

**National Strategic Planning for the Less Commonly Taught Languages
(eLCTL Initiative)
Middle East Caucus
Tucson, April 6, 2003**

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Draft report compiled by Michael Bonner. Notes were taken at the Caucus meeting by Mary Margaret Popova, University of Arizona.

The Middle East Caucus met immediately after the Multi-Language Conference of the Western Consortium for Middle East Languages. Organizer of the Caucus was *Michael Bonner (MB)*, Director, Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies, University of Michigan, and Middle East Coordinator for the eLCTL Initiative. Other participants in attendance were:

- *Kirk Belnap (KB)*, Associate Professor of Arabic and Director of the National Middle East Language Resource Center (NMELRC), Brigham Young University
- *Anne Betteridge (AB)*, Director, Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Arizona
- *Terri DeYoung (TDY)*, Associate Professor of Arabic and Director, Arabic For Interactive Communication (AFIC, the NSEP-funded Flagship Center for Arabic), University of Washington
- *Erika Gilson (EG)*, Senior Lecturer in Turkish, Princeton University
- *Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami (MK)*, Senior Lecturer in Persian, New York University
- *Amy Newhall (AN)*, Executive Director, Middle East Studies Association, and Assistant Professor of Near Eastern Studies, University of Arizona
- *Kamran Talattof (KT)*, Assistant Professor of Persian, University of Arizona

I. Introductory

MB discussed the context and goals of the eLCTL project. The MSU proposal to US/ED had previously been made available electronically to participants, and copies were also brought to the Caucus, together with other materials. MB pointed out that distance learning (DL) is woven throughout the MSU proposal and must be a central issue for this ME Caucus.

All agreed that Kirk Belnap would act as MB's co-coordinator for the project. This made ample sense because of the strategic importance of NMELRC. KB is already coordinating extensively with TDY and her Center, the AFIC at University of Washington; the extent and goals of this coordination need to be made widely known within the ME language profession and the eLCTL project.

(AFIC/NSEP is mandated to achieve highest-level proficiency; NMELRC concentrates on other issues.)

Reports and deadlines (see MSU proposal to US/ED, 6-7): the first occasion will be NCOLCTL in Los Angeles, May 2-4. KB can make a preliminary presentation there. Afterwards, a full

report from the Caucus will be prepared and presented by MB, and will be available on the project website.

II. Compiling national data

1. Course enrollments. These are difficult to put together on a national basis. In thousands of teaching institutions, language courses often come and go. What exactly should be counted, and according to what rationale? What methods are available for finding and treating the data?

Another question regards literature classes, normally given at advanced levels. If all these are included, the total number of courses burgeons. Should the compiling of data be limited then to first and second year courses?

Information will be gathered regarding the NRCs. MESA can provide access to this information. However, all agreed that the NRCs alone are not enough, since ME languages are taught in a variety of institutions.

US/ED ought to be able to help through EELIAS, but in reality this has not worked out so far.

It became apparent that acquiring complete national statistics on ME languages is an enormous task which will require much time. In any case, the time and other resources available to us now make this undertaking discouraging.

KB said that NMELRC has already confronted this problem, since it also needs reliable national statistics. KB consulted with statisticians on the best approach. The recommended solution was to take a representative sample. On the basis of this sample, national statistics may then be extrapolated. The Caucus agreed that this is the best and, under the circumstances, the only available way for us to proceed.

NMELRC has already begun to implement this sampling approach. KB will provide the data when they are available. These include level of training of language instructors, as well as student demographics.

EG agreed to send national data regarding elementary and intermediate Turkish. MB and UM/CMENAS will work with MESA to compile statistics on the NRCs. [Note: this is well underway as of late May.]

The MLA has some lists of language enrollments, raw data. It is important that our data (both for NRCs and more generally) show pre- and post- September 11 enrollments.

2. FLAS Awards. TDY—with the agreement of the entire Caucus—emphasized that the FLAS program should set measurable standards and aim toward precise outcomes. Under current conditions, FLAS criteria tend toward vagueness. Awards are made to promising graduate students, sometimes with little regard to their actual proficiency in the target language, before or after the time of the fellowship. FLAS ought to be entirely a language award, including precise performance criteria.

For purposes of the final report to eLCTL, FLAS statistics will be available from US/ED.

3. *Student demographics.* Percentages and absolute numbers of heritage students are high and growing, as is well known. Should curriculum be designed with these students in mind? Several institutions have considered this question, but very few have proceeded with real programs. Other demographic factors requiring consideration are age of students and other background factors.

