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# Middle East Studies in Italy: a field in search of an identity and recognition within and outside academia

*Giulia Cimini and Claudia De Martino*

## **Introduction**

This chapter explores the evolution of Middle East Studies (MES)<sup>1</sup> in Italy, and offers a state-of-the-art analysis of Italian academic thematic patterns, mosaic-like teachings and research. It revolves around two main research questions: how does a major ‘amnesia’ (Pace and Roccu, 2020) of the national colonial past play out in Italy’s MES tradition; and to what extent can this be ascribed to a structural dependency of the Italian academy on those in power in terms of MES agenda-setting?

We explain how far in the past a genuine scientific interest by Italian scholars towards the ‘Orient’ stretches back, partly building upon, and partly emancipating itself from, the church-led centuries-old tradition of Oriental Philological Studies. To a certain extent, we argue, a proto-scientific turn in Oriental Studies replaced earlier theological and missionary purposes with a colonial project, which was first sponsored by the liberal authorities of the new Kingdom of Italy (1861–1946) and further pursued under Fascist rule (1922–43).<sup>2</sup> Rooted in mainstream Orientalism (Said, 1978) but displaying national peculiar traits (Proglione, 2012), the development of Italian MES as an autonomous discipline has been intricately intertwined with the country’s monarchical and republican colonial history in a relationship of mutual benefit and exchange. This had a profound impact on research agendas, both thematically and in terms of resources, as Italian MES followed the ebbs and flows of politics, systematically sidelining a self-reflection on Italy’s colonial past until the mid-1990s (other than isolated individual attempts in the mid-1960s). Moreover, the ‘colonial original sin’ introduced a flawed binary perception of MES as pertaining to underrated non-European countries, thus dismissed as a minor branch of enquiry. The more markedly ‘scientific’ turn since the nineteenth century succeeded in broadening the research horizons of Italian MES but failed to emancipate them from the long-standing intellectual and financial dependence on the ruler of the day, be it the church or the state. Browsing through Italian

MES research topics, black holes stand out: while the Arab–Israeli conflict, migration flows, Islam and the ‘Mediterranean’ are recurrent themes dictated by the political contingency of the moment, in-depth analysis of colonial crimes stay largely neglected to this day and are yet not incorporated into educational curricula at all grades.

Italian MES are still struggling to get rid of this dual dependency. In 2016, however, the outrageous murder of the Italian PhD researcher Giulio Regeni while conducting fieldwork in Egypt marked a temporary discontinuity in the traditional academic alienation from politics. The Italian academy reacted – as a close-knit community – in seeking justice on behalf of the victim. Nonetheless, on this occasion it sadly discovered its vulnerability, as it was left alone to face the challenges that Area Studies research, and particularly fieldwork, are exposing scholars to: political authorities deny the academy a broad legitimacy, watering down its claims for justice through unprincipled diplomatic means.

In addition, MES still come up against substantial organisational hurdles affecting Italian academia’s functioning at large, such as the lack of structural funding and high compartmentalisation, plus suffering from its lower ranks within academia at large.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, it provides a cursory look at the historical evolution of Italian MES; it then offers an analysis of the long-standing colonial ‘amnesia’ underpinning them; third, it explores Middle East Studies’ current status within the academy, arguing against the heavy state-funding dependency still typifying it. It concludes by taking stock of MES’s quest for emancipation from political power, as well as from misperceptions Area Studies are still confronted with both within and outside academia.

### **MES in Italy: a need for emancipation from the dual church and state dependency**

All through the ‘dark centuries’ during the Middle Ages, Oriental languages continued to be studied in monasteries for exegetic and missionary purposes. Suffice it to mention the decree issued by Pope Clemente V in 1311 CE according to which the universities of Rome and Bologna had to introduce the teaching of Hebrew, Arabic and Chaldean ‘in order to promote the study of the Oriental languages and so to facilitate the conversion of the heathen’ (Landon, 1909: 271 quoted in Aurox *et al.*, 2001: 1185). Under the church’s temporal power, missionary zeal merged with scholarly interest, leading to a remarkable growth of Oriental Studies concentrated in Rome. Notably, even the secular main tradition of these studies from

the last decades of the nineteenth century to the 1940s – the so-called *Scuola Romana* – developed next to the Vatican where most of the libraries holding precious collections of books and documents were located, and not in cities with major Islamic influence, such as Palermo or Naples. Besides the study of Semitic languages, a rich tradition of travelogues thrived, mostly authored by aristocrats wandering around the French Maghreb Protectorates such as Tunisia, often sponsoring an over-romanticised exotic imaginary of the Islamic ‘Other’ in typical Orientalist style.

