

**Cole M. Bunzel '08 \*18**  
Mountain View, CA

*Recent Graduate School Alumni Trustee Candidate*

A fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, Cole Bunzel is a noted scholar of Middle East history and politics with a research focus on Saudi Arabia and militant Islamism. His interest in the Middle East began early. Even in his college application to Princeton, he notes, “I wrote that I intended to study Arabic and pursue Middle East studies, and that is what I did and have continued to do ever since.” His journey would include ten years spent living and studying in Princeton, three degrees from the University, and a book published with Princeton University Press.

A Near Eastern Studies major, he spent summers studying Arabic in Syria and Egypt, and after graduation spent a year in Damascus studying advanced Arabic with the Center for Arabic Study Abroad (CASA). He then took a job as a research assistant at a Washington think tank before pursuing a master’s degree at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, working as an analyst at the Defense Intelligence Agency during his second year of study.

On completing the Hopkins program, he had the opportunity to enter government service full-time. He chose instead to return to Princeton to pursue a Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies. He credits his adviser with “opening doors for me to study the two subjects that continue to be my main research interests: the movement known as jihadism, which is the ideological movement associated with al-Qaida and ISIS, and the history of Saudi Arabia, particularly its foundational religious movement known as Wahhabism.”

During his research, he obtained access to jihadi web forums and soon began blogging about developments in al-Qaida and jihadi ideology for the website *Jihadica*, which he now edits. By 2013-14, he was publishing his earliest articles about ISIS, including a widely read report on ISIS's ideology for the Brookings Institution that in turn led to his doing television interviews, being quoted on the front page of *The New York Times*, and briefing government agencies. "This was all while trying to finish my comprehensive exams," Bunzel recalls.

His interest in jihadism introduced him to the controversial heritage of Wahhabism, the religious tradition most cited by the ideologues associated with ISIS and al-Qaida. Bunzel made several research trips to Saudi Arabia, gaining access to rare manuscripts. A Jacobus Fellow, Bunzel used this material to form the basis of his dissertation that, in revised and expanded form, Princeton University Press published as a book titled *Wahhābism: The History of a Militant Islamic Movement* in 2023. The cover art is of a rare manuscript, the sole copy of one of the earliest refutations of Wahhabism, which is held at Firestone Library.

After a post-doctoral year at Yale Law School, Bunzel took up his position as a Hoover Fellow at the Hoover Institution, which he describes as "a research institution at the intersection of policy and academia, allowing me to pursue both my more historical and more contemporary research projects and to contribute to conversations on policy in the Middle East." His research has exposed him to a variety of the Middle East's complex politics. He has found himself "dining with Saudi princes and interviewing jihadi ideologues in their homes."

At the Hoover Institution, he is a member of the Working Group on the Middle East and the Islamic World and has led groups of academics of diverse perspectives at the annual meeting hosted in Washington, D.C. A member of the Academic Freedom Alliance, Bunzel follows closely issues of academic freedom in what he describes as “an increasingly fraught atmosphere on college campuses across the country.” He is published widely in online and print journals, such as *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy*, and is frequently invited to speak on panels and at conferences in Washington, D.C. and elsewhere.