

## SOCIAL SCIENCES

# DOD Funds New Views on Conflict With Its First Minerva Grants

The Pentagon makes a \$45 million bet that social scientists can help it understand the world—and protect the United States

Mark Woodward is an unlikely soldier in the global war on terrorism. A professor of religious studies at Arizona State University (ASU), Tempe, and a lifelong academic, he says “a lot of my research involves sitting in coffee shops and talking to people.” Woodward has spent much of the past 30 years trying to understand how local communities throughout Southeast Asia preserve their own religious and cultural identities as radical and violent Islamic movements gain strength around the world.

Currently a visiting professor at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, Woodward recalls a recent visit to a mosque nearly destroyed by an earthquake. A Saudi Arabian foundation that was financing its reconstruction also wanted to provide a teacher who would disseminate Wahabi-style Islam. Village elders politely but firmly declined the instructional assistance, Woodward says. “This is Wahabi colonialism,” said one local leader. “We don’t need Arabs to teach us Islam.” That reaction is why Woodward believes that “the forces of locality” will prevail in a clash of ideologies. “I think that attempts to establish hegemonic Islam are going to fail, through very creative uses of traditional rituals and language,” he says.

U.S. military leaders want to find out if he’s right. Last month, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), which is waging wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and spending billions at home to counter the threat from Islamic extremists, chose Woodward to lead a team that proposed a study of “the diffusion and influence of counter-radical Muslim discourse” in Southeast Asia, West Africa, and Europe. The project is one of seven led by social scientists that were selected earlier this month to receive a total of \$45 million from a controversial DOD program called the Minerva Research Initiative. The Pentagon plans to issue a

second solicitation this spring of roughly the same size, and officials have hinted strongly that there will be subsequent rounds.

Minerva is a banquet for a field accustomed to living on scraps. But some social scientists see it as a threat to academic freedom. They cite the military’s history of questionable research practices and worse going back to the Vietnam War, running through the interrogation of prisoners at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and continuing with the much-maligned Human Terrain Teams now in Afghanistan. They say DOD’s choice of topics reflects a narrow, military perspective on the world. In addition to “the strategic impact of religious and cultural changes in the Islamic world” that Woodward’s project addresses, DOD solicited proposals relating to “terrorist organizations and ideologies,” the relationship between Chinese technological and military growth, and Ba’athist Party materials seized at the start of the Iraq war. Critics also worry that the lure of so much money will cause researchers to shift their attention from more important issues.

“The problem is the process,” says Brown University professor Catherine

*“In the cyberworld, anybody can play. We need ... the conceptual tools to couple the virtual and the real worlds.”*

—NAZLI CHOUCRI



**Imagemakers.** A 2007 video of Osama bin Laden, released by a group that monitors terror messages, is part of the cyberworld of diplomacy that Nazli Choucri (*inset*) is studying.

Lutz, one of many anthropologists who have been scornful of the program. “DOD shouldn’t be involved because it’s not likely to fund the best work. My fear is also that DOD will choose researchers who agree with them about the problems that the world is facing.”

DOD officials say they’ve bent over backward to address those concerns. When Secretary of Defense Robert Gates unveiled Minerva last spring in a talk to the Association of American Universities, he acknowledged the often “hostile” relationship between the military and social scientists and pledged that Minerva would abide by a policy of “complete openness and rigid adherence to academic freedom and integrity.”

Toward that end, DOD held a well-attended community workshop in August. And there’s a Web site run by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), a venerable New York City–based nonprofit research organization, that has published 18 essays on the controversy ([www.ssrc.org/essays/minerva/](http://www.ssrc.org/essays/minerva/)). Webmaster Thomas Asher, an anthropologist by training, says he hopes the dialogue will improve future solicitations; ironically, SSRC’s own bylaws preclude it from accepting military funding.

William Rees, deputy undersecretary of defense for labs and basic research, who oversees the Minerva initiative, emphasizes that the research is unclassified and that results will be posted on the project’s Web site ([Minerva.dtic.mil](http://Minerva.dtic.mil)). He says his goal is to attract the best researchers, to expand the pool of scientists addressing these questions, and to foster collaborations among researchers from many fields. An examination of the first cohort of winners suggests that he’s come close to hitting all three targets.

DOD received 211 initial queries from researchers seeking funding in one of five categories, four times the number community leaders had told him to expect, says Rees. “Rees was worried about getting the top researchers to participate,” says Howard Silver, executive director of the Washington, D.C.–based Consortium of Social Science Associations. “My sense is that he got the A team.”