Besides the church’s theological input, a genuine renewal of secular MES stretched back to the Renaissance’s revived curiosity about the Orient, spurred by the transfer back to the Italian peninsula of major archival collections of the Eastern Roman Empire after its fall in 1453: the Eastern Church’s dignitaries then emigrated to the maritime Republic of Venice bringing along wide collections of ancient manuscripts, codebooks and miniatures, until then mostly unknown in the West.<sup>3</sup>

However, a more proto-scientific turn in MES as a specific and independent cluster was brought about only four centuries later by three key interrelated events: the merger of the Italian states into a single kingdom in 1861; the conquest of the city of Rome by the new state (1870) which brought the acquisition of many church collections; and Italy’s entrance into the European scramble for colonial territories in Africa. The main drive in this revival of MES was therefore political, being spurred by the newborn state’s first colonial expeditions sparked by the quest for national prestige.

The main representatives of this new ‘scientific’ turn in stark opposition to the long-standing ‘antiquarian’ model practised by the church were Michele Amari (1806–89), David Santillana (1855–1931), Leone Caetani (1869–1935) and Carlo Alfonso Nallino (1872–1938), all acknowledged as leading scientific authorities throughout Europe and beyond (Bausani, 1957).

What was consolidated was a complex academic model made of both a very rigorous scientific practice and a partisan legacy of intellectual dependency on those in power. In fact, Italian MES scholars, with the remarkable exception of Caetani, actively contributed to both the liberal and the Fascist colonial regimes’ objectives. The several successive Italian colonial enterprises<sup>4</sup> were keystones in the legitimation of the new country’s state-building project projecting itself overseas. Colonialism was a fundamental tool in the aspiration of the new state to rise among the modern European powers (Agbam, 2019; Triulzi, 2003).<sup>5</sup> Not that much different from other European societies, the ‘myth’ of progress, the moral responsibility – and especially the patriotic duty – of civilising ‘inferior others’, became part of the ideological arsenal supporting Italian colonial action. Imbued with Orientalist references, Italian MES scholars provided the authorities with

essential cultural tools to interact with local people – above all, the needed language skills and a broad insight on customs and traditions, as evidenced by the spread of dictionaries and handbooks (Soravia, 2005). In particular, in the years between the two world wars and thanks to the establishment of a number of influential public institutions,<sup>6</sup> MES came to be systematised through the publication of standard textbooks, such as the first comprehensive Arabic grammar (*Grammatica teorico-pratica della lingua araba*), published in 1937. At the same time, Orientalist scholars, and particularly those of the above-mentioned ‘School of Rome’, were offered in return appointments to public offices (Soravia, 2005) and social prestige as authorities in the field of extra-European knowledge and given first-hand access to government’s documents, sources and funding. The wide convergence between intellectual and political agendas proves the extent to which this field of study owed its *raison d’être* to political authorities. It thus comes as no surprise that most coeval Italian scholars embarked on the colonial enterprise with full enthusiasm without questioning its agenda. For instance, Laura Veccia Vaglieri (1893–1989) and the above-mentioned Carlo Alfonso Nallino, then two of the most distinguished Orientalists, made no reference in their works, and little reference overall,<sup>7</sup> to the brutality concurrently exerted by the authorities over the Arab and African people subjected to Italian rule, nor displayed any critical stance on the Euro-centred Orientalist cultural practices widespread among both the Italian leadership and the public at large. Even more deafening was the silence surrounding the introduction of racial laws in the colonies as test cases, even earlier than those applied in the mainland against Jews (Labanca, 2002: 355–60).<sup>8</sup>

The Orientalist representation of the ‘Other’ and the colonial origins of MES were instrumental in the construction of a national academic culture enforcing strict separation and a dual scheme between those studies concerning the ‘modern world’, that is, Europe and the West, and extra-European non-Western countries. This binary schematisation guided by a Self/Other dichotomy was entrenched in the missionary tradition inherited by the church as much as by liberal and Fascist authorities.

Paradoxically, in the post-1945 period and despite the wide support that both scholars and public opinion gave to colonisation, Italian colonial dominions rapidly sank into oblivion. Likewise, in the four successive decades a critical reflection on the use of academic knowledge for nationalist purposes and on colonial heritage was largely missing. The academic ‘detachment’ from politics translated into two different trends: on the one hand, a politically engaged, pro-Marxist academic component championing against other Western countries’ colonial wars without critically enquiring into Italian national colonial crimes; on the other hand, a neutral philological tradition, mostly focused upon Islam as a religion. Both streams entailed

a structural separation between academic research and its positioning with respect to politics, the result of which was the consideration of post-colonialism 'as a field that may be fascinating but really concerned almost exclusively with the history of others' (Mellino, 2006: 464).

Since the inception of the twenty-first century, and particularly in the last decade, MES have significantly evolved in Italy, mirroring a growing global context and as a result of the openness of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries to foreign scholars practising field research. This trend encouraged an already growing sensibility of Italian academics towards civil society and local agency, following the reception of the influential book *Life as Politics* by the Iranian-American scholar Asef Bayat (2010) and particularly in the footsteps of the post-2011 Arab Spring's cultural shift. This stream of scholarship started off as less compliant with state authorities' objectives.

