International Relations Theory and a Changing Middle East

September 17, 2015
# Contents

One model of engagement between MES and IR .................................................. 6  
*By Pinar Bilgin, Bilkent University*

Forms of international pressure and the Middle East ........................................... 13  
*By Sarah Bush, Temple University*

Ideologies, alliances and underbalancing in the new Middle East Cold War .............. 16  
*F. Gregory Gause, III, Texas A&M University*

When sovereignty and self-determination overlap in claims to statehood: The case of Iraqi Kurdistan ................................................................. 21  
*By Zeynep N. Kaya, London School of Economics*

New dimensions of security and regionalism in the Middle East ............................. 27  
*Matteo Legrenzi, Ca’ Foscari University of Venice*

Coming in from the Cold ..................................................................................... 32  
*By Helle Malmvig, Danish Institute for International Studies.*

IR and Middle East studies .................................................................................. 36  
*By Nora Fisher Onar, George Washington University and University of Oxford*

Why the Islamic State won’t become a normal state ............................................... 39  
*By Lawrence Rubin, Georgia Institute of Technology*

Regime security and shifting alliances in the Middle East ........................................ 42  
*By Curtis R. Ryan, Appalachian State University*

Overlapping contests and Middle East international relations ................................. 47  
*By Bassel F. Salloukh, Lebanese American University*

Transcending disciplinary divide/s ....................................................................... 52  
*By Etel Solingen, University of California, Irvine*

States, markets and power .................................................................................... 62  
*By Erin A. Snider, Texas A&M University*

Beyond “geosectarianism” ................................................................................... 68  
*By Ewan Stein, University of Edinburgh*

“2011”: Middle East (R)Evolutions ...................................................................... 71  
*By Stephan Stetter, University of the Bundeswehr Munich*

International relations theory and the new Middle East: three levels of a debate .......... 74  
*Morten Valbjørn, Aarhus University*
Online Article Index


http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/06/03/why-isnt-there-an-anti-iran-alliance/


The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.
The story of the Arab uprisings of 2010-11 has typically been told as a series of loosely related national stories, happening simultaneously but whose successes and failures were essentially determined by internal factors. Over the last few years, political scientists have made great progress evaluating the success or failure of each country’s uprising in terms of country-specific qualities such as types of domestic institutions, the nature of opposition movements, the wise or poor decisions made by leaders and access to oil revenues. The comparative politics literature on the uprisings has demonstrated real theoretical progress, sophisticated empirical analysis and useful—if too often ignored—policy advice.

This comparative politics approach to the uprisings has always been problematic, though. The Arab uprisings began in transnational diffusion and ended in transnational repression and regional proxy wars. Put simply, there is not a single case in the Arab uprisings—with perhaps, as Monica Marks argues, the very partial exception of Tunisia—in which international factors were not decisive to the outcome. It is remarkably difficult to accurately explain the course of events in Egypt, Yemen or Libya without reference to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar or Iran. However, with but a few notable exceptions, the academic literature on the uprisings has been dominated by comparative analysis and country case studies, with international factors included as one among several variables, if at all.

This seems odd. Why has there not been an efflorescence of international relations scholarship comparable to the impressive outpouring of comparative politics scholarship on the Arab uprisings? And if there were, what would it look like? To begin rectifying this gap, the Project on Middle East Political Science teamed up with Danish scholar Morten Valbjørn of Aarhus University to bring together nearly two-dozen American, European and Arab international relations scholars in May. The result of the workshop was an astonishingly rich set of essays from a wide range of theoretical perspectives, which are now available for free download as a special issue in the POMEPS Studies series.

It is generally accepted that the uprisings themselves were very much a region-wide phenomenon. For all the accumulated grievances and internal politics that characterized the situation in each Arab country circa late 2010, it is difficult to conceive of each simultaneously erupting in protest without the highly publicized example of successful uprisings overthrowing long-entrenched dictators in Tunisia and Egypt. There is now abundant evidence and an increasingly sophisticated theoretical literature detailing the diffusion and demonstration mechanisms by which the Arab uprisings spread. The initial uprisings, then, clearly cannot be understood without an appreciation of their regional and international dynamics.

Then, consider the outcomes in most of the key countries that experienced turmoil in the early days of the Arab uprising. The military coup that ended Egypt’s attempted democratic transition on July 3, 2013 received massive support from the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states—
aid which replaced Qatari backing for Mohammed el-Morsi’s Muslim Brotherhood-led government. Morocco, Jordan and Oman received significant Saudi financial assistance to resist popular pressure for change. Bahrain’s uprising was crushed with the support of Saudi and other GCC military forces. Qatar and the Arab League pushed successfully for an international military intervention in support of Libya’s rebels, which ultimately decided Qaddafi’s fate. Yemen’s transition was carefully managed by a Gulf Cooperation Council plan that installed Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi as president in place of the long-ruling President Ali Abdullah Saleh, while granting the latter immunity from prosecution. The resurgence of the Arab security state has been a transnational phenomenon. None of these outcomes can be explained solely through domestic factors.

And, of course, there are the wars. A Saudi-led coalition is six months into a grinding, bloody military campaign in Yemen designed to roll back the advances of Saleh and the Houthi movement. Libya’s failed transition and spiraling war has been deeply shaped by external backing for its rival forces and episodic Egyptian military strikes. Syria’s uprising has long since transformed into a horrific war fueled by massive direct and indirect intervention by multiple Arab states, Iran and Turkey.

The Arab uprising’s initiation and outcomes, therefore, have been manifestly and profoundly shaped by international factors, with which international relations theory has yet to fully engage. This diverse group of scholars addressed a wide array of issues raised by reconceptualizing the Arab uprisings in terms of international relations.

Some of the contributors seek to bridge levels of analysis, focusing on traditional forms of statecraft, alliances, and institutions. Sarah Bush and Etel Solingen examine the different forms of international pressure on the Middle East and the role that Western actors have played in blocking meaningful democratic change. Gregory Gause and Curtis Ryan highlight the ongoing centrality of regime survival concerns in shaping the foreign policies of Arab states, locating unusual new foreign policy gambits in the heightened or transformed sense of the threats to their rule. Erin Snider brings international political economy back into frame. Bassel Salloukh examines how the proliferation of weak and shattered states has changed the structural dynamics of the region’s politics. Matteo Legrenzi explores new forms of regionalism and the prospect for greater institutionalization of state cooperation.

Others focus on the importance of ideas. Ewan Stein explores the relationship between the regime legitimation formulas and their regional foreign policies, while Lawrence Rubin similarly looks closely at how the ideational security dilemma created for these regimes by the Islamic State. Helle Malmvig evocatively asks how sectarian identity politics can be taken seriously without giving in to the cynical manipulations of powerful elites. Zeynep Kaya considers the efforts of Kurds to achieve genuine sovereignty. Stephan Stetter incorporates social evolution theory and political communications to assess the extent to which 2011 represented genuine change in regional affairs.
A final set of authors, led by workshop co-host Morten Valbjørn, reverses the sights by using the Arab uprisings to challenge international relations as a discipline. Pinar Bilgin investigates the parochialism of IR theory, manifested in its difficulty to incorporate the ways in which non-dominant actors conceive of their own security concerns. Nora Fisher Onar pushes for the serious inclusion of feminist and critical scholarship and a broader engagement with the emergent literature of “global international relations.” This should not be seen simply as the metatheoretical prejudice of European and Turkey-based scholars: their case for seriously incorporating human security and critical scholarship could hardly be more urgently relevant given the horrific and enduring human cost of the wars raging across Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen.

The thoughtful essays in this outstanding collection only begin to scratch the surface of what international relations theory should contribute to the study of the Arab uprisings. Much remains to be done with the implications of a perceived decline in U.S. power and commitment in the region, the potential emergence of new alignments between Israel and Arab regimes, the role of transnational networks in a system still structured by states, the possibilities raised by joint Arab military action in Yemen, the long-term effects of population displacement and human trauma caused by the region’s wars and so much more. Download POMEPS Studies 16 International Relations Theory and a Changing Middle East for a remarkable survey of current thinking and a great introduction to the analytical debates to come.

Marc Lynch, Director of POMEPS
September 17, 2015
One model of engagement between MES and IR: Inquiring into others’ conceptions of “security”

By Pinar Bilgin, Bilkent University

This paper argues that the difficult relationship between Middle East Studies (MES) and International Relations (IR) is an instance of the age-old gap between area studies and social science disciplines—a gap that may have grown wider in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, see Morten Valbjorn in this forum. The development and persistence of this gap has meant that the students of MES and IR often do not engage with each other’s work, see Stefan Stetter in this forum. In what follows, I will first identify two aspects of the gap between students of area studies and IR, discuss its implications for the study of security, and then suggest one model for communication: by giving up those assumptions of “universalism” that are actually based on observations of rather “particular” phenomena, and by paying attention to others’ conceptions of “security.” Here, I define “others” as those who happen not to be located on or near the top of hierarchies in world politics, enjoying unequal influence in shaping various dynamics, including their own portrayal in world politics.

Area studies and disciplinary IR I: why didn’t area studies fulfill its promise?

The gap between MES and IR has its origins in the division of labor between economics and politics on one hand, and social science disciplines and humanities on the other (Chomsky, 1997, Cumings, 1997, Szanton, 2004). Over the years, particular approaches to different parts of the world have been shaped by this gap insofar as some parts of the world have come under “area studies” to gather “raw data” and “test” theories (as with the Middle East); whereas dynamics in some other parts of the world were studied to “develop social scientific approaches” to world politics, as with North America and Western Europe (Valbjorn, 2004, Bilgin, 2004a).

When it was initially founded in the late 1940s, area studies promised to make the social sciences “whole” and their findings of “universal” relevance by providing data about the “Third World.” Thus, the political scientist Gabriel Almond called on his colleagues to study the “uncouth and exotic” regions of the world in order to make political science a “total science” (cited in Mitchell, 2003: 157). In time, the division of labor between the students of disciplines and areas became a hierarchical one. In a manner reminiscent of the upstairs, downstairs dynamics of a colonial household, disciplinary generalists looked down upon their area studies colleagues, who produced the “thick descriptions” that they needed to theorize grandly about the world (Agathangelou and Ling, 2004). One outcome of the realization of this hierarchical division of labor in IR has been the failure of area studies to fulfill the task of making the social sciences less parochial and more “universal.”

On one hand, parochialism may come across as “an almost inevitable and universal characteristic of IR globally” insofar as “there are ‘national’ IR disciplines and that these quite naturally tend to be concerned with their own national interests,” (Hellmann, 2011). Viewed as such, scholars in those parts of the world that are adversely affected by environmental degradation may prioritize green politics, whereas scholars who are citizens of great powers may focus on their countries’ hegemonic ambitions and those of other aspiring hegemons. On the other hand, what renders parochialism a challenge for IR is not that scholars in different parts of the world may have particular areas of interest and/or concentration, but rather when IR theorizing mistakes its theories driven from “particular” observations for the “universal.” Understood in this latter sense, parochialism pervades IR scholarship and constitutes a limitation for our theorizing about world politics (Alker and Biersteker, 1984, Jarvis, 2001, Hellmann, 2011, Biersteker, 2009).

To return to the story about the division of labor between
Area studies and discipline IR II: IR is not interested in the world beyond North America and Western Europe?

Disciplinary IR has not always been interested in the world beyond the great powers. “Denmark does not matter,” quipped Kenneth Waltz, highlighting the marginality of smaller states to system theorizing. This is not because those who are in the peripheries of world politics are also relegated to the peripheries of one’s thinking. It is because mainstream IR orientates its students to think of states as like units, the internal composition and dynamics of which are of relatively little consequence for world politics.

The choices made by the students of mainstream IR in favor of conducting state and great power-centric analyses have had implications for the discipline. Throughout the years, critical scholars have been documenting the implications of such methodological and epistemological choices, thereby preparing the groundwork for the project of what Amitav Acharya (2014) termed “global IR.” For, over the years, IR treatises, even as they focused on other parts of the world, have failed to be fully relevant to the concerns of people, states and societies living in those other parts of the world. This is because analyses of “sage bush wars,” “low intensity conflicts” and “guerrilla wars” focused on and thus were able to capture only the threat perceptions and interest calculations of the “West” (Korany, 1986). Put differently, the “Third World,” even when it was made the focal point of IR, was not treated as the referent object (what/who needs protection).

Consider, for example, the literature on “state failure.” On one hand, the shift in mainstream security analyses from purely military to broader “human security” concerns may be considered a “good thing.” On the other hand, state “weakness” is still portrayed as a problem by virtue of the so-called “weak” states’ inability to prevent their territories from being used as a safe harbor by terrorists—not because those states fail to deliver the necessary goods and services to their citizens, or in terms of the global system that has allowed them to “fail” (Bilgin and Morton, 2002). Consequently, the so-called “strong” states of the “Third World,” even when they fail to prioritize their citizens’ concerns, may not be considered a problem as long as they remain attentive to “First World” security interests (Bilgin and Morton, 2004). Nor are women’s and other gendered insecurities in the “First World” problematized by virtue of their “successful statehood” (Enloe, 1990, Enloe, 1997, Tickner, 1992).

To recapitulate, students of IR have not always been socialized into being curious about others’ approaches to the world but have been encouraged to explain away such dynamics by superimposing ostensibly “universal” concepts and categories. For purposes of illustration, let me focus on my own field of security studies. I suggest that students of security studies have not always been interested in the others’ conceptions of “security.”

The example of security studies

Security studies may not be any better or worse than other sub-fields of IR. Toward the end of the Cold War, students of security studies came under criticism by the students of Soviet studies, who reminded them that the Soviet Union did not “play” the deterrence game in the way deterrence theorists assumed. Deterrence theorizing developed almost independently of inquiring into the perspectives of those who we were seeking to deter (Booth, 1979, McCGwire, 1985). In the aftermath of the Cold War, Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein (1994) declared
that “We All Lost the Cold War,” based on the evidence they gathered by studying Cold War practices of deterrence by multiple nuclear powers (esp. see Janice Gross Stein in this forum). These critical inquiries into Cold War deterrence thinking and practices joined to highlight the limitations of security studies in inquiring into others’ approaches to security in general and deterrence in particular.

However, security studies scholarship did not always integrate these critical insights. Consider the following quote by Peter J. Katzenstein, from his introduction to the edited volume, *Cultures of National Security*, which is one of the earliest sustained attempts to bring “cultural analysis” into the study of security. Katzenstein wrote: “In the context of a bipolar, ideological struggle, the Cold War made relatively unproblematic some of the cultural factors affecting national security. Theories that abstracted from these factors offered important insights” (Katzenstein, 1996: 1). It is only with the end of the Cold War and the demise of bipolarity, argued Katzenstein, that the need for inquiring into others’ “culture” became apparent. Put differently, Katzenstein suggested that during the Cold War, superpower dynamics and the theoretical tools developed to analyze those dynamics rendered less relevant the need to know about others’ views of the world. It was after the end of the Cold War, he seemed to suggest, that those needs surfaced once again.

Contra Katzenstein, and building on McGwire (1985), Lebow and Stein’s (1994) critique of deterrence theorizing, it was not the case that the Cold War rendered others’ different ways of thinking about the world “relatively unproblematic.” Rather, it was “particular” ways of thinking about world politics, which were presumed to be “universal,” that lured security analysts into presuming that a lack of curiosity about others’ approaches to world politics was not a problem when theorizing about International Relations and security.

It was not a student of Security Studies, but an anthropologist, Hugh Gusterson (1999) who unmistakably identified the parochialism of security studies. Surveying articles published during 1986-1989 in the sub-field’s leading journal, *International Security*, Gusterson noted that those “readers who relied on the journal International Security alone for their understanding of world politics would have been taken more or less completely by surprise by the end of the Cold War in the fall of 1989,” (Gusterson, 1999: 319). The point Gusterson made was not about (failures in) prediction in the study of security. Rather he argued that, “authors in the journal constructed a discursive world within which the indefinite continuation of the Cold War was plausibly presumed and what we would in retrospect narrate as signs of the impending end of the Cold War were rendered dubious or invisible,” (Gusterson, 1999: 323). Put differently, Gusterson’s analysis highlighted how Anglo-American security concerns and a particular approach to these concerns had become embedded into the epistemology of security studies as reflected in the articles published in *International Security*. Gusterson suggested that, those scholars who relied on the journal for insight into the dynamics of world security likely became unable to even consider the possibility of the Cold War coming to an end. “The problem with the dominant discourse in security studies in the 1980s was not that its construction of the international system was wrong,” wrote Gusterson (1999: 324) “but that it so marginalized discussion of competing constructions.” What led to parochialism in the study of security, argued Gusterson, was not only the search for prediction though utilizing a particular way of thinking about world politics, but the sub-field’s failures to go outside that particular way of thinking, often without recognizing its particularity.

Students of security in the “Third World” have, for long, pointed to the limitations caused by the imposition of the superpower conflict when studying dynamics in other parts of the world. Bahgat Korany, among others, problematized the way in which “When states of the ‘periphery’ were taken into consideration at all, they were supposed to fit into the established paradigm, and assigned the role of junior partners in the power game. Otherwise, they are considered ‘trouble-makers,’ thriving on ‘nuisance power,’ fit for the exercise of techniques of ‘counter-insurgency,’” (Korany, 1986). However, even the critics of security studies, such as Korany, who highlighted the
sub-field’s limitations to account for security in the global South, chose to focus on the “different” characteristics of those states but not necessarily the limitations of the notion of “security,” upon which the sub-field was built. The title of a chapter by Caroline Thomas (1989), one of the forthcoming scholars on “Third World” security, summarized the concerns of this body of scholarship: “Southern instability, security and western concepts: On an unhappy marriage and the need for a divorce.” Put differently, what students of security in the “Third World” focused on were “new” concepts suited for the “Third World” and not necessarily re-thinking existing ones that were shaped by parochialism of the sub-field.

My point being that, identifying the problem with ostensibly “universal” concepts but remaining content with the solution of offering ‘new’ concepts for the “Third World” allowed for parochialism of security studies to continue. As such, notwithstanding their significant contributions pointing to the limitations of Security Studies in accounting for insecurities experienced in the “Third World,” students of security in the global South left untouched the parochialism of security studies. Yet at the same time, this solution allowed for new parochialisms in the study of security in the “Third World” as with the more recent “state failure” literature (Bilgin and Morton, 2002).

To summarize, students of security studies remained relatively oblivious to the sub-field’s limitations stemming from parochialism. While students of security in the “Third World” were critical of those “theories that abstracted from [cultural factors]” (to use Katzenstein’s phrase), they sought to replace them with “new” concepts that drew from some other particularisms. In doing so, they missed the opportunity to point to the parochialism of mainstream IR’s concepts and the fact that those concepts were also shaped by “particular” dynamics and contexts that remained unaware of its “particularism” while claiming “universal” insight.

**Being curious about others’ conceptions of security?**

Let me highlight the need for inquiring into others’ conceptions of security with reference to security dynamics in the Middle East.

Steven M. Walt’s study on Middle East security, *The Origins of Alliances* (1987), focused on alliance politics in the Middle East. In this book, Walt pointed to a type of alliance behavior that remained unaccounted for by structural realist accounts. Whereas existing frameworks looked at power balancing, noted Walt, the dynamics of relations between Arab states pointed to balancing threats. In response to this puzzling behavior of Arab states, Walt offered a new concept: “balance of threat.”

About a decade after the publication of Walt’s study, Michael J. Barnett (1998) offered an alternative account of the dynamics of the relations between Arab states. While Walt correctly diagnosed an aspect of Arab politics that was previously unaccounted for, argued Barnett, he could not fully explain what he observed, given the limitations of the structural realist framework that he used. Instead, Barnett offered a social constructivist toolkit for analyzing Arab politics. If states seem to be balancing threats, noted Barnett, it is the relationship between identity and security policy that required investigation. As such, Barnett’s study, *Dialogues in Arab Politics* (1998), did not identify a new puzzle but presented an alternative theoretical framework for responding to Walt’s puzzle, that is, by studying the constructedness of identity and its relationship with security policy (also see Barnett, 1999, Telhami and Barnett, 2002).

What if we are not curious about others’ conceptions of “security?” After all, both Walt and Barnett were curious about particular instances in the behavior of Arab leaders, while they presumed that they already knew what it meant to be secure in Egypt, Syria, Jordan, etc. In other words, both authors bracketed security as they inquired into the policy behavior of the Arab leaders (Bilgin, 2004b). Walt was puzzled with the way Arab leaders were responding to “threats” and not “power” (understood in material terms). Barnett sought to understand how balancing threats works and found an answer in the Arab leadership’s (re) constructions of “Arab” identity through “dialogues in
Arab politics” (the title of Barnett’s book). Neither Walt nor Barnett inquired into Arab leaders’ conceptions of “security”.

Walt and Barnett are not alone in being less-than-curious about others’ conceptions “security.” Significant aspects of IR are conditioned by these limitations. As students of IR, we presume that we understand others’ behavior (based on “our” assumptions about “their” intentions and/or capability), often without inquiring into their conceptions of “security.”

Conclusion

Writing in the immediate aftermath of the Arab uprisings, some students of IR admonished students of MES for not paying attention to Arabism. Following the 9/11 attacks, students of MES were criticized for not paying enough attention to radicalization in the Muslim world. After the end of the Cold War, students of MES had sought to find beginnings of democratization, in response to criticisms from disciplinary IR and Political Science, that this part of the world came across as an outlier to world dynamics (democratization, globalization, regionalization…) (Anderson, 2003). Their focus on democratization was faulted by their critics for missing the ‘facts’ about Middle East politics. The presumption being that extremism is a ‘fact’ of the Middle East and democratization mere ‘fancy’!

These are only some of the criticisms raised by the students of disciplines to their colleagues in MES. I am not citing them to signal agreement. On the contrary, many students of MES could respond to such criticism by showing how they did, in fact, point to these phenomena in their research. The problem, I suggest, lies in the two sides not engaging with each other’s work.

Those students of the disciplines who also have expertise in one part of the world or another produce valuable and insightful studies and manage to communicate with their colleagues in both the disciplines and area studies. But they are in the minority.

