



## Middle Eastern Studies Librarians: An Ambivalent Professional Identity<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate the ambivalent identity of librarians supporting Middle Eastern studies in North America (Canada and the United States), and Western Europe (France, Germany and the United Kingdom), as well as in North American and European institutions located in the Middle East (such as the Library of Congress, American Universities Libraries, or French Research Institutes) in 2014. To do so, the article focuses first on the emergence and evolution of the profession, then on the demographics, training and competencies of the professional community, and last on their perceptions of both characteristics of, and challenges faced by the profession. This research is based on the collection and analysis of primary and secondary sources. After a thorough review of the existing literature on Middle Eastern studies libraries, librarians<sup>1</sup> and librarianship, a survey was conducted among librarians working in North America, Western Europe and the Middle East between June 9 and July 6, 2014. Through an analysis of the survey answers, I sought to glean a better understanding of professionals active in this field in 2014.

Middle Eastern studies librarianship, in spite of fundamental differences inherent to each area studies specialization, shares many similarities with specialized librarianship on other geographic areas. This paper could therefore be used as a model for research on librarians serving the teaching and research community on other areas, or as a base to compare Middle Eastern studies librarianship with other area studies librarianship.

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This article investigates the professional identity of Middle Eastern studies library specialists working in North America (Canada and the United States), and Western Europe (France, Germany and the United Kingdom), as well as in North American and European institutions located in the Middle East (such as the Library of Congress, American Universities Libraries, or French Research Institutes) in 2014.

A recent survey of area studies in North America touched lightly on the challenges facing libraries (Adams, 2014, p. 11) that support teaching and research programs in the field, such as those serving the research community in Middle Eastern studies. These challenges range from the decrease in funding affecting collection development to the lack of appropriately trained librarians to replace retiring professionals. Existing writings on Middle Eastern studies librarianship focus on an older model of a rapidly evolving profession (Auchterlonie, 1982; Dykgraaf, 2003; Luther, 1974; Partington, 1981, 1990; Pollock, 1974; Sable, 1973; Smith, 1965, 1974; Straley, 1988), essentially in the United States, looking at daily tasks (Straley, 1988), the Middle Eastern studies librarian's role and place (Auchterlonie, 1982; Luther, 1974; Pollock, 1974; Smith, 1965, 1974), or work methods (Dykgraaf, 2003). The present paper is innovative in three respects: first, it investigates

contemporary Middle Eastern studies librarianship, second, it compares the profession in three different settings – North America, Western Europe and the Middle East – and third, it aims to look at different facets of Middle Eastern studies librarianship than the ones covered in the published literature such as the Middle Eastern studies librarian's training, work experience, and perceptions of the characteristics and challenges of their profession. Last, this paper, which is a follow-up to a study exploring the intricacies of Middle Eastern studies librarianship, presented in May 2014 at the annual MELCom international conference,<sup>2</sup> intends to fill a gap in the professional literature.

This research is based on the collection and analysis of primary and secondary sources. First, I thoroughly examined the scientific and professional literature on Middle Eastern studies libraries, librarians and librarianship. Then, between June 9 and July 6, 2014, I conducted a survey among librarians working in North America, Western Europe and the Middle East (employed in North American and European institutions). The bilingual questionnaire<sup>3</sup> (French and English) was created with SurveyMonkey, and consisted of eight demographic questions (gender, current position, education and competencies), and two open-ended questions about the characteristics of, and challenges faced by Middle

<sup>☆</sup> Taking full responsibility for the content of this article, the author warmly thanks the known and anonymous reviewers who helped to enhance this text.

<sup>1</sup> Although the terminology commonly accepted in the professional community is "Middle East librarians", for the purpose of this paper I prefer "Middle Eastern studies librarians".

<sup>2</sup> The program of the 2014 annual MELCom International (Middle East Librarians Committee) meeting, held in Istanbul in May (26–28), can be found here: [http://www.melcominternational.org/wp-content/content/past\\_conf/2014/2014\\_programme.pdf](http://www.melcominternational.org/wp-content/content/past_conf/2014/2014_programme.pdf) (accessed 19 May 2015).

<sup>3</sup> The survey instrument can be found in Appendix 1.

Eastern studies librarianship. The survey instrument was designed to guarantee the anonymity of respondents, and to encourage responses (i.e., short) while providing participants with as many opportunities as possible to comment, or add information seen as relevant. The questionnaire was distributed via three professional mailing lists to a total of 964 email addresses: 430 MELANET subscribers,<sup>4</sup> 288 JISCMAIL LIS-Middle East subscribers,<sup>5</sup> and 246 Auteurs Arabes subscribers.<sup>6</sup> This number of email addresses doesn't reflect either the number of individuals, or the number of library professionals reached,<sup>7</sup> but since all existing professional mailing lists have been exploited, it was circulated the most widely possible within the professional community. At the end of the survey period, 78 people had responded, of whom two were excluded because they work outside the region studied: this study is therefore based on the responses of 76 professionals. As an active member of this community for over 15 years – in North America, Europe and the Middle East – I estimate the number of Middle Eastern studies librarians active in those areas in 2014 to be approximately 250 individuals, which leads to the conclusion that the cohort who answered the survey on a voluntary basis represent more than one quarter of the profession. This is a significant response rate.