### **Thematic lines and black spots: lights and shades of Italy's 'new' MES after 1945**

After the Second World War, Italian MES did not tackle the issue of decolonisation. Throughout the so-called 'economic boom' (1951–60) and for a decade later, few studies were devoted to colonial mandates such as Somalia, still administered as a trusteeship by the first Republican governments (Attuoni, 1953; Azzaroli and Simonetta, 1966; Meregazzi, 1954). Scanning through the publications from the 1950s to 1970s,<sup>9</sup> it stands out how Somalia, as much as Libya, Ethiopia and Eritrea, was looked upon as a distant object, with no interest to carry out any critical assessment of the long-term impact of Italian colonial action.<sup>10</sup>

Thus far, this silence is deafening compared to the debates raised – not without hesitation or contentiously – in neighbouring EU countries, such as France (see the contribution of Timo Behr in this edited volume). In comparison, Italy seemed to enjoy a positive form of 'amnesia', only a partial 'redirection' and no 'atonement' at all, as Pace and Roccu (2020) would put it.<sup>11</sup> Instead, Italy displayed a 'not guilty' identity towards its former colonies and blissfully overcame decolonisation without plunging into any internal strife. It was not until the mid-1990s that the first series of critical colonial studies appeared, preceded by the pioneering volume on the Italian brutal conquest of the Ethiopian Empire authored by Del Boca (1965). Remarkably, he was a journalist and not an academic, and only belatedly and controversially integrated at the University of Turin as a professional historian (Del Boca, 2000). The groundbreaker of Italian colonial studies made an opening in Italians' widespread self-perception as 'a good people'.

Likewise, his politically engaged colleague Giorgio Rochat (1971, 1973, 1979) sketched a first critical portrait of Marshal Pietro Badoglio (Rochat and Pieri, 1974): the man for all seasons wryly linking the most crushing military defeat of the Italian liberal regime with both a major role in the Fascist colonial expansion and the country's controversial leadership in the post-Second World War capitulation (Salerno, 2019 [1979]).

Since the 2000s a gradual awakening has taken place but MES academic knowledge filtered down little to the general audience. As the historian Nicola Labanca (2002) wrote in his seminal book *Oltremare* (Overseas), even if nowadays everyone in Italy knows by heart popular songs such as 'Faccetta nera' ('Pretty black face') and 'Tripoli bel suol d'amore' ('Tripoli beautiful land of love') of the colonial era, only a handful of citizens are able to place any former Italian colony on a map or recall the historical circumstances that brought them about. This public attitude of ignorance and denial is no longer related to the lack of critical studies on colonial history, but rather to the existence of a permanent gap between academic research and public opinion.

Many international scholars, though, denounce the collateral damage of this collective practice of denial and oblivion (see, for example, Blanchard, Bancel and Lemaire, 2006) and point to the joint will of academia and the authorities to classify Italian colonial history as a difficult page to be ascribed to a set historical age. No room whatsoever is left to the emergence of a ripe 'politics of memory' tackling sensitive issues, such as the inclusion of former colonial minorities within the national community; the need to introduce alternative remembrance days (Pace, 2022); and the necessity of launching a serious debate about reforming university and school curricula, adjusting them to recent multicultural findings. In fact, Blanchard (2006) argues that Italy has so far been spared the heated debates raging in other Western countries because it lacks its own 'Republican indigenous', that is, a grassroots movement of citizens of colonial origins challenging its national narrative from within. Exonerated from a national sense of guilt, it joyfully embarked on the Anglo-Saxon postcolonial studies' approach, rejecting detailed chronicles of events to focus on societal and anthropological aspects where colonial history is no longer given centre stage (Lacoste, 2010: 404).

While struggling to reckon with the colonial legacy, MES gradually broadened their geographic and thematic focus. From the dominant historical-linguistic approach in the 1960s, new research trends appeared in the 1970s. Indeed, a new generation of scholars came to the fore, widely influenced by the gradual opening to US academic culture. The most famous scholar of the time was Alessandro Bausani (1921–88) who coined the expanded notion of *Islamistica* (Islamic Studies) as 'the



scientific study of Islam in its global aspects', encompassing its political and anthropological elements, thus stretching beyond the simple religious facet (Bono, 1971: 372). In addition, Bausani exposed MES academic practice's lingering limits, denouncing the neglect of socio-economic issues as much as the lack of teamwork and disciplinary common standards. In 1971, to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary, the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient (IsIAO, Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente)<sup>12</sup> gathered Italian MES scholars to take stock of the discipline: the Congress contributions highlighted the predominance of historical studies, language and literature, as well as a great bulk of works still devoted to early Islam. In his Congress review article, Salvatore Bono (1971: 373) pointed to the overstretched notion of 'Oriental Studies' spanning from the Near East to Africa and lamented the same shortcomings pointed out by Bausani. His state-of-the-art review called for the further opening of the discipline to take in political science and economics, and this time his comments found a warm welcome in a quickly-changing Italian academic context, influenced by Europe's increasing exposure to US academic trends. Upon the release of the first scientific journal explicitly mentioning 'MES' in its header (*Middle Eastern Studies Journal*, 1964), the US academy had in fact initiated the brand new course of 'Area Studies', eagerly transposed to Italy. The big challenge now was to build a new field of study geographically and sector-wise much more inclusive than the former 'Near East' and no longer strictly associated with the Islamic world, to comprise the non-Muslim State of Israel (Davison, 1959).

