

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN  
REGENTS COMMUNICATION

**SUBJECT:** Department of Near Eastern Studies

**ACTION REQUESTED:** Rename as the Department of Middle East Studies

**EFFECTIVE DATE:** September 1, 2018

The dean and the Executive Committee of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts request approval to rename the Department of Near Eastern Studies as the Department of Middle East Studies, effective September 1, 2018.

Faculty in the Department of Near Eastern Studies voted on this matter in the faculty meeting of April 24, 2017. The outcome was unanimous support for the name change. The competing denominations of Near East and Middle East have long confused audiences in the academy and beyond. These denominations are the result of a twofold genealogy in the field. In the early modern and modern periods, Biblical studies expanded to include other regional languages (e.g., Semitic), and in the wider social and historical context, these areas became known as Near Eastern Studies, in analogy to French (*proche orient*) or German terminologies (*Vorderer Orient*, *Naher Osten*). As such, they have been part of a larger field of Oriental studies that comprised nearly any region east of Europe.

On the other hand, the area was known in contemporary politics since the colonial era as the Middle East, so that the modern political (and directly colonialist) occupation would be known as Middle East Studies. This dichotomy is on display at Michigan, where Near Eastern Studies, which originated in Biblical studies and for the longest time had a powerful presence of scholars in the ancient and Biblical fields, operates next to the Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies, with many of their audiences unaware that they both cover the same geography and significantly overlap in terms of their core faculty. While this division has been in place for more than half a century, it is not tenable any longer on intellectual and practical grounds.

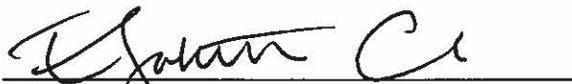
While many cherish the heritage of Near Eastern Studies, the current generation of students overwhelmingly approaches the region through its contemporary culture and politics, and thus identify it spontaneously as the Middle East, while fewer and fewer are aware of a longstanding academic field of Near Eastern Studies. Enrollment comparisons between modern Arabic and Hebrew versus Akkadian, Hittite, and even Biblical Hebrew speak for themselves. Hires and curricular decisions have steadily shifted the center of gravity towards the modern and the Middle East. Occasional discussions around future directions of the department have regularly pointed to areas that are more contemporary. While none of these observations should be taken to mean that we would consider the ancient fields that were the basis for the current name obsolete – far from it – we have conclude that it is time that the name should reflect these new realities. On a practical level, in reviewing course advertising and student recruitment, it was discovered that many students found the name confusing and do not use the term Near Eastern

when searching for courses on what they call the Middle East. They simply do not recognize the current NEAREAST label as pertinent to their interests. In other words, we have come to realize that our traditional name has come to be an obstacle between our department and its audience. Instead, we want to make it a bridge.

We recommend approval of the recommendation of the Executive Committee of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts that the Department of Near Eastern Studies be renamed as the Department of Middle East Studies, effective September 1, 2018.

Recommended by:

Recommendation endorsed by:



Andrew D. Martin, Dean  
Professor of Political Science and Statistics  
College of Literature, Science, and the Arts



Martin A. Philbert  
Provost and Executive Vice President  
for Academic Affairs

June 2018