## THE EMERGENCE OF A SPECIALIZATION

### ORIGINS DATING BACK TO THE COLONIAL EXPANSION (17TH CENTURY–1950)

Appearing in Europe in the 17th century, Middle Eastern studies librarianship stemmed primarily from Europe's colonial expansion into the Indian and African continents: it emerged, and developed alongside the field of Orientalism, Islamic and Middle Eastern studies. The *École des jeunes de langues*, the first educational institution devoted exclusively to Oriental studies, was founded in France in 1669. Until 1873 – when the school opened its own library – students used the royal library's Oriental collections.<sup>8</sup> In Germany, the University of Göttingen established in 1735 had amassed the largest collection of English-language Oriental works in Europe by 1800 (Jefcoate, 1998, 292). In Great Britain, the idea of a school specializing in Oriental studies was first proposed in 1798, in a report by Richard Wellesley, Governor of India, but it wasn't until 1917 that the School of Oriental and African Studies<sup>9</sup> and its library opened.

Meanwhile, in the Middle East, the European colonial powers established a network of study and research centers with libraries. The French, for instance, founded the Institut Français d'Archéologie du Proche-Orient, the Institut Français d'Études Arabes de Damas (IFEAD, Damascus, Syria) and the Centre d'Étude et de Recherche sur le Moyen-Orient Contemporain (CERMOC, Amman, Jordan) in 1922. This network of public institutions was complemented by a network of private institutions with their own collections. The latter included religious establishments, such as the *École Biblique Archéologique Française de Jérusalem* (Palestine) opened in 1890, or the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies (Cairo, Egypt) officially founded in 1953

(Avon, 2005, p. 455) but whose library had started being constituted 20 years earlier (Avon, 2005, p. 177). Private institutions also included secular establishments, such as the American Universities of Beirut and Cairo, established respectively in 1866 and 1922. In North America, a few institutions established Middle Eastern programs and libraries as soon as the end of the 19th century: the Yale University Arabic and Islamic Studies program was created in 1841, along with the Near East collection. But for the most part, although a great number universities have offered area studies programs “since approximately World War I” (Sable, 1973, p. v), it is not until the end of World War II that they started developing their own specialized documentation centers:

“Indeed, it became fashionable in the 1950s to think that our ‘national interest’ required all sorts of studies of the area [Middle East], and this assumption led in turn to the rapid development of very large collections of Middle Eastern books and serials at several university libraries” (Partington, 1980, p. 154).

In 1945, the Library of Congress created a “Near East” section,<sup>10</sup> later merged with the African section and the Hebraic section into the African and Middle Eastern Division (AMED) (Gray, 2001). In Canada, McGill University opened an Islamic Studies Library in 1952,<sup>11</sup> and from the mid-fifties on, several American universities followed suit, including Harvard University<sup>12</sup> (1954), the University of California in Los Angeles<sup>13</sup> (1957), and the University of Chicago<sup>14</sup> (1965) among others. Historically, Middle Eastern studies collections are mainly found in academic and research libraries. The rapid growth of area studies collections in the West led to the emergence of specialized librarianship – including Middle Eastern studies librarianship – as a profession, when prior to this, library professionals were often scholars “more concerned with protecting and preserving collections under their guardianship than with expanding them or with facilitating their use” (Partington, 1980, p. 154).

### THE ERA OF PROFESSIONALIZATION (1960–1980)

The 1960s witnessed a veritable institutionalization of Middle Eastern studies librarianship in Western Europe and the United States thanks to the creation of professional associations that generated a community and network for skills exchange through annual conferences and specialized publications. The two main associations are the Middle East Librarians Association (MELA), founded in 1972 and based in North America, and the Middle East Librarians Committee International (MELCom International), founded in 1979 and based in Europe. A third professional association, the Association of Orientalist Librarians (IAOL) gathering information professionals specializing on all “area studies” defined in North America as “Oriental” (i.e., Middle-East librarianship, East-Asian librarianship, Indian librarianship, etc.)—created in 1961, seems to be currently dormant, if not dissolved, since no information on recent activities could be located. MELA defines the Middle East librarian as “anyone who is employed by an institution to service Middle East library materials in a professional capacity.”<sup>15</sup> The respective numbers of members of both associations fluctuate between 53 and 103 depending on the year for MELA, and between 273 and 296 for MELCom; and it is possible that some professionals might not be members of any

<sup>4</sup> MELANET is the Middle East Librarians Association listserv: <http://mela.us/melanet.html> (accessed 29 May 2015).

<sup>5</sup> JISCMAIL LIS-Middle-East listserv is based in the United Kingdom (<https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?AO=LIS-MIDDLE-EAST>; accessed 29 May 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Auteurs Arabes is based in France (<http://liste.cines.fr/info/auteursarabes>; accessed 29 May 2015).

