

Brandeis Professor Advises Hanging Out With Terrorists

By Benjamin Baird (August 2017)



The Brandeis Logo: Truth.



Students studying the modern Middle East at Brandeis University, America's only non-sectarian Jewish-sponsored college, are subjected to the disturbing, pro-Islamist worldview of Professor Pascal Menoret. One of his syllabi for

spring semester 2017, obtained by this reporter, assigns readings sympathetic to violent jihadists and requires students to conduct a lengthy interview with a known Islamist. In his words, "Hanging out with Islamists is crucial to the comprehension of their politics."

The Renée and Lester Crown Professor of Modern Middle East Studies, [Menoret](#) specializes in the people and culture of Saudi Arabia, the epicenter of Wahhabi Islam. Despite the strict and brutal application of Shariah law in the Arabian peninsula, his [scholarship](#) overwhelmingly frames Islamists as the marginalized victims of state oppression.

Menoret teaches [five](#) anthropology courses, two of which are examined below. The syllabi for "Islamism" (Anthropology 141a) and "Culture and Power in the Middle East (CPME)" (Anthropology 118b) exemplify his soft approach to Islamism. By assigning texts by Islamist sympathizers who in some cases have embedded with their subjects, Menoret portrays these radicals as harmless souls seeking escape from imperialist oppression through spiritual rebellion.

The readings for "Islamism" include Francois Burgat's [Face to Face with Political Islam](#), which attacks the West's "collective ignorance" of Islam and attempts to hide its religious foundation by cloaking it in Arab nationalism: "Much more than a hypothetical 'resurgence of the religious,' it should be reiterated that Islamism is effectively the reincarnation of an older Arab nationalism, clothed in imagery considered more indigenous." Throughout the work, Burgat sympathizes with [Islamism](#), which he prefers to call "political Islam," to imply a nonexistent moderation derived from adopting Western political ideas.

Also assigned is Charles Hirschkind's [article](#) "The Ethics of Listening: Cassette-Sermon Audition in Contemporary Egypt," which recounts the author's acculturation through participation in a series of sessions with Egyptian Islamists as they listen to recorded copies of radical sermons. The reader almost forgets that Hirschkind is in the company of violent extremists, as they smoke cigarettes, drink tea, and tell jokes, all the while listening to impassioned exhortations from Islamist tapes banned in many Muslim countries.



Pascal Menoret (photo credit: Louis Monier)

Naturally, Menoret assigns CPME his own 2014 [book](#) *Joyriding in Riyadh: Oil, Urbanism, and Road Revolt*. The culmination of years of study in Saudi Arabia, [Menoret admits](#) he intended the book to "critique widespread stereotypes on Arab youth and to show that Islamic groups were not the hotbeds of religious radicalization." By accompanying young Islamist men as they participate in exhilarating street races, Menoret echoes the theme so common in his classroom: Islamists are nothing more than harmless, innocent reflections of rebellious American youth—a Muslim version of [Fast and Furious](#).

But Menoret's thesis collapses when, after spending time in a rural Saudi village, he is [threatened](#) with conversion and later forcibly expelled by conservative tribesmen grown weary of his presence. As a Western tourist, [he is warned](#) that his host's relatives "have weapons, and they have been on the

lookout since this afternoon.” Apparently, these harmless Islamists were not as enamored with his cultural exoticism—a fitting example of the dangers of jihad tourism.

CPME’s readers of Paul Rabinow’s book [Reflections of Fieldwork in Morocco](#) are instructed—as noted in [a review](#) that quotes the book—to “completely subordinate one’s own code of ethics, conduct, and world view, to ‘suspend belief.’” Jettisoning one’s critical faculties is a prescription for being propagandized, a perversion of higher education. Since Islamist ideals are so radically incompatible with universally acknowledged standards of human decency, most students can accept them only by suppressing their reason and morals.

By assigning one of the most politically divisive apologias for Islamism, Faisal Devji’s [essay](#) “The Terrorist as Humanitarian,” Menoret teaches students in CPME that Islamists are simply humanitarians and philanthropists. Devji quotes approvingly Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri and praises their alleged underlying messages of victimhood and charity in the name of Islam. He even contends that humanity “lies at the heart of militant action”—an indefensible claim that whitewashes cold-blooded murder.

Yet students enrolled in “Islamism” are taught that their preconceived notions of Islam and Muslim culture are necessarily bigoted. Key among its assignments is the late Edward Said’s [Orientalism](#), the [fatally flawed](#) and regrettably influential work that proclaims a “subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic peoples and their culture.” (In fairness, Menoret assigns Bernard Lewis’s comprehensive critique of *Orientalism* in CPME, but in this course, Said stands alone.)

Menoret shares Said’s antipathy for Israel, having supported

the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement as a professor at New York University's Abu Dhabi campus [by signing](#) a petition aimed at convincing the University to sever Israeli academic and business relationships. More broadly, his syllabi indicate his predisposition for Said's unfounded condemnation of Western scholarship on the region.

Accordingly, Menoret frames ethical questions in the language of postcolonialism. In the CPME-assigned [Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter](#), author Tal Asad describes post-WWII anthropologists as "Europeanized elites" studying the "'traditional' masses in the Third World" as part of their "bourgeois disciplines."

For Asad, Western research on the Middle East can only occur within a dynamic of "power relationships" between the "dominating" Europeans and the "dominated" non-Europeans. Consequently, he argues that most traditional scholarship on the region has been conducted "toward maintaining the structure of power represented by the colonial system."

Menoret's reliance on postcolonial theory reflects its disproportionate influence on the field of Middle East studies. Furthermore, he is part of a much larger coterie of scholars who whitewash Islamism to portray it as harmless despite all the chaos and violence it has spawned across the Middle East and in the West. This approach is disarming the West by blinding it to the enemies of liberal, pluralistic Western culture—a deadly error we cannot afford to commit.

The [Crown Center](#) for Middle East Studies at Brandeis claims to be "committed to a balanced and dispassionate approach to the

Middle East.” Yet, by “hanging out with Islamists” and demanding his students do the same, Menoret reveals the cynicism and hollowness at the Crown Center’s core.

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