More often than not, students of area studies pay lip service to disciplinary concerns with theory building. Similarly, students of the disciplines utilize X or Y region of the world for “theory-testing” purposes, often devoid of the contextual and historical knowledge of that part of the world. Students of IR and MES alike need to render less parochial our concepts and categories toward better accounting for the dynamics in different parts of the world. I suggested that inquiring into others’ conceptions of “security” may be one way of doing so (Bilgin, forthcoming).

Inquiring into the conceptions of “security” in “Arab” actors during the Cold War, as I have suggested in previous work (Bilgin, 2004c, Bilgin, 2005, Bilgin, 2012), allows us to uncover a “different” way of thinking about concepts of “national security,” and “Arab national security” (Korany, 1994, Korany et al., 1993, Dessouki, 1993). Inquiring into this idea of "national security" that transcends the "nation-states" in the Arab world— and the context within which it emerged, developed, and declined— allows us to understand insecurities experienced by various state and non-state actors in the Arab world, as well as the military, economic, and societal dimensions of insecurity. For those students of MES and IR who are curious about both worlds, there is a wealth of material to engage scholars on both sides of the gap.

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Bibliography


Forms of international pressure and the Middle East

By Sarah Bush, Temple University

In today’s world, international actors attempt to influence the domestic politics of states in myriad ways. International pressure can be exerted by state or non-state actors, can target state or non-state actors, and can involve military or non-military means. Moreover, it can attempt to influence virtually any aspect of domestic politics. Although international pressure does not always succeed—indeed, it can lead to a backlash against foreign influence as well as other unintended consequences—it is undoubtedly an important variable that explains the conduct of domestic politics in many countries today.

Studying international pressure in the Middle East is unique. Doing so illuminates the ways that international pressure leads to differentiation across countries and polarization within countries in addition to global diffusion and convergence. That is to say, international pressure can cause countries to become more different from each other and can also cause groups within countries to become more different from each other. Although these divergent effects are by no means unique to the Middle East, they are particularly stark there because international pressure tends to take highly partisan forms. Scholars of International Relations (IR) benefit from paying close attention to these dynamics as the research program on international pressure continues to grow.

What We Know about the “Second Image Reversed”

In an oft-cited article from 1978, Peter Gourevitch coined the phrase “the second image reversed” to refer to the ways that the international system affects the domestic politics of states. Although the “second image reversed” framework can also be used to understand patterns of conflict, cooperation, and institutional change throughout history, it has been a particularly fertile framework for researchers to use when examining patterns in IR recently, perhaps as a response to the real-world phenomenon of increased interdependence. The literature that builds on Gourevitch’s insights is too large to review in the context of a short essay, but recent contributions in political science have applied the framework to understand patterns of democratization, economic liberalization, elections and electoral politics, and gender and human rights policies. Although in many cases, international influences on domestic politics can occur without direct international pressure, both direct and indirect international pressure is important in all of the aforementioned issue areas, including via international institutions, state-to-state diplomacy, transnational advocacy networks, and epistemic communities.

For the most part, the recent literature on the “second image reversed” focuses on how and why similar policies and practices have been adopted in so many countries. Countries around the world have democratized, significantly reduced restrictions on cross-border capital flows, signed bilateral investment treaties, invited election observers, promised to respect certain human rights,


adopted gender quotas, joined international institutions, and more. In other words, it is easy to read the IR literature and conclude that the “second image reversed” is a framework best used to understand dynamics of diffusion and convergence. But this framework can just as easily be applied to study differentiation and polarization across and within states. Examination of dynamics in the Middle East is especially illuminating in terms of these dynamics.

**Differentiation as well as Diffusion**

As noted above, international pressure has led to the diffusion of a number of practices and policies to most countries in the world. But some countries are left behind when these changes occur. Indeed, international pressure has encouraged the diffusion of political liberalization in most countries in the world outside of the Middle East. An example of this phenomenon, which Judith Kelley and Susan Hyde have documented in excellent studies, is how international pressure caused countries around the world to hold national elections and then invite international election monitors to observe. This type of pressure generally came late—and in some cases, not at all—to the Middle East.

Part of the explanation for this differentiation—though by no means the only, and probably not even the most important one—is that international pressure in the Middle East is different than international pressure in other parts of the world. Specifically, international efforts to promote political liberalization in most of the countries in the Middle East have been half-hearted at best and often combined with forceful international efforts to promote the authoritarian status quo. As a consequence, differentiation is not simply the result of internal factors that make countries in the region less responsive to international pressure. Rather, the form and type of international pressure has led to differentiation in the international system. This claim is related to a point also made by Etel Solingen in her valuable contribution to the “International Relations and a new Middle East” symposium. She argues that Arab rulers have effectively built “firewalls” to protect themselves against the pressures of diffusion.

It is worth underscoring that international pressure can have a differentiating effect through two mechanisms. On one hand, international pressure can lead directly to differentiation, because it is applied differently to different countries or because countries respond differently to the same types of pressure. On the other hand, international pressure can lead indirectly to differentiation, because it leads some countries to adopt certain policies while other countries do not do so because they were not pressured. Pressure has an indirect differentiating effect in this case, because it inadvertently leads countries that were not pressured to grow further apart from other countries.

**Polarization as well as Convergence**

We often think of international pressure as leading countries to be socialized to new policies and practices, which usually involves a large number of people and institutions throughout a society changing their preferences. Yet international pressure often has polarizing effects within countries’ domestic politics. Almost inevitably, international pressure as it relates to democracy and other issues empowers some forces within domestic politics over others, helping particular economic or political forces make policy or effect change.

In some cases, the polarization effect is deliberate: International actors provide their partisan allies with a variety of forms of support, including money, technical assistance, security assistance, and rhetorical backing. Perhaps most obviously, these forms of support can help partisan allies win elections—but they also help partisan allies pursue their policy goals and stay in power through

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means outside of elections. Drawing on evidence from Lebanon, for example, Corstange and Marinov found that when voters became more polarized on the issue of foreign relations when they were exposed to messages about the electoral interventions of the United States and Iran.\(^8\)

In other cases, the polarization effect is not deliberate: international actors may end up dividing the people of a country despite not trying to do so. Based on my research with coauthors Amaney Jamal and Lauren Prather in Jordan and Tunisia, I have argued that there is some reason to think that election observers as well as other foreign non-governmental actors may have this type of polarizing effect when they attempt to provide new political information to local audiences. When election observation groups issue reports on election quality, for example, their assessments are likely to be taken up differently depending on whether the audience supported the winning party or the losing party in the election.\(^9\)

There is no reason why these polarizing effects of international pressure ought to be unique to the Middle East, but it is no accident that in this region the scant research on the topic has blossomed most fully. The Middle East is the place where international actors take sides most regularly and most clearly. On the one hand, Iran and Qatar are commonly perceived to intervene on the side of Islamist forces and, though they may give lip service to supporting democratic principles, are clearly not countries that are in the habit of promoting democracy abroad. On the other hand, countries ranging from Saudi Arabia to the United States and European states are commonly perceived to intervene on the side of secular forces. The United States and European states also claim to support democratic principles in the Middle East. Their actual commitment to promoting democracy in the region is ambivalent, at best, and is often combined with considerable support for regime maintenance. That being said, these states they do offer democratic aid programs related to elections, civil society, and women’s political participation, among other things.\(^10\)

Because multiple foreign countries in the Middle East tend to try to exert international pressure, and they do so in competing directions, it is easy to see how foreign countries might polarize the domestic sphere. But similar dynamics of polarization due to international pressure seem likely to take place in other world regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa, Central and Eastern Europe, and the post-Soviet world. Hopefully scholars working at the nexus of IR and comparative politics in other parts of the world can learn lessons from those who have studied these issues in the Middle East.

**Implications**

Research on the “second image reversed” is an area of IR that has been very dynamic in recent years. Studying the processes of diffusion and convergence that have occurred thanks to international pressure, including democratization and economic liberalization has been important. But diffusion doesn’t always reach the entire population of countries, and there is something to learn about where and why international diffusion stops and what the consequences of growing inequalities in the international system might be. Moreover, international pressure can polarize domestic politics within countries, and this polarization also has important consequences. Studying the Middle East can help us refine theories about diffusion by demonstrating where the processes end and can suggest new theories about the polarizing effects of international pressure to be tested globally. In other words, scholars of IR more generally have much to learn from the dynamics of international pressure in the Middle East.

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Ideologies, alliances and underbalancing in the new Middle East Cold War

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It is a very popular short-hand to portray the international politics of the post-Arab Spring Middle East as a simple tale of Sunnis v. Shiites, with Saudi Arabia and Iran leading the respective sectarian camps—a Middle East version of the 30 Years War. However, the reality of alliances and alignments in the new Middle East cold war (Gause 2014; see also Ryan 2012; Salloukh 2013) is much more complicated than that, which makes it an interesting case for testing more general ideas about alliances. This brief discussion paper will explore two issues regarding Middle East alignments in this period: 1) what explains the “underbalancing” (Schweller 2004) that can be observed against Iran in the current regional picture; and, following from that, 2) how to best explain alliance patterns in the region—by balance of power logic, the sectarian lens or a variant of Walt’s balance of threat (Walt 1987) framework that emphasizes ideology and domestic regime security issues, and thus is informed by the constructivist emphasis on identity.

Few of the alignments discussed here fall under more formal definitions of alliance, in terms of a written agreement between states for mutual support in specific circumstances. But the cooperative frameworks are enduring enough to qualify as alliances from a theoretical perspective, in that the parties involved have borne costs to support each other. Alignments might be the more accurate descriptor, but I will use the two words interchangeably. Many of the alignments discussed are not between two states but between a state and a non-state actor. I grant that the motives driving the behavior of non-state actors can be very different than those of states. Non-state actors are primarily concerned with their fortunes within the fractious politics of their own states. States usually have broader motives in making their alliance decisions. I will focus here on the states’ behavior, though many of their most important alliances are with non-state actors.

“Underbalancing” and the New Middle East Cold War

A notable but underappreciated element of the current political configuration of the Middle East is the fact that a strong regional alliance against Iran has not come together. Iran is the undoubted winner in the past decade of regional upheaval. It is the most influential player in Iraqi politics now, having close relations with the Abadi government, sponsoring if not controlling a number of Shiite militias and maintaining a cooperative relationship with the Kurdish Regional Government (exemplified by its supplying arms to the KRG during the Islamic State offensive of the summer of 2014). Its client, Hezbollah, remains the dominant force in Lebanese politics. Iranian support has been essential to the preservation of the Assad regime in Damascus, even as other rulers challenged by the Arab Spring have fallen. While Tehran’s relationship with the Houthis is not as strong or as direct as that with Hezbollah or the Iraqi militias, the success of the Houthis in Yemen further contributes to the regional sense that Iran is on the march. Efforts by other regional powers to challenge Iranian gains have all failed, whether Turkish and Saudi support for the Syrian opposition (though different elements of it), Saudi financing of the March 14 coalition in Lebanon and military aid to the Lebanese government, or the Saudi and Emirati campaign in the summer of 2015 against the Houthis.

By pure balance of power logic, the region should have witnessed a Turkish-Saudi-Israeli alignment aimed at checking and rolling back Iranian power. All three states worry about Iranian power. Israel and Saudi Arabia both seem to identify Iran as their major threat. Two-thirds of that hypothetical balancing alignment, a Turkish-Saudi understanding, makes perfect sense by the sectarian logic that many believe is driving regional politics. But neither the trilateral nor the bilateral balancing alignment against Iran has emerged. This is a perfect example of “underbalancing.”
Mark Haas (2014) provides a framework to understand why we are seeing this clear example of regional “underbalancing.” Haas argues that it is not simply power that defines the structure of an international system. Identity also structures the system. States that share common ideas about appropriate and legitimate principles of governance will tend to group together. In systems characterized by ideological bipolarity, where the great powers divide between two overarching systems of governance, alliances will tend to follow ideological lines and be very stable. But when there are more than two transnational ideological principles present in the system, being put forward by great powers, the likelihood of underbalancing increases.

Haas (2014: 729) argues that in cases of ideological multipolarity, state leaders will eschew alliances that seem logical from a power perspective because they dislike and fear the ideological stance of a potential ally: “Thus, all other things being equal, a shift from ideological bipolarity to multipolarity will make it more difficult for at least some states to form alliances because there are likely to be fewer ideologically acceptable allies in the system. The greater the impediments to alliance formation, the less efficient the balancing process will be against potential threats.” His paradigmatic example is the refusal of conservative politicians in Great Britain and France to consider an alliance with the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany in the 1930’s. He adds another impediment to effective balancing in ideological multipolarity, already recognized in more Realist accounts of alliance behavior (Christensen and Snyder 1990): the greater incentives for buck-passing. Why pay the price for balancing a threat if a third party will do that for free? So in ideologically multipolar situations, the likelihood of underbalancing is considerable.

The Middle East is currently in a situation of both power multipolarity and ideological multipolarity. Iran puts forward a transnational Islamist model that it claims should apply throughout the region, though its strongest appeal is to fellow Shiites. The Iranian model rejects monarchy, seeing it as illegitimate. It also challenges the American-led regional order that prevailed since the end of the Cold War. Saudi Arabia is directly challenged by the Iranian model, particularly among its own Shiite minority. It supports fellow monarchs and discourages democratic reform both at home and, in its support for the coup of then General, now President al-Sissi in Egypt, abroad. Turkey under AKP rule has supported a version of Islamist democratic reform in the Arab world, particularly in backing Muslim Brotherhood movements. While one can hardly call the Islamic State a great power, it is propounding a transnational salafi ideological model that shares elements of Saudi Arabia’s conservative official version of Islam, Iran’s revolutionary rejection of the current regional system and AKP Turkey’s Sunni Islamist populism but is a direct threat to all three states. Meanwhile, the Israel of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is following a barely-veiled colonialist project in the West Bank that makes it anathema to public opinion throughout the Muslim World.

Haas’s model of ideological multipolarity fits the current Middle East like a glove. The Saudis seem uncertain as to who is their greater threat, Iran or the Islamic State. The seemingly natural Turkish-Saudi balancing alliance against Iran (both want to see Iranian influence in Syria and Iraq reduced) is impeded by Saudi fears that the Turkish model of populist, democratic Islamism will aid the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world. While the Saudis clearly want to roll back Iranian influence in the Arab world, they have also declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization. Turkey partnered with Qatar, another regional player that had bet on the Muslim Brotherhood, to encourage Islamist opposition to the Assad regime but now seems to be torn between the goal of Assad’s removal and the fear that both ISIS and Kurdish groups in Syria have become the more salient threats to Turkish security. Ankara, which historically has had decent relations with Israel, for ideological and domestic political reasons has now chosen to distance itself from Jerusalem. The desires of some of Israel’s friends in the United States to foster a Saudi-Israeli connection against both Iran and the Islamic State have not been realized, because Riyadh cannot contemplate an open relationship with the Netanyahu government.
Balancing What? Sectarianism, Balance of Power and Balance of Threat

The underbalancing that Haas predicts in ideological multipolarity is driven to a great extent by fears related to regime security. Leaders worry about the domestic effects of transnational ideological messages, and thus are leery of partnering with regional allies whose own principles of legitimate domestic governance are in conflict with their own. In this way, using Haas’ framework of ideological multipolarity to explain underbalancing in the Middle East is consistent with past work on regional alignments that has argued for the primacy of regime security considerations and the importance of transnational ideological factors in driving alliance decisions (Gause 2003/4; Ryan 2009; Rubin 2014).

Straight balance of power logic, defined narrowly as balancing behavior against threats defined by material capabilities, cannot provide as comprehensive an explanation for underbalancing in the contemporary Middle East. It can certainly explain why the Saudis and even the Turks are worried about increased Iranian influence in the Arab world. But it cannot, almost by definition, explain underbalancing. The alignments one would expect under balance of power theory—Saudi-Israeli, Saudi-Turkish, Turkish-Israeli—have not been realized, at least so far.

Sectarianism, the most popular framework for understanding the current dynamics of regional politics, is also unsatisfactory at explaining underbalancing. A sectarian perspective would assume that the Sunnis would flock together, but that has not happened. No alliance of Sunni regional powers, that would bring together Saudi Arabia and Turkey along with Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf states, has appeared. Rather, alliance patterns among the Sunni states are driven more by ideological compatibility and regime similarity. Saudi Arabia is closely aligned with other monarchs and with the anti-Muslim Brotherhood regime of Gen. al-Sissi in Egypt. Turkey has been more closely aligned with Qatar under Shaykh Hamad, when Doha was more actively backing Muslim Brotherhood causes, with Egypt under the brief Brotherhood government of Mohamed Morsi, and with the Hamas administration in Gaza.

This is not to argue that sectarianism is unimportant in the current alignment picture in the region. There is an elective affinity between Iran and Shiite groups: Hezbollah, various Iraqi Shiite militias, perhaps even the Houthis, even though they are not Ja’faris but Zaydis. The Muslim Brotherhood looks to Sunni powers historically more than to Iran for support (though Iran has been supportive of Hamas). Lebanese and Yemeni Sunnis look to Saudi Arabia for help. But sectarianism’s importance comes from the weakening or breakdown of state authority in many places where, for a variety of reasons, sectarianism has been a salient part of political identity. Lebanese, Syria, Iraqi and Yemeni politics all have important sectarian elements. As the state has seen its grip loosen (or completely collapse) in these places, sectarian identities have come to the fore in local struggles for power. Sectarian groups naturally look to their co-sectarians in the region for support—Shiites to Iran and Sunnis to Saudi Arabia and Turkey. These local groups invite the outsiders into their own domestic conflicts. The sectarian template emerges from below; it is not imposed from above.

Domestic regime security best explains the alignment behavior of the regional players in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia supports fellow monarchs and an Egyptian

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1. It is an utter misunderstanding, however, to characterize the long-standing relationship between the Islamic Republic and the Batist regime in Damascus as a sectarian alliance. Setting aside the question of whether Alawis are actually Shi’a, the core of the Iranian-Syrian alliance has been common enemies (Saddam’s Iraq, Israel) and common interests (in Lebanon and against the United States), not a common sectarian identity. The Asad regime can be characterized, particularly in recent years, as sociologically Alawi, but it is hardly ideologically Alawi, Shi’i, Islamist or anything similar to the Iranian regime.

2. It is important to note that sectarianism is not the only salient identity factor in cases of state weakening/breakdown. There are both Sunni and Shi’i Kurds in Iraq, but it is their ethno-linguistic identity that seems to be trumping their sectarian identity. In Yemen, regional and ideological affiliations are as important as sectarian ones, certainly among the Shafi’i Sunnis and perhaps even among Zaydis who do not sympathize with the Huthis. It would not be surprising if the followers of the Saleh clan eventually fall out with their fellow Zaydi Huthis. In Libya, where everyone is Sunni, the divisions are regional, tribal and ideological.
government that stands against democratic Islamist populism. Turkey finds Syrian Kurds as threatening as the Islamic State, because of its continuing worry about Kurdish identity politics in Turkey itself. The seemingly “natural” Turkish-Saudi alliance, anticipated both by strict balance of power logic and by sectarian understandings of regional politics, has not occurred because the two states are leery of the underlying tensions in their domestic legitimation formulas—democratic Islamist populism v. salafi monarchism. Israel, the strongest military power in the region, is an unacceptable alliance partner for any regional state because of the potential domestic political consequences of an open partnership with Jerusalem.

Conclusion

Haas (2014: 732) does point out that alliances across ideological lines in ideological multipolarity are hardly impossible; they are just harder to achieve than Realist interpretations of balance of power theory would predict. He argues that if powers in different ideological poles come independently to view a third power as both their most salient power threat and their most salient ideological threat, then a balancing alliance can form against that third power across ideological lines. Thus, the Western democracies and the Soviet Union eventually allied against Nazi Germany, though it took quite a while for the parties to finally settle into that alliance.

Haas follows Peter Katzenstein in asserting that, “identities cannot be stipulated deductively. They must be investigated empirically in concrete historical circumstances” (2014: 720, see also 741-49). British and French conservatives were much more worried about the ideological threat of the Soviet Union in the 1930’s than were British and French socialists. Were the left in power in London at that time, or in Paris for more than a few months at that time, the obstacles to the alliance that was eventually formed between the democracies and the Communists would have been lessened. Leaders’ perceptions of threat are the key element here. Those perceptions can change over time, or new leaders with different perceptions can come to power.

There are a few tentative indications that just such a change may be afoot in the ideologically multipolar Middle East. The new Saudi King Salman seems to be less focused on the domestic political threat to the Saudi regime posed by the Muslim Brotherhood than was his predecessor. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan might be feeling his current regional isolation more than in the past. His February 2015 visit to Riyadh occasioned speculation from both sides that a rapprochement was in the works. The capture of Idlib by a coalition of Islamist elements of the Syrian opposition at the end of March 2015 might (and I stress might) signal a new willingness for Saudi and Turkish clients in Syria to cooperate. The Yemeni Islah Party, of which the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood is a component, recently announced its support for the Saudi bombing campaign against the Houthis. In their current Yemeni campaign, the Saudis seem to have set aside their previous aversion to support a local Muslim Brotherhood.

These are all straws in the wind. But they raise the possibility that the new Saudi king is re-evaluating his predecessor’s ranking of the threats faced by Riyadh, downplaying the Muslim Brotherhood threat to Saudi domestic regime security, and thus opening up the possibility of a Turkish-Saudi alliance against Iran. Of course, the successful conclusion of the P5+1 talks with Iran could lead other regional parties to conclude that they have to do their own deals with Tehran, or it could increase balancing incentives against the Iranians. Much will depend on the course of Iranian foreign policy in the wake of the recent nuclear agreement. If a real rapprochement develops between Iran and the United States, that would be the kind of change in “concrete historical circumstances” that could occasion a wholesale revision of the regional pattern of alignments.

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Sources


When sovereignty and self-determination overlap in claims to statehood: The case of Iraqi Kurdistan

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Introduction

The Arab uprisings that began in 2011 have brought unexpected and massive changes to the Middle East with their impact varying from context to context. While some states made a push for more accountable and democratic political rule, others became immersed in internal/regional conflict and instability. In addition, non-state actors, such as militant and non-militant Islamist groups and nationalist organizations, have also been an important component of these transformations. These actors’ efforts to seize power both at local and national levels have resulted in violent conflict, civil war, the emergence of new political entities and changes in political rule. The different outcomes of the uprisings in different states are largely related to the pre-existing political structures of the states, rulers’ authority, regime types, state-society relations and power constellations. Therefore, this process raises important political and theoretical questions about not only the internal political structures of the states, their future and regional and international politics, but also non-state political actors and their recognition and international legitimacy.