This conceptual shift came over together with a thematic renewal in US research avenues turning to power dynamics, state-society relations and grassroots movements. Italian academia followed suit and throughout the 1980s-2000s it gradually implemented the same reading grid, reframing the field and diverting the bulk of its research efforts to address the spectrum of hegemony and counter-hegemony against the backdrop of a waning Cold War logic. The major fault line then passed between those supporting pro-Marxist, Gramsci-inspired views<sup>13</sup> in the reading of MENA wars and policies (Manduchi, Marchi and Vacca, 2017) and those staunchly shielding US interests and reading of regional dynamics. Among the latter, some designated fresh and innovative research frameworks to read traditional top-down authoritarianism in the MENA, such as the 'rentier state' concept elaborated by Giacomo Luciani, scholar and former deputy director of leading Italian energy company ENI, together with Hazem al-Beblawi (Luciani and al-Beblawi, 1987), a prominent economist and, between 2013 and 2014, Egypt's interim prime minister. Concurrently, Italian MES broadened their geographical horizon to comprise a 'Greater Mediterranean' stretching as far as the Horn of Africa and the Indian

subcontinent, thus projecting them beyond the political influence of a middle-power state such as Italy.

What paved the way to this radical cultural change was the 'Third Way' approach adopted by one of the major political parties of the time, the Italian Communist Party (PCI, Partito Comunista Italiano). By analysing the tense relationship running between Europe and its former colonies, the PCI decided – not without internal disagreement – to side with the new indigenous national movements striving for independence against European colonial powers which were obstinately attached to their shreds of power and resisted decolonisation. Srivastava (2018) rightly catches the major difference between the 'pro-Third World' approach developed in Italy and the US-inspired postcolonial studies: whereas the former was rooted in the daily fight of party members, intellectuals and activists politically supporting decolonisation processes worldwide, the latter was a critical reflection with no political strings attached, born and bred inside the academy. The strong political engagement prevailing in Italian communist culture could partly explain why attention was mainly directed to protesting against other colonial wars of the time, such as the Algeria War (1954–62) or the Vietnam War (1956–75), rather than critically processing Italy's own past crimes.

The dominant Marxist approach kick-started the thriving study tradition on the Arab–Israeli conflict, bringing many scholars, mainly historians, to focus on it from the vantage point of the Palestinians. The main representative of this major disciplinary trend was Guido Valabrega (e.g. 1967, 1999) who, despite his Jewish origins, started off his career with a thesis on the Palestinian worker and peasant movements which he identified as central for achieving pan-Arab independence. Indeed, the Arab–Israeli conflict acted as the main research focus of Italian MES over more than three decades.<sup>14</sup> In Gerges's (1991: 218) words, it was an 'obsession' besetting the field: an 'intellectual obsession' partly explained by Jerusalem being an elective place of interest for both the Catholic Church and 'its herd'.

In addition, the new field of 'Mediterranean Studies' emerging in the 1990s took the lion's share. This was due both to endogenous and exogenous factors, the former being associated with the geographical position of Italy at the heart of the Mediterranean Sea; and the latter with the influence exerted by three major international events: the outbreak of the first UN-led war against Iraq (the Gulf War) after the collapse of the binary world order (1991); the hopes raised by the Oslo Accords signed between Israel and the PLO (1993); and the enthusiasm raised by the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership launched by the European Commission (1995, the so-called Barcelona Process). In particular, the latter marked the launch of a very ambitious policy aimed at setting a new course in EU–MENA relationships, ideally establishing an area of multilateral cooperation. Along these lines, it

was especially the Italy-based but EU-led European University Institute (EUI, since 1972) that eagerly embraced the European Commission's pan-Mediterranean framework spearheading the Barcelona framework process. It did so by designing a dedicated programme, the 'Mediterranean Programme' (1999–2013), which, in the words of the Institute, placed 'the EUI at the forefront of the Euro-Mediterranean research dialogue'.<sup>15</sup>