The sample survey being conducted by NMELRC (see above) includes student demographics. KB mentioned a survey performed by the MLA in 1990, which can shed light on relevant issues of “volatility.” In the MLA survey, Carnegie categories were used; statisticians then recommended how many from each category would serve as a representative sample. In the NMELRC survey, Arabic will be done first and will serve as a springboard for the other main languages (Hebrew, Persian and Turkish).

III. Establishing priorities among ME languages taught in the US

1. *Identifying the ME languages taught in the US.* This is an important part of the eLCTL project. However, the ME region has its own specificities which need to be emphasized, before priorities can be set.

MB had previously asked Esther Raizen of the University of Texas to stay on after the Western Consortium meeting to represent Hebrew at the Caucus; however, she was unable to do so. The Caucus agreed that Modern Hebrew must be included among the ME languages in this project. Enrollments in modern Hebrew are now about equal with Arabic enrollments nationwide.

There was brief discussion of the distinction between less- and least-commonly taught languages, which was not thought to have much meaning for ME.

The study of dialects is an important aspect of Arabic instruction. The other ME languages (at least those taught with any regularity) also have dialects, of course; however, in those cases, issues of dialect can be introduced to students within the regular sequence of curriculum. For Arabic, with its many and varied dialects, almost all major programs feature courses in at least one dialect. Questions include which dialects to choose and how far to go with them. There was agreement that all this is necessary and that there are “natural” groups of students with an interest in Arabic dialects.

Central Asian and Caucasian languages are considered as a separate region in the context of the eLCTL project. Of course these languages are often taught in Near Eastern Studies departments, and overlap can occur in the allocation of FLAS (for instance, UM/CMENAS offers FLAS for the study of Armenian). However, for the most part we can leave the compiling of numbers and the formulation of strategy in these languages to the Central Asianists.

Similarly, the languages spoken in Pakistan (Urdu, Punjabi, etc.) are basically for the South Asian section of the eLCTL project.

Otherwise, the discussion for MENA includes Arabic, Modern Hebrew, Persian, Turkish, Kurdish, Pashtun, neo-Aramaic, Berber, and possibly (but very marginally), Baluchi.

2. *Prioritizing the ME languages.* While many languages are spoken in MENA, the Caucus agreed that there are good reasons for continuing to privilege the current “Big Four,” namely, Arabic, Modern Hebrew, Persian and Turkish. These reasons include the following:

- Sheer numbers of speakers. Clearly this argument does not work in the case of Hebrew. However, the demographic preponderance of the other three can easily be shown through numbers. Similarly, the historical and cultural centrality of these languages can and should be demonstrated.
- The fact that these Big Four represent three entirely different language families (Semitic, Indo-European, Turkic). Mastery of any one of these languages facilitates study of others within the same family: so, for instance, a student who has learned Persian can readily acquire Kurdish, a student of Turkish can learn Azeri or Uzbek, and so on.
- Practical difficulties in establishing courses in LCTLs beyond the Big Four. Pashtun has been established at University of Pennsylvania and will be taught next year through Title VI and the Eastern Consortium, probably at Ohio State. However, demand for Pashtun is miniscule. Similarly, Kurdish and Berber are taught at barely a handful of places (statistics to be provided). On Central Asian and Caucasian languages, see above, III: 1. Realistically speaking, any channeling of resources toward such LCTLs tends to divert those resources away from existing programs in the Big Four. At that point, because of Title VI restraints—the requirement and high cost of maintaining three years of instruction in existing language programs—NRCs will almost always end up choosing in favor of what they already have in the Big Four. (As a rule, it is only NRCs that have the option of offering instruction in these rarer LCTLs.)
- A strategy of using the Big Four as “gateways” to other languages. Fully-developed programs of instruction in the Big Four can serve as templates for new programs in the less-known languages. KB mentioned a relevant program at BYU, in which a master teacher’s classes are videotaped for use with teaching assistants. This program builds confidence in teachers and students, and addresses the problem of developing new LCTL courses in situations where few instructors are available and other resources are scarce.

3. *Specificities of the region.* What is unique about the MENA region, from a language-teaching point of view? A number of things were discussed. All agreed that language is the essential key to understanding a culture and a society, and that other considerations—notably security issues—must not distract us from this basic point.

