

# THE MIDDLE EAST

INTO RESEARCH NOT POLITICS

## M.E. scholars meet in Ann Arbor

Every November America's Middle East academics gather to get reacquainted.

"This is the best opportunity for direct exchange of scholarly information, plans and gossip for Middle East specialists that we have in this country," noted Richard Bulliet, executive director of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) and Columbia University history department professor.

The latest gathering was held at the

University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Discussions on topical issues such as the situation in Iran and the Camp David agreements were well attended. Others on such obscure subjects as "Ottoman economic history" and "Aspects of saintliness in Islam" were but forums where painstakingly researched academic findings were presented and began their long journey to one scholarly journal or another.

MESA has about 1,350 members, primarily in the US and Canada, and there are also 150 associate members from the worlds of government, business or public service organisations. The association has a quarterly journal, a twice yearly bulletin with timely comments and teaching suggestions, and a new newsletter covering organisational matters, which appears three times a year.

Sixteen book publishers exhibited their wares to the many hundreds who attended the 12th MESA annual meeting. A variety of Middle East films were shown. And a Lebanese folk group entertained guests at the annual banquet where the association's new woman president, Afaf L. al-Sayyid Marsot of the University of California in Los Angeles, was presented.

MESA is a non-political organisation. "The association doesn't even have a mechanism for determining any political policies," Bulliet noted. "I can't think of any relevant political issue in which we don't

have strong advocates on both sides. Individuals try to correct the government or the press, but the membership doesn't feel that the organisation as a whole has that kind of responsibility."

Bulliet added his own personal caveat about political scientists in this discussion of MESA's complete lack of political undertakings. "I have an enormous distrust of political scientists," he began. "Social scientists and political scientists now seem to feel they know what is right. The people attracted to this field have a shade more megalomania than your average professor. Scratch a political scientist and you have someone who wants to rule the world. So I don't want to see this group making policy. Psychologically they aren't properly motivated."

Many at MESA's gathering wouldn't accept the outlook of Bulliet, a medieval scholar whose Harvard University Press study on the history of camel domestication is something of a classic.

MESA then is pretty much an in-house professional association loosely linking American and Canadian Middle East professors. In addition it is the starting place for Middle East academics with their fresh Ph.Ds looking for their campus niche. "We relate much more to the regularly constituted Middle East programmes across the country," Bulliet noted. "A student looking for a job will come to us - this is our orbit." □