However, this flourishing stream of 'pro-Mediterranean' studies was once again induced by and supportive of a state-led process. This overt political engagement brought many scholars of the time to overemphasise the existence of a common pan-Mediterranean identity based on shared ethnocultural features that had survived centuries of internecine conflict, while obscuring the deep colonial wounds and the wide economic gaps dividing the two shores – an academic enthusiasm soon due to wane as the peace envisioned by the Oslo Accords was stalled by the Israeli right in 1996. Moreover, the 9/11 attacks on Washington, DC and New York drew public attention to the tense relationship simmering between the West and the MENA region still shaken by deep identity and development issues. In so doing, they unveiled a potential hatred between those two 'poles' questionably referred to as 'clashing civilisations' (Huntington, 1996). Against

this backdrop, a notable exception stood out in the national academic context: the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Bologna has been leading its own independent research agenda following that of US universities. Although SAIS does not devote a specific research or study programme to the Middle East, it regularly

holds MES events, conferences and seminars. Moreover, it distinguishes itself by adopting a more policy-oriented and hands-on research approach, constantly dialoguing and confronting renowned international scholars but also local and international policy-makers. In so doing, it opens up the academic community to the wider society, and in particular to area experts outside the academy and decision-makers. However, both SAIS and the above-mentioned EUI dwell within the Italian academic context, enjoying little or no interaction with average Italian universities due to the language barrier, the different academic recruiting procedures and research histories.

In contrast to SAIS's agenda, in Italy no major attention was paid to investigating the spillover effect of the 9/11 attacks, though it is well documented that the press – probably more influenced by the international information agenda-setting – started taking more notice of events occurring in the MENA region, thus indirectly bringing MES into the limelight. Islam and the region thereby became major attractions, moving beyond academic circles: this interest was mirrored by increased editorial and news production, an astonishing mushrooming of works on the Arab-Islamic world that tripled when compared to previous years (Galleri, 2011), and a genuine

interest in the debate on Islam's potential compatibility with democracy confronting opposite perspectives (Allam, 2006; Guolo, 2007).

Heightened public interest for the MENA region was also due to the onset of incoming mass migration flows from Muslim-dominant countries, which started being perceived as a structural phenomenon and accordingly codified by the so-called 'Legge Foschi' (Colucci, 2018),<sup>16</sup> with the year 1998 hitting the psychological threshold of one million foreign migrants living in Italy thanks to the Immigration Policy Regularisation Decree issued in the same year (CESTIM, 2000).

During the decade 2010–20, MES devoted themselves to analysing the Arab Spring in all its facets, but dealt mostly with migration flows, routes and reasons. As the number of refugees from the MENA region and beyond grew year by year, together with the number of conflicts shaking the region, migration studies and geopolitics gained ground, with other global topics – such as Islamic terrorism, Gulf economies, the Sunni–Shia divide – taking a minor share too.

The Arab Spring's disillusion gradually took hold: the uprisings had brought into the limelight a new revolutionary, Internet-connected MENA generation which most Italian scholars,<sup>17</sup> in tune with their Anglo-Saxon colleagues, believed was able to reform their societies from within by toppling their unyielding governments. With their projects abruptly coming to an end, though, those short-lived hopes were dashed and with them the possibility of MENA reconciliation with so-called 'modernity', too often oversimplified and unilaterally associated with Western standards of democratic and societal progress. However, those uprisings also marked an intellectual divorce between MES scholars and the public at large, dissenting both on the well-meaning nature of protests and their outcomes. Suffice it to think that the Arab Spring, while arousing excitement amongst a consistent majority of Italian academics, soon turned into intercine bloodshed and domestic conflict, paving the way for new major migration flows deeply unpopular in Italian public opinion circles.

In the last two decades, Italian academia seemed to be willing to redeem itself by shaking off the above-mentioned tradition of complacency towards both church and state powers to embark on new avenues of independent research and severing the link with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In this context, Giulio Regeni's brutal murder came as a major shock; it acted as a wake-up call for the academic community to become even more critical of political power and to engage not only with the pressing issues of the Middle East, but also with Italian disputable institutional, entrepreneurial and lobbying activities in the region. In light of the authorities' visible reluctance to appreciate the work and protect the lives of researchers active in non-European countries (Casini, Melfa and Starkey, 2019), Italian academia, like

similar institutions elsewhere in Europe, is questioning itself about the high risks run by scholars carrying out field research. At the same time, it points to the double standard shown by Italian authorities in this regard: namely, a *de facto* lack of diplomatic protection of their fellow citizens, contrary to official statements (Bonini and Foschini, 2017). Academics also increasingly challenge the widespread perception of public opinion about MENA as dangerous areas and societies to keep away from (Wike, Stokes and Simmons, 2016). However, the never-bridged gap between academia and the public at large is widening. On one side, there is an emboldened academy ever more critical of political power; on the other, a public opinion which seemingly does not appreciate the benefits of carrying out fieldwork research in areas considered risky (Casini, Melfa and Starkey, 2019) – a dangerous hiatus that, conflating the traditional pretentious attitude of Italian academia (to keep away from mainstream media) with the constantly dropping university enrolment rates (OECD, 2020), could easily turn Italian MES into an isolated ivory tower with little or no influence on society at large, at a time when getting qualified information on the MENA is most needed.