The principles of sovereignty and self-determination are crucially relevant in discussing the recognition and international legitimacy of non-state actors, such as the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Today, with the uncertainty of the future of two states that were formed during the World War I period, Iraq and Syria, and the Islamic State threat to existing defined borders, Iraqi Kurdish aspirations for statehood have been revitalized. Other Kurdish political actors in the Middle East also have enhanced their political prominence and demands for self-rule in this process, giving even greater volition to the resurgence of Iraqi Kurdish aspirations. Some scholars have gone so far as to label these developments the “Kurdish spring,” referring to peace talks between the government and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) in Turkey and the formation of a de facto Kurdish autonomous region (Rojava) in Syria (Gunter 2013).

In Iraq, Kurds have official autonomous rule over the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Iraqi Kurdistan), since 2003; before that, they had de facto autonomy from 1991 until 2003. The Arab uprisings, the instability that ensued afterwards and the withdrawal of U.S. forces, further intensified conflict within Iraq that had been ongoing since 2003. Despite this, Iraqi Kurdistan has remained the most stable part of the country. The region’s stability and economic prosperity thanks to international aid and activation of Kurdish oil reserves has increased KRG’s confidence.

Poor relations with Baghdad and the relative stability of Iraqi Kurdistan fed into an already strong sense of Kurdish nationalism (Tahiri 2007). Issues over the national budget, a territorial dispute over Kirkuk and the use of oil reserves within Kurdish territories exacerbated the KRG’s dissatisfaction with the central government. As a result, the idea of remaining part of Iraq has become less appealing within the KRG. Indeed, Iraqi Kurds see the Baghdad government as an impediment for Iraqi Kurdistan’s progress and for reaching international standards in their rule of law and governance. The KRG has restated their desire for independence several times since the beginning of the Arab uprisings. Only recently, in mid-2014, it declared plans to hold a referendum to decide on independence. However, these plans were postponed partly due to the Islamic State’s advances in Iraq, but more importantly, due to a lack of support from the United States that wants to keep Iraq united.

1 Kurds in the Middle East constitute a large community with huge social, political, linguistic and cultural heterogeneities. Dispersed in the peripheries of four states, Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria, Kurds are represented by several political organizations in each country. Their political activism has been met with differing degrees of suppression in each state. Kurdish nationalism is considered a late nationalism.
Iraqi Kurdistan provides crucial insights into the question of what constitutes legitimate sovereignty because of its state-like but non-state status as well as its desire to secede from Iraq. Iraqi Kurdistan has been characterised as having “de facto statehood” (Voller 2013), being an “unrecognised state” (Voller 2015) and being a “quasi-state” (Natali 2010). The first two concepts emphasise the sovereignty the KRG enjoys domestically and to a certain degree internationally, but these characterisations underestimate the fact that Iraqi Kurdistan is still fairly economically dependent on the budget coming from the Baghdad government. Externally, even though the KRG holds some degree of diplomatic relations with external states, under the existing constitution it cannot take part in international negotiations as an independent entity. On the other hand, the concept of “quasi-state” refers to states that are “sovereign in name” (Erskine 2001) but dependent on international support due to underdevelopment, conflict or financial difficulties (Jackson 1993). This concept is useful in describing the political and economic position of Iraqi Kurdistan since 1991, but fails to fully correspond to its status conceptually.

This paper focuses on the KRG’s use of the self-determination principle in order to legitimize its claims to full sovereignty. The meaning of self-determination that it uses is intertwined with sovereignty, not simply in its most basic meaning as absolute control, but also in terms of demanding independence in arriving at decisions. The conceptual shifts in the meaning of self-determination and sovereignty in relation to separatist groups over the course of the 20th century allude to an overlap between the two principles, and the Iraqi Kurdish demands for statehood fit in this overlap. Non-recognition of the KRG as a state pushes the KRG to democratize in order to increase its international legitimacy (Voller 2015). Indeed, the KRG, through restating its relatively more democratic and stable status, tries to increase its international legitimacy and present itself as a political entity that deserves statehood. In furthering its domestic demands, it uses relevant international norms to advance its aspirations showing that the KRG aligns itself with the internationally accepted rules and norms.

**Linking sovereignty and self-determination**

The development of the Kurdish political movement in Iraq and the evolution of the way in which it has framed its claims to statehood align with the way the principles of self-determination and sovereignty have changed over time. The interpretations of the meaning of these two principles and the potential implications of their meanings have gone through substantial changes throughout the 20th century and early twenty-first century in line with the changes in world politics. Typically, in relation to separatist nationalism, self-determination and sovereignty are seen as conflicting principles. This is because secessionist demands that make a claim to self-determination threaten the sovereignty of the state. However, the transformation of the meanings of these two principles, especially in the context of new claims for statehood, has brought these principles together and now they can be seen as overlapping in many respects. The case of Iraqi Kurdistan and the way in which Iraqi Kurds have used the principles of self-determination and sovereignty to give them demands more credence show that there is a match between these two principles rather than conflict.

Conceptually, sovereignty has come to take meanings beyond its original dominant understanding of territorial control or supreme authority within a territory (Philpott 2001). It is now understood as having “more to do with the concept of independence in arriving at decisions rather than exclusive and absolute power in making them” (Castellino 2000). Independence in arriving at decisions is attributed to the people (or their representatives) as the sovereigns. This meaning of sovereignty and external self-determination, when legitimate, appear to be two sides of the same coin. When a secessionist group claims external self-determination it does not necessarily challenge the principle of sovereignty but challenges the sovereignty of an existing state. Such groups advance a particular understanding of sovereignty, namely sovereignty for their self-defined nation, which alludes to an overlap between self-determination and sovereignty.
Self-determination means “people's right to freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development” (Article 1, 1966 UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights). Internal self-determination refers to accommodating the group's claims within existing states, whereas external self-determination refers to secession, the creation of new states and changing boundaries in order to accommodate claims (Castellino 2000). An inability to fulfill internal self-determination is typically seen as a possible justification for claiming external self-determination. This is where the KRG's claims to find its source of justification as it argues that the Baghdad government is inhibiting the Kurdish peoples' ability to fulfill their internal self-determination and pursue their economic, political and social development.

Therefore, the KRG aligns itself with the international norms on legitimate rule and political behavior, such as self-determination and democratization, in order to maintain the support of international actors and to increase its international recognition (Voller 2015). Halliday's concept of “international society as homogeneity” is useful in explaining such alignments. This concept incorporates shared values and the diffusion of ideas with the direct or indirect imposition of ideas and values by great powers, states, media, international organisations and government institutions. It implies totality, meaning that domestic structures are directly connected to international society. As a result of the totality between domestic and international spheres, states and other non-state actors are under pressure to organise their political and social structure in a way that is similar to each other (Halliday 1992; Halliday 1994). Iraqi Kurdish nationalists align themselves with norms and principles relevant to territorial rights and sovereignty and communicate their goals using the international normative discourse. They do this either because they genuinely adhere to those principles or because they aim to instrumentalize them for their own purposes.

**Self-determination and Iraqi Kurds**

In their claims for self-rule, Iraqi Kurds have aligned themselves with the international norms of the period when they made their appeals. Self-determination has always been the key principle and Kurds' use of this principle has changed based on the way in which the meaning of the principle and its relation to other international norms have changed. However, the recognition or non-recognition of their appeals for self-determination, either in the form of statehood or autonomous sovereignty, depended on the political, economic and geostrategic realities of the era. Their appeals to the right to self-determination were overlooked until Iraqi Kurds faced mass killings in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a period proceeded by long-term human rights' abuse, pressure and Arabization policies. The Iraq Kurds began to de facto enjoy internal self-determination after the creation of safe haven in northern Iraq in 1991, which turned into a de facto Kurdish autonomous region.

Today, the U.S. and other states do not support the KRG's plans for full secession, because keeping Iraq united is their priority.

The implementation of self-determination for Kurds in Iraq first came to the agenda during the post-WWI period. The international circumstances of the era led Kurdish leaders in the ex-Ottoman territories to raise their hopes for statehood. Not long after the proceedings of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 ended, the Treaty of Sevres was signed in August 1920. Despite its limited provisions for a Kurdish state, modern Kurdish nationalist historiography claims that the Sevres treaty legally provided for the implementation of self-determination for Kurds and the establishment of a Kurdish state. According to this view, if it were not for the 1923 Lausanne Treaty signed between the new Turkish state and Western powers, the Kurdish state would have been established. Therefore, for Kurdish nationalists, the WWI period, during which the map of the Middle East (Levant) was drawn, was a missed opportunity.
The meaning of the principle, as defined by Wilson, during the WWI period was “people's right to govern.” Wilson's self-rule for peoples meant self-governance or peoples' sovereignty. This is because, by definition, the democratic enterprise has always been based on a defined group of people, who are understood to be the nation. For the democratic enterprise, sovereignty belongs to the nation: popular sovereignty. Therefore, differentiating the meaning of sovereignty from self-determination in this period is not a straightforward task. Many aspiring nations of the time, including the Kurds, used self-determination in the context of claiming statehood as a nation and therefore creating a new sovereignty, seeing self-determination as a right to statehood or right to sovereignty.

The WWI period and the rise in Kurdish aspirations for statehood coincided with the internationalization of the principle of self-determination. Wilson propagated the principle as one of the key norms for the post-war international order and oversaw the dissemination of this principle across the world. However, cautious measures were introduced later in the implementation of the principle. The Paris Peace Conference limited the application of self-determination to territories and peoples in Europe, Turkish possessions in Anatolia and the Middle East, and the German and Italian colonial possessions (Manela 2007). For claims outside these territories in the future, Wilson suggested the formation of an international mechanism, which would be dealt with by the League of Nations.

Even though the territories that the Paris Peace Conference decided to deal with encompassed the Kurds, Kurdish demands were overlooked, as were those of other small nations (e.g. the Irish) whose claims were in conflict with the ally powers. Indeed, the implementation of the principle in the WWI period is an example of balancing idealist and realist considerations. When the idea of creating a Kurdistan did not correspond with the political, economic and geostrategic considerations of the time, it was disregarded. Moreover, despite the very generous idea behind Wilsonian self-determination, which recognized “a people's right to govern,” in practice it was very difficult to apply because of the difficulty in defining who should constitute the “people.” Even though the British initially saw the Kurds as a potential people to self-govern, gradually they became less interested in the idea. This is often attributed to the fragmented status and inconsistent attitude of the Kurdish leadership, which the British perceived as a drawback for the formation of Kurdish state (McDowall 1996).

The multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition of the population in east Anatolia (eastern Turkey) and north Mesopotamia (south-eastern Turkey and part of northern Syria and northern Iraq) also rendered it difficult to implement self-determination and to draw boundaries to create viable political entities. Moreover, the British were concerned about the overlapping territorial claims of the Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians and Turks (McDowall 1996; O’Shea 2004). In the end, the only area where self-determination for Kurds was implemented, albeit in quite a procedural form, was the Sulaimaniyah district of today’s Iraqi Kurdistan, where a semi-autonomous regional administration headed by Kurdish tribal leaders was established in 1918 (ending in 1932). This was done so as to nominally comply with the League of Nation's expectations, but it was made clear that this area was actually Iraqi territory.

In this period, Iraqi Kurds aligned their goals with the key international norm of the time: self-determination. The Barzanis, a leading Kurdish tribe in Iraq, revolted against Iraq and the British in a bid to expand their leadership. They refused to accept the status quo and asserted that the Kurds of Sulaimaniyah were entitled to implement their right to self-determination and to a state of their own (Natali 2005). Although their distinct ethnic identity underpinned these attempts, the nationalistic and culturalist dimensions of their self-determination claims were less prominent and appeared more as a power struggle than liberation. These rebellions were fully suppressed by 1932 and after that, the British sent a memorandum to the Council of the League of Nations that rejected the Kurdish right to self-determination and justified the British denial of this right.
Another period when Iraqi Kurds’ self-determination claims came to the agenda was the 1940s. In this period, cultural and democratic rights became more explicit in the rhetoric of self-determination claims by Kurdish nationalists. This change in rhetoric coincided with the enshrinement of the principle of self-determination as a right in the U.N. Charter. In this period, Iraqi Kurdish nationalists made several appeals to international society to claim their right to self-determination and form a free Kurdistan. For instance, on March 22, 1945, they submitted a Memorandum on the Kurdish Question to the American Legation in Baghdad. This memorandum defined the ethnographic boundaries of Kurdistan and requested that the Kurds be given “their place among free nations.”

In the 1970s, the Kurdish demands for self-determination had more nationalistic underpinnings than before. Kurdish leaders declared that they aimed to attain a Kurdish autonomous region for Kurdish populations to exercise Kurdish national rights and autonomy. This was happening in the context of activities led by Kurdish intellectuals and elites to generate a cultural and linguistic project to raise national awareness (Aziz 2011). Kurdish revolts against the Iraqi regime continued, and eventually a Kurdish administrative region was formed in 1974. However, it didn’t last long. Despite the continuing official existence of an autonomous administrative region, in practice the Iraqi government applied suppressive policies in this region to limit autonomy.

The creation of a de facto autonomous region in order to protect of Iraqi Kurds’ right to self-determination happened as a result of international intervention after the Gulf War. During the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, the Iraqi government destroyed many villages in the Kurdish areas. The 1988 Anfal Campaign, carried out by the Iraqi government, killed tens of thousands of people (Van Bruinessen 1994). After the 1991 Kuwait War, Kurdish nationalist militant groups, with U.S. encouragement, tried to increase their control again, however, this led to another major attack by the government. Huge numbers of Kurds were pushed to the borders of neighbouring countries, leading to a humanitarian disaster. The creation of a “safe haven” by the United States led to a de facto autonomous Kurdish authority in northern Iraq, which became official after 2003.

Today, Iraq is the only country where Kurds have their own officially recognized government within a federal system. Therefore, it could be argued that they have achieved the fulfillment of their right to internal self-determination. However, the KRG has not discarded the idea of Kurdish statehood. Today, with the turmoil going on in the region, the KRG have often expressed the possibility of a referendum to decide on independence. This shows that the KRG sees self-determination as a right to sovereignty. Its status as an autonomous region with state-like characteristics makes it an interesting case to study the principles of sovereignty and self-determination and their implications for entities aspiring to statehood.

Conclusion

Iraqi Kurdish claims for independence through self-determination present a conflation between external self-determination and the principle of sovereignty. However, their status as a semi-sovereign entity has already provided them with a high degree of internal self-determination, even if they are not fully satisfied with this. In order to justify their desire for external self-determination, they have consistently aligned themselves with international norms since the end of WWI, most notably democratic and liberal rights through self-determination. Kurdish nationalists have argued that Kurdish people will be more able to realize these rights and develop in economic, social and political terms when they are independent from Iraq. The meaning of self-determination they use is a form of sovereignty, meaning independence in arriving at decisions. This shows that actors in international society, including non-state and state-like actors, such as the KRG, also align themselves with internationally accepted rules and norms to further their domestic demands. The domestic structures of state or state-like entities are thus intrinsically linked to the international society.

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New dimensions of security and regionalism in the Middle East

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The Middle East started facing a new set of security challenges in the second decade of the 21st century. Regional states were called to re-examine their strategic priorities and foreign policies at both the regional and global level.

Rapid regional changes bring to the attention of IR scholars the old debate about the low responsiveness of the Middle East to regionalism and regionalization in both the economic and political fields as well as the absence of a functional Middle East security complex. Particularly since the end of the Cold War, endogenous dynamics have rather benefited sub-regional integration. Concurrently, exogenous pressures—particularly the European goal of creating a Euro-Mediterranean common area—have not achieved the desired results. Regime changes that occurred after the 2011 uprisings and instability in many of the states formerly involved in the Euro-Med regionalization project have challenged the traditional approach of a dialogue between the northern and the southern banks of the Mediterranean. New policies meant to achieve stability on the two shores and contain potential insecurity connected to migratory flows, commercial exchanges and raw materials imports, are crucial for Brussels as well as for economic growth and the consolidation of the emerging political orders in the Middle East.

New perspectives ought to be adopted for the analysis of evolving Euro-Med relations. The combination of international and domestic factors (intermestics) could constitute a privileged analytical tool: will governments with popular legitimation re-conceptualize the national interest? Does the political identity of new actors push towards multilateralism rather than bilateralism? Do European and Middle-Eastern interests converge more than in the past?

With regards to European security policies, a specific focus ought to be the analysis of future military agreements with Middle-Eastern states, as well as the impact of the European conditionality principle in structuring civil-military relations: can we expect the separation of military and civilian power, subordinating the former to the latter? Will Europe—conceptualized here as both a single actor and a complex of national states that do not necessarily act in concert—be in a position to play the role of “external shaper,” combining “soft power” and coercive action?

Regime changes following the 2011 Arab uprisings are also driving a transformation of the regional system. We can identify three phenomena, which we expect will impact the redefinition of inter-state alliances and the conceptualization of threats from single actors: i) Progressive Islamization of politics in the regional context; ii) proliferation of civil wars after the collapse of some specific regimes; and iii) a new more assertive foreign policy by regional powers on both shores of the Persian Gulf.

A further field of inquiry should be the impact of the variables above on the level of Middle East stability and on the dynamics of inter-state competition and cooperation in the region.

State of the art

The Middle East is a region marked by a constant proliferation of threats and long standing conflicts. There is unanimity in recognizing the high impact of the security dilemma among regional actors; moreover, many scholars emphasize the profound security interdependence, which defines the inter-state dimension: the Middle East is often defined as a “regional security complex” marked by systemic enmity patterns (Buzan-Waever 2003).

Even after the Cold War, while the number of conflicts within the International System decreased considerably, competition among Middle Eastern states remained
high, making the regional context less attuned to global dynamics. Furthermore, since the dismantling of the bipolar international system, the lack of meaningful regionalism and regionalization seems to have created a gap between the systemic functionality of the Middle East and that of other regional systems (Aarts 1999; Harders-Legrenzi 2008; Fawcett 2009).

Indeed, there is a trend in the ever growing literature on the topic that chooses to consider the Middle East in terms of “exceptionalism,” defining it as the only regional space resisting durable and institutionalized cooperation in the economic, political and security spheres. Different theoretical approaches have yielded distinctive explanations: according to realists and neo-realists the Middle East is the most “hobbesian” space within the International System—or, rather, the area in which inter-state relations reflect, at the highest level, natural competitive tendencies. Therefore, for Realists it is difficult to implement de-securitization policies in the Middle East (Waltz 1979).

This theoretical approach has met with criticism. One of the most compelling lines of criticism refutes the realist state-centered approach in the analysis of the Middle East inter-state system, preferring to recognize in the region a status of “immature anarchy” and permeability of borders. From this point of view, the conceptualization of threats is not just related to but even more revealing in a trans-national perspective (Bassel, Salloukh, Bryner 2004). This is particularly relevant when focusing on terrorism or sub-state forces aspiring to disarticulate state entities (e.g. the Kurdish movement in Iraq). Additionally, some Realists and some dependency theorists link the perpetual systemic (in)security with the high level of external (i.e. global powers) penetration (Brown 1984; Korany 2009).

Conversely, from a liberal-institutionalist perspective, the failure of regional cooperation is attributed to institutional fragility at both state and supra-state level (Kheoane 1984). Whereas, when looking at the situation through the lenses of complex interdependence, the difficulty in the emergence of a benign “regional security complex” has to be attributed to the low development of interregional commerce and economic cooperation among Middle Eastern states (Nye 1968; Richards-Waterbury 2007).

Moreover, a lot of work focused on way the overstated autonomy of the national interest towards the regional context constituted an obstacle to the formulation of common regional goals. This line of thinking is mainly put forward by constructivist authors and by those considering the identity of regional actors as one of the sources of regional (in)securities (Bryner-Korany-Noble 1993; Ryan 2007).

In the last few years, scholars have also focused on security sub-regionalization. In this context, attention has been given to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Within this territorial space, the conceptualization of threats is closely related to energy security- oil fields securitization and energy diversification (Gause III 2010; Legrenzi 2011). With the rapid change of the regional system, the importance of these two factors has manifested itself, initially, in the rising tension between Gulf Arab states and Iran; later, in new dynamics of sub-regional cooperation within GCC members and their role in the wider regional scenario; and finally, in the evolution of relations between the Gulf and i) the US, as a traditional security provider on the Arabian peninsula and among the most important oil importers; ii) Europe as a commercial partner and significant hydrocarbons importer as well as mentor of liberalization for political regimes of the region; and iii) China and India as new actors in the Persian Gulf.

Directions for future research

As I blissfully leave behind academic management for at least the next two years, my research will aim to map out an appraisal of Middle Eastern regionalism, more attentive to catch and critically evaluate efforts of institutionalizing regional cooperation in economic and security fields. It is certainly true, and it is clearly acknowledged by bureaucrats who work for regional or sub-regional bodies such as the League of Arab States, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Gulf Cooperation...
Council (GCC) that the failure to implement signed agreements both in the fields of security and economics has damaged the credibility of these organizations. However, it is important to recognize the growth in regional awareness brought about by the activities of these organizations. For example, the profound change in the notion of Arab identity that followed the demise of Pan-Arabism allowed Gulf leaders in 1981 to spurn previously accepted norms of intra-Arab political behaviour by setting up an organization that was explicitly sub-regional in character.

The sub-regional setting has been enthusiastically embraced by intellectual and business elites bent on reform. The latter saw the sub-regional setting as a quasi discursively “good” area in which they were free to debate issues of economic, and, to a certain extent political, liberalization to a degree that was difficult in the single member states. For many, the GCC was seen as a possible vehicle of “top down” liberalization. Even if this did not prove to be the case, the GCC has certainly acquired a well-defined role in the cognitive boundaries of politicians and businessmen alike both within and without the region.

I aim to explore the potential and actual role of regional and sub-regional organizations in the Broader Middle East. I will then focus on economic, professional and civic regionalization. Finally, I will investigate the role that the European Union can play, if any, in abetting the growth of regionalism and economic regionalization in the region. My specific goals can be summarized in more detailed research questions:

i) I aim to discern the actual impact that current regional and sub-regional organizations have in the Broader Middle East.

