



Honoring Fouad Ajami, SAIS Middle East Studies Director from 1980- 2011

Fouad Ajami came to SAIS from Princeton in 1980 to direct Middle East Studies. His first decade would be fruitful, with the publication of the classic *Arab Predicament*, followed by a Mac Arthur prize and the publication of a second seminal book, *The Vanished Imam: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon*, in 1986. Having leaped to the front stage of policy debate from the platform of scholarship, Fouad Ajami produced political writings entangled with the turbulence of the following decade. An idealist, he concluded from the invasion of Kuwait and the Bosnian war that American power should be used to rescue populations at risk. A pragmatist, he looked at the Peace Process as a collective awakening to reality.

In the unusually calm late 1990s, Fouad Ajami returned to the elusive question of Arab modernity with *The Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation's Odyssey*. In parallel, he dabbled with skepticism in the then dominant paradigms of globalization, convergence and peace. Commerce alone would not, he suspected, bring about the social and political changes he wished for. History called him again brutally in September 2001. For the next 10 years, his work was associated with the American efforts to reshape the region, in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Lebanon. A book traces this journey: *The Foreigner's Gift: The Americans, the Arabs, and the Iraqis in Iraq*. At the end of that tiring road, the Arab Spring bloomed as the apotheosis of the change he had aspired to in his classes and writings.

Fouad Ajami left Middle East Studies in 2011 with just 36 months to wrap up his scholarship and cherish his family. Instead of respite, Fouad was drafted as a public defender of the cause of the Syrian rebellion, which unraveled as a metaphor to his own battle with illness. Fouad Ajami is no longer but history continues to rage in the region he helped to illuminate. In a lifetime, Fouad Ajami journeyed from quiet, agrarian Arnoun—to his students the most famous locale of South Lebanon—to the intense metropolitan life of New York City. This theme, transition, bound his personal life to the broader history of the region.

For 31 years, Middle East Studies students at SAIS have gotten to know Fouad Ajami in the intimacy of his Thursday morning breakfast seminar. It is there that he tested the thoughts that would find their way into his editorials, it is there that he elaborated on the subtext of his public positions, it is there that he shared for hours on end the anecdotes and personal experiences that had shaped his views of Arab societies. No one knew better the complexity of his thinking, the intimate, passionate, and conflicted relationship he had with the Middle East than the generations of students he taught. Fouad Ajami's focus on the small, on the micro, disarmed tension about big regional issues. Fouad Ajami was a public intellectual known for public positions, but under his directorship, the Middle East Program has never allowed partisanship. Students learned to be scholars, not militants, and to pay attention to facts and details. There was no "anti-" in the teachings of Fouad Ajami, no rage, only down to earth pragmatism, a distaste for nonsense, and a keen awareness of the mechanics of history. All of us, his students, are his legacy, and the best tribute to him from us is to continue his effort. Wherever you may be, we hope your work will give you the opportunity to contribute to the region transitioning into a peaceful modernity.

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