In sum, despite the positive coming of age of Italian MES, they still suffer from major challenges. Some of the above-mentioned critiques of both Bausani and Bono still hold today, plus the inability to set an independent agenda and share it with a broader audience. Moreover, the permeability of the field by foreign scholars remains extremely low: Italian scholars continue to marginalise the production of works authored by MENA scholars, displaying weak and unsubstantial translation rates of non-European authors and including too few of them in their midst. MES scholars' ranks are getting larger, yet they still struggle to gain full recognition in a conservative academic system as a coherent and full-fledged discipline, as proved by the weaker distribution of relevant teaching positions, better illustrated in the next section below.

### **Portrayal of a field in search of recognition**

Between the 1990s and 2010s, the US-led MES gained momentum and succeeded in setting up a standard academic programme. In line with other West European countries, Italy witnessed a boom in interest for extra-European areas, as evidenced by the sharp increase in university MES enrolment rates. On both the 'demand' and 'supply' sides, this growing interest in MES translated into the setting of common academic standards, such as the introduction of Modern Standard Arabic courses, this time fully incorporated in the curricula as a fundamental linguistic requirement to obtain a master's degree (Kalati, 2005).

However, when compared to other academic domains, MES still distinguish themselves as being extremely heterogeneous, and, against the backdrop of a highly conservative, compartmentalised academic system, they pay the price for being too hybrid to be classified according to existing rankings.

In addition, they suffer from the overall structural problems affecting scientific research in Italy, among which the shortage and erratic nature of funding rank first. Opportunities for national funds are somewhat scant and scattered, and mostly earmarked by the Ministry of University and Research (MIUR, Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca) which recently split from the Ministry of Education. In 2014, for instance, one of the major research grants issued by the MIUR – the Scientific Independence of young Researchers (SIR) grant – promised to become the official support mechanism for a young generation of researchers and to privilege interdisciplinary and team-based projects, but it never saw a re-edition after the first call.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, since 1997, an important funding programme devoted to research projects of national interest (Progetti di rilevante interesse nazionale, PRIN) was progressively undermined in terms of funds and frequency of calls: from being annually issued, it became randomly announced between the years 2009 and 2016. Although the PRIN mechanism was eventually revitalised in 2017 with a quadrupled budget (ANVUR, 2018), randomness prevails, while the amounts of available funding vary widely. Financial allocations to research over the last years have swung back and forth but have remained overall low. According to the last report issued by the Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes, Italy's R&D (research and development) spending accounts for 1.32 per cent of GDP, considerably lower than the EU and OECD countries' average (1.95 per cent and 2.36 per cent, respectively) (ANVUR, 2018). The report also testifies to an uneven distribution of resources across regions, to the detriment of the south and the islands.<sup>19</sup>

In short, calls for funding are competitive, yet launched in erratic ways and not on a regular basis. All these features negatively affect research activities, by making mid- to long-term planning difficult, if not impossible. The dominant uncertainty in securing funding does not encourage long-term investments, neither in academic personnel nor in research development, and there is a significant incentive to look for alternative sources of funding, mostly European Commission grants. Therefore, it is no surprise that disciplines perceived as less 'relevant' to the country's economy, that is, those falling under the broad MES umbrella, could be further penalised at times of financial strain, as evident at smaller universities, where MES run the risk of being eliminated.

A second major fault is what we could refer to as a 'silo organisation', which mirrors a resistance and uneasiness to open up to an interdisciplinary approach. In fact, research and teaching in Italy are organised according to 367 micro 'Scientific Disciplinary Sectors' (SSD) further aggregated in Recruitment Sectors (188), then Macro-Sectors (88) and finally in macro-disciplinary 'Areas' (14). Although disciplinary boundaries fluctuate over time to accommodate societal socio-political changes, SSDs are quite stable and watertight containers (Bellotti, Kronegger and Guadalupi, 2016) conditioning the recruitment and career evaluation process, as well as funding allocation. Academic staff are thereby recruited on SSD-related grounds of expertise. For instance, in order to be eligible as associate professor, one has to pass a national competition and be evaluated by a public scientific committee reviewing the candidate's CV not only for the quality and quantity of scientific output, but also for their relevance for the SSD applied for (Bellotti, Kronegger and Guadalupi, 2016). Thus, every scholar-to-be takes into due consideration the venues for their works, as each SSD has its own list of academic journals and strict eligibility criteria to obtain the *abilitazione* (the official 'qualification'):<sup>20</sup> although academics can potentially change their affiliation throughout their career, only one per cent of them actually dare to do so (Bellotti, Kronegger and Guadalupi, 2016). This way, academic careers display little flexibility, as scholars tend to stick to their SSD only.