Do states in the Arab Middle East take into consideration their membership in regional and sub-regional bodies when formulating their foreign policy? Is there a modicum of consensus seeking behaviour at the regional and sub-regional level when new political initiatives are elaborated? Are decision makers in any way affected by membership in regional and sub-regional organizations in the formulation and day-to-day implementation of foreign policy? Are bureaucrats working in the secretariats and headquarters of regional and sub-regional organizations aware of the impact that membership has on the foreign policies of the member states? Are they working actively to increase the impact of membership in the formulation of the foreign policies of member states?

ii) I aspire to identify the impact of regionalization as opposed to regionalism in the Broader Middle East.

I will do so by affirming an important distinction between regionalism as a conscious policy of Middle East states and economic, professional and civic regionalization as the outcome of such policies or of “natural” economic forces in order to identify the impact of objective indicators including capital movements and foreign direct investment between countries of the region. Along these lines, I will also explore the hypothesis that technical agencies such as the Arab Petroleum Investment Corporation (APICORP) and the Gulf Investment Corporation (GIC) have been far more successful than their political counterparts. At the regional level, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (AFESD) are also proving more vibrant than regional and sub-regional political organizations.

I will seek to discern whether new media such as Internet and satellite TV are creating a new public sphere in the region that transcends national boundaries. The following questions ought to be answered: are NGOs more likely to organize on a regional and sub-regional basis because of the existence of regional and sub-regional organizations? Do professional organizations meet on a regional and sub-regional basis? In more general terms, did the establishment of regional and sub-regional organizations result in a reshaping of cognitive boundaries within the region? Are these cognitive boundaries recognised by the regional professional and civic elites? What is the level of foreign direct investment among countries of the region? What are the capital flows crisscrossing the
Broader Middle East? Why do some banking centers, such as Bahrain, thrive in spite of the opacity of their banking practices? Is transparency achievable in a business environment that values personal trust and discretion above anything else? What is the impact of these business practices on the effort to stem illicit capital flows? Why do technical agencies seem to work better than their political counterparts? Does it have to do with the fact that they are organized along corporate lines? Do they attract better expertise than political bodies? Are the new media really creating a new public sphere or do national political imaginaries still retain their grip? Are there quantitative indicators that we can utilize to measure this process?

iii) I will try to establish whether the European Union can play a fruitful role in the Broader Middle East by encouraging the proliferation of regional and sub-regional initiatives in the economic and social fields.

Can the European Union gain a less subsidiary role in conflict resolution in the region by encouraging regional and sub-regional initiatives? Has the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership proved a success in this regard? Can the European Union leverage its institutional expertise and help regional and sub-regional organizations in the Broader Middle East deepen the convergence and integration of member states in the economic and defence fields? Are the obstacles encountered by member states the result of lack of technical know how or of deep-seated political problems?

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Coming in from the Cold:
How we may take sectarian identity politics seriously in the Middle East without playing to the tunes of regional power elites

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In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings and especially the Syrian war, sectarianism appears to have become entrenched in Middle East regional politics. Rivalries and alliances are increasingly framed in sectarian terms, and the main conflicts of the region from Yemen to Syria and Iraq can all be said to entail a sectarian dimension. As Gause puts it: “There is no denying sectarianism’s important role in understanding current regional conflicts,” (Gause, 2014:4). However, while much of the literature agrees that sectarianism indeed has grown and deepened over the last decade or more, it paradoxically has difficulties understanding the eruption and meaning of sectarianism in regional politics. The three dominant approaches to sectarianism—primordialism, instrumentalism and historical sociology—all tend to explain sectarianism away, reducing the phenomenon to factors exterior to sectarian identity politics itself. This is unfortunate in so far as the explanatory focus is thereby moved away from what sectarianism is/or means, how it becomes a source of conflict and what makes it distinct and effective compared to other identity and ideational claims.

This short article, therefore, argues for taking sectarian identity politics seriously on its own terms. It claims that this can best be done by bringing in insights from poststructuralist theory in International Relations, particularly from the Copenhagen School’s conceptualization of securitization and religion. Drawing on securitization theory will allow us to bridge concerns with the power politics involved when regional actors and local elites make sectarian claims and the processes of social construction whereby sectarian identities are enacted and discursively framed as security threats.

Securitization theory and religion

Securitization theory’s core idea is that security can be analyzed as a speech act, which brings certain referent objects and threats into existence by being uttered as such by securitizing actors e.g. state representatives or political leaders. By making an effective security claim to a certain audience, a political issue is moved from the realm of normal politics into a realm of expediency, where extraordinary measures (e.g. military means) can be used (Wæver, 1995). Studying sectarianism from a securitization theory perspective will thus imply examining how political elites use sectarian discourses as powerful sources of legitimation and persuasion.

However, sectarian articulations would be approached as articulations that produce the very sectarian community they invoke as being under threat, rather than as mere rhetoric or manipulated constructions. The analytical focus thereby shifts towards questions of meaning and social construction—such as how sectarian identities are produced and re-produced, what it means to speak in sectarian community terms, or how sectarian identities are imbued with certain specific characteristics through strategies of Othering—rather than to questions of the underlying intentions or drivers behind actors’ use of sectarian language—such as the quest for power, state interest or regime survival.

Secondly, while sectarian identities in this sense are taken seriously as socially constructed facts—in some respects similarly to a primordial approach—these are not presumed to have a certain essence that can be defined, neither to be inherently conflictual or antagonistic. Instead, I would argue that this needs to be approached as an empirical question of how a given identity relation is articulated and how it may become securitized over time with reference to a sectarian community under threat. Obvious cases for such diachronic analysis of securitization would be the uprisings in Syria, in Yemen, or the post-2003 period in Iraq. For instance, the Syrian
conflict initially hardly contained a sectarian dimension, but over time securitizing practices and discourses adopted by the regime, local “defense forces” and regional powers in particular, created self-fulfilling prophesies and anarchic security dynamics that prompted all actors to believe that their own community was threatened by the mere existence of the Other sect, and thus that the survival of their community ultimately was dependent on fighting the Other.

Thirdly, securitization theory argues that religion has its own distinct logic and a specific referent in the form of “faith” that securitizing actors claim to act in defense of (Wæver & Lausten, 2000, Sheikh, 2014). Sheik stresses that religious claims therefore are different from other identity and ideological claims, and that religious forms of legitimation will have distinct effects in terms of conflict dynamics. Speaking in terms of the defense of religion will, according to Sheikh and Juergensmeyer, for instance enable the securitizing actor to claim that it is a religious duty to use extraordinary measures, enable actors to elevate conflicts to cosmic battles between good and evil, potentially turn wars into sacred and eternal struggles with no time limits, provide personal rewards in terms of redemption or heavenly luxuries, and make it easier to mobilize vast numbers of supporters who otherwise would not have been mobilized around a given political or social issue. Especially this latter point seems relevant in relation to the current securitization and regional mobilization around the Sunni-Shia rift, where sectarian referents effectively have elevated local conflicts to regional security problems.

Some of the above suggestions, however, may primarily be applicable to the study of jihadist and radical religious actors (such as the Islamic State, al Qaeda, or Jabrat al Nusra) and less to the study of sectarian discourses and practices employed by main regional power and actors. In part this may also be due to the fact that there are differences between making a religious and a sectarian claim. Although sectarian identity claims may have faith as their security referent, the referent would more likely be a specific sectarian community that securitizing actors would claim to act in defence of. Sectarian identities are in this sense closer to ethnic and national identity constructions, more “political”, and often put forward within an already existing nation-state discursive framework. E.g. when Hezbollah legitimizes its military intervention in Syria, it does indeed articulate Sunni extremists and so-called takfiris as the Other and represents this Other as an existential threat. Yet Hezbollah does usually not explicitly refer to its own sectarian faith as being endangered, but rather to the identity of the whole of Lebanon.

The primordial, the instrumentalist, and the Historical Sociology approach

How does this perspective then depart from dominant ways of studying sectarianism in Middle East regional politics? The current literature on the role of sectarianism in Middle East regional politics can be divided into three different strands i) a primordial, ii) an instrumentalist, and iii) a historical sociology approach; with significant overlaps between the latter two.

The primordial approach is particularly dominant in the media, where it often implicitly guides the analysis of the region’s wars and competitions. But it also figures prominently in policy analysis and diplomatic circles. Within this perspective sectarian identities are presumed to lie at the roots of conflicts in the Middle East. The Shia-Sunni conflict is viewed as an ancient struggle, “for the soul of Islam, a great war of competing theologies and conceptions of sacred history and a manifestation of tribal wars of ethnicities and identities” (Nasr, 2007). The Sunni-Shia split is taken to be a primary conflict of the region that reaches back to the 7th century and continues to drive the politics of the region today. In this way the sectarian divide comes to explain present conflicts, but is not itself in need of explanation. Sectarian identities are assumed to be primary or natural, and they are presumably

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1 Yet different from these, notably because sectarian communities seldom aspire to statehood. Shia minority communities in the Gulf for instance, and even in Iraq hegemony over the state and its resources rather than carving out an independent state.
played out between two clearly defined religious sects – leaving little analytical space for the study of overlapping or inter-sectarian identities. Although primordialists acknowledge that sectarianism has varied historically, and thus that it is not a constant in Middle East politics, this is largely interpreted as a type of overlay or repression that have kept latent sectarian identities under the radar. Abdo for instance argues that sectarian identities were kept in check by authoritarian regimes and strong state structures prior to 2011, and that the undermining of these orders - in the form of state collapse, revolution and sudden violence in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain – have allowed people to return to their primary identities and unleashed the tide of sectarianism (Abdo, 2013).

In contrast, instrumentalists are deeply skeptical about using a sectarian framework to explain the causes of the region's present struggles and rivalries. Sectarian identities are primarily seen as superficial political constructs, open to manipulation and exploitation by political elites, who use sectarian fear-mongering to garner vested patron-client relationships, as gateways to mass mobilization, or as powerful levers in regional rivalries. To understand why sectarianism has risen over the last decades, instrumentalists primarily look to the way that authoritarian states have exacerbated sectarian divisions both domestically and regionally in order to prop up their regimes and remain in power. Arab states have for decades skillfully manipulated fears of political exclusion and claimed to protect certain sections of the population from others. The Assad regime is for instance infamous for its strategy of self-fulfilling sectarianism, having succeeded in galvanizing support from Alawite and Christians communities in particular due to their fears of Sunni majority rule. Political leaders may also use sectarianism to discredit their political opponents and rivals. In fact attacking Shiites is often a result of rivalries between different Sunni factions, rather than being motivated by a larger Sunni-Shia struggle (Lynch, 2013). Precisely because sectarianism is exacerbated by, and plays into the hands of authoritarian regimes, instrumentalist caution that the primordialist approach may lead to dangerous political prescriptions (Gause, 2014, Lynch, 2013). As Marc Lynch points out, primordialist arguments "tend to lead towards solutions involving the heavy hand of authoritarian states to suppress the supposedly inevitable violent clash of sectarian communities", or alternatively toward the partition of states into clean ethnic-sectarian enclaves, echoing the solutions applied to the Balkans in the 1990s (Lynch, 2013).

Moreover, instrumentalists rightly point out that the primordialist approach often neglects the multiple cross-cutting divisions, alliances and overlapping identities within the so-called Sunni and Shia camps. For instance by analyzing the Saudi-Iranian rivalry as a struggle driven by sectarian motivations, it is difficult to explain the alliance between Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria and Iran, as well as the rivalry between Saudi-Arabia and Qatar. Indeed both Iran and Saudi-Arabia have crossed the sectarian fault line when seeking regional allies. Iran's close relationship with the Assad regime is not founded on an alawite-shia sectarian kinship, but rather on geo-strategic interest and a common position on Israel (Lynch, 2013, Ayub, 2013). Similarly to the logic in the domestic arena, Saudi-Arabia may use sectarianism regionally to mobilize local clients in conflict zones, or as a way to discredit Iran. But this is a part of a game for regional influence rather than a centuries-long religious dispute (Gause, 2014:5). Thus to instrumentalist, sectarianism is foremost an ideology that state actors conveniently employ either regionally in a classic realist balance of power, or domestically to hold on to state power (Gause, 2014, Lynch, 2013, Ayub, 2013, Delacarious).

Instrumentalists importantly point to the power and politics involved in sectarian identity politics, and to the analytical and political consequences of operating with an underlying assumption of essentialist identities. However, to instrumentalists sectarianism is precisely an "ism", a form of ideology up for grasp alongside other ideologies in the region. The conflation of ideology and identity is however problematic in several respects.

Firstly, sectarianism becomes a type of surface phenomenon—or in Marxist terminology a mere
superstructure—underneath which one will find the real drivers of politics, i.e. material power and interest. In a reverse image of the primordialist—who implicitly assumes sectarianism to be deep structure overlaid by power—instrumentalists see material power as a deep structure that moves sectarianism. This implies that sectarianism is removed from the equation and instead is explained away. In so far as sectarianism is assumed to be just another ideology cynically used by power-holders, instrumentalists are less well-equipped to explain why sectarian identity politics has become so prominent over the last decade, or what has made it so effective, compared to other ideologies available in the region. In other words, given that instrumentalists presume sectarianism is a mere expression of continuous universal power struggles, they are less focused on the particularities of sectarian identity formations or what it means to make sectarian claims.

Other scholars inspired by historical sociology therefore instead emphasize those historical path dependencies that have led to the recent thrive in sectarian identity politics (see e.g. Hinnebusch, 2014, Dodge, 2014, Heydemann, 2013). Dodge, for instance, argues that it is foremost the gradual weakening of state structures, the army, the policy force and the ability to deliver protection and services that creates the conditions of possibilities for sectarianism. When state institutions are eroding—because of sanctions, conflict, or foreign invasion—people turn to “whatever grouping, militia or identity that offers them the best chances of survival,” (Dodge, 2014:3). Analyzing the gradual break-down of state order in Iraq, Dodge points out how the withering of the state’s monopoly on collective violence, its civilian institutional capacity, and its infra-structural power all meant that Iraqis had to seek protection and services on a local and regional level instead. So-called “ethnic-religious entrepreneurs” were ready to jump in and supply these goods, and they were predominantly legitimizing their role in terms of communalistic identities. With the Arab uprisings in 2011, and the subsequent conflicts and weak/collapsing state structures, sectarian identity politics has gained further traction. Heydemann emphasizes how the deepening sectarianization of politics from the domestic sphere to the regional level now is a two-way street: Local conflicts have led to sectarian spill-over in neighboring states and have drawn in major regional actors along sectarian lines. Regional politics have become locked into a strategic culture of sectarianism, just as regional actors have exacerbated local sectarian dynamics by establishing patron-client support structures based on sectarian affinities (Heydemann, 2013:11).

To scholars inspired by historical sociology, the rise of sectarian identity politics is thus primarily a question of sufficient strong state structures (or the lack thereof) at the domestic level prompting communities either to seek protection with sub-state actors or regional patrons. In contrast to instrumentalists, historical sociologists do, to a certain extent, analyze these identities as different from ideologies. Sectarian identities are seen as more entrenched than mere ideology and more difficult to change or reverse once they have become established in popular discourse and practices. However, as in the case of instrumentalists, sectarian identity itself is withdrawn from the explanation by making it a function of something else. Sectarian identifications constitute a type of fallback position ready to be used in situations of heightened insecurity and state collapse, in which individuals or groups, out of rational self-interest, seek safety, goods, and order. Thus, as in the case of the instrumentalist approach, sectarianism is implicitly presumed to be a tool for self-preservation and a form of passive undercurrent available to sub-state elites when state structures collapse.

**Conclusion**

This article has argued that there is a need to take sectarianism more seriously, without reducing sectarian identity politics either to an already given essence or explaining it away by factors exterior to sectarianism itself. Inspired by some of the key concepts of the Copenhagen School’s conceptualization of securitization, I presented an analytical focus on how sectarian identities becomes securitized and accepted as security threats over time, the power involved when securitizing actors make sectarian claims/representations, and what it means within a
distinct discursive field to make a sectarian claim. In this
sense, one might argue that securitization theory may
potentially bridge key concerns of all three approaches:
the primordialists’ concern with identity, instrumentalists’
concern with power, and historical sociologists’ concern
with identity formation. However, empirical studies of
sectarian identity politics in the Middle East have yet to be
carried out from a securitization perspective. This piece
has hopefully taken the first steps in this direction, but
the fruitfulness of securitization theory for the study of
sectarianism will of course ultimately depend on future
empirical studies.

Yet arguably, securitization theory is primarily concerned
with conflict situations and the discourses of political
elites. This makes the theory well suited to address the
current Middle East regional order, but less to the everyday
local sectarian practices. There anthropological approaches
may have more to offer.

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IR and Middle East studies:
Speaking Truth to Power In a Multipolar World

By Nora Fisher Onar, George Washington University and University of Oxford

Ours is an era of Western retrenchment. The rise
of the “Rest” has piqued a range of reactions among
policymakers and publics. Responses range from anxiety
(typically on the right) to enthusiasm (typically on the
left) with a guarded willingness to engage emerging
actors situated somewhere in the middle. The need to
understand the new geocultural landscape presents the
IR academy—with its global scope and networks—a
timely opportunity to engage area specialists, not least
when it comes to the turbulent Middle East.

The discipline of international relations, its name
notwithstanding, has not always enabled a pluralistic prism
onto world affairs. At the height of formal decolonization
in the 1960s and 1970s, the IR academy—steeped in Cold
War great power politics—mostly ignored the “third
world.” A quintessentially “American social science,” the
task of “seeing the world as others see it” (as J. William
Fulbright exhorted his grantees) was allocated to
comparative politics and area studies. Arguably, the most
empathetic inquiry into the affairs of “Others” emanated
from the humanities. This was largely due to the work of
Middle East scholar Edward Said. His synopsis of a century
of critique from the region in the seminal Orientalism
offered a template with which to deconstruct Western
readings—and the power relations they enabled—of the
rest of the world. The approach transformed disciplines
like literary theory, history, cultural, gender, and
subaltern studies, as well humanistic social sciences like
anthropology and sociology.

In time, such insights percolated into the IR academy in
tandem with the challenge mounted by critical scholars
from within (e.g. constructivists, historical sociologists,
feminists). Empirical developments since at least the
2000s accelerated this process, converting what was
long a normative project—decentering our reading of
world affairs—into a strategic imperative.¹ After all, the latest economic crisis took the West down several pegs vis-à-vis emerging economic powers. And challenges continue to mount from the East (e.g. revanchist Russia; revisionist China) and the South (e.g. Arab turmoil; equatorial pandemics). The TRIP survey of faculty in 25 countries² tells us that 76.2 percent of IR scholars believe the discipline is Western-centric while 60.2 percent believe this state of affairs is untenable. In short, there is a palpable need to capture not the view from nowhere but views from everywhere.

Such trends have propelled research recently aggregated under the label “Global IR.” Given center stage at the 2015 International Studies Association annual convention under the presidency and committee leadership of figures like Amitav Acharya, Pınar Bilgin, and L.H.M Ling, the event was the largest ISA gathering ever. It brought together an interdisciplinary group, including students of the Middle East, who believe that “provincializing” the West in our analytical apparatus can enable more effective and more equitable global governance. As Charles King notes in his powerful piece on the state of international studies for Foreign Affairs, such “granular and culture-specific knowledge”—often gleaned through ethnographic, case study, and archival work, but also via the statistical survey and large-N toolkit of positive social science—can make “the critical difference between really getting a place and getting it profoundly wrong.”

But what is the added value of Global IR for students of the Middle East? There are at least two good reasons to engage. The first is to overcome parochialism. Bridge-building can help us think outside of exceptionalist boxes that stymie dialogue across the region much less with interlocutors beyond. An IR-ME studies conversation can leverage insights about transnational phenomena: the rise of “post-Western liberalisms,” as I have written elsewhere, “from Istanbul to Hong Kong”;³ the growing salience of religiously inflected populism across an arc of rising Eurasian powers (in Turkey and Iran, but also Russia, India, and China);⁴ and the role of Islamism from a genuinely Islamicate perspective transcending the traditional focus on the Arab Middle East, in which Egypt is ground zero, other Arabs are secondary, Turks and Persians tertiary, and South and Southeast Asians are beyond the pale.

One initiative that has done an exemplary job of brokering such a conversation, the Social Science Research Council’s collaborative Inter-Asia platform,⁵ is conspicuous nonetheless for the dearth of voices from politics and IR. This may reflect the wariness of many a humanistically oriented scholar from imbrication with power. However, and this is the second reason why in Global IR, Middle East studies has a kindred soul: both draw inspiration from the Saidian view of the public intellectual as one who should “speak truth to power.” Doing so, Said suggested, requires “unbudgeable conviction in a concept of justice and fairness that allows for differences between nations and individuals, without at the same time assigning them to hidden hierarchies, preferences, [and] evaluations.”

This approach is but one mode of being a public intellectual. Other legitimate forms include neutrality in, say, the classroom, or lending expertise to agents and institutions of governance. Ultimately, the core of all public intellectuality is the willingness to ask hard questions. And in a multipolar era, the nature of such questions has changed. The relative decline of the West, for example, has driven a narrative of world historic comeuppance in Ankara and Moscow, Beijing and Sao Paolo. In more or less colorful idiom, pundits from these emergent centers of gravity argue that the West had been eclipsed and its

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² The Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) project housed at William & Mary examines the relationship between IR teaching, research and practice. TRIP conducts an annual multi-country survey of faculty on the state of the discipline. The data cited here is from the 2013 poll.


⁵ See http://www.ssrc.org/programs/interasia-Program/
civilizational energies spent at a time when erstwhile non-Western empires are regaining traction in their former imperial geographies.

In the case of Turkey, this story was amplified after the Arab uprisings when some in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere cited the Turkish experience as one source of inspiration in their rebellion against authoritarian regimes.\(^6\) Turkey appeared to be in the vanguard of the right side of history, trumping the persistent Western/Orientalist view of the region and its peoples as incapable of either economic dynamism or political freedom.