Regarding security issues, the NSEP was discussed at length later on (see below, Section VIII). However, at this point all agreed that it is utterly impossible to produce high-proficiency speakers in, for instance, Arabic, if the only motivation and goals present are those of intelligence and security work. There needs to be a broadly-based culture of ME language learning in the US. Some students will go far with these languages, some won’t; those who do go far will then use their skills in a wide range of professional and non-professional settings. Above all, we need to have lots of this instruction, so that Arabic and Persian become hardly more exotic than, say, French and Italian. Such a turn would yield enormous benefits, both for our

security and for our general cultural awareness. An informed citizenry is what we need. However, we are now far from such a situation. What can we do to build up ME language instruction in the public eye?

Undergraduate FLAS, now mentioned by some of our US/ED contacts as a possibility for the future, holds promise. Such a grant need not provide total funding for a student, as partial incentives would be beneficial all around. However, given the current fiscal realities, it seems unlikely that significant funding will be devoted to a new undergraduate FLAS program. Such a program might even come at the expense of the existing FLAS program for graduates—which would be utterly self-defeating.

KB and others emphasized that we need to be more flexible and efficient in handling shifts in student demand. So for instance, while we agree with the US/ED requirement that language programs should offer three years of instruction, we do not have to be obsessed by this in the case of each individual student. Even just two years of instruction can provide important exposure and broader perspective, while increasing the net overall benefit just discussed.

Some members of the Caucus expressed the optimistic view that, despite the current political crisis, MENA societies will become more open to study and travel on the part of US students, as these societies become more affected by globalization. All agreed that one semester in a MENA country could work wonders in changing a student's attitude. It is important to provide models of language instruction that give students plenty of options.

4. Characteristics of the profession within the US. These include the simple fact of orthography. Most ME languages employ non-Roman alphabets; even Turkish requires a special set of diacritics to use with the Latin alphabet. Most instructional software becomes problematic or unusable as a result.

More critical is the lack of up-to-date teaching materials. Changes in techniques and technologies have made existing materials cumbersome or unusable. So for instance, MK said that there is no Persian textbook in general use, adequate for current needs. Many individuals and units are generating instructional materials for use online—some of these were discussed in the Western Consortium meeting just before the Caucus. Materials available commercially (such as those described by Esther Raizen for Hebrew) may be good, but they present problems regarding storage and security. NMELRC has undertaken the enormous task of evaluating and coordinating all these efforts.

Most critical of all is the shortage of qualified language instructors. At the present time, demand in the US for ME languages is increasing dramatically. Of the many positions currently listed for Arabic, for instance, it is likely that some will go unfilled. Yet we find graduate students steering away from language instruction. Language instructors are widely, and correctly perceived as second-class citizens. Their pay and prestige are low and they often have little or no job security. University administrators still adhere to the old view that language instruction can be performed, more or less on the side, by a “non-permanent” faculty member or by even just a “native speaker,” or else by tenure-track faculty whose main task is teaching and research in literature or other subjects. This view does not take into account the fact that language instruction in our day

requires full professional commitment. It dooms those language instructors who are on tenure track to underevaluation of their achievements, and consequently, to the possibility of professional disaster. And it puts those language instructors who are not on tenure track into a kind of permanent limbo.

Many institutions have added on or increased such instructional categories as Senior Lecturer, outside normal tenure track. But if these categories are to be effective—in other words, if good graduate students are to be attracted to language instruction—then these instructional categories must have rewards and incentives comparable to those of tenure track itself.

This situation may well look different from the perspective of other world regions. However, for ME it works out this way. A frequent pattern is for Arabic and Hebrew to be “safe” from an enrollment point of view, thereby acquiring support from deans and administrations. Persian and even more so, Turkish, tend to be in perpetual danger, with enrollments at or even below the threshold at which universities willingly keep them alive. Yet we need these programs, and not only because of Title VI requirements.

The Caucus viewed this professional issue as a central concern for the eLCTL project overall. Since the underlying structures are rigid and huge, our audiences and contacts in US/ED and Congress may be the only ones able to effect any change. The Caucus raised a possibility regarding Title VI. Here it could be required that NRCs have language coordinators, with specific credentials and duties. These would need to be language professionals rather than specialists in, for instance, literature. This requirement could also provide an incentive for talented language instructors, by offering them titles such as “director of ___ language program,” and enhanced visibility and representation within their own departments or centers.

This is much more than a matter of mere titles. This issue of coordination should be integrated into the process whereby US/ED assesses language programs for allocation of Title VI funds (both for FLAS and NRC). In current practice, NRCs (and NRC proposals) usually list a “language coordinator” for each language, usually the tenure-track faculty member whose name appears in the catalogue. Two basic issues emerge: does this “language coordinator” actually hold authority in curriculum and personnel decisions? And what are his/her language-teaching credentials?