This can be quite problematic for Area Studies. In fact, MES are yet not merged into a single department with standardised curricula and research procedures, but rather split across a wide range of existing SSDs. Being extremely diversified in terms of both geographical coverage and approach may prove both a blessing and a curse, as it attests to their vitality but also holds makes their academic status precarious. In 2018–19, the Italian Association for Middle Eastern Studies (SeSaMo, Società per gli Studi sul Medio Oriente) carried out a thorough mapping project on Italian scholars working on this area. According to its data,<sup>21</sup> Italian MES academics are distributed across 21 SSDs grouped into five macro areas (out of 14): (1) Philology and Art History; (2) History, Philosophy; (3) Law Studies; (4) Economics and Statistics; and (5) Political and Social Sciences. Most of the 133 mapped scholars active in the field (around 55 per cent) belong to the domain of Philology *et al.*, followed by that of Political and Social Sciences (21 per cent), with the remainder distributed along other disciplines. These numbers not only point to the liveliness of MES, but also to their high fragmentation, as it is well known that they struggle with a thorny definitional dilemma about geographical and cultural boundaries as a result of their being an offspring of an 'artificial nineteenth century abstraction' (Gerges, 1991: 209). Indeed, SeSaMo is a good



example of what MES are about, grouping together scholars working on MENA and Muslim-majority countries, such as the Horn of Africa and the Indian subcontinent, as well as migrant-sending countries. At the risk of oversimplifying, we argue that MES reflect a plurality of 'Others' extremely different in their midst, covering most of what is 'left' out from alleged geopolitically 'relevant' macro-regions: this extreme geographical plurality, let alone the kaleidoscope of thematic patterns, time frames and methodological toolkits, make it difficult to find a common thread. In addition, the stigma within the university remains high: a scholar of any background working on these 'Others' will find it more difficult to be acknowledged as a mainstream political scientist, historian, jurist or economist, being perceived first and foremost as belonging to a grey area with no clear academic affiliation. As mainstream disciplines had been conceived only insofar as they deal with the West – or alternatively with global powers such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) – studies predicated on other non-European states are not clearly included. Moreover, this conceptual cleavage has practical implications: for instance, a MES junior scholar may struggle to progress towards the official 'qualification' due to a not-so-obvious match between his or her academic works and strictly defined SSD disciplinary borders, thus paying the conservative 'silo mentality' penalising interdisciplinary 'contamination' in research.

SeSaMo's mapping study also points to MES's close similarities to Italian academia's dysfunctional organisation overall. For instance, in terms of generational and geographical divide, the picture does not significantly depart from general top-down and highly hierarchic academic traditions. In line with the national average, MES scholars account for a tiny minority of full professors (9 per cent) followed by associate professors (almost 33 per cent), while non-tenure-tracked researchers and post-docs represent the true core of the research personnel (57 per cent). Likewise, most of these scholars are geographically concentrated in the north of the country (51 per cent), fewer in the south (30 per cent) and fewer still in the centre (19 per cent), reflecting regional divides. Nonetheless, two of the three oldest and most renowned universities with 'Oriental' professorships are based in Rome (La Sapienza) and in Naples (L'Orientale), respectively located in the centre and south of Italy. This has twofold negative implications. First, with the exception of the Ca' Foscari University hub in Venice, most of the scholars are spread out at minor universities neither specialised in 'Oriental' studies, nor offering specialised BA and MA MES curricula, thus carrying out their work in an insulated environment. Second, the three main research poles (Rome, Naples and Venice, and to a lesser extent Turin in recent years) draw the main bulk of resources, students and staff,



to the detriment of smaller universities, feeding into an already established trend towards university concentration.

To end on a positive note, in comparison with Italian academia displaying a wide gender gap at leadership roles on a national scale, MES stand out as showing a far more balanced ratio at senior positions (around half) – a breakthrough supposedly due, though, to their current underrating within the academic ranks.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we have highlighted the fact that Italian MES, whose geographical coverage is broader than this label straightforwardly evokes, have been suffering from an ‘original sin’, that of their colonial origin. Also, they have been constrained by two conceptual limits: the erudite, politically disengaged and nitpicking antiquarian tradition of church-led philological studies and their intellectual and organisational prostration to the political ruler of the day. Nonetheless, from the 1980s this composite discipline has progressively moved towards increasing independence, gradually taking on board a critique of colonial power dynamics. Nonetheless, until today, and unlike other European countries, Italian MES academics tend not to focus on former colonies, which fell into the broader category of former ‘Oriental Studies’ before the adoption of the US-driven academic reframing of MES. The latter are still largely overlooked in both university curricula and the media, contributing to the erasure of collective memory from public debates. The only exception is Libya, which draws public and academic attention, mostly due to its current relevance for migration and energy issues.