Today, the magic of that moment has faded. In addition to the authoritarian backlash, sectarianism and militant movements with which the Middle East grapples more broadly, Turkey’s success story has been tarnished by sluggish growth and the anti-democratic turn of its leadership. Turkey’s pattern is not precisely one of democratic “reversal,” as the basis of political legitimacy remains the will of the voting public. It does, however, seem to entail democratic “careening.” Slater coined this term to describe: “the sense of endemic unsettledness and rapid ricocheting that characterizes democracies that are struggling but not collapsing.”\(^7\) This pattern is evident in what Human Rights Watch, among others bodies, calls serious “rollback” in areas including freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and the protection of women as well as ethnic and religious minorities.\(^8\)

The recent dismantling of rule of law in Turkey evokes a broader trend toward repressive populism from Hungary’s Orban and Russia’s Putin to India’s Modi. Certainly, there are counterexamples among emerging actors like Indonesia with its vibrant and pluralistic democracy and Tunisia with its remarkable, if fragile, coalition politics. But the trend across geopolitically significant Eurasian powers may be towards charismatic strongmen.

What does this mean for the emancipatory thrust of global IR? And what are the implications for the conversation with Middle East studies? In other words, how should the public intellectual, international and regional alike, speak to power in a multipolar world? On balance, after all, the West is still hegemonic. But with the rise of new centers, we encounter new centrisms. What responsibilities does the intellectual have, if any, to vulnerable individuals and groups in the societies in question such as women or ethnic and sexual minorities? And how do we grapple with the complex dialectics via which those minorities may be empowered when they embrace what populist leaders in their regions lambast as “inauthentic” Western-cum-universal values? Last but not least, how does the student of global IR disaggregate his or her analytical intervention from their own partisan preferences?

One possible approach, which I call “double decentering” entails jumping through two hoops. The first is to interrogate how the questions we ask and answers we proffer may (or may not) reproduce Orientalist binaries. The second is to ask tough questions about the co-constitution of Orientalism and Occidentalism.\(^9\) This requires challenging claims of non-Western cultural purity and authenticity in the twenty-first century. Doing so may enable us to register the plural and hybrid nature of political subjectivities in the Middle East and global arena broadly. A double decentered vantage point is well-suited, moreover, to uncovering the roles of transnational as well as international, non-state and well as state actors.

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6 A retrospective perspective drawing on survey and interview data reveals that while Arab political elites may have been put off by Turkey’s aspirations to leadership majorities—77 percent in 2009, 66 percent in 2012, and 60 percent in 2013—see Turkey’s regional imprint as positive. The decline, moreover, can be accounted for by the significant decline of support in Syria and Egypt, while other Arabs polled remained y positive on Turkey’s regional role. See M. Mufti, “Arab Reactions to Turkey’s Regional Reengagement,” Insight Turkey, 16(3), 2014 (summer), pp.15-23.

7 Careening occurs, he argues, when there is competition between proponents of two different types of democratic accountability: vertical (encompassing the whole society) and horizontal (encompassing those who demand checks and balances to curb majoritarian excess). Dan Slater, “Democratic Careening,” World Politics 65.04 (2013): 729-763.


9 See, for example, my contribution, “Frames at Play: Beyond Orientalism and Occidentalism” in the POMEPS collection on Islam and International Order available at, http://pomeps.org/2015/05/15/islam-and-international-order-memos/
In a nutshell, the added value of double decentering is to acknowledges the experience of multiple minorities—arguably aggregate majorities—in the “non-West” who have experienced double colonization: at the hands of Western colonialism and its legacies to be sure, but also at the hands of (neo-)traditional authorities within their respective societies.

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Why the Islamic State won’t become a normal state

By Lawrence Rubin, Georgia Institute of Technology

There has been a recent surge of interest in what type of impact the Islamic State might potentially have on the international system. Most provocatively, in a recent Foreign Policy article Stephen Walt suggests that should the Islamic State win (i.e. survive), the U.S. should “live with it” and rely on a policy of containment. Over time, he suggests, the international community might come to accept the Islamic State into the community of civilized nations as it has accepted other revolutionary and expansionist states in the past, because the pressures of the international system would force it to change its barbaric behavior to survive as a recognized state. Walt’s argument challenges the conventional wisdom that the Islamic State would continue expanding territorially through violence to maintain its survival and to reestablish the Caliphate in pursuit of its ideological goals.

This realist account of the socializing power of the international system on actors even as radical as the Islamic State misses a crucial piece of this puzzle. It assumes that as states interact, they learn more about each other’s capabilities and intentions, decreasing the chances of armed conflict due to misperception. Moreover, as Walt claims in his book, “Revolution and War,” revolutionary states are likely to modify their short-term behavior with this new information. But what if learning more about your adversary is destabilizing rather than reassuring? As Barak Mendelsohn argues, the Islamic State’s goal is the destruction of the international order, yet Walt proposes that this very system should socialize states. The likely impact of the Islamic State’s survival as a revolutionary state in the Middle East is better understood not by realism but through a theoretical lens that takes seriously the effects of ideas and ideology both across states and inside them.

Realism tends to focus on external military threats to state. But this is not the most important security challenge in today’s Middle East, where ruling regimes are preoccupied with threats to their survival that are primarily ideological in nature and domestic in impact. Were the Islamic State to become a permanent political reality in the form of a recognized state, my research suggests that it would be destabilizing for the region, though not for the reasons most people may assume.

An internationally recognized Islamic State would create an ideational security dilemma with its neighbors in which ideological power, not military power, would be the primary trigger of threat perception and policy. Even
if IS did want to become a legitimate state, the internal threat it poses through the potential recruitment and mobilization of the citizens of Sunni Arab states would make its socialization within the Middle Eastern order extremely difficult and unlikely. Neighboring states’ perception of threat is unlikely to decline if they fear their own population may be attracted to the ideology and symbols of the revolutionary regime. And the revolutionary regime may even be encouraged by this prospect. For example, the recent attacks by IS supporters in Tunisia, Egypt, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are manifestations of the Islamic State’s challenge to the political legitimacy and authority of neighboring regimes. It is precisely these domestic and systemic challenges, even absent a balance of power threat, that could lead to outbidding wars, domestic instability and even armed conflict.

What is an ideational security dilemma? Although it is similar to a traditional security dilemma, an ideational security dilemma has a different context and currency of power. A security dilemma, at the heart of international relations, is a structural condition in which one state’s moves to acquire security, which may very well be defensive, are interpreted as threatening by other states. A purely defensive action taken out of self-interest may be interpreted by another state as intent to prepare for a future aggression, and this perceived escalation could trigger arms-racing or armed conflict. Today, this means that the efforts taken by anxious regimes to counter IS ideas and recruitment might only accelerate the spiral of conflict, especially if efforts include internal repression that drives alienated mainstream Islamists into the hands of IS or sectarianism that pushes Shiite citizens away from the state.

This is why the call for a war of ideas against IS led by Arab regimes is likely to cause more instability and conflict, not less. Consider the history of the 1950s and 1960s, the so-called Arab Cold War. The Egyptian president at the time, Gamal Abdel Nasser, sought to control the meaning of Arabism as the foundation of both his regional power and his domestic legitimacy. As Michael Barnett points out in his book on the topic, the ensuing competition over the meaning of Arabism led to conflict between and within states. This was an important feature of the Arab Cold War, as was the competition between two Baathist socialist Arab republics Iraq and Syria from the 1960s onward. Ideas, in the form of political ideology, were the sticks and stones that buttressed political tensions. Today, similar to the pan-Arabism of that earlier era, the Islamic State draws strength from a set of ideas that may not be specifically embraced by most Muslims in the region but whose concepts about political and social order have broad resonance and, in some cases such as Saudi Arabia, are central to domestic legitimacy.

Should IS become a recognized state, this aspect of the region’s history would likely repeat itself. During the current period of societal crises, many political actors appear to understand that they may stand to reap bigger domestic and international payoffs by invoking transnational identities. Moreover, the security motivation to project ideational power stemming from domestic pressure to shore up the regime’s legitimacy may have international implications. Revolutionary regimes often face pressure to legitimize themselves, and they may look outward especially when the ideology that drives the revolution has a universal component (consider the humanist principles of the French Revolution, the internationalist ambitions of the Bolsheviks or the socialist-revolutionary appeal of the Islamic revolution).

As I argue in “Islam in the Balance,” this might take the form of attacking the legitimacy of neighboring regimes for not adhering to what they deem authentic Islamic practices and beliefs. These types of ideological appeals are evident in IS propaganda, and it is reasonable to assume it would be part of any possible domestic legitimation efforts as well. IS leaders have attacked the legitimacy of the Hashemite monarchy, the Saud dynasty, Hamas and even al-Qaeda.

The Islamic State’s effort to project this ideological power will almost certainly trigger defensive reactions from threatened regimes that play out in the religious public
IR Theory and a Changing Middle East

space. Neighboring states would likely respond the way they already have but with increased intensity in the ideological sphere through ideational balancing. This non-military response aims to mitigate the communicative power of an ideational threat through resource mobilization and counter-framing. Both domestic and foreign policies will then increasingly focus on bolstering beliefs about a targeted regime’s legitimacy, defending against rhetorical attacks or undermining the credibility of the source of the ideational threat. However, by arguing on Islamic terms against an Islamist threat, these regimes will continuously move the terms of combat further and more deeply onto the Islamic State’s preferred battlefield.

The Islamic State has already triggered some of this type of balancing. Jordan has gone so far as to change its flag, incorporating Koranic verses so as to solidify its Islamic identity and promote its image of Islam that expects political loyalty. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sissi’s directives to state sponsored religious institutions have a similar goal in mind, which have instituted many changes—from implementing strict supervision of public sermons (khutbah), to calling on clerics to “correct” flawed understanding of Islam, to closing down unofficial mosques outright. Most recently, al-Azhar has launched a cyberspace offensive called the online observatory, which attempts to correct misinformation about Islam circulating online and to respond to extremist interpretations of the religion. These programs are part of Sissi’s goals to “revolutionize Islam” and employ religious institutions to balance against the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood domestically and to combat ongoing and future confrontations with extremist ideas in general.

What does this mean for U.S. foreign policy? Why does this matter? It is critical to have a nuanced understanding of threat perception, both who and what drives it, that takes into account the regional players. This includes an assessment of how non-military forms of power, such as ideology, can not only trigger military conflicts but also constitute threats themselves. The United States neither has the tools to engage in these types of conflicts nor should it try. While military assistance is certainly important, and at times vital for the survival of allies, policy makers should recognize that military power has limitations, especially when the most destabilizing elements are not sticks and stones but words.

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Regime security and shifting alliances in the Middle East

By Curtis R. Ryan, Appalachian State University

The 2015 announcement of a major deal between Iran and six major world powers, including the United States, was but the latest in a list of major jolts to the Middle East regional system. In the last several years alone, the region has been rocked by the pro-democracy uprisings of the original Arab Spring, the dark turn toward civil wars, insurgencies, and increasing terrorism in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, as well as authoritarian backlashes from Egypt to Bahrain. These events have shaken the system of regional alliances and alignments—including in inter-Arab relations—as states have tried to adjust to drastic changes in regional politics and security.

For all the jolts, changes, and challenges to the regional system, however, some key aspects of regional politics continue to operate along familiar lines. If 2011 was the year of regime change, the years since have seen the return of essentially reactionary regime security politics, against both internal and external challenges. Regime security dynamics, in other words, are all too familiar and pervasive. This doesn’t mean that regional politics hasn’t changed. Rather, it means that regional regimes are still playing with the old playbook, even as societies have changed dramatically and both democratic and militant movements alike challenge states. Regime security remains the key driver of alliance politics in the Middle East, perhaps especially so in inter-Arab relations.

Regime Security is Still Job One

Even before the Iranian nuclear deal, the region was already beset by crises and rising violence, and inter-Arab solidarity remained as elusive as ever. Yet the 2015 summit of the Arab League promised more than the usual platitudes to emerge from the organization. This time, the Arab regimes insisted, the summit would be meaningful and finally lead to regional cooperation to restore some semblance of regional order. At least rhetorically, the Arab states seemed united: calling for a joint Arab military force for “rapid reaction” against militancy and terrorism. The force was to consist potentially of as many as 40,000 troops, to be drawn heavily from Egyptian, Jordanian, Moroccan, and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) ground, air, and naval forces. But despite the flurry of temporarily unified rhetoric, actual activity failed to match the aspirations of yet another Arab League Summit—to the surprise of no one—because, despite the lofty rhetoric, states and regimes in the region have different interests and different security priorities.

No matter what the next regional jolt will be, the focus of regional regimes on their own individual security will still remain job one and will underlie their responses. Even when the Arab regimes agreed to work together against militancy and extremism, they had different security threats in mind. For Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, the key threat was Iran and Iranian influence in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, and allegedly even within Saudi Arabia and Bahrain themselves. For the UAE and Egypt, the core threat remained the Muslim Brotherhood and other similar Islamist movements. For Jordan, meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood seemed a loyal opposition compared to rising Salafi movements within the kingdom and the transnational jihadists of the Islamic State who had taken huge swaths of Syria and Iraq, frequently testing Jordan’s borders. While Jordan supported its allies (especially Egypt and the GCC), its main security concern remained the Islamic State.

But aid and economic security are also part of regime security, leading aid dependent states such as Jordan, Morocco, and Sudan, not only to give diplomatic or verbal support for Gulf security, but also to send war planes to take part even in war efforts. For these states, regime security concerns were not rooted in fear of Houthi rebels or even of Iranian regional ambitions, but rather in maintaining the good graces (and relatedly, the security and well-being) of rich aid donors such as the Arab Gulf...
states. In that sense, when the Jordanian foreign minister referred to Gulf state security as a direct interest of Jordan, he was not merely being figurative. In terms of aid, investment, trade, labor remittances, and oil, the security of the Arab Gulf states does indeed correlate directly to regime security in Jordan, Egypt and other resource-poor states.

Regime Security, Security Dilemmas, and Alliances

Regime security, I argue, is the key driver of alliance politics in the Middle East. Traditional international relations theory previously had focused on Neorealist concerns with system-structure, anarchy, and external threats to explain alliance politics, with occasional reference to the Middle East (Walt, 1987). But among scholars of the region itself, these types of macro-level theories rarely matched the empirical realities of regional politics. It was for that reason that in my own research, I found myself turning to another subfield, comparative politics, to better explain the international relations of the region, with particular attention paid to the insecurities of regimes in both their domestic and regional settings. I argued that a regime security approach, rather than a Neorealist framework, better explained Arab foreign policies and alliance choices (Ryan 1995). I later developed those ideas in a more detailed study of Jordanian foreign policy as the kingdom maneuvered within inter-Arab relations (Ryan 2009).

Even as regional alliances, alignments, and coalitions change, these overall regime security dynamics continue to underpin regional international relations. Arab regimes, I argue, remain frequently trapped in internal and external security dilemmas of their own making, obsessed with ensuring the security of their ruling regimes against both internal and external challenges. Politics in the Arab world, and indeed elsewhere as well, continues to include internal as well as external security dilemmas. In the latter, states unwittingly undermine their own security even as they bolster their military preparedness and defenses, by triggering alarm in their neighbors. In the former, however, regimes also face an internal or domestic security dilemma, in which their own security measures serve to create fortress regimes, ever more distant from their own societies, resistant to change, yet vulnerable to discontent from an alienated public. Both versions refer to the dangers of a deepening cycle of insecurity.

Alliances then serve as not just country-to-country defense pacts but also looser transnational support coalitions of ruling elites, as regimes help prop each other up against perceived security threats. These can be both material and ideational. Laurie Brand has written on the former, in the form of a political economy of alliance making and budget security; while Gregory Gause and Lawrence Rubin have made clear that that latter—ideational threats—can be every bit as dire in the eyes of regimes as those of a material nature. (Brand 1994, Gause 2003/4, Rubin 2014). The importance of ideational as well as material political struggles in the international relations of the region can be seen especially in what some have called a “New Middle East Cold War’ (Gause 2014) or a “New Arab Cold War” (Valbjorn 2007, Bank and Valbjorn 2012, Ryan 2012).

A key fault line in Arab politics is the regime’s perception of its own security and stability. When this faces a significant challenge, regimes respond by re-arranging domestic support coalitions, increasing the active role of the internal security apparatus, and—in foreign policy—shifting alliances and alignments to better ensure regime security. Regimes are continually tempted to provide quick fixes to regime security concerns via foreign policy and alliance choices, however, because adjusting external relations seems less risky to them than genuine internal restructuring and reform. The foreign policy focus of regime security politics, in other words, also has domestic consequences, often bolstering existing authoritarian systems and thwarting hope for greater domestic change.

Focusing on regimes and their security concerns (internal and external, economic and military, material and ideational) allows us also to use a regime security approach to link otherwise competing paradigms. Constructivist scholars, for example, have also challenged traditional I.R. theories, with emphasis on identities, ideas, and changes in
A regime security approach is not just compatible with, for example, realist and constructivist approaches, but also provides a bridge between them. And if anything, events since the start of the regional Arab spring have only underscored the relevance of a regime security approach to understanding regional international relations and alliance politics.

**Insecurity and Shifting Regional Alliances, 2011-2015**

Just a few years ago, in 2011, the Arab League met in the wake of the first wave of the Arab Spring, with new semi-democratic regimes sitting uncomfortably alongside increasingly nervous dictatorships. For some of the latter, the greatest threat appeared to be not Israel, not Iran, and not militant jihadist movements, but rather domestic democratic grassroots activism and demands for regime change. But for some, an even greater threat came from “reformist” and potentially revolutionary Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

The rise of Islamist regimes (an-Nahda in Tunisia, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt) led alliances such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to close ranks and even to invite non-Gulf states such as Morocco and Jordan to join the GCC. They may not have been fellow Gulf states, but they were fellow Arab and Sunni monarchies with extensive ties to Western powers. As the tide of the Arab Spring rose and toppled regimes (all authoritarian republics) the monarchies coalesced together in pursuit of a kind of collective regime security. Yet the Syrian war continued to divide the core of the alignment itself, as Saudi Arabia and Qatar were more often than not at odds with one another in their (failed) attempts to determine regime change elsewhere. Saudi Arabia, for example, tended to oppose Islamist groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, while the regime in Qatar actively supported Brotherhood movements.

Non-Arab states such as Turkey played ever-larger roles in regional politics, as Turkey’s AKP-led regime, in alliance with Qatar, backed Islamist movements across the region. When former President Mohamed Morsi’s Muslim Brotherhood regime rose to power in Egypt, many Arab regimes (aside from Qatar) were deeply alarmed. Islamists had, after all, taken power following a popular revolution and a democratic election. Egypt’s regime change led to a closer alliance of Egypt, Qatar, and Turkey, but in the same vein, another regime change would then rearrange regional alliances once again. The 2013 coup d’état of General Abdel Fatah al-Sissi in Egypt ousted the Islamist regime, restoring secular and essentially authoritarian rule, while preserving the power and privileges of the vast Egyptian armed forces. The shake-up in regional alliances and inter-Arab relations was immediate. Within 24 hours of the regime change, Jordan’s King Abdullah II visited Cairo to support the new regime. Qatar pulled its financial support but was soon outshone by the vast support showered on Egypt by Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Ryan 2014).

The Arab Spring had given new urgency to the politics of regime security. The toppling of four regimes, each in a completely different way, still got the attention of all surviving regimes in the region. But now the post-Morsi regional system saw the strengthening of regimes committed to thwarting regime security threats and committed to propping up themselves and their allies. Specifically, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Jordan emerged as key allies, similarly suspicious of—or even outright hostile to—the Muslim Brotherhood. Three of the states outlawed the Brotherhood entirely, while Jordan allowed the movement (as old as the Jordanian state itself) to continue to operate legally within the kingdom. Still, it was the perception of an internal, and to some extent transnational, threat to their own legitimacy, security, and stability that lead each of these regimes to work closely together—far more closely than they had in responding even to severe regional crises like the Syrian civil war or the rise of extremist threats like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

By 2015, the early hopes of the Arab Spring seemed dashed by counter-revolution, military coups, civil wars, and rising regional terrorism. The 2015 Sharm el-Shelkh summit looked like it would be dominated by discussions of the
Islamic State (or Da’esh), but instead took place at the start of Arab military intervention in Yemen to prop up the (Arab League-backed) regime of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. In 2011, the idea of Arab states routinely crossing borders to intervene militarily directly in the affairs of neighbors would have seemed highly unlikely. But by 2015, a Saudi-led coalition of Arab states was bombarding another Arab country.

The Hadi regime was backed by Saudi Arabia and many Arab states, while Houthi challengers were backed in part by Iran. In any case, the Yemen conflict amounted to multiple dueling regimes, backed by still other regimes, with Yemeni society paying a terrible price for regime and prospective-regime miscalculations and failures. Not even the Syrian civil war, al-Qaeda, or the Islamic State had triggered similar attempts at regional realignment or pan-Arab security cooperation. Rather, it took seemingly less intense threats—democratic street activism, the Muslim Brotherhood, or Iranian backing of local Shi’a movements—to trigger existential regime security fears, with corresponding shifts in alliances and even in direct Arab military action.

The nuclear agreement between Iran and major world powers then shocked the regional system yet again. And certainly Saudi Arabia tried to lead an essentially Sunni and Arab alliance against Iranian inroads in Arab politics. But despite misunderstandings to the contrary, the agreement did not amount to a U.S. realignment away from Egypt, Jordan, or the GCC states toward Iran. Regional Arab allies feared abandonment by their main great power patron, to be sure. And indeed, abandonment, and its counterpart entrapment (that is, having an ally drag one into an unwanted conflict) are the two traditional concerns in yet another security dilemma—one between allies themselves (Snyder 1984, 1990). But the United States increased its support, especially militarily, to each of these regimes and even more so to its ally Israel. In real material terms, the U.S. alliances were closer, even as inter-personally the regime-to-regime distrust between allies had increased, making the alliances seem distant and uncertain.

However, the U.S.-Iran dimension had more in common with U.S. arms control deals with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. They were deals between adversaries, with ambitions to work together on some issues, but against one another on others. They were not, in short, the beginnings of new alliances or a massive regional realignment on the part of the United States. It was likely, however, to lead to further changes within the region: including deepening the already-existing alliance of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Jordan, and other GCC states—and perhaps leading to rapprochement with Qatar.