<sup>7</sup> It is likely that a number of professionals subscribe to more than one list, or subscribe several times to the same list with different email addresses, as well as it is probable that non-librarians such as booksellers and publishers subscribe to these lists.

<sup>8</sup> Now called “Bibliothèque Nationale de France” (BNF). See: [http://www.bnf.fr/en/tools/a.welcome\\_to\\_the\\_bnf.html](http://www.bnf.fr/en/tools/a.welcome_to_the_bnf.html) (accessed 29 May 2015).

<sup>9</sup> See: [http://www.bnf.fr/en/tools/a.welcome\\_to\\_the\\_bnf.html](http://www.bnf.fr/en/tools/a.welcome_to_the_bnf.html) (accessed 29 May 2015).

<sup>10</sup> See: <http://www.loc.gov/rr/amed/> (accessed 24 May 2015).

<sup>11</sup> See: <http://www.mcgill.ca/library/branches/islamic> (accessed 24 May 2015).

<sup>12</sup> See: <http://hcl.harvard.edu/libraries/widener/collections/mideast.cfm> (accessed 24 May 2015).

<sup>13</sup> See: <http://guides.library.ucla.edu/content.php?pid=22907&sid=275980> (accessed 24 May 2015).

<sup>14</sup> See: <https://cmes.uchicago.edu/page/library-resources> (accessed 24 May 2015).

<sup>15</sup> See: <http://www.mela.us/> (accessed 15 May 2015).

association when others may adhere to both. Although approximate, these figures provide insight into the size of this professional community: based on both the membership figures and my 15 year-long activities (through congress participations and committee memberships) in this community, I estimate that there are approximately 250 Middle Eastern studies librarians currently active in those areas in 2014.

The terms “Middle East librarianship”, “Middle East studies librarianship” or “Middle Eastern studies librarianship” don't accurately reflect today's professional reality. Librarians serving Middle Eastern studies communities are often responsible for collections on regions that extend far beyond the Middle East—that is, where the common denominator is the presence of a predominant or significant Muslim community. This terminological issue, which is shared with the field of Middle Eastern studies, and has been the subject of debate among a number of researchers since the 1960s (Capdepuy, 2008; Davison, 1960; Denoix, 2004; Khoury, 2000), raises a valid question: Could – or should – a more accurate designation be found for “Middle Eastern studies librarianship” to better represent the profession? Both “Middle East librarian/ship” used in the survey, and “Middle Eastern studies librarian/ship” used in the article designate someone who may specialize in a considerably larger geographic area, extending from “Mauritania to China, Africa to the Balkans, not to mention the diaspora on all continents” (Denoix, 2004, p. 7).

## THE MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES LIBRARIANS COMMUNITY IN 2014: A DEMOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT

### A MIXED COMMUNITY

The cohort surveyed was composed of 41 women, 35 men and 2 individuals who did not specify their gender. Geographic distribution is as follows: 33 respondents work in North America, 29 in Western Europe, and 14 in the Middle East. At first glance, the group of respondents seems well-balanced with regards to gender. However data shows a significant difference in gender ratios for each region: in the Middle East, the ratio is perfectly symmetrical with 7 women and 7 men; in North America, the ratio is nearly identical with 15 women and 16 men, but in Western Europe, women outnumber men 17 to 12. In the North American setting, although librarianship is generally dominated by women<sup>16</sup> (American Library Association Office for Diversity, 2012), our survey questions this pattern concerning Middle Eastern studies librarianship. For Europe and the Middle East, equivalent statistics which would have allowed a more systematic analysis are not available (Charts 1 and 2).

Senior positions within our sample, such as library director or curator, are unevenly distributed with 13 women and 8 men, and regional differences are similar to those mentioned earlier. In the Middle East, 3 women and 2 men holding managerial positions responded; in North America, 3 men and 3 women; and in Western Europe women outnumber men 7 to 4. According to a survey conducted by the American Library Association (ALA), 57% of senior positions in university libraries are held by women (American Library Association, 2014).

In sum, despite the gender disparity generally observed in the profession as a whole, Middle Eastern studies librarianship appears to question this gendered pattern. Moreover, despite significant regional

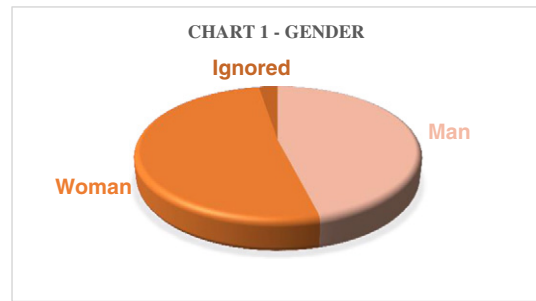


Chart 1. Gender.

differences, findings show greater gender equality in North America and the Middle East than in Western Europe.

