, developed with funding from the Language Flagship Program and the College of Liberal Arts, offered an intensive Arabic language and culture program for beginner, intermediate, and advanced students of Arabic. To fulfill this objective, the Institute combined instruction in standard and colloquial Arabic to provide students with academic credit equivalent to one full year of learning. In addition to Arabic language and content courses, the Summer Institute also provided daily conversation hours, cultural events, a student lounge, a resident advisor to provide tutoring, tuition support, and student housing.

On June 1, the Arabic Flagship Program, was open to anyone ready to plunge into Arabic. It’s worth it!”

Adding Variety to the Arabic Flagship Program

At the beginning of the fall semester, Flagship students, faculty, and staff gather at tranquil Zilker Park for an annual barbecue to greet new students recently accepted into the program. Mohammad Mohammad, Associate Professor of Arabic, serves as the resident griller and cooks up tantalizing chicken, beef, and vegetable kebabs. In addition to enjoying a tasty meal, the newcomers have the opportunity to meet fellow students and converse with their future professors and instructors—all in Arabic, of course. Returning students take time to reminisce with each other about their studies and travel abroad in the Middle East, as they excitedly await the adventures that lie ahead.

Another noteworthy event organized and hosted by the AFP was a private musical performance by renowned Lebanese singer May Naar this past April. Naar serenaded an audience of faculty, staff, and friends of Middle Eastern Studies with an acoustic guitar and vocal performance. Afterward, she mingled with audience members in the Texas Union Courtyard to chat about her world tour and to sign CDs and pose for photos with fans.

The integration of educational and language-learning focused events in the Arabic Flagship Program is as important as the inclusion of student social and cultural events. For this reason, the AFP is also diligent about hosting guest speakers, lectures, and workshops. Recent examples included a lecture by Mustafa Mughazy, who visited the AFP in March to present a talk entitled “Alexandria’s Dialect over One Hundred Years: A Historical Study in the Sociology of Language.” Caitlin Eaves is appreciative of the events that are planned for AFP students: “Practicing Arabic outside of the classroom and within another setting at these events is definitely an essential part of my language learning. Besides the educational element, these activities allow for socializing in Arabic.” She is hopeful that as long as there is the Flagship, there will be educational events like these to encourage her study of Arabic.

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Daily dances, or conversation hours, were an integral component of the program, aimed at enhancing the development of spoken skills in Arabic, both standard and colloquial. During conversation hours, students met with their instructor to discuss a variety of topics ranging from politics and social issues to poetry, music, travel, cuisine, and upcoming weekend plans.

Several key goals were achieved this summer, with the most remarkable being the high-level scores students received on their end-of-term Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPIs), developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). Forty students participated in the OPI testing, with nineteen of them scoring in the Advanced category on the ACTFL scale. “We are exceptionally proud of our students’ performance on the OPI test, as their outstanding scores clearly emphasize their individual achievement in accelerated language learning, showcasing the success of the Summer Institute,” explained Dr. Mohammad Mohammad, Director of the Arabic Language Summer Institute.

The Arabic Flagship Program and Middle Eastern Studies looks forward to hosting a second cohort of talented students during the summer of 2010.
As a grad student in the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, I was excited to spend the summer studying and traveling in Iran, Turkey, Israel, and Egypt. Turkey was fabulous. Egypt was overwhelming. Israel schizophrenic. Iran... let’s just say I’d never experienced a mini-revolution before.

My mother had decided to go back to Iran to visit family, and it was a great opportunity for me to tag along. While in Tehran, I took a Persian language course at the University of Tehran with a variety of interesting characters from North America, Europe, Japan, and Korea.

My mother and I knew we were visiting Iran during a historic election, but we never expected, nor did anyone in Iran, what would erupt in the wake of the elections. The unprecedented, passionate rallies in the days leading up to the election were transformed into indignant demonstrations after the results were revealed. After four years of unpopular rule, a massive economic downturn, deteriorating international relations, polls that seemed to point to a downturn, deteriorating international relations, polls that seemed to point to a downturn, deteriorating international relations, polls that seemed to point to a downturn, deteriorating international relations, polls that seemed to point to a downturn, deteriorating international relations, polls that seemed to point to a downturn, deteriorating international relations, polls that seemed to point to a downturn, deteriorating international relations, polls that seemed to point to a downturn, deteriorating international relations, polls that seemed to point to a downturn, deteriorating international relations, polls that seemed to point to a downturn, deteriorating international relations, polls that seemed to point to a downturn, deteriorating international relations, polls that seemed to point to a downturn.

But on June 13, the day after the elections, nobody knew yet what was being voting. That morning the city seemed abnormally quiet, defeated, depressed. The driver and passengers on my shared taxi ride to school spoke as if they had just woken up from a dream. How naive we had all been, thinking that the government would relinquish even a shred of its power in the name of democracy. After school that day, I walked from my uncle’s apartment in central Tehran toward the nearest Internet cafe, on Valiasr Street. As I approached the street, I saw a crowd of perhaps a few hundred chanting “death to the dictator.” Referring to the leader of Iran as a dictator, let alone suggesting his imminent death, was certainly an executable crime. It was an amazing scene: the first post-election demonstration, totally spontaneous. I wanted to join in, but my gut reaction was to stand back and observe. I took a few photos and began recording with my digital camera, when I heard a roar of human voices from down the street. A wave of people ran up the sidewalks, in the street, and climbed on top of cars. Finally the source of their terror appeared. With masks guarding their faces and batons in their hands, hundreds of riot police corridors into a shoe store. One riot officer beat a man to death, and news of his death quickly spread throughout the city. I saw the injustice and oppression that affected the daily lives of many in my own family, my presence on that street had potentially disastrous consequences. I wasn’t worried about getting hurt; I was worried about getting arrested. As an American citizen, I would likely be accused of espionage. With that in mind, I ran home in exhilaration. There’s a revolution in the streets! I yelled. That was the first of many days of protest, a mini-revolution that forever changed Iran, and myself. —Behrang Vessali

This year the Center is pleased to mark a momentous milestone for one of our most popular books, and we look forward to expanding our publications in 2010.