Still, perception matters more than reality in political life, so the perceived realignment still seems to dominant narratives within Arab regional politics, as the system adjusts to what is indeed a dramatic change in regional politics. But it remains only the latest of a series of regional shocks: the Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war, the rise of the Islamic State, the Iranian nuclear deal, each of these has shaken the regional system. And in each case, regimes responded by putting regime security concerns first, rearranging regional alliances accordingly, and ultimately allowing their many security dilemmas to dampen (or worse) the democratic hopes and aspirations of those who had led the original 2011 Arab Spring demonstrations and uprisings. As much as regional politics has indeed changed in such dramatic ways over these last four years, regime security dynamics and security dilemmas continue to drive regional alliances, with profound implications for both internal and external politics.

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Overlapping contests and Middle East international relations: The Return of the Weak Arab State

By Bassel F. Salloukh, Lebanese American University

One of the most enduring legacies of what Michael Hudson once labelled “the Montréal School” of Arab politics is its emphasis on the overlap between domestic, transnational and geopolitical factors in the making of Middle East international relations. Long before the Islamic State exploded onto the regional scene in its quest for an imagined borderless caliphate, proponents of this school argued that International Relations (IR) theory could ill afford to ignore the overlap between these different levels of analysis. Through a sustained critique of realism’s obsession with external material threats and its underlying assumption of the state as a unitary rational actor, the Montréal School underscored the stubborn interplay between the domestic and regional levels in the making of Middle East international relations. This overlap, it argued, assumed a number of forms. Whether in the use of the region’s permeability to transnational ideological currents to advance the state’s geopolitical interests, domestic actors aligning with regional powers to balance against their domestic opponents, the “omnibalancing” choices facing regime leaders, or the regime security and ideational threats driving foreign policy choices and regional alliances, the interplay between the domestic and regional levels served the local agendas of domestic actors and the geopolitical and state-building objectives of many states in the Arab world. It also underscored the salience of immaterial, ideational threats in the making of Middle East international relations.

Even the realist foreign policies that prevailed in the 1980s as states consolidated their infrastructural and coercive capabilities and started acting like seemingly rational actors did not end the aforementioned interplay between the domestic and regional levels. As Gregory Gause argued persuasively, Iraq’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait—like the 1980 invasion of Iran— was rooted in primarily regime security considerations. The 1990-91 invasion and subsequent liberation of Kuwait exposed but also unleashed a set of overlapping domestic and trans-regional challenges that collectively underscored the domestic challenges facing authoritarian regimes, the changing permeability of the regional system, and the explosion of transnational non-state actors. In our 2004 co-edited volume, Persistent Permeability? Regionalism, Localism, and Globalization in the Middle East, Rex Brynen and I summarized these challenges to include “authoritarian states and inefficient economies confronted by the forces of globalization and by the exigencies of domestic reforms; foreign policies driven by both realpolitik and the complex dynamics of domestic politics; a consolidated state system set against a regional permeability now sustained by rapidly evolving information and communications technologies; American unipolarism set against its local (sometimes militant, and often Islamist) opponents, and, finally, a contemporary American neoconservative democratic discourse at odds with Washington’s political legacy in the region.” The 9/11 terrorist attacks and the explosion of al-Qaeda in the Arab world magnified the role of transnational actors in a new regional system in flux. Even its own proponents admitted that realism was ill equipped to accommodate these overlapping challenges.

The 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq created a new regional landscape, unleashing dynamics that ultimately restored the primacy of the overlapping domestic and geopolitical battles of the 1950s and 1960s. Henceforth, the region became the theater for a grand Saudi-Iranian geopolitical confrontation fought not through classical realist state-to-state military battles, but rather through proxy domestic and transnational actors and the domestic politics of a number of weak Arab states, including the perennial candidate Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, postwar Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Yemen and Bahrain. As Gause has carefully noted, for both Riyadh and Tehran, the two main protagonists of this geopolitical contest, as well as for Qatar and
Turkey, the objective “is not to defeat their regional rivals militarily on the battlefield. It is to promote the fortunes of their own clients in these weak state domestic struggles and thus build up regional influence.” Yet lest we deny them agency, domestic actors also possess their own calculations and interests. They invite and align with regional actors in a bid to balance the political influence of their domestic opponents and advance their own local political interests. Lebanon’s sectarian elite mastered this game of aligning with external actors against domestic opponents in overlapping domestic and regional struggles. Consequently, Lebanon has served as a site for geopolitical contests since its creation. By 2006, state collapse and the pull of centrifugal forces in post-Saddam Iraq made the country look increasingly like Lebanon, however. Overlapping domestic and regional struggles also dominated the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The popular uprisings intensified and complicated the geopolitical contests that commenced after the U.S. invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq, exacerbating them in some places, like in Lebanon, Yemen, and the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and allowing them to spread to new sites, namely Syria and Libya. As the contributions in this series by Gause, Curtis Ryan and Lawrence Rubin admirably demonstrate, the concomitant collapse of some regimes or states and ascendance of old and new political actors with transnational ideologies, the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic State respectively, restored to center stage the regional system’s ideational balancing dynamics.10

The Return of the Weak State

The swiftness with which the Syrian state collapsed as its own originally peaceful uprising developed into an overlapping domestic, regional and international “struggle for Syria”11 captured the enduring interplay between domestic, regional and international factors in the making of Middle East international relations.12 Yet unlike past contests over the Syrian state fought primarily through military coups, political clients and transnational ideological permeability, the present one underwent a complete militarization. Hafiz al-Assad’s once Hobbesian state, one that was capable of playing a substantial role in shaping Middle East international relations, is all but gone. To be sure, the regime’s survival hinges on a number of domestic factors, namely the military capabilities of its praetorian forces and its ability to retain narrow but viable political alliances with urban socioeconomic elites and ethnic or religious minorities. Equally, and at times even more, important, however, is the support of international (i.e. Russia) and regional actors, namely Iran. Tehran’s proxies, whether Hezbollah or a posse of Iraqi and Afghan Shiite militias, proved instrumental in propping up the regime at a moment of dire crisis when it was losing control of Syrian territory rapidly, and its end was predicted on a daily basis. The transformation of Syria from a Leviathan capable of waging sometimes domestically unpopular geopolitical battles to a weak state penetrated by regional actors and their proxies, as well as transnational and domestic Salafi-Jihadi actors, brought the regional system’s interplay between the domestic and regional levels to new heights. The intrusive role played by the non-Arab regional states in the struggle for Syria transformed the region’s overlapping domestic and geopolitical battles from what Malcom Kerr once labeled an “Arab Cold War” waged primarily through the fig leaf of Arab nationalism to what Gause more recently branded a “New Middle East Cold War” waged this time through the destructive force of sectarianism and Salafi-Jihadism.13

Yemen is another site where the militarization of the region’s overlapping domestic and geopolitical battles assumed new and destructive levels. The institutional and coercive weakness of the Yemeni state and its grim economic conditions always invited external intervention in its domestic affairs.14 Yemen’s inspiring popular uprising was hijacked when Riyadh intervened to ensure a transition away from Ali Abdullah Saleh to another authoritarian leader, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who proceeded to monopolize power and subsequently alienate the country’s tribal groups. Capitalizing on the Houthis’ “deep sense of victimization by the state,”15 Tehran’s involvement in the Yemeni conflict is driven by its grand confrontation with Riyadh over geopolitical influence.
After all, meddling in Saudi Arabia’s security backyard is in keeping with the rules of geopolitical engagement described by Gause above. Riyadh’s military response to the Houthi nimble takeover of large swathes of Yemen represented a break with Saudi Arabia’s longstanding geopolitical tools, namely, proxy actors and financial largess. Riyadh’s “Decisive Storm” campaign against Yemen may be driven by both geopolitical and domestic calculations. It raised the geopolitical stakes between the two states, taking their confrontation beyond proxy wars, yet it has nevertheless avoided a direct military confrontation with Tehran.

Conclusion

The popular uprisings intensified the interplay between the domestic and regional levels in the making of Middle East international relations. Security and ideational threats are intertwined as regimes scramble to defend both their geopolitical interests and their domestic political order from a mix of domestic, regional and transregional actors and ideologies. Whether this long enduring interplay has found itself into IR theory is another matter, however. Indeed, a 2012 stocktaking of “Domestic Explanations of International Relations” included only one reference to a work pertaining to Middle East international relations! Despite this, it would be wrong to assume that Middle East international relations has had no impact whatsoever on mainstream realist theorizing. For example, the more nuanced and sophisticated realist approach of Stephen Walt’s Taming American Power is one fine example of the impact of Middle East international relations on IR theorizing. The richer analysis undertaken in this book, expanding the arc of strategies available to threatened states to include balancing, balking, binding, blackmail and delegitimation, is informed substantially by the overlapping regional and domestic consequences of the 2003 US invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq.

The ‘new Middle East Cold War’ is also a textbook case of the effects of overlapping domestic and geopolitical conflicts on the malleability and renegotiation of otherwise complex ethnic identities and, in turn, how these identities affect foreign policy and alliance choices. In Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya, overlapping conflicts incurred state collapse, which in turn led to a shift from national and more inclusive identities toward narrower sectarian, tribal or ethnic identities. Saudi Arabia’s deployment of sectarianism to achieve what are otherwise geopolitical objectives, before as well as after the popular uprisings, and Iran’s use of sectarianism to mobilize its regional proxies in defense of its geopolitical allies, magnified the sectarian dimension of these conflicts in which other divisions have always been equally if not more important and class or regional divisions often overlapped with sectarian cleavages. Lebanon is the Arab world’s enduring example of the institutionalization of historically constructed sectarian identities into a corporate consociational power-sharing agreement that, with time, looks immutable. Post-Saddam Iraq is duplicating Lebanon’s pitfalls: sectarian and ethnic identities will soon assume a reified status with the country exposed to overlapping domestic and external contests. Yemen is also instructive here. Riyadh’s use of sectarianism as an instrument of geopolitics and the Houthi’s revengeful acts as they move south are shattering the country’s once shared traditions. In a country where “sectarian differences meant almost nothing until recent years,” the overlapping domestic and geopolitical struggle over Yemen is cast increasingly in sectarian terms, at the expense of far more important tribal and regional markers of political identity. Similarly, the overlapping domestic and geopolitical contest in post-Qaddafi Libya has created new fault lines along hitherto dormant ethnic and religious identities. These include battles between “Libya’s Islamists, the merchants of Misrata, the Arab Bedouin tribes concentrated in the Green Mountains of the east, the indigenous Imazighen (i.e., Berbers) in the west, and the two ethnic groups of Libya’s slice of the Sahara—the Tuareg and Tubu.” Contests over post-Qaddafi Libya increasingly look like “a battle between Bedouin Arab tribes and Libyans of other ethnic groups Arabized over centuries.” They are constructing new modes of political identity and mobilization, tearing Libya apart.

The return of the weak state to the Arab world and the renegotiation of new identities as a result of the interplay...
between domestic and geopolitical battles underscore the continued benefits of theoretical eclecticism in explaining Middle East international relations. Whether we are studying the foreign policy and alliance choices of regional actors, or the regional system’s ‘persistent permeability’ and the use of transregional ideologies as a power resource, it is far more rewarding to travel between theoretical paradigms than to engage in theoretical sectarianism. Scholars of Middle East international relations have long mastered this kind of theoretical eclecticism, deploying any mix of neo-realist, regime security, historical sociology and constructivist explanations in a happy theoretical marriage. It is high time IR theory does the same and, in the process, pays better attention to those more generalizable theoretical insights generated from the study of Middle East IR.

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IR Theory and a Changing Middle East


13 See Kerr, The Arab Cold War; and Gause, Beyond Sectarianism.


19 See Worth, “Yemen.”


21 In addition to the ME IR literature cited above, see also Raymond Hinnebusch, The International Politics of the Middle East, 2nd Edition, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).
Transcending disciplinary divide/s:
A comparative framework on the international relations of the Middle East

By Etel Solingen, University of California, Irvine

The call for papers for this conference alludes explicitly or tacitly to two different divides. ¹ The first one is that between Comparative Politics on the one hand, and International Relations/International Political Economy on the other, in the field of Middle East studies. The second, more implicit divide, suggests that the study of international relations of the Middle East has been detached from the study of International Relations more generally. This memo responds to the organizers’ invitation to reflect on some of my own efforts to transcend those two divides. Indeed, the conceptual framework I revisit here has also sought to extricate the study of international relations/international political economy of the Middle East from yet a third divide, one that implicitly or explicitly separates the Middle East from other regions, as if things were so completely different (“exceptional”) in the former that they almost preclude cross-regional inferences. This is certainly not the case. All these divides may have more to do with sociological aspects of the profession than with intrinsic analytical barriers.

Linking domestic, regional and international politics:
A General Framework

The theoretical framework I discuss in this memo builds on political coalitions as a micro-foundation for understanding and integrating the causal pathways running through global, regional, and domestic levels of analysis.² Figure 1 below describes the linkages among them. I dwell on the domestic distributional consequences of globalization as the analytical point of departure (Vector 2). These second-image-reversed (Gourevitch, 1986) or outside-in effects lead to the constitution of two ideal-typical domestic coalitions—internationalizing and inward-looking—vying for power and control of their states.³ Domestic politics and institutions, in turn, convert those effects into competing grand strategies of local, regional, and global reach—inside-out effects that are synergistic across all three levels. The inside-out effects from the domestic to the regional realm (Vector 3) are thus a primary concern for understanding the nature of regional orders. The latter emerge from the strategic interaction among different domestic coalitions in a given region (Vector 4). Regions reflecting dominant internationalizing coalitions typically display more cooperation than regions largely controlled by strong inward-looking ruling coalitions. In turn, regional arrangements in internationalizing regions reinforce the domestic logic of internationalizing coalitions. Similarly, regional arrangements in inward-looking regions reinforce the domestic logic of their inward-looking coalitional referents. A region's coalitional center of gravity—which coalitions are dominant—also affects the way regions interact with one another and the extent to which models of regional order diffuse across regions (Vector 5).

Subsequent sections in this paper dissect these vectors in greater detail and apply the general framework to the Middle East. However, because the framework is suitable for understanding regional orders in a globalized world more broadly, comparisons with other regions are especially illuminating. I include them because such comparisons, along with the conceptual framework itself, also help extricate the Middle East from the three disciplinary divides discussed in the introduction.

¹ Memo from Marc Lynch and Morten Valbjørn's letter of invitation. See also Valbjørn (2015).
² This section builds on Solingen (2015) and Solingen and Malnight (2015).
³ On the applicability of “second-image reversed” approaches to the Middle East, see Bush (2015).
Increased openness to international markets, capital, investments, and technology affects individuals and groups through: a) changes in employment, incomes, prices, public services, and b) their evolving commitments to international regimes and institutions in economics, security, the environment and other domains (Keohane and Milner, 1996; Mansfield and Milner, 1997). Politicians understand the mobilizing capacity of economic interests, norms, and identity associated with dilemmas of internationalization. They thus organize constituencies across the state-society divide into competing coalitions, and craft models of political survival attuned to those coalitional preferences. Politicians across regime types (democratic, autocratic) rely on available rules and institutions to fashion coalitions that maximize their own relative power and control over resources, leading constituencies to logroll across material economic and ideational interests of both state and private actors.

Two ideal-typical coalitional forms emerge from that process and vie for power and control of their states: internationalizing and inward-looking. Ideal-types are heuristic devices that transcend historical or “true” realities; hence they are not applicable to all cases equally or indeed to any particular case wholesale (Eckstein, 1975; Ruggie, 1998:31–32; Weber, 1949: 93). Yet they can be helpful in placing real-world domestic coalitions along the internationalizing/inward-looking spectrum. Internationalizing coalitions attract beneficiaries (or potential beneficiaries) of economic openness such as export-intensive sectors and firms, highly-skilled labor employed in competitive industries or firms, analysts oriented towards an open global economic and knowledge (technology) system, competitive agricultural sectors, consumers of imported products, and bureaucracies central to economic reform (independent central banks, finance ministries, managers of export-processing zones). Inward-looking coalitions attract import-competing firms and banks closely tied to the state, state-owned enterprises and banks, urban unskilled blue-collar and white-collar sectors, state bureaucracies rendered obsolete by reform, considerable segments of the military and its industrial complex, and civic-nationalist, ethnic, and religious movements threatened by internationalization.

High uncertainty about the impact of internationalization leaves many behind the “veil of ignorance,” unable to figure out where and how they will come out at the end of the process. When crafting coalitions, politicians portray the benefits and pitfalls of internationalization on the basis of actual or putative impacts. At some times, the two competing coalitions carve out different parts of a state divided by this coalitional competition. At other times, either coalition succeeds in controlling the state and is thus able to implement its preferred model (grand strategy) of political survival in power. Internationalizing models rely on economic performance and growth via integration into the global economy whereas inward-looking models rely on autonomous “self-sufficiency.” The two ideal-types also differ in the extent to which states (including military-industrial complexes) replace or enhance markets.

Grand Strategies: Implications for Regional Order

Where internationalizing coalitions successfully realize their favored model of political survival, they capture opportunities offered by the global political economy and institutions. Their grand strategy emphasizes regional cooperation and stability and access to global markets,
capital, investments, and technology. They accord primacy to macroeconomic stability and international competitiveness, because both are expected to reduce uncertainty, encourage savings, and enhance the rate of investment (including foreign). Why are these coalitions more prone to cooperate with their neighbors? Because conflict-prone postures require the mobilization of resources for potential military conflict which, in turn, contributes to many of the ailments afflicting domestic political economy from the standpoint of internationalizers. Such ailments include unproductive and inflation-inducing military investments and the protection of state enterprises under a mantle of “national security.” Mobilization of resources for conflict often emasculate macroeconomic objectives via expansive military budgets, government and payments deficits, the rising cost of capital, inhibited savings and productive investment, depleted foreign exchange coffers, overvalued exchange rates, currency instability and unpredictability, and foiled foreign investment. For example, many East Asian ruling coalitions have steered their states in an internationalizing direction since the 1960s.

Where inward-looking coalitions realize their favored model, they challenge the reach of markets, international institutions, and powerful states, asserting complete sovereignty and control across issue-areas. Their grand strategy, in its purest form, hinges wholly on the interests of state industry and ancillary inward-looking military-industrial sectors, as well as of ethnic, religious, and nationalist groups threatened by internationalization. Regional insecurity and competition helps sustain these coalitions in power whereas rising regional cooperation has the potential for eroding their resources and undermining their objectives. Inward-looking state and private actors are generally unconcerned with the prospects that regional instability might undercut foreign investment. Typically these coalitions rely on populism, active states controlling prices, increasing nominal wages, overvaluing the currency to raise wages and profits in non-traded goods sectors, and dispensing rents to private firms by discriminating against competing imports through tariffs, controls, and multiple exchange rates. Inward-looking coalitions flout an array of international economic, political, and security regimes that they depict as anathema to the economic, national, ethnic, or religious objectives they safeguard. Many Middle Eastern ruling coalitions have steered their states in an inward-looking direction since the 1950s.

Grand strategies, or models of political survival in power, are also ideal-typical categories rarely matching the real world perfectly. Yet they provide a benchmark for classifying grand strategies along a single spectrum. Such strategies don’t envelop states overnight or in linear fashion. They evolve through coalitional competition and causal mechanisms that link comparative and international politics (Solingen, 2009). They thus constitute a productive approach for taking account of Vector 3 effects that map domestic politics onto the regional level (inside-out). As we shall see next, however, the domestic coalitional competition in one state is itself affected by the nature and strength of domestic coalitions in other states in the region, forcing attention to Vector 4 (outside-in) effects.

Strategic Interaction within Regions: Implications for Regional Orders

The relative strength of coalitions—at home and throughout the region—accounts for the degree to which grand strategies are more pristine or diluted versions of the ideal-type. A state’s regional environment can be defined as an aggregate measure of the relative strength of internationalizing or inward-looking coalitions. An internationalizing regional environment is one dominated by a more or less homogeneous cluster of internationalizing coalitions, as in East Asia in recent decades. The reverse is true for an inward-looking regional environment dominated by a more or less homogeneous cluster of inward-looking coalitions, as in the Middle East in recent decades.

What are the effects of strategic interaction among different coalitional combinations in a given region? The incidence of each coalitional type, and the different regional coalitional clusters they constitute in the aggregate, define a region’s propensity for
conflict and cooperation. Regions reflecting dominant internationalizing coalitions typically display more cooperation than regions largely controlled by strong inward-looking ruling coalitions. In turn, regional arrangements in internationalizing regions reinforce the domestic logic of internationalizing coalitions. Conversely, regional arrangements in inward-looking regions reinforce the domestic logic of their inward-looking coalitional referents. These are Vector 4 effects in action.

Different coalitional mixes throughout a region thus create and reproduce typical regional orders and, conversely, are affected by them. Strong internationalizing coalitions in a region are expected to create more cooperative and peaceful regional orders (“zones of peace”) than those typical of clusters dominated by strong inward-looking coalitions (“zones of war”). Regions dominated by mixed or hybrid coalitional forms exhibit “zones of contained conflict” that elude extensive cooperation or war. Converging internationalizing grand strategies in a given region are collectively stable, creating an environment least propitious for inward-looking strategies. The more internationalizing the region’s center of gravity, the higher its reliance on cooperative (though not necessarily formal) arrangements that enable implementation of all pillars of internationalizing grand strategies. Converging inward-looking strategies are also collectively stable, feeding on each other’s existence, resulting in war zones resistant to internationalizing strategies.

Internationalizing “zones of peace” challenge lingering inward-looking coalitions in their region undermining their grand strategy, from the merits of economic closure to the advantages of militarization. In time, these regional orders can overturn coalitional balances within outstanding inward-looking states, easing their eventual inclusion into their regional framework, as in ASEAN. Where inward-looking coalitions dominate a region, “zones of war” trigger pressures that loom large on the survival of internationalizers, weakening them and forcing them to dilute their preferred strategy. Regions dominated by inward-looking coalitions, such as much of the Middle East since the 1950s, have threatened the viability of would-be internationalizers in Jordan, Lebanon, Kurdish areas, and elsewhere for many decades.