### VARYING PROFESSIONAL LONGEVITY

Professional longevity among the surveyed cohort is rather uneven: professionals with more than 20 years' experience make up the largest segment of the cohort (25 respondents), professionals with 10 to 20 years' experience and young professionals with less than 5 years' experience account for less than a quarter of the group (22 and 17 respondents respectively), and librarians with 5 to 10 years' experience represent the smallest segment (only 12 respondents). In the North American and Middle Eastern settings, categories are more or less equivalent, composed of 7 to 9 individuals each for North America, and 3 to 5 for the Middle East—i.e., a little under a quarter in both settings. In the Western European context however, librarians with over 20 years' experience constitute close to half of the group (13 out of 29 respondents), followed by those with 10 to 20 years' experience (8 respondents), young professionals (6 respondents), and those with 5 to 10 years' experience (2 respondents). Thus, professional longevity is similar in North America and the Middle East, but seems much higher in Europe. Furthermore, in the cohort, experienced librarians outnumber less experienced librarians. Several factors impact professional longevity and may explain this generational gap: employment status and regulations in specific countries and professions; levels of requirements and professional mobility; and age pyramids in the broader society and academe. Sorting out these variables would however require further investigation into the job market, professional statute and demographics in each region (Chart 3).

A total of 23 respondents hold management positions. In the group of librarians who have been in the profession for more than 10 years (47 respondents), 20 hold positions with responsibilities such as “director”, “head”, “lead curator”, “senior chief”, etc. Among those with less than 10 years' experience (29 respondents), all except one are

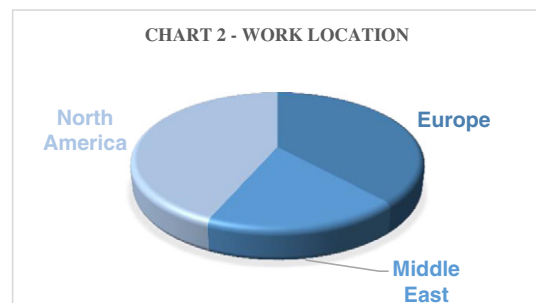


Chart 2. Work location.

<sup>16</sup> Between 2010 and 2014, numerous studies and surveys showed that in the United States women represent:

- 82.8% of active librarians (Department for Professional Employees 2011, p. 2)
- 62.7% of research librarians (Kyrillidou and Morris 2012, p. 10)
- 67% of academic librarians (“Library Directors: Gender and Salary” 2014).



Chart 3. Professional longevity.

“bibliographers”, “librarians” or “subject specialists”. Survey results show that for the first 10 years of their career, Middle Eastern studies librarians work as subject specialist librarians, when professionals with more than 10 years' experience hold management positions. This observation was confirmed in all three regions, as the 13 Europeans (out of 21), 7 North Americans (out of 16) and 3 Middle Eastern librarians (out of 8) occupying senior positions have more than 10 years' experience. Crossing this data with the level of qualification reveals that among librarians in senior positions (23 respondents), 22 hold both a Library and Information Science Degree, and a Middle Eastern Studies Degree of whom 8 hold a doctoral degree (PhD). To conclude, results indicate that in the three settings (4 North American, 3 Europeans and 1 Middle Eastern), surveyed professionals combining more than 10 years' experience and higher qualifications tend to hold managerial or senior positions when younger librarians (less than 10 years' experience), generally less qualified are subject librarians.

#### A HIGHLY QUALIFIED COMMUNITY

The first striking fact regarding the level of qualification of this cohort of Middle Eastern studies librarians is that out of the 76 respondents, only 2 have neither a diploma in Middle Eastern studies nor in library and information studies, revealing a very high rate of qualified professionals in the field. In addition, more than half of the respondents have both a MES and a LIS degree when the others have a degree in either one of these two fields (Table 1).

Only 9 respondents (5 men and 4 women) have a PhD, all in the field of Middle Eastern studies. Were they initially in research and teaching before becoming librarians? Or did they pursue a doctoral degree while working as, or with a view to becoming, librarians? Among the Doctors, half hold senior positions,<sup>17</sup> and the other half are subject librarians: if having a PhD does not appear to be a prerequisite for a senior position, it doesn't systematically lead to a managerial position either. With regard to the library directors with doctorate degrees, gender does not seem to be a determining factor as 2 are men and 2 are women.

In summary: (1) this group of Middle Eastern studies librarians is highly qualified; (2) the fact that PhDs were obtained exclusively in Middle Eastern studies seems to underscore the dominance of subject specialization over librarianship; (3) although the level of education affects the professionals' level of responsibilities, it is not a benchmark for access to managerial positions; (4) gender equality is high among graduates and senior-level staff.

#### A MULTILINGUAL COMMUNITY

Apart from 3 individuals who skipped question #7 the whole cohort is proficient in at least one or more language(s) spoken in the Muslim world, otherwise known as “Eastern” or “Middle Eastern” languages.

Table 1  
University degrees.

	Library and information studies (LIS) degree <sup>a</sup>	Middle Eastern studies (MES) degree <sup>b</sup>	Both	Neither	Either
Yes	52	54	36	2	LIS MES
Of which PhD	–	9			only only
No	19	14			
Currently enrolled	2	–			20 18
Other	3	–			
Total	76	76	36	2	29

<sup>a</sup> Includes North-American Library and Information studies Bachelor and Masters degrees, as well as European degrees considered equivalent (Maîtrise, Mastère, Diplôme d'Études Supérieures Spécialisées [i.e., DESS], etc.)