Many of the Minerva grantees already have ties to the defense establishment. One such grantee is David Matsumoto, a professor of psychology at San Francisco State University in California. His team will study the role of emotion in stok-

ing or quelling ideologically driven movements. A longtime collaborator with psychologist Paul Ekman in his work on microexpressions, Masumoto has helped train airport screeners for the Transportation Security Administration and has worked with several DOD agencies over the years on what he calls “behavior-detection techniques.”

On the other end of the career continuum is Jacob Shapiro, an assistant professor of public affairs at Princeton University. A former U.S. naval officer who was on active duty from 1998 to 2002, he completed his postdoc only 1 year ago and is lead researcher on a project to understand the economics of counterinsurgency movements around the world. “I entered the academic community because I felt there were not enough veterans in the academy, and that is not a good thing,” he says. “The military represents all of society and so should the academy.”

Rees hopes the Minerva program will bring together scientists who haven’t had a chance to work on a problem of mutual interest and allow small interdisciplinary groups to expand their activities. That’s what Nazli Choucri, a political scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, is hoping to accomplish with her project to examine cyber international relationships. The team includes foreign policy and national intelligence heavyweights such as Harvard University’s Ashton Carter and Joseph Nye, as well as Internet and artificial intelligence gurus such as MIT’s David Clark.

“Our current theories are inadequate, and what we know now is anecdotal,” says Choucri. “In the cyberworld, anybody can play. We need a fuller vocabulary to understand cyberspace as an environment, as well as the conceptual tools to couple the virtual and the real worlds.” Choucri is in line to receive the largest single Minerva grant, which Pentagon officials expect to be approximately \$10.4 million over 5 years. (Grantees are still negotiating with DOD on funding levels.)

That type of funding is on a scale most social scientists have only dreamed about. “We’re talking about a huge order of magnitude bigger” than a typical grant, says Woodward, who requested \$5.8 million. Woodward is working with Muhammad Sani Umar of Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, an expert on Islam in western Africa, and David Jacobson, a professor of global studies at ASU, who’ll examine Islamic communities in France and Germany. The project will combine ethnographic fieldwork at each location with global survey data on public attitudes toward Muslims. It will also feature a Web component to track the flow of



**Bombs or bombast?** Patricia Lewis (*inset*) and her team will explore the context of materials seized during the U.S. invasion of Iraq in April 2003, like these purported descriptions of chemical and biological weaponry.

ideas across the various Islamic communities and analyze their influence on daily life.

For labor economist Eli Berman of the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), the Minerva grant is a game changer. He is working with Shapiro to understand what it takes for communities to counteract grass-roots movements such as Hamas or the Tamil Tigers. “Instead of just a summer salary and a graduate student, I’ll be able to do surveys and experiments around the world, partner with additional organizations, and bring on postdocs as well as several graduate students,” he says. “We’ll be able to accomplish things in a matter of years rather than decades.”

Berman is also a research director for the UC-wide Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, based at UCSD, that received a grant to explore how China’s growing technological prowess is fueling the modernization of its military forces. The driving force behind the project is the institute’s Tai Ming Cheung, a former journalist who has seen the literature on the topic explode over the past 2 decades in step with China’s booming economy.

“Tai Ming has been working on this for years as the lonely monk scholar, and this grant will allow us to engage many other researchers,” says Susan Shirk, who directs the institute and is the named principal investigator on the grant. “Most of the social scientists working in China are looking at rural development, or urbanization, issues that are a lot easier to study and less sensitive. It’s hard to find

academic jobs from which you can look at [Chinese] national security issues.”

None of the grantees who spoke to *Science* expressed concern about limitations on their research or on how it could be presented. “We’re not in the business of providing DOD with information that is tactical or operational,” says Woodward. “This is basic social science research. It’s not telling the government what it wants to hear.”

In fact, one grantee who has written about “why we got it so wrong” on the status of Iraqi biological weapons before the U.S. invasion hopes her project will help policymakers understand that uncertainty is inevitable and that perfect knowledge is impossible. Patricia Lewis, a nuclear physicist who directs nonproliferation research at the Monterey Institute of International Studies in California, will lead a team analyzing materials captured in 2003 that many social scientists say do not even belong in U.S. hands. “I’m interested in how we interpret information and how we too often see things in the light of what we already believe,” says Lewis. “Biases are everywhere, and the worst sorts are those that aren’t disclosed.”

That culture of openness apparently means something different to political scientist James Lindsay of the University of Texas, Austin, who refused to discuss his Minerva project, which is titled “Climate Change, State Stability, and Political Risk in Africa.” He told *Science*, “I don’t owe you an explanation, and I have nothing to say about the program.”

—JEFFREY MERVIS

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