Empirical applications provided detailed evidence for patterns consistent with this framework. Some documented why evolving models of political survival offered compelling explanations for decades of Middle East wars and enduring rivalries in the inter-Arab, Arab-Israeli, and Arab-Iranian arenas; for cooperative Arab-Israeli breakthroughs in the early 1990s and reactive responses to them; for why regional economic barriers among Arab states never receded; for why regional institutions such as the Arab Common Market existed largely in paper, much as some of their Latin American counterparts; and for why chemical weapons and missiles have been used most frequently in the Middle East than in any other regions. Inward-looking models account for greater proneness to spearhead more wars than internationalizing ones, intendedly or unintendedly. Competing models also shed light on the taming of conflicts among East Asian states via internationalizing strategies. The absence of war in this region for several decades (over four in Southeast Asia and over six in Northeast Asia) is especially important because serious disputes remain in both cases. This is not a zone of complete harmony.

Divergent Regional Trajectories out of Shared Initial Conditions

The evolution of cooperation in East Asia and continuous wars in the Middle East raise a puzzle. Why did these divergent paths emerge out of shared initial conditions in both regions? The two regions shared relatively similar conditions in the 1950s and early 1960s, including harsh autocratic rule, ethnic diversity, state-building challenges, and involvement in militarized conflicts. Yet the two looked dramatically different in the early twenty-first century as East Asia became the engine of the global

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5 Keohane (1984) differentiates between harmony (i.e., no adjustment, states pursue their own interest) and cooperation, the latter requiring mutual adjustments.
Leading theories of international relations do not provide satisfactory answers to this puzzle. For neorealism the very premise of a Pax Asiatica is erroneous; the universal logic of power distribution reigns perennially, leading to cyclical war or pauses in war-making at best. But what explains the pause? A standard hypothesis—robust, bipolar, and symmetric distribution of nuclear weapons—does not apply here. Other neorealist variables—dramatic changes in power distribution with China’s rise, Japan’s normalization, North Korea’s nuclearization—should have led to war, as indeed has been predicted for decades, but it has not. Fluctuations between U.S. hegemonic assertion and defection have not altered the no-war outcome either. One crucial difficulty with power-based explanations is stipulating whether East Asia has been multipolar, bipolar, or under U.S. hegemony, but there are many others.

Neoliberal-institutionalist approaches trace absence of war to institutions presumed to reduce transaction costs and enhance cooperation. However the decades-long Pax Asiatica (no war) has unfolded in the absence of legalized institutions. Regional institutions emerged after remarkable expansion in markets, investment, and cooperation but remained minimalist, informal, and consensus-based. Cooperation preceded institutions to a large extent. Cultural interpretations like “Asian values” and “ASEAN way” have been properly debunked (Kahler 1995); the same cultural construct could not explain both earlier periods of militarized conflict and a subsequent Pax Asiatica. Nor did the ancient “Oriental wisdom’s” penchant for consensus, harmony, unity, and community produce peace in earlier times. Indeed East Asia is not at all culturally homogeneous—it is perhaps less so than the Middle East—yet extremely diverse cultures have not precluded cooperation. Traumatic memories of Japan’s World War II cruelty or of repeated aggressions against Vietnam by several powers have not precluded extensive economic, political, and diplomatic rapprochements, including informal institutions. Democratic-peace theory is inapplicable because Pax Asiatica preceded the emergence of a cluster of democratic states and continues to operate in a region hosting several autocracies. And a fairly autocratic but internationalizing cluster spearheaded more peaceful conditions in Southeast Asia several decades ago.

Competing models of political survival can explain the puzzle. East Asian leaders pivoted their political control on economic performance and integration in the global economy whereas Middle East leaders relied on inward-looking self-sufficiency, state and military entrepreneurship, and a related brand of nationalism. But why were such choices made? What remote sources and causal mechanisms explain why the two competing models took root in each region? The permissive and catalytic conditions explaining the emergence of respective models can be briefly summarized as follows: early and effective land reform, a relatively brief period of import-substitution, and natural resource scarcity weakened domestic political opposition to export-led growth in East Asia. By contrast, late, inefficient or nonexistent land reform; longer exposure to import-substitution through extensive state and military entrepreneurship; and abundant oil resources or second-order rentierism (in neighboring non-oil economies) empowered opponents of export-led growth throughout much of the Middle East. Put differently, politically stronger beneficiaries of relative closure, import-substitution, state entrepreneurship, and natural resource monopolies—mostly within the state itself—constituted powerful veto points against alternative models for decades.

The respective coalitional formations had first-order implications for three crucial domestic institutions: states, militaries, and authoritarian institutions. First, both models relied on state institutions; however, differences in the character of that reliance would have divergent effects on the respective evolution of states. The two models differed in the extent to which states replaced or enhanced private capital. East Asian states were active lenders and regulators but significantly less active entrepreneurs than their Middle East counterparts. East Asian leaders watchfully steered states to macroeconomic stability and

6 For a more detailed argument regarding this section, see Solingen (2007b).
proper conditions for sustained export-led growth. States thus evolved into relatively adaptable institutions linking across the domestic, regional, and global economies. Middle East models shared rigid, exhausted, and depleted state institutions presiding over current account and budget deficits; high inflation and unemployment; and scarce foreign exchange. These states became too weak to exert control over society except through force, as remains widely the case today. Despite significant differences among them (and outliers like North Korea), East Asian states approximated ideal-typical developmental states, Weberian-style meritocratic bureaucracies able to extract resources from society and convert them into public goods (Evans 1995). Despite extensive variation across the Middle East, predatory states undercutting development even in the narrow sense of capital accumulation remained largely dominant, relying on patronage-based bureaucracies primarily supplying private goods to rapacious ruling coalitions.7

Second, military institutions played important roles initially in both models, particularly as repressive mechanisms of political control. Yet the military itself evolved along different lines, in tandem with prevailing political-economy models. The requirements of each model imposed different constraints on: (1) the relative size and missions of military-industrial complexes; and (2) the extent to which these complexes replaced private enterprise over and beyond arms production. In the Middle East, dismal economies notwithstanding, arms races typical of inward-looking models consistently attracted the highest levels of military expenditures relative to GNP worldwide, about twice East Asian averages. Internationalizing East Asian models were much less compatible with the kind of militarized economies (expressed as percentages of military ownership of the economy) typical of Middle East states. This Middle East pattern replaced and often decimated the private sector whereas East Asian growth models nurtured them. The former entrenched mukhabarat repressive states; the latter professionalized militaries with far more limited political control over the economy and polity.

Third, both models relied on authoritarian institutions; yet each would foreshadow differential paths regarding democratization, stemming from variations in the nature and role of military institutions and private entrepreneurship just described. Export-led models incepted by authoritarian leaders and ruling coalitions in East Asia were not precisely designed to advance democracy. However those models unintentionally encouraged democratic institutions via several causal mechanisms: fostering economic growth, stronger private sectors and civil societies, and more professionalized militaries attuned to outward-oriented growth. Over time several—though not all—authoritarian regimes in East Asia evolved into full-fledged democracies. By contrast, Middle East models engendered higher barriers to the development of democratic institutions: weaker private sectors and weakened civil societies less able to demand political reform and entrenched military industrial complexes better able to resist those demands.

These differences had implications for regional conflict and cooperation. Their inability to deliver resources and services to constituencies previously mobilized through revolutionary or nationalist fervor, and their efforts to divert attention from failed, economically depleted, entropic, crisis-prone, militarized and de-legitimized models led Middle East regimes to: (a) emphasize nationalism and military prowess; (b) externalize conflict; (c) exacerbate arms races; and (d) engage in competitive outbidding at the regional level. Each of these vectors individually enhanced the prospects for intended or unintended war, militarized incidents, and militarized or political intrusions in the domestic affairs of neighboring states. Collectively they made those even more likely, creating a structural tendency toward conflict even though war itself might not always have been the preferred outcome. Mobilizations, overt subversions, and cross-border invasions were certainly intended but not always controllable. Lacking institutional power and legitimacy domestically and regionally, Middle East leaders deployed

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7 Arab Human Development Report (2009). On how welfare support networks by religious parties step in to solve state failure, deepening social divisions and inequality along the way, see Cammett (2014).
violence at home and abroad, evoking Tilly’s arguments regarding the use of force. According to Khouri (2015), “politicized Arab militaries used at home and abroad tend to promote chaos and destroy Arab countries, rather than maintain order and national integrity.” Domestic fragility hidden behind pan-Arab or pan Islamic rhetoric fueled mutual assaults on sovereignty among Arab-states (Halliday 2005). By contrast, East Asia’s developmental states required: (a) contained military-industrial complexes and limited military competition; (b) war avoidance; (c) domestic stability, predictability, and attractiveness to foreign investors; and (d) tamed arms races, lest such races adversely affect conditions (a) through (c). Each of those requirements individually dampened the prospects for war and militarized conflict. Collectively, they made them even less likely despite lingering hostility and nationalist resentment. Inter-state militarized conflict declined in East Asia since 1980s and intra-regional trade and investment expanded dramatically.

Regional and international diffusion and firewalls

The previous section analyzed primarily domestic barriers to the development of democratic institutions in the Middle East, particularly its typical political economy model. Other processes affecting democratization are external, stemming from regional or global influences. Studies on international and transnational diffusion, for instance, found regional neighborhood effects to have dominated democratic transitions in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East far more so than global ones. One mechanism explaining why democratic transitions tend to cluster within regions focuses on the role of pivotal states. In the post-communist world, such states shared an unusual combination of relatively large and organized opposition movements; enduring authoritarians which could not defeat popular mobilizations; geopolitical importance; similar political economies across neighboring states; and powerful international support for incumbents and opposition, revealing tolerance for regime change (Patel and Bunce 2012). Those conditions in pivotal states signaled to neighbors the potential for further diffusion of democracy. Another mechanism for diffusion of color revolutions was emulation of elite-defection and elite-learning models (Mekouar 2014).

The 2011 Middle East contagion brings to relief the complexity entailed in the study of diffusion, with wide-ranging debates over who the main agents were, what causal mechanisms dominated (bread prices, learning, emulation, and identity, inter alia), the varying mix of firewalls and conductivity in the relevant medium, and spatial and temporal patterns (direction of contagion, duration of gestation). While the role of social media is often cited as a core transmission belt, the most affected states were less endowed in such media than those that were less affected by regional diffusion. Indeed recent work found new media not to have played a significant role in either coalescing collective action within countries or underpinning diffusion regionally. However, that type of media would have been more likely to spread information beyond the region than within it. Arab uprisings hailed from Tunisia to Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria. Higher firewalls in Iran, Algeria, and the GCC among others blocked further diffusion. Even assuming primarily regional—rather than global—sources of diffusion for those upheavals, their effects leapt into both adjacent non-Arab states (including Israel’s 2011 protest movement) and into more remote regions, from sub-Saharan Africa to Myanmar, Malaysia, Chile, Wall Street, Frankfurt, and

8 Dodge (2002). Of 48 militarized regional conflicts between 1965 and 2006, 41 involved Arab-Iranian, inter-Arab, and Turkish-Cypriot dyads. The Iran-Iraq, Iraq-Kuwait/Saudi Arabia, and Morocco-Polisario wars accounted for the bulk of casualties, the only interstate wars with over 10,000 casualties since 1973 until the more recent catastrophic events in Syria. Seven (of 48) militarized conflicts involved Israel, three of those against Syria and Hezbollah after 1973. Gulf Cooperation Council Secretary General Abdalla Bishara remarked that the basic threat to Gulf states were other Arab states, not Israel (Korany 1994:66). More recently the Council defined Iran as the most serious threat. Iran was involved in five militarized incidents; only the Iran-Iraq war—initiated by Iraq—resulted in 500,000 to 1 million deaths. Turkey was involved in 3 militarized conflicts; only the 1974 Cyprus invasion—which pointedly preceded Özal’s inception of export-led growth—involved thousands of casualties.

9 On the utility of focusing on firewalls that increase or decrease a medium’s conductivity along the diffusion path; on the political agents that seek to reinforce or dismantle firewalls and the causal mechanisms through which they operate, see Solingen (2012).
Russia, although with varying intensity.

The occurrence and diffusionary potential of the 2011 Arab uprisings may also have deep roots in the models of political survival adopted by different regimes in power over the preceding decades. I outlined earlier why a significant number of East Asian political-economy models (Taiwan, South Korea, Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and others) were able to re-invent themselves in democratic form, often through the model’s unintended effects rather than by design. I also outlined the domestic sources explaining how internationalizing political-economy models came to take root in that part of the world to begin with. But a more complete account of this process requires a better understanding of regional diffusionary mechanisms. Progressive diffusion of successful export-oriented models arguably predisposed successive East Asian regimes to adapt analogous models to local circumstances in Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, China, Indonesia, and Vietnam. This diffusion was famously captured initially by the “flying geese” metaphor, pointing to Japanese capital and technology as an agent of diffusion through foreign direct investment (FDI) and bank loans. The economic success of models adopted by Asian “tigers” and “dragons,” in turn, led to a pattern of outward but uneven region-to-region diffusion. Ruling coalitions from Turkey to Chile adapted components of East Asian models. Today’s Pacific Alliance in Latin America (Chile, Peru, Colombia, and Mexico) may well be another instance of such diffusion.

By contrast, domestic firewalls—notably dominant coalitions in rigid, exhausted, and predatory states—explain the very limited diffusion of East Asian models into the Middle East. Deeply rooted in the inward-looking political economy described above, these regimes were slower to recognize the end of the brief, “easy,” period of economic expansion under import-substitution. They continued to spend heavily, particularly in the military and its sprawling entrepreneurial activities, leading to inflation, balance-of-payments crises, and further decline (Egypt wrote the manual; Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Pakistan the 7.0, 8.0 and 9.0 versions). Often protected by oil revenues or second-order transfers from oil-rich to oil-poor and other remittances, they responded to economic crises by “deepening” inward-looking models rather than replacing them. “Dutch disease” reinforced reluctance to change. Yet, counter to deterministic oil-curse (or religion-based) expectations, Malaysia and Indonesia were receptive to the regional diffusion of internationalizing models throughout East Asia.

Entrenched inward-looking models in the Middle East explain not only the resolute firewalls against extra-regional East Asian models. They also explain intra-regional firewalls in dominant Middle East states that worked to prevent internationalizing steps primarily through mechanisms of coercion and emulation as well as socialization. Nasserite and Ba’athist models—crucial agents of diffusion of inward-looking models—exerted forceful intervention in neighboring states. They threatened and subverted internationalizing efforts by small, resource-poor Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia. The latter, as well as Turkey and the Gulf, were able to partially stem those intrusions to different degrees. Today it is quite clear what model is diffusing endemically over the carcasses of failed inward-looking states, including Syria and Iraq: extreme variants (Daesh et al.) of autarky-seeking movements.

**Conclusions**

The theoretical framework and applications reviewed here suggest that cleavages between Comparative Politics and International Relations in Middle East studies, between the study of international relations of the Middle East and the study of International Relations more generally, and between the study of the Middle East and that of other regions are not only artificial. They also unambiguously detract from our ability to understand this as well as other regions.

The coalitional framework proposed here can also explain additional dependent variables not explored here, such as

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10 See memo by Legrenzi (2015).
different patterns of demand for nuclear weapons across
regions; different receptivity to external positive and
negative inducements to dissuade states from acquiring
such weapons; and different proclivities to civil war and
state disintegration. The framework defies essentialist
approaches to any region. Notwithstanding efforts to
distill typical models, regional variation within regions
is extensive. Intra-region variation challenges presumed
primordial penchants for war or peace in any region. Most
states in the analyzed regions may conform to a general
pattern, but there were also anomalies. The latter, in
departing from modal regional patterns, provide further
support for the relationship between different models of
political survival and external conflict. Where different
models were sought, regional behavior reflected those
shifts. Some Middle East outliers strove, at various points
in time, to adopt alternative models to those prevailing
in their region. Outliers, here and elsewhere, thus
question the scope of micro-phenomenological theories
emphasizing local cultural origins and regional uniqueness.

Above all, the incidence of outliers counters deterministic
views about inevitable outcomes in any region. Southeast
Asia, once the “Balkans of the East” under inward-
looking stewardship, superseded those older models and
established cooperative foundations that have largely
withstood the test of time. Cases around the world suggest
that history can weigh heavily but does not invariably
impose a point of no return. Turkey, Morocco, Jordan,
Tunisia and some Gulf sheikhdoms have made important
strides toward greater economic openness. The barriers
are high but not insurmountable. Effective reforms
should not be conflated with the much-maligned term,
“neoliberalism,” if the latter retains basic features of the old
model, including corruption and rent-seeking patterns.
Openness to the global economy has lifted many millions
out of poverty elsewhere and, done well, can narrow
inequality. Only extensive reforms can prevent predatory
states from being overrun by even greater predators such
as Daesh.

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11 On the demand for nuclear weapons, see Solingen (2007a).
12 On Egypt’s current efforts, see Snider (2015).

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States, markets and power: 
International political economy and the new Middle East

By Erin A. Snider, Texas A&M University

Introduction

Questions about the economy were undeniably at the heart of the Arab uprisings. The clearest and most iconic expression of this centrality was heard in the chants demanding, ‘bread, freedom and social justice,’ which echoed throughout protests in the Arab world in 2011. For many in the region, this expression reflected deep frustration with declining living standards, diminished opportunity, corruption and ultimately the organization of the economy by authoritarian regimes. In the months thereafter, many scholars turned their attention towards understanding how economics mattered in the uprisings, raising fascinating questions about the interplay of processes linking the region’s economies with that of the international: the effects of globalization; changes in commodity prices; perceptions of inequality; the role of remittances; and the effects of neoliberal reform policies.

Inquiries into economic causes also opened a door to challenging questions about the motivations and role of international and regional actors in aiding, and in some cases, containing the political transitions that would follow. The uprisings may have represented a euphoric moment for citizens in the region, but for others, it represented a rupture and threat to their respective interests in the existing regional order. Expressions of support for the uprisings from some donor governments and organizations were often suffused with apprehension about the best way assist emerging political actors in an enormously fluid political environment. For other actors, that apprehension reflected an explicit fear that new political forces might jeopardize their own commercial and strategic interests in the region.

As the five-year anniversary of the uprisings approaches, it is striking to note how little such questions about the economy and the structure of economic power in the region are now discussed. Egypt’s recent economic development conference illustrates seemingly strange
contradictions in the wake of the uprisings. Over three days in March 2015, the Egyptian government held its economic development conference in the Red Sea resort town of Sharm El Sheikh. More than 1,500 delegates attended the conference, including representatives from over 750 international companies. No expense was spared for an aid conference meant to showcase the Egyptian government’s plan to tackle its abysmal economy, promote investment opportunities and ultimately secure broader international support for its president. On the first day of the conference, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates announced $12 billion in new loans and grants to Egypt, bringing their total aid to $25 billion since President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s ascension. Most of the megaprojects unveiled by the government to anchor its development strategy were awarded to Gulf-based real estate and development companies and were striking both for their disconnect from reality and their similarity to Mubarak era development strategies that had become synonymous with corruption and exclusion. Examples of such projects included plans to build a new capital city whose aesthetics reflect those of the Gulf with an amusement park seven times larger than Disneyland; a new compound near Sheikh Zayed with a glass pyramid skyscraper, malls and luxury housing; and plans to privatize beaches west of Alexandria.

A closer inspection of the projects and their justification underscores that the conference was less about economic development and more about cementing the foundations of economic diplomacy established between President Sisi and his Gulf partners in 2013. The government’s estimations for the number of jobs it claims such projects will generate seem more aspirational than grounded in any real economic analysis. Visibly absent from the conference was any recognition of more pressing socio-economic issues, and strategies to tackle challenges such as providing what Egypt’s own Ministry of Housing acknowledges as 500,000 new homes needed annually for lower income housing. The topic of social inclusion was notably relegated to the very last day of the conference schedule on a panel absent of businessmen.

Such changes in Egypt and other states in the region suggest the re-organization of political power through the economy with reforms focused on stabilization, containment, and the preservation of donor interests rather than emancipatory or structural changes. The path of present transitions thus raises important questions about the nature of shifting power structures and their relationship to divergent outcomes in the region. What is the relationship between uprisings in the region and the economic interests of domestic, regional, and international actors? How have economic demands by different actors shaped political outcomes? If economic grievances were a driving force behind the uprisings, why haven’t international donors and transitional governments adopted more aggressive responses to redress socio-economic issues? What influence have regional and international pressures had on the form of domestic transformations (or reversals) that have occurred thus far?

These questions broadly capture critical issues of political economy that gave rise to the uprisings and that are now shaping the direction of present transitions in the Middle East. Ten years ago, Halliday characterized political economy in the region as “an indissoluble interconnection of political factors—states, conflict, and ideology—with the economic—production, finance, technology.” The centrality of these factors to new and old questions about the international relations of the Middle East is clear whether we are examining conceptions of power, alliance politics, security interests, or the role of norms and institutions in the region.

Scholars in this symposium were asked to think about how IR theory might illuminate Middle East international relations since 2011, and whether Middle East international relations might challenge IR scholars to think more creatively about international relations. The economic questions raised by developments in the Middle East present an important opportunity to reflect on the orientation of international political economy

1 Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005).
(IPE), the sub-discipline of IR concerned with questions of power and wealth in the international system. Over the last three decades, the field of IPE has evolved considerably, embracing different approaches to explore the interaction between politics and economics; states and markets; globalization; multilateral institutions; trade; and multinational corporations. While many foundational works in IPE have contributed important insights to our understanding of the global economy, its engagement with the Middle East has been limited. The region’s absence from the conversation of mainstream IPE is particularly striking since 2011. In the sections that follow, I explore possible reasons behind its omission and discuss how the inclusion of developments in the Middle East would enhance both the study of IPE and Middle East political economy.

**International Political Economy and the Middle East**

A special 2009 issue of the *Review of International Political Economy (RIPE)* on the state of IPE provides some insight into the relative absence of the Middle East from the field. A survey conducted by Maliniak and Tierney of IPE scholars in the United States found that more were “likely to believe East Asia is strategically important today compared to non-IPE people, 23% to 17%, while 6% fewer IPE scholars believe that the Middle East is the most strategically important region today.” Regionally, the authors found that IPE scholarship focused more on developed countries, with 35% of articles concentrated on the U.S., 35% on cases from Canada and Western Europe, and 29% on data and cases from East Asia. Those remaining covered what the authors called global work drawing on data from “every country or region in the world.”