<sup>b</sup> Including North-American Bachelor and Master Degrees, as well as equivalent European degrees (Licence, Maîtrise, Mastère, Diplôme d'Études Appliquées [i.e., DEA], etc.)

Out of 73 respondents, a total of 24 master two languages, 21 master only one, 19 master three, and 9 master more than three. Results indicate that proficiency in one or more Eastern languages is the norm among this group of Middle Eastern studies librarians. Data also shows that the most experienced professionals are the ones mastering a greater number of languages, raising the question of language learning being a part of the professional development or not. If in the group proficient in one language, professional longevity doesn't seem to make any difference (10 librarians have less than 10 years, and 11 have more than 10 years' experience), an overwhelming majority of Middle Eastern studies librarians proficient in 2 or more Eastern languages have been in the profession for more than 10 years (respectively 15 out of 24, 12 out of 19, and 7 out of 9) (Table 2).

As highlighted by Chart 4, Arabic is unquestionably the most widely spoken language among the surveyed cohort, with 58 respondents out of 73 reporting they spoke it. Persian and Turkish – including Ottoman Turkish – are spoken by 29 and 26 respondents respectively. The other languages spoken include Hebrew (9 respondents); Kurdish and Azeri (2 respondents each); and Urdu, Swahili, Judeo-Spanish, Judeo-Arabic, Crimean Tatar, Berber and Armenian (1 respondent each). Results show that proficiency in Arabic, which is not only the most widely spoken Middle Eastern language, but also common to all Muslim communities – since it is the language of prayer – is predominant among these Middle Eastern studies librarians. Incidentally, 20 professionals out of the 21 who master only one language know Arabic; the last one (respondent #77), reported speaking Hebrew only. Among bilingual respondents, 9 speak Arabic and Persian, 7 noted Arabic and Turkish, and 3 reported Arabic and Hebrew. Among trilingual professionals, the most common language combination is Arabic, Turkish and Persian, spoken by 12 respondents. In addition, it should be noted that librarians who reported speaking more than three languages also mastered the rarest languages.

To conclude, collected data indicates that proficiency in at least one Middle Eastern language is the norm among this professional community. When only one Eastern language is mastered, it is almost always Arabic (one exception); when more than one language is spoken, Arabic, Persian and Turkish are the most common languages. Besides, proficiency in rarer languages<sup>18</sup> such as Berber, Azeri,<sup>19</sup> Crimean Tatar<sup>20</sup> and Swahili<sup>21</sup> confirms the fact that Middle Eastern studies librarians' expertise extends far beyond the strict Middle East.

<sup>18</sup> Chamito-Semitic language spoken in North Africa.

<sup>19</sup> Turkish language spoken in the Middle-East and Caucasasia.

<sup>20</sup> Turkish language spoken in Ukraine, Romania, Turkey, and Uzbekistan.

<sup>21</sup> Bantu language spoken in East Africa.

<sup>17</sup> Positions such as “Curator of Oriental Holdings”, “Curator of Oriental Manuscripts and Rare Books”, “Head of Oriental and Asia Department”, “Head, Near East Section”, etc.

**Table 2**  
Middle Eastern languages proficiency.

Proficient in					TOTAL
1 language	2 languages	3 languages	More than 3	Ignored	
21	24	19	9	3	76

#### A FIELD-COMMITTED COMMUNITY

Only one person ignored the question relating to travel to the Middle East; and of the 75 respondents, the overwhelming majority (65 individuals) noted they had visited at least one Middle Eastern country. Results show that visiting the geographic region of expertise is common practice among Middle Eastern librarians. If professionals based in the Middle East logically answered yes to this question (14 respondents), librarians active in Western Europe and North America also comprised a great proportion of travelers: 23 Europeans out of 29, and 24 North Americans out of 28 reported having visited, or lived in, the Middle East. Surprisingly, the proportions of travelers from Europe and North America are almost similar (more than three-quarters of each group) when the distance separating North America from the Middle East is much greater than the distance between Europe and the Middle East (Table 3).

As for the open part of the question relating to the duration of visits to Middle Eastern countries, a significant number of respondents (17) ignored it or provided incomplete response. Among those who gave a complete answer (59 individuals), more than half (29) spent from 1 to 5 years in the region, 18 stayed more than 5 years, and only a small proportion (11 respondents) visited for less than a year. Results show that a majority of Middle Eastern studies librarians in this cohort spent more than a year in the Middle East, whether they did a long trip or multiple shorter visits.

Crossing this data with the professional longevity reveals that the older professionals are not necessarily the ones who spent the most time abroad: the majority of Middle Eastern studies librarians with more than 20 years' experience visited for less than a year (9 respondents out of 17) while 6 respondents out of 11 with less than 5 years' experience lived in the Middle East for more than 5 years. Reasons brought forward by the respondents include "education" and "archeological digging" (respondent #1); "studying" and "studying/working" (respondent #7); being "a child-father was working there" [sic] (respondent #8); "visit friends" (respondent #10); being "born and raised in (...)"