Similarly, current practice for institutions applying for Title VI NRC and FLAS funding is to give the impression in their proposals that their language programs are run by tenure-track and tenured faculty, whereas in reality the bulk of this teaching is performed by other faculty—and often by graduate students—even though the course catalogue lists the course under the name of a tenure-track or tenured faculty member. Now the use of graduate students may be appropriate, but only if they have received meaningful training, enough to lead to a teaching certificate.

US/ED might want to fund a project collecting real data about this issue. In any case, the Caucus believes that the Title VI/NRC funding process ought to put these questions into the forefront, so as to determine an institution’s real commitment to language instruction. (This issue has been raised by MK.)

Training of ME language instructors begins, of course, at the level of graduate student instructors/teaching assistants. MB asked whether it is worthwhile to provide such instruction to students whose declared goal is research and teaching in other areas (history, literature, etc.) and who enter language instruction merely in order to stay alive while working through their graduate programs. KB replied that such instruction should not be considered wasted. These students in other fields will benefit in a number of ways, while the language programs will still produce a number of dedicated professionals—a number which should not, in any case, be too large. The Caucus as a whole agreed.

IV. Levels at which languages are and should be offered

The Title VI/NRC requirement of maintaining three years of instruction in each language taught is reasonable and sound, as previously mentioned. However, many institutions find it quite demanding to have third-year courses, not only on their books but actually taught regularly. NRCs thinking in terms of their Title VI strategy will often allocate their resources (and their arguments with their deans) in such a way as to satisfy this requirement.

This points to the essential importance of Title VI funding for ME languages. University administrators like market arguments: if you have enough students in your class then it's fine, whatever language you may happen to be teaching. We need to insist on the importance of strategic choices, to some extent independently of strict market considerations. This means maintaining our “Big Four” languages (Arabic, Hebrew, Persian and Turkish, see above). No program is complete without all of them. (Of course there are NRCs which do not have all four, but that's another matter.) Ideally, then, NRCs—and whoever else can also manage it—will persist in maintaining at least three years of instruction in each of the Big Four languages.

This is particularly important and sensitive in the case of Persian and even more so, Turkish. Even second-year enrollments can be problematic in some programs (for instance, University of Michigan).

The emphasis on “three by four” comes at a price, of course. Does it interfere with the goal of achieving high proficiency—a Title VI/NRC goal shared by the Caucus, and indeed the profession as a whole? Three years of study certainly do not suffice for this kind of proficiency, in any ME language. But few programs can take students far beyond the third year.

Achieving high proficiency has been a primary goal of the NSEP program. As KB and TDY described it, the collaboration between NMELRC and AFIC involves a basic division of labor whereby AFIC takes primary responsibility for pushing students to the highest possible level, of course in Arabic only (since AFIC is only about Arabic).

The Caucus agreed that this is not an either-or situation. What needs to be achieved is a broadening of the total base. Many, actually most students of a language do not progress beyond a certain level. This has always been the case and will remain so. But if more students enroll in first-year classes, then that many more will progress to the highest levels—even though this will remain a select group.

V. Instructional models: academic year

Again, Title VI has formed much of the way in which these things are done. And not at all badly, either. Now we find on the one hand, increasing pressure to “produce” speakers and readers of ME languages, including at very high proficiency; while on the other hand, this “production” has traditionally relied on overseas programs and long-term exposure of language students to life in ME countries. Such long-term exposure is becoming more and more difficult to achieve, at least with predictability and confidence.

For many years the premier program for American students of Arabic has been CASA (Center for Arabic Study Abroad), a consortial arrangement which provides both a full-year and a summer-only program for advanced students of Arabic, in Cairo. When the Caucus met (at the beginning of the Iraq war) there were no reports of threats to American students in Cairo. Since then, indications seem to be mixed. But in any case, the future is uncertain. In the minds of many people, there has been a “backup” for Cairo and CASA (if things there were to become dangerous) in Morocco, where there are several Arabic-language programs involving institutional partnerships with US universities. But events in Morocco since the Caucus show that even Morocco may become dangerous, at least in the eyes of students’ parents.

The worst-case scenario, in this respect, would be the outright cancellation of overseas programs. If this happens, how do we get students to the necessary high levels?

The first thought that comes to mind is the creation of full-immersion programs inside the US. However, KB stated, and the Caucus agreed entirely, that such domestic immersion programs *cannot work during the academic year*. AFIC pushes students to the highest possible level for Arabic; but in the end, we cannot do without the overseas programs.