Notwithstanding the fact that MES research interests – both geographically and thematically – are growing far more diversified and independent from government agendas, they are suffering from the flip side of ‘self-centredness’ shared by the whole Italian academy, till recently refraining from engaging with the media to reach out to the public at large. Moreover, MES are struggling to define their status as an autonomous discipline within the academy, thus overcoming their relative marginalisation while being equally penalised by the structural, financial and organisational constraints affecting Italian universities overall. The greatest challenges looming in the near future for MES in Italy include the task of shaking off their academic inferiority complex and taking on the duty of influencing public debate on pressing and politically sensitive issues such as migration flows and Italy’s colonial legacy – two heated issues that could dictate future events in the country.

## Notes

- 1 In Italy, 'MES' does not exist as a single disciplinary university department or programme but relates to a geographic area expertise, shared out by multiple research domains. MES scholars therefore do not identify as such but according to their respective 'scientific disciplinary sectors' (SSD, *Settori Scientifici Disciplinari*).
- 2 With the exception of the Republic of Salò in the north (September 1943 to April 1945).
- 3 For instance, Cardinal Bessarione donated more than 900 books to the Republic of Venice in 1468 (Bianca, 2017: 318).
- 4 Assab and Massawa in 1881, Somalia and Eritrea in 1889 and 1890, Libya (more precisely, Cyrenaica and Tripolitania) and Ethiopia in 1911 and 1936 respectively, all rather unsuccessful in hindsight.
- 5 Above all, the most evocative events were Italy's military defeat at Adua by the Empire of Ethiopia in 1896 and Italy's 'revenge' on it with the victory of May 1936 and the proclamation of an empire in East Africa (comprising Ethiopia and the pre-existing territories of Italian Somaliland and Eritrea).
- 6 For example, the Istituto Coloniale Italiano in 1906 (Istituto Italiano per l'Africa since 1947), the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (IsMEO) in 1933, later known as the Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente (IsIAO), and the Istituto per l'Oriente Carlo Alfonso Nallino in 1921.
- 7 See, for instance, Cresti (2004) on the mild critiques by Carlo Alfonso Nallino of the 'brutal acts' perpetrated by Italian authorities at the expense of the peaceful Libyan population in 1930.
- 8 Among others, the 'Defense of the Race' Law of 20 December 1937, the royal decree law of 17 November 1938 banning mixed marriages, and Law 1004/XVII of 29 June 1939 introducing the crime of 'damage to the race prestige'.
- 9 A useful source for the scholarly production and bibliographic collections in Italy is the website *Internetculturale* at [www.internetculturale.it](http://www.internetculturale.it).
- 10 The first critical essays on Somalia were published only in the 2000s by Quartuccio (2001) and Hagi Scikei (2001).
- 11 'Amnesia' is to be understood as the complete erasure from memory of the national colonial past; 'redirection' as the process of self-centring by the past colonial power in all relations with its former dominions; and 'atonement' as the inclination to carry out restorative justice gestures to former colonies in both symbolic and financial terms.
- 12 The IsIAO was closed by decree in 2012 for economic reasons after the 2008 financial crisis.
- 13 This approach revolved around the scientific journal *Studi storici*, founded in 1959 as a quarterly review of history, published by the Istituto Gramsci and distributed by Carocci Editore.
- 14 Among the more than 300 works published on the Arab-Israeli conflict between 1960s and the early 1990s, see Goglia (1980), Savioli (1988), Capanna (1989), Maltese (1992) and Codovini (2000).

- 15 Since 2016, the 'Mediterranean Programme' has morphed into a new research track named 'Middle East Directions' (MEDirections), hosted by the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies. In line with the European Commission's research guidelines in the Horizon Research programme and the Union of the Mediterranean's Partnership on Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area (2018–28), the MEDirections Programme aims to turn the EUI into the single greatest Mediterranean research hub bringing together scholars from the two shores of the Mediterranean Sea.
- 16 Law no. 943 of 30 December 1986 establishing 'the equal treatment in the placement of extra-European migrant workers and combatting clandestine migration'.
- 17 By making a simple bibliographical search using the keyword 'Arab Spring', *Internetculturale* shows up twenty-seven records which mostly express a genuine interest and confidence in the Arab Spring's societal renewal projects.
- 18 The MIUR call was plagued by many shortcomings and drew a number of criticisms from the same young researchers it was meant to support: first of all, it succeeded in financing only 4.3 per cent of the submitted projects, for overall lack of funding and not based on scientific reasons; second, the budget allocated to each of the only 216 projects eligible was deemed insufficient by the same beneficiaries. The MIUR did not provide any explanation about the cancellation of 'call for bids' in the following years.
- 19 The overall number of university-enrolled students has dropped by 65,000 between 2005 and 2015, more than half (35,000) of whom have been missing from the universities of the south (Intravaia and Zunino, 2016).
- 20 That is, the title of associate or full professor. For the position to become effective, one has to pass a local competition and be hired by a university before the title acquired expires, as it is valid only for a given period of time.
- 21 The following numbers and percentages are the authors' personal elaboration (and approximation) based on the original data collected and kindly made available by SeSaMo.

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