**Table 3**  
Travel to the Middle East.

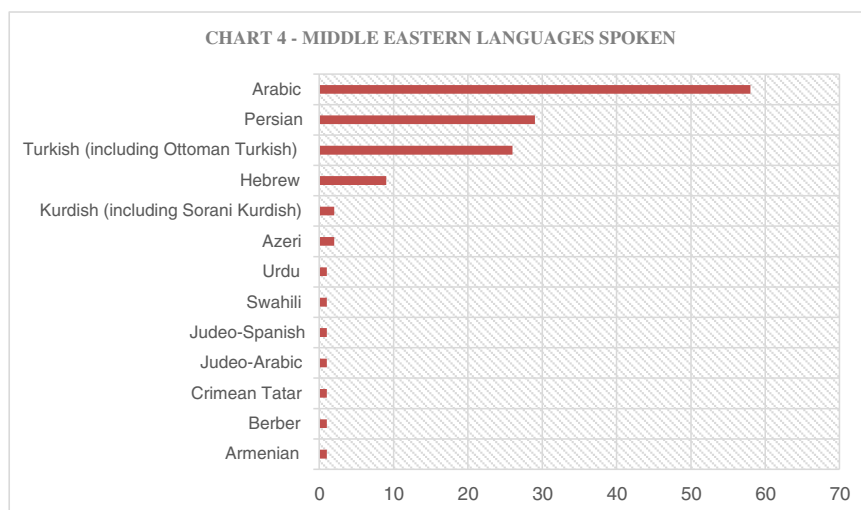
	Traveled to the Middle-East	Duration of stay:			Ignored/incomplete
		Less than a year	1 to 5 years	More than 5 years	
Yes	65	11	29	18	17
No	10				
Ignored	1				
Total	76	75			

(respondent #13) & "live and born in (...)" [sic] (respondent #37); "work-related purposes" (respondent #24); "just conferences for one week" (respondent #58); and "acquisition trips" (respondent #62). Beyond these possible explanations, what remains is that the respondents are highly committed field specialists of their area.

Future research projects could include confirming my Middle Eastern studies librarians gender ratios hypothesis, and exploring the causes and consequences of gender ratios in the local professional communities; researching factors determining the professional longevity in each setting; further investigating the main criteria to become eligible to management positions in each setting; determining whether second, third, and higher languages were acquired before entering the profession or while working as librarians, as part of the professional development; and clarifying the circumstances in which individuals traveled to, or lived in, Middle Eastern countries, and if it was – or not – related to their career in specialized librarianship

#### MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES LIBRARIANSHIP IN 2014: CHARACTERISTICS AND CHALLENGES

The last two survey questions were open-ended, seeking to understand how Middle Eastern studies librarians perceive the characteristics of, and challenges facing the profession today. They were intentionally kept general to give respondents the opportunity to share any characteristic or challenge they felt worth mentioning. The wording of questions resulted in very similar – sometimes almost identical – answers to both: this is a recognized limitation to the study, and the reason why responses to both questions were analyzed together. A total of 10 respondents ignored question #9; two said they had difficulty answering: "I'm not really sure what defines Middle East Librarianship, so this

**Chart 4.** Middle Eastern language spoken.

is a difficult question to answer” (respondent #51) and “A little difficult question”(respondent #27); and one noted that “it is not some special form of librarianship” (respondent #23). 12 professionals didn’t respond to question #10, one answered “yes,” totalizing 13 invalid responses. This analysis is therefore based on 66 comments for question #9 and 63 comments for question #10. Comments were grouped by theme, and four elements emerged from this conceptual analysis. It was observed that Middle Eastern studies library professionals who participated in the study share the following concerns<sup>22</sup>:

- The necessity of mastering a dual expertise (subject and professional)
- The difficulty of defining “Middle Eastern studies”
- The issue of “Mediation” between Middle East collections and users
- The will (or need) of cooperating with Middle East institutions (Chart 5).

#### *A DUAL EXPERTISE: A DUAL CHALLENGE ACQUIRING AND MAINTAINING IT*

“Should be a scholar and a librarians [sic] too. In my opinion, one cannot just [be] a subject librarians [sic] without having a subject degree. Also a scholar cannot be a subject specialist without having a library degree.” (Respondent #56).