In honor of the twentieth anniversary of the publication of Leila Abouzeid’s Year of the Elephant, the Center has just released a revised edition of the book. When published in 1989, Year of the Elephant was the first book written in Arabic by a Moroccan woman to be translated into English. Enhanced by an introduction by Elizabeth Fernea, Abouzeid’s book launched the Center’s Modern Middle East Literatures in Translation Series, and twenty years later it remains our bestselling title. One reviewer has said of it, “Whether spinning original tales or imaginatively recounting a rich folkloric past, Leila Abouzeid’s work proves an important contribution in the annals of modern Middle Eastern literature.”

This revised edition includes an introduction by Barbara Harlow that contextualizes the book in the twenty years of scholarship that have followed its publication. An interview with Leila Abouzeid conducted especially for this new edition and a study guide are also featured.

In June, we will reach another milestone with the publication of Muslim Reformers in Iran and Turkey: The Paradox of Moderation, the twenty-fifth volume in the Center’s Modern Middle East Series. Moving forward from studies which have established that Islam and democracy are not incompatible, Gunes Murat Tezcur analyzes the emergent and evolution of democratic Islamic opposition groups. Based on extensive fieldwork conducted in Turkey and Iran—which at this time seems an unlikely pairing—during recent elections, Tezcur’s book provides new insight into Muslim politics in the twenty-first century.

Also forthcoming in 2010 is a translation of The Puppet, by the renowned Libyan Tuareg author Ibrahim al-Koni. Translator William M. Hutchins has done a beautiful job of rendering it into English–al-Koni’s mystical tale of greed and corruption, set in a Saharan oasis.

Thanks to generous donations, the Center has also begun work on a volume of translated fiction from Middle Eastern women in honor of Elizabeth “BJ” Fernea. Anne McCann-Baker, a friend of BJ’s and retired publications editor for the Center, is supervising the collection.

The Center continues to build upon a tradition of bringing noteworthy short story collections and novels from the Middle East to English-speaking audiences, but we have also begun an initiative to publish literature from experimental new genres, such as blogs. Our inaugural publication in this endeavor will be a translation of the popular Egyptian blog “I Want Get Married,” which we expect to publish next fall.
ROTC Language and Culture Project

“I sincerely miss living in Egypt; it was one of the best times I have had in my life! The knowledge I learned about the culture and the exposure to the people of Egypt have opened my eyes to a whole new way of living. I hope my future holds another visit to Egypt!” enthused Navy Midshipman Jordan Penland after spending the summer of 2009 living and studying Arabic in Cairo as a scholarship recipient of the ROTC Language and Culture Project.

In 2006, UT was approached with an opportunity to pilot an initiative for engaging ROTC cadets and midshipmen in critically needed languages and cultural study in regions of strategic national importance. Initially, UT was one of three institutions to receive funding from the National Security Education Program. Through our participation in this pilot program, we have helped create a model for sister programs nationwide who share the goal of training global officers who can effectively apply their language skills and cultural knowledge in the areas in which they will serve.

Now in its third year, the Language and Culture Project is undergoing a period of tremendous growth in terms of critical language enrollments, study abroad scholarship applications, and participation in cultural events. As the fall 2009 semester commences, the program is working closely with twenty-one students from the Air Force, Army, and Navy who are taking languages as diverse as Arabic, Hindi/Urdu, Korean, Persian, and Russian. These students make up almost fourteen percent of the entire ROTC student population.

In summer 2009, nine cadets and midshipmen, representing each of the three services and a wide range of different majors and language backgrounds, traveled to Dushanbe, Tajikistan to study Persian. Their program of study involved four hours in the classroom each weekday and homestays with local families. With this constant exposure to the language, even students with no prior study of Persian advanced quickly, and by the end of the program were able to read, write, and speak at the elementary level. Those students who entered the program at the intermediate level progressed rapidly as well, honing their skills and improving their proficiency. The group also traveled throughout the capital city and the surrounding Vovzob Valley, were interviewed by the local press during Tajik National Language Day, visited historic Hissor Fort and Medrasse, came face to face with Central Asia’s largest surviving Buddha, developed a love for the local specialty, and studying Arabic in Cairo as a scholarship recipient of the ROTC Language and Culture Project.

In addition, opportunities for funded study abroad are available to cadets and midshipmen who display discipline in their language studies and leadership in their battalions. Past cadets and midshipmen have lived and studied in Egypt, Morocco, and Tajikistan, and return to campus refreshed and keenly aware of the doors that language study opens.

The ROTC Language and Culture Project at the University of Texas is an exciting part of the vanguard movement on the national level to increase the number of officers who can speak and understand languages other than English. The program is working to create a cohort of well-rounded future leaders with the ability to understand context for engaging ROTC cadets and midshipmen in critically needed languages and cultural study in regions of strategic national importance.

As this year’s Language and Culture Project comes to a close, we are excited to announce the new Liberal Arts Building project, which will provide classrooms ($260,000–$2,000,000); a Student Center space with study alcoves, computer labs, and meeting rooms ($121,000–$3,400,000); administrative and advising offices in the $100,000–$250,000). The new building will be complete by 2010 and will provide much-needed space for the Middle Eastern Studies program.

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