The Caucus came back to the same point as in the previous section: the importance of a broad base. ME programs in the US need to concentrate on increasing their first and second-year offerings, and thus increasing the total student population. New options need to be added on.

VI. Instructional models: summer institutes

Summer immersion programs in the US, by contrast, can work productively, as the example of Middlebury College shows. However, these are expensive and unwieldy and probably cannot be used on a large scale.

Experience shows that overseas programs are well suited to higher levels of language instruction. They also contribute to keeping overall attrition rates down. This does not answer the question, dealt with in the previous section, of what to do if overseas programs are curtailed or shut down.

What levels of language should be taught at summer institutes? The logic of the foregoing leads to the conclusion that in the US, it is necessary to have only one or two locations offering high-level instruction during summer. The basic need for the US campuses, regarding summer programs, is to invest in lower levels of instruction, meaning the first two years (as is generally already done at the present time).

The problems of overseas programs (whether for summer or academic year) are, of course, intertwined with current political realities. It is often parents who insist on pulling students out of overseas programs.

MK repeatedly referred to a political problem which is particularly damaging for Persian studies. Because of the US embargo against Iran, it is impossible to use US government funds for study in that country. The other Persian-speaking countries, Afghanistan and Tajikistan, are difficult for other reasons.

Here, as elsewhere, the Caucus (TDY in particular) returned to the point that Title VI does not sufficiently address issues of quality control (see above, under FLAS).

VII. Instructional models: distance learning

TDY is an authority on this, as she directed the UW program in Arabic distance learning until 2002. This was the pioneer program in the US for Arabic. It was also the only such program! Other distance learning programs in Arabic are getting geared up only now. Other ME languages lack distance learning altogether. The precise inventory will be provided in final report.

Distance learning can be expensive, labor-intensive and difficult to set up. However, it has great potential for reaching students scattered over wide areas. It can also make room for increased specialization on the part of advanced learners. By the same token, distance learning can also compensate for the shortage of teachers, which is one of the most severe problems facing the ME language teaching profession. However, Caucus agreed that distance learning cannot be a substitute for real interaction. Distance learning programs require the present of a human being on-site. Here there is a danger of “diminishing returns”: as a program expands, reaching out to more students, its outcomes and products may deteriorate after a certain critical point.

The University of California system has a major grant from FIPSE for a distance learning project, in conjunction with KB and NMELRC. [Kirk, need you to fill in here.] There was discussion of distance learning programs at the University of Chicago and at AFIC.

NMELRC is developing a distance learning program at BYU, with Muhammad Eissa.

A main strategic choice in distance learning is between synchronous and asynchronous environments. The synchronous environment is web-based and requires continual recasting. It provides clear advantages in keeping track of the administration of the program. The asynchronous environment requires more thorough preparation. However, it provides the advantage of allowing for “canning” of the product.

Which levels of what languages are appropriate for distance learning? It is well suited to advanced-level students who need maintenance and are typically more motivated to follow through. Distance learning may also be valuable for the least-commonly-taught languages.

Languages with strong enrollments need NRCs to provide leadership for community colleges and four-year colleges. Here again there is a need for coordination among NRCs.

Distance learning allows an opportunity for teachers to stay up-to-date and to develop course materials. It is also valuable for training graduate student instructors/teaching assistants and for providing (additional, supplementary) instructional support.

The Yale Consortium on Teaching is a good example of sharing among teachers. EG will send us a report on the Yale Consortium. There is great need to avoid duplication of effort and materials among instructors in different places.

There is an obstacle for distance learning in the scheduling mismatches between different institutions: different starting and stopping times, semesters vs quarters, etc. This calls for national coordination.

VIII. Other matters

KB mentioned discussion to the effect that the NSEP program may be moved to US/ED in the near future. All agreed that this would be a good thing. However, it is not clear what this would mean administratively or institutionally.

TDY, who directs AFIC, the new NSEP program at University of Washington, said that the federal sponsors of the program do not interfere at all with classrooms and students. NSEP funds students without any obligation as to future employment, including four students at CASA at the present time. NSEP also offers scholarships which carry obligations for service in government (which can include the Peace Corps).

NSEP is now working to create a Flagship Center for Persian language at UW in the near future, alongside the Arabic one (AFIC) which is already there.

There was agreement that Title VI centers need to improve levels of accountability: the problem is one of measurement: how do we measure programs against one another?