Among the cohort, 32 respondents mentioned that the profession required expertise in Middle Eastern studies and 14 underscored the need for technical expertise in library studies. When listing essential skills, they noted cataloguing – and more specifically cataloguing materials in Middle Eastern languages – (29 respondents); proficiency in at least one language spoken in the Muslim world (22 respondents); advanced subject and field expertise (20 respondents); digitization, optical character recognition and keeping abreast of internet technology (9 respondents). Respondent #32 outlines that Middle Eastern studies librarianship has to “Balance subject/area expertise with knowledge of current information science techniques. Both are important” while respondent #50 explains that the “knowledge of at least one of the languages spoken in the area” and the “double training librarianship and Middle East [are] required”. How do, then, Middle Eastern studies librarians acquire and maintain this double expertise? Respondent #60 outlines “the challenge of finding and retaining qualified librarians in a demanding and highly specialized field in a time of increasing demand, shrinking resources and pressure to streamline and generalize library functions [sic]” while respondent #49 regrets that there is “no appropriate/not enough training opportunities for young librarians, resulting in an increasing number of librarians lacking the double qualification.” A thorough examination of the most prominent programs in library and information studies in the United States, Canada, France, the United Kingdom and Germany, showed evidence of an area specialization in LIS in two places only. In the 1980s, the School of Library, Archive & Information Studies, at the University College London offered an “African studies bibliography” course (McIlwaine, 1980, p. 141), and currently, the University of North Carolina hosts the “Educating Librarians in the Middle East: Building Bridges for the 21st Century” (ELIME-21) program<sup>23</sup> which although focused on enhancing library and information education in the Middle East rather than on Middle Eastern studies librarianship in the West, integrates Middle Eastern studies courses to the curriculum. In sum, this group of Middle Eastern studies librarians is concerned about the lack of

professionals with the dual expertise working in the field, the challenge of hiring and retaining skilled professionals, and the paucity of university degrees and continuing education programs.

#### *THE “MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES” SPECIALIZATION: AN OBSCURE DEFINITION*

“What is meant by ‘Middle East librarianship’? The expression is inherently difficult to define given the vast and diverse subject areas involved: geography, history (ancient or contemporary), type of medium used (print or manuscript) [...] and also individual library perspective (specialized or general field).” (Respondent #24).

The surveyed cohort seems highly concerned by a lack of recognition on campus attributed to an absence of understanding of what Middle Eastern studies and Middle Eastern studies librarianship are (25 respondents), leading to a decrease in institutional, financial, human and material support (11 respondents). A total of 8 respondents mentioned the importance of defining Middle Eastern studies; 10 emphasized the immensity of the geographical area covered, 3 noted the long history and 2 the inter-disciplinarity that make it virtually impossible to position the profession in relation to well-established disciplines (5 professionals). Respondent #42 wonders: “how can we position ‘Middle East’ librarianship in relation to general librarianship without alienating ourselves from the rest of the profession?” Respondent #50 shares his “Difficulty to explain (even academics external to the field) what Middle East studies are and why they’re important on a campus”, while respondent #29 argues that there is a need for “reassessing the role of Oriental librarianship in the Western world and its continuing relevance for scholarship at home and in the Middle East”. But the issue of defining and promoting Middle East librarianship in universities is not new: it was already being debated among professionals in the nineties (Partington, 1990, pp. 29–30). Regarding funding decrease, respondent #54 raises that “Changing budget climates [...] often bring a laser focus on typically low-use collections in specialized languages.” Ill-equipped libraries attract fewer visitors (1 respondent), and their collections circulate less—two reasons that are often used to justify even more decrease in financial support. Solutions brought forward to address the constant decrease in funding include the establishment of a “Consortial acquisition agreement to leverage limited fiscal resources” (respondent #34), “maintaining the relevance of the field for funding opportunities” (respondent #5), and “fight to prevent budget decrease”<sup>24</sup> (respondent #69).

In sum, data shows that this cohort of professionals agrees on the need to advocate for Middle Eastern studies librarianship, in order to be better understood, gain more recognition, and stronger institutional support (human, financial, and material).

#### *THE CRUCIAL YET COMPLEX MEDIATION OF COLLECTIONS*

[Middle Eastern studies librarianship] “Needs an intensive communication between users and librarian, intensive intermediation of holdings” (Respondent #17).

“Mediation” in this context refers to the main tasks performed by librarians to make Middle East collections available to users, such as bibliographic description (cataloguing), collection development, and information literacy. Although these tasks are common to all librarians, the comments reveal a number of aspects that appear specific to the

<sup>22</sup> Ordered by importance according to the number of occurrences in comments.

<sup>23</sup> See: <http://elime.web.unc.edu/> (accessed May 15 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Author’s translation: “Se battre pour que les budgets ne diminuent pas”.



proposals are made to improve regional and international cooperation, Middle Eastern studies librarians have evidently not been able to convince university and library directors and the general public of the importance of this debate and the need for institutional support. Setting up internal, national and international cooperation networks would help to better promote the particularities of the profession among directors, library and information studies schools and persons outside the field of Middle Eastern studies, hence offering a better service.

The underlying element emerging from responses to both questions #9 and #10 is the ambivalent identity of Middle Eastern studies librarians. Most comments and questions asked by respondents themselves revolve around the definition of Middle Eastern studies librarianship, and its place in regards to the broader library community. The surveyed cohort also appears concerned with the ability and willingness of Middle Eastern studies librarians to further convinced their respective administrations that they face specific challenges requiring specific solutions. Follow-up research could focus on investigating if this ambivalence and difficulty to define themselves are an issue or a fertile tension, and what it implies in very concrete ways in the daily practice of Middle Eastern studies librarianship.

