

International Conference on China in the Middle East

Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie

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Peking University

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9:30 a.m.

1. INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you, Professor (Kemal) Silay.

It is a pleasure to be back at Peking University for this international conference on China in the Middle East.

I want to commend Professor Silay as well as Peking University's Dr. Zan Tao—who we were honored to have as a visiting scholar at Indiana University recently—and Dr. Tuğrul Keskin of Portland State University for their efforts in organizing this conference.

I also want to thank Professor Zhang Fan, chair of the Department of History at Peking University, and this morning's keynote speaker, Dr. Pan Guang of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.

Indiana University is also proud of its longstanding relationship with Peking University, one of China's leading universities. We have been partners since the 1990s, and have strong connections in history, medicine, the humanities, and graduate education. In 2008, I was honored to sign an agreement that deepened our partnership with Peking University in areas such as law, computer science, informatics, and music.

I look forward to meetings later today with Provost Gao and with the leaders of PKU's School of New Media, particularly in light of our establishment at IU of a new Media

School within our College of Arts and Sciences, which has merged our programs in the School of Journalism with our programs in telecommunications; communications and culture; and film studies.

All of these areas are changing rapidly, and we look forward to talking with Provost Gao about potential future partnerships between our universities in media studies.

2. CHINA IN THE MIDDLE EAST

As this conference demonstrates, the politics, cultures, religions, and languages of the Middle East have long been a source of intense interest around the world—and this remains true today.

China, of course, has long-standing connections in the Middle East, and is home to a large and well-established Muslim population.

But, as China rightfully takes its place on the world stage, the country's interest and involvement in the Middle East continues to grow.

The principal topics that will be explored over the two days of this conference reflect some of the main implications of that growth as well as some of the major geopolitical issues of the 21st century.

Today and tomorrow, you will discuss

- China's political and economic interests in the Middle East,
- its policies in the region in the wake of the Arab Spring,
- the nation's role as a potential broker of peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Chinese national debate surrounding that conflict,

- and China's strategic relations with Iran, including the issue of nuclear non-proliferation.

You will also explore the myriad implications of the rapid and sustained economic growth China has experienced over the past three decades, including the emergence of energy security as a major concern given that the majority of China's oil imports come from the Middle East.

And you will consider China's relations with Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iraq from historical and literary perspectives, and examine China's bilateral and multilateral security cooperation in the region, as well as the country's promotion of cultural exchange by establishing Confucius Institutes in the Middle East and by expanding cooperative academic programs with Middle Eastern universities.

As you explore these important topics, you will be making important contributions to scholarship as you bring to bear a wide range of expertise and situate these issues within an international context.

3. INDIANA UNIVERISTY'S STRENGTHS AND INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Supporting international conferences like this one is one of the primary reasons we established the IU China Office here in Beijing.

Given the many deep connections between China and Indiana University, we established the office, in part, to help us serve our Chinese students, our many Chinese alumni, and our American students studying in China more effectively.

The office also supports scholarly research and teaching, workshops and conferences like this one, study abroad programs, distance learning initiatives, executive and

corporate training, and it allows our China-based students, alumni, and university partners to connect directly with IU.

Indiana University's deep commitment to free and open academic exchange and collaboration is also reflected in our activities in the Middle East, which transcend political and social divisions.

IU has very strong ties, for example, to the Israeli academic community, including flourishing student exchange programs with several institutions, including a nearly three-decade-long relationship with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, one of Israel's leading universities. These ties continue to flourish, in part, because we have one of the oldest and largest Jewish Studies programs in the United States.

One of the first international trips I made as president of Indiana University was to Israel and the West Bank in 2008 as part of a delegation of American university presidents which had the aim of exploring closer academic and research ties between the two nations.

Last year, I also had the pleasure of leading IU delegations to Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

We have around 600 students from Saudi Arabia at Indiana University, and the number of Saudi students at IU is growing quickly. Saudi Arabia has rapidly become one of the leading countries of origin for international students at IU. Saudi students are currently the fourth largest international student body at IU.

And Turkey consistently ranks among the top 10 nations of origin for IU's international students.

IU's longstanding ties with Turkey date back to at least the 1930s, when a Turkish graduate student became the first person to earn a doctorate in economics at IU.

In 1997, the Republic of Turkey established an Ottoman and Modern Turkish Studies Chair Professor in the Department of Central Eurasian Studies at IU Bloomington, and as a result of a worldwide search, Professor Silay was appointed as its permanent holder with tenure.

IU is also home to the only Turkish Flagship Center in the United States. The Language Flagship, a project of the National Security Education Program in the U.S. Department of Defense, chose Indiana University Bloomington as the only location for its program in Turkish and other Turkic languages.

IU has been teaching these languages for more than four decades and we have an impressive range of scholarly and educational activities.

We also have established at IU the Center for the Study of the Middle East, which has been designated as a Title VI Comprehensive National Resource Center by the U.S. Department of Education. This prestigious designation is shared by IU's center and only 14 other Middle East centers at universities across the United States. IU's Center for the Study of the Middle East promotes multi- and inter-disciplinary knowledge of the Middle East by supporting academic programs, scholarship, public outreach, and support for educators and students at all levels.

In light of these strengths and our ties to a number of universities across the Middle East, Indiana University is exploring opening one of our next international offices in Istanbul. Our China office was our first international office, and last year we also dedicated an office in New Delhi, India.

4. CONCLUSION

I do hope that your time here today and at the IU China Office tomorrow will be productive and intellectually stimulating.

This conference is a wonderful example of how cooperation between Indiana University faculty and colleagues in China can lead to the realization of admirable goals that can improve research and scholarship in both our countries and can benefit scholars and institutions around the world.

I am sure that this visit of the Indiana University delegation to Beijing will be just one of many more such visits to come, so I look forward to seeing you again, and I wish you all the best as you engage in your important work.

Thank you very much.