## CONCLUSION

The main objective of this article was to investigate Middle Eastern studies librarianship in North America, Western Europe and the Middle East in 2014. First appearing in Western librarianship during the European colonial expansion, the Middle Eastern studies specialization has been evolving alongside library and information studies and Middle Eastern studies ever since. By analyzing the qualitative and quantitative data gathered through the survey, I was able to glean a better understanding of professionals currently active in this field. The surveyed Middle Eastern studies librarians are highly qualified professionals who first and foremost value the Middle East specialization, followed by librarianship training. The study also shows that, despite regional differences, the group of respondents is well-balanced in terms of gender, but professional longevity is rather uneven. The comments analysis has brought to light four main challenges faced by Middle Eastern studies librarianship, as interpreted by these professionals: dual expertise (subject and professional); difficulty – or near impossibility – of defining Middle Eastern studies; challenging “mediation” between Middle East collections and users; and the need for more cooperation among professionals. These concerns are very similar to major challenges faced by “area studies” library directors in North America, as identified in a conference report on “International and Area Studies Collections in 21st Century Libraries” (Hammond, 2013, pp. 12–13), including staff training, the dual qualification, and the challenges of interpersonal and inter-institutional cooperation. The similarities between Hammond’s findings and the comments of the surveyed Middle Eastern studies librarians seem to indicate that the issues affecting Middle Eastern studies librarianship in North America, Western Europe and the Middle East are very similar – if not identical – to those observed at large in “area studies” librarianship. A librarianship workshop focusing on “Collaboration, Advocacy, and Recruitment: Area and International Studies Librarianship”<sup>27</sup> brought together specialists in all branches of area studies at the University of Indiana in Bloomington in 2013 (Indiana University Bloomington, 2013). It

revealed that in spite of the fundamental differences inherent to each area studies specialization, Middle Eastern studies librarianship shared many similarities and challenges with specialized librarianship in other geographic areas. This paper could therefore be used as a model for research on library professionals specializing on other geographic and cultural areas. Moreover, a study comparing Middle Eastern studies librarianship with other area studies librarianship could be an invaluable complement to this work.

## APPENDIX 1. SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Middle East Librarianship survey/Sondage bibliothéconomie Moyen-Orient.

#	Questions	Suggested answers (when applicable)
1	Are you/Êtes-vous	<input type="radio"/> Man/Homme <input type="radio"/> Woman/Femme
2	What is your exact job title/Quel est votre titre exact?	
3	Where do you work/Où travaillez-vous?	<input type="radio"/> Europe/Europe <input type="radio"/> Middle East/Moyen-Orient <input type="radio"/> North America/Amérique du Nord <input type="radio"/> Other/Autre*
	*If you chose “other”, please specify/Si vous avez choisi « autre », merci de préciser: [in comment box]	
4	How long have you been a Middle East Librarian/Depuis combien de temps êtes-vous bibliothécaire spécialiste Moyen-Orient?	<input type="radio"/> Less than 5 years/Moins de 5 ans <input type="radio"/> 5–10 years/5–10 ans <input type="radio"/> 10–20 years/10–20 ans <input type="radio"/> More than 20 years/Plus de 20 ans
5	Do you hold a degree in Library and Information Science/Avez-vous un diplôme en sciences de l’information et des bibliothèques?	<input type="radio"/> Yes/Oui* <input type="radio"/> No/Non <input type="radio"/> Currently enrolled/En cours d’obtention*
	*If yes or currently enrolled, please indicate which degree and from which University/Si oui ou en cours d’obtention, merci d’indiquer quel diplôme et de quelle université: [in comment box]	
6	Do you hold a Middle Eastern studies degree (or assimilated, i.e., Islamic Studies, Arabic Studies)/Avez-vous un diplôme en études moyen-orientales (ou assimilé: études islamiques, études arabes, etc...)?	<input type="radio"/> Yes/Oui* <input type="radio"/> No/Non <input type="radio"/> Currently enrolled/En cours d’obtention*
	*If yes or currently enrolled, please indicate which degree and from which University/Si oui ou en cours d’obtention, merci d’indiquer quel diplôme et de quelle université: [in comment box]	
7	Do you know (a) Middle Eastern language(s)/Connaissez-vous une ou plusieurs langues moyen-orientales?	<input type="radio"/> 1 <input type="radio"/> 2 <input type="radio"/> 3 <input type="radio"/> More than 3
	Please indicate which language(s)/Merci d’indiquer quelle(s) langue(s): [in comment box]	
8	Did/do you travel or live in the Middle East/Avez-vous voyagé/vécu ou voyagez-vous/vivez-vous au Moyen-Orient?	<input type="radio"/> Yes/Oui* <input type="radio"/> No/Non
	*If yes, please specify where, when, and how long/Si oui, merci de préciser où, quand et combien de temps: [in comment box]	
9	What would you say characterizes Middle East Librarianship/Quelles sont, selon vous, les spécificités de la bibliothéconomie Moyen-Orient?	
10	What do you think are the three main challenges Middle East Librarianship currently faces/Quels sont, selon vous, les trois défis principaux de la bibliothéconomie Moyen-Orient à l’heure actuelle?	

<sup>27</sup> See: <http://www.indiana.edu/~libarea/main.html> (accessed 15 May 2015).



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