Beyond perceptions of strategic importance, the findings also seem to reflect disciplinary biases and incentive structures that may dissuade IPE scholars from engaging with the Middle East. Over the last fifteen years, American IPE scholars have employed increasingly sophisticated quantitative and formal methods in their research. While such methods have significantly refined our understanding of many dynamics in the field, they have also been criticized for an overly positivist and narrow approach to studying the global economy. In a trenchant critique of American IPE, Cohen observes that research in the field has become data driven and “diverted away from issues that lack the requisite numbers. In effect, the approach plays a key role in defining what can be studied, automatically marginalizing broader questions that cannot be reduced to a manageable set of regressions or structured case-study analysis.”

Cohen rightly notes that one of the clear consequences of this orientation of the field is the lack of incentive to tackle big questions and challenges such as those raised by the Arab uprisings. McNamara echoes similar concerns about what she described as a growing “intellectual monoculture” in the field that might reify one mode of studying the economy and thus both socialize and incentivize those in the field, particularly graduate students, to value particular questions and approaches. The limitations of doing research in the Middle East may feed into the dynamics suggested by Cohen. Data, when available, is often of questionable quality or has been massaged by officials to convey a reality favourable to a regime. Not surprisingly, officials in authoritarian regimes may see data as political and often view researchers interested in acquiring it or conducting surveys with deep suspicion. Overcoming such challenges to study political economy is not impossible, but it often necessitates investments in time, language skills, and creative approaches to fieldwork to which many IPE scholars may not want to commit.

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3 Ibid

4 Ibid


6 Ibid.

The changes now unfolding in the Middle East relay the importance for IPE scholars to embrace a broader, more eclectic approach to studying political economy in order to develop a far more nuanced understanding of the domestic and international forces shaping change in the region. The foundation for such an inquiry is already in place. Some of the core works in IPE by scholars like Gourevitch, Keohane, Krasner, Lake, and Milner have contributed important insights into how the domestic and international interact to shape economic policies and aggregate interests through institutions. Research by scholars such as Rodrik has tackled the effects of globalization, examining the costs and benefits of increased economic integration that may constrain policy choices available to states, particularly for social welfare. Such works provide a useful frame through which to interpret change in the Middle East but could be greatly strengthened by engaging with normative IPE questions and Middle East scholarship.

The call to engage such questions echoes concerns by many of the field's founding scholars about the neglect of questions that consider how values and interests shape political economy. In the aforementioned issue of RIPE, Keohane observed that, “injustice and inequality are endemic” to IPE yet rarely have IPE scholars deeply engaged with what would seem an obvious and crucial component of the field. Years earlier, Simmons and Martin noted the importance of such questions to the role of international institutions: “Normative questions also rise to the top of the agenda once we recognize the lock-in role of institutions. If they do in fact solidify a pattern of cooperation preferred by the most powerful, we should question the ethical status of institutions, turning our attention to equity, as well as efficiency questions.”

Those working in the British tradition of IPE have been more sensitive to these points, particularly scholars like Susan Strange. Concerns about equity were central to Strange's research, particularly her work to understand the interaction between states and markets. The question of who benefits from state-market interaction and how the politics that animates markets also structures power is one with critical importance to Middle East political economy. Fligstein's work in fiscal sociology also reflects this concern about rules governing markets and power, which promise to bring depth to IPE analyses of the Middle East. For example, in his work on the architecture of markets, Fligstein advises us to “think systematically about how government capacity and the relative power of government officials, capitalists, and workers figure into the constructions of new market rules to define the forms of economic activity that exist in a given society.” Fligstein and Strange's concerns also extend to thinking about the normative assumptions of legitimacy and stability underlying aid strategies by international and regional actors since the uprisings. Who manages, governs, and directs forms of assistance given to states in the region? What does the orientation of aid programs tell us about the preferences of actors? How is aid negotiated between international actors and organizations? Is aid reinforcing or disrupting elite coalitions? How should we think about the authority of non-state actors and their influence in transitioning states?

Scholars of Middle East political economy in many respects have already attuned us to such questions and concerns. Insightful work by Owen and Pamuk, Waterbury, Cammert, Mitchell, Bellin, Soliman, Chaudhry, Vitalis, Brand, and Moore, among others have illuminated

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the impact of globalization, colonialism, and great power politics on the region’s domestic economies and its citizens. If the trajectory of mainstream IPE has been to favor studying those steering the helm of the global economy, research by these scholars has given us a better understanding of those on its receiving end. IPE scholars can also learn much from the work of scholars whose methods of inquiry may not mirror our own discipline, but whose research gives us a rich view of important dimensions of Middle East political economy not easily quantifiable such as the role of remittances, the functions of the informal economy, and rents in society. Elyachar’s detailed ethnographic work in informal neighborhoods in Egypt, for example, challenges what she calls “the secular manifest destiny of the invisible hand,” which animates programs promoted by institutions like the World Bank and NGOs. Beyond illuminating how market experiments have functioned in Cairo, her work also challenges IPE scholars to question power structures very often taken for granted.

IPE scholars also have much to gain by incorporating historical sociology into their analytical frameworks and engaging earlier histories of the modern Middle East for insights into the region’s present political economy. Many scholars have remarked that globalization is not a new phenomenon in the Middle East, nor certainly are protests and rebellion. Research on the tobacco rebellion in Iran, the Egyptian revolution of 1919, and other moments of protest may yield useful insights from regional scholars on the interaction between the domestic and the international at such moments and the shifting terrain of economic power. Grounding our focus in history also underscores the familiarity of present changes in Middle East political economy and parallels with other regions emerging from colonial and imperial economic arrangements. There is enormous potential for IPE and Middle East scholars to broaden our exploration of the factors shaping the political economies of the Arab uprising through a closer examination of domestic and international elite interests, capital, and labor elsewhere.

Understanding developments in the Middle East over the last five years is an important intellectual challenge for both the field of IPE and Middle East studies and invites more collaboration and creative approaches to understand the forces shaping the region’s political economy and the possibilities for structural change. Calls for methodological pluralism are often evoked in political science yet seem to gain little traction. The historic upheavals in the region provide an opportunity to change that trend and hopefully enrich the study of the field as well.


Beyond “geosectarianism”: political systems and international relations in the Middle East

By Ewan Stein, University of Edinburgh

All of the Middle East’s most powerful states now face acute crises over the legitimacy of their political systems. Two years into the ‘Arab Spring’ it seemed that some kind of populist, majoritarian Islamic republicanism would sweep away secular dictatorships and monarchies alike. Today, however, the prospects for this brand of political legitimacy appear dim. Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) has lost its parliamentary majority, halting what many saw as Turkey’s drift toward Iranian-style religious authoritarianism. Egypt’s first freely elected president Mohamed Morsi faces a death sentence two years after his ouster, with many blaming the Muslim Brotherhood’s fall on its desire to create a single-party Islamic state. Iran’s reform-oriented president endures ongoing tussles with conservative forces over the extent to which the state should intervene in religious, cultural and intellectual life and has been accused of helping to legitimize an authoritarian system. And in Saudi Arabia, the international spotlight shines on a regime that deems 1000 lashes a proportionate response to political dissidence.

These struggles over domestic political legitimacy are the bread and butter of Comparative Politics but rarely of International Relations. Conventional accounts of Middle East international relations tend to prioritize geopolitical drivers, often incorporating sectarian or other identities as intervening variables: Turkey aims to boost its influence in the region through cultivating fraternal links with Sunni Islamist parties; Iran attempts the same but is stymied by the Sunni-Shiite divide and so must fall back on Shiite allies and proxies; Saudi Arabia fights a rear-guard battle to contain Iranian influence by bankrolling “moderate” Sunni dictatorships and jihadist groups.

This geosectarian approach paints, at best, an incomplete picture. A look at the reactions of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran to the Arab, particularly Egyptian, uprisings between 2011 and 2013 supports the following, fairly intuitive, hypothesis: foreign policy actors support abroad the same kinds of political structures they enjoy, or would like to enjoy, at home. This occurs primarily for reasons of internal and external legitimation: i.e. “my system looks better if others are also using it.” The tendency toward homogeneity in “the ordering of domestic affairs,” as Fred Halliday noted in his book, Revolution and World Politics: the Rise and Fall of the Sixth Great Power, represents a central dynamic in the structure of international relations.

Turkey

The AKP’s pro-Islamist—essentially populist—foreign policy alienated large parts of Turkish political and civil society, and may have contributed to the party’s poor parliamentary election showing in June 2015. Turkey was not pushed into pursuing this foreign policy by any powerful external actors and had been achieving steady success with its “zero problems with neighbors” approach prior to 2011. There is no compelling geostrategic explanation for what turned out to be a reckless gamble on the success of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and a comparable outcome in Syria.

Turkey’s response to the Arab uprisings reflected, rather, the domestic fears and aspirations of the AKP as a party of government. Internally and externally (particularly in the eyes of Washington), Turkey’s prestige could only increase as its model of a majoritarian democracy with an interventionist Islamic cultural agenda spread across the region. With the overthrow of former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, Erdogan saw an opportunity to export the AKP model to the Arab world’s most populous and influential state. Turkey’s commitment to the Muslim Brotherhood amounted to more than words: it invested some $2 billion in the country during Morsi’s tenure.

Turkish support for Morsi as Egypt’s legitimate elected president was no altruistic strategy to democratise the
Arab world. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, as Erdogan knew well from its actions while in power, was ambivalent about liberal democracy. The Brotherhood could be expected to behave in the same majoritarian manner that alienated substantial sections of Turkish society from the AKP. The collapse of this model in Egypt would have serious implications for the legitimacy of the socially interventionist and populist system the AKP hoped to perpetuate.

**Saudi Arabia**

Saudi reactions to the Arab uprisings and their aftermath cannot be fully explained by geosectarian concerns either. Saudi Arabia’s hostility toward the Muslim Brotherhood was evidently not related to any actual Egyptian foreign policy realignment: Egyptian-Iranian rapprochement was lukewarm at best and policy toward Israel remained business as usual. Even the United States praised Morsi’s statesmanship in brokering a deal in Palestine.

For a more complete explanation, we must turn once again to the question of the kinds of domestic political systems the Saudis feel most comfortable living among. It is no revelation that Saudi Arabia has an interest in seeing that none of the existing Arab monarchies, particularly those of the GCC, fall. Saudi Arabia is almost always considered a conservative, as opposed to a revisionist, power in that it seeks to preserve monarchies against the onslaught of popular sovereignty. However, this classification misses the arguably more significant transformatory influence Saudi Arabia has had on domestic politics beyond the Gulf, particularly since the 1970s.

Just because Saudi Arabia has not used its economic might to bring back monarchies in Egypt and elsewhere does not mean that it has not exported key elements of its political model. The most salient of which is the functional separation between holders of political power, on the one hand, and holders of cultural (mainly religious) power, on the other. This division of labor has been a defining feature of post-populist republics in the Arab world, at least partially due to Saudi influence. The laboratory, and most important poster child, for Saudi political engineering was Egypt.

Hosni Mubarak has been credited with returning Egypt to the “Arab fold” following its expulsion from the Arab League in the wake of the Camp David Accords. This reintegration involved the progressive strengthening of Egyptian-Saudi military, economic and cultural integration. Mubarak’s brand of sovereignty was coercive and dictatorial, but not—to use Robert Jackson’s term—“totalitarian” in the sense of aspiring to an organic ideological unity between state and society. This was the hallmark of the Nasserist system that also survived under Baath party rule in Iraq and Syria as well as, in an idiosyncratic form, in Ghaddafi’s Libya. Under Mubarak, state-level politics became increasingly managerial, while the ideological and cultural initiative was ceded to a range of (mainly Islamist) actors in society.

The external legitimation function, for Saudi Arabia, of post-populist systems such as Mubarak’s Egypt is captured in the notion of the “moderate state.” Within this rubric, the international community (again, primarily Washington) overlooks domestic coercion and illiberalism when the state’s foreign policy practice is aligned with U.S. interests. Such alignment is harder to guarantee under populist republics. The post-populist system in Egypt survived until the triumph of Mohamed Morsi in the 2012 elections, which placed the Muslim Brotherhood in a position of both political and ideological leadership. Egypt’s drift, at least potentially, toward some kind of majoritarian Islamist democracy, was a change the Saudi regime could not allow.

It is significant to note, however, that President Abdel Fattah al-Sissi has not returned Egypt to the status quo ante. In dispensing with the Muslim Brotherhood, and indeed any partners in society, Sissi appears bent on establishing a totalitarian (actually quasi-fascist) state based on the cult of his personality. Although Saudi Arabia whole-heartedly approved of the suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood—declaring it a terrorist organization and criminalizing any expression of sympathy for it—there are some indications that the new administration under King Salman may be ready to ease up on punishing the Brothers. Although generally explained in terms of a Saudi desire to strengthen the Sunni front against Iran, this shift
more strongly supports the argument that Saudi Arabia prefers a return to post-populism in Egypt.

Iran

While Iran’s eagerness to build bridges with post-Mubarak Egypt makes good geopolitical as well as economic sense, its confused reaction to Morsi’s performance and ouster does not. Iran’s position has been ambiguous, partially due to the fragmented, factionalized nature of its political system. The Arab uprisings offered an opportunity for the Iranian regime to gain external legitimation for its Islamic republican political model. As with Saudi Arabia, the fact that Iran it not exporting its version of a state governed by a religious leader (wilayat e-faqih) to the Arab world does not mean its model is not replicable. It embodies the same populist, culturally interventionist model toward which the AKP has been moving. Although this may be a well-worn polemical charge, it contains more than a grain of truth. Significantly, Iran-Turkey relations are currently more functional than either Iran-Egypt or Turkey-Egypt relations, despite the two states being essentially at war in Syria.

When the Islamist political breakthrough of 2012 failed to yield a substantive foreign policy shift in Egypt, internal Iranian discourse became more critical of the Muslim Brotherhood; however, in general, the Islamic Republic adopted an uncharacteristically indulgent attitude toward the reticence of Egypt’s Islamist leaders. It largely refrained form launching the kinds of fiery attacks it employed against Saudi Arabia, for example. Instead, Iran adopted a wait-and-see approach. Unlike Turkey, which invested substantial economic and political capital in backing Morsi’s regime, Iran lacked both the means and, more significantly, the domestic political consensus to follow suit. The AKP considered the spread of the Turkish model vital for its internal and external legitimation and had the executive power to follow through with this policy. Iran, on the other hand, was divided: the totalitarian elements of the political system, led by Khamenei, had no interest in spreading ‘democracy’, whereas the reformist current, represented by Rouhani, balked at legitimizing a majoritarian Brotherhood regime.

Iran ultimately joined Turkey in condemning the coup but in far less vociferous terms. Whereas Erdogan focused his ire on the military, for obvious domestic reasons, Rouhani and Khamenei also blamed the Muslim Brotherhood. Morsi’s ouster triggered a flurry of intellectual analysis in the Iranian (state controlled) media. For conservatives, the Brotherhood failed because it did not follow the Iranian example and purge the political system of counterrevolutionary elements, and because it remained subservient to U.S. and Israeli diktats. Reformists blamed Morsi’s undemocratic practices and the Muslim Brotherhood’s incompetence. The fact that Khamenei himself repeated the democratic legitimacy line, despite his totalitarianism, arguably reflects the Supreme Leader’s acknowledgement of Rouhani’s mandate and Khamenei’s reluctance to provoke domestic protest at a time of regional turmoil. This hypocrisy will have been lost on few Iranians.

Conclusion

Geopolitics and identity remain highly relevant to international affairs, but they do not present the complete picture. In the post-Cold War world, where the battle over economic systems has been largely won, the most salient divisions in the world relate to political systems. The Middle East, as has so often been the case, is a pivotal front in this battle, which rages between regimes and oppositions, as well as between state and non-state actors. At stake is whether totalizing majoritarian Islamic democracy can assert itself as a serious challenge to Wahhabi-style monarchy and its progeny, post-populist dictatorship. Given the setbacks Islamic democracy has suffered in Egypt, and now Turkey, the prospects for monarchy and dictatorship appear rosier. A third alternative, that of a more liberal democracy, may remain elusive in the region for quite some time as it continues to lack any powerful state sponsor.

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“2011”: Middle East (R)Evolutions

By Stephan Stetter, University of the Bundeswehr Munich

Theories of social evolution focus on continuity and change of communications and ensuing regimes of truth with which we make sense of the world around us. A social evolution perspective is well suited to generate understanding of continuity and changes in political communications in the post-2011 Middle East. I argue that the Arab uprisings that started in 2011 are, in social evolution terms, a revolutionary benchmark date: they deeply affect political communications and power relations by re-arranging communicative variations and selections through which people in the region and beyond make sense of what the Middle East “is.” Yet, as social evolution theories also highlight, the more difficult thing to attain in modern social orders is re-stabilization. The Middle East 2011 communication revolution is a case in point: communicative variations and selections led to the collapse of the pre-2011 post-colonial/post-Ottoman social contract that shaped regional politics since the mid-20th century. However, these new variations and selections seem to block the way for any straightforward re-stabilization of the post-2011 order.

When looking at “2011” from a social evolution perspective, it becomes immediately apparent that a geographically limited perspective cannot adequately account for politics in the new (and old) Middle East. Regimes of truth about the Middle East emerge in a fundamentally globalized setting: the Middle East is “whenever and wherever it is communicated” (Stetter 2008: 21) and in a globalized world this wherever transcends territorial and cultural borders. And at all levels—from the global to the regional, national and local—it seems that Middle East politics are characterized by antagonized political identities and intense conflicts between social groups. As I have argued elsewhere (ibid.), Middle East politics both in the colonial/Ottoman as well as in the post-colonial/post-Ottoman eras are shaped by what can be termed “frozen crossings” and “hot contestations” in political communications. That is, a fortification and vigorous defense of the status quo by those possessing power and a reluctance to engage in power-sharing arrangements with contenders. These “frozen crossings” are then mirrored by often-violent opposition and the resistance of those aiming to overthrow the status quo. Such “macro-securitization” (Buzan/Wæver 2009) of Middle East politics not only underpins the strong antagonization of political identities in the region. It also legitimizes rigorous group-based forms of inclusion and exclusion in politics and other social spheres. The dominant regime of truth about Middle East politics then is to not view these political communications as what they are—contingent and historically evolved patterns—but rather attribute something inherently conflictive to this region and its people. In other words, a deeply held belief both in the region and outside of it that the predominance of conflicts is unchangeable, almost like a natural law: that there is something in the nature of the Middle East and its people that renders a belief in less antagonistic politics naïve at best and dangerous at worst. To some extent, ‘2011’ shattered that belief.

So if we consider “2011” a benchmark date, the key question to ask is what change, if any, it left on political communications and regimes of truth about Middle East politics. For that purpose, evolution theory offers a useful analytical distinction between three main dimensions of evolution: variation, selection, and re-stabilization. In social evolution theory, variation refers to all forms of communicative negations. Social evolution is slow as long as the amount of negations in society is kept at a minimum, e.g. in traditional, pre-modern societies. In that sense, “2011” shares many credentials with previous forms of mass protest against entrenched political orders in the modern Middle East, e.g. against colonialism, occupation, Westernization or corruption. Yet the aforementioned macro-securitization of Middle East politics in both the colonial and post-colonial eras ensured that the likelihood of variations leading to change (selections) and
new orders (re-stabilization) was structurally inhibited by the simultaneity of a fortification of the status quo, on the one hand, and equally antagonistic opposition to it, on the other. Challenges to the status quo and entrenched power distributions are, thus, omnipresent in the history of the modern Middle East. Yet, they often remained only a potential threat that justified politics of fear and violent suppression of any form of meaningful opposition. Structurally speaking: negations were hard to be actualized, leading to an overthrow of entrenched orders or meaningful power-sharing arrangements between erstwhile opponents. Negations in Middle East politics mostly remained at the level of potential challenges to the societal status quo. The significance of “2011” then arguably is not that this benchmark date allows us to make more or less educated guesses about the future(s) of social and political structure at regional, global, and national levels. That would be a question about the (re-)stabilization of order, impossible to be answered from an evolution theoretical perspective that always has to expect the arrival of one or the other black swan (Taleb 2010).

An evolutionary perspective, however, does suggest that “2011” is a relevant benchmark date insofar as it made a change at the level of variation. The significance of “2011” and the struggles over re-arranging national and regional power relations that ensue since then are not mainly that legitimacy of power and order is negated by some, and defended by others, often violently. As already argued, this macro-securitization of the status quo has a long history in the Middle East. What is now added is the memory, trickling into discourse and regimes of truth, that the seemingly natural logic of strict inclusion/exclusion can actually and not just potentially be overcome, if only for a moment. Viewing “2011” from this perspective means to study it as a “communicative project” of negations (Brunkhorst n. d.: 97) that moves from the realm of potentiality to actuality. The inception of the idea (see Chris Noland’s movie, Inception) that a different Middle East is possible and that this idea can be realized and can no longer be easily forgotten or ridiculed as “unrealistic.” In evolution theoretical terms, “2011” arguably figures as a punctuational burst (Gould 2007). It is not about “sorting” (Vrba/Gould 1986), i.e. the selection and re-stabilization of new structures, but rather enriching the pool of variations, thereby changing, however subtly, the discursive logic of social struggles in Middle East politics.

In that sense, “2011” bears characteristic of a discursive revolution, i.e. a sudden burst in negations that occur “at a speed that nobody can adapt to” (Brunkhorst n. d.: 72). This not only widens the pool of variations, but also generates new possibilities for what social evolution theory describes as positive and negative selections. As other key political revolutions in global modernity, “2011” also triggers a confusing multiplicity of such positive and negative selections that renders it difficult to distinguish between variation and re-stabilization, as visible in the lively debate in Middle East studies of whether “2011” was the beginning of the end of the authoritarian post-colonial/post-Ottoman social contract (i.e. the “Arab Spring”) or only a flash in the pan that quickly gave way to an “Arab winter” and regional chaos. In the case of “2011,” positive selections relate to cracks in the colonial/postcolonial discursive logic, to those selections that challenge the idea and practice of the Middle East being inherently conflictive and antagonistic. In other words, a “worlding” of Middle East politics in the form of a discursive “re-Orienting” of the region (Dabashi 2012: 250) that provides more room for polyarchic social contracts at national and regional levels, such as the nascent democratization in Tunisia or the equally nascent U.S.-Iranian détente, which nurture the idea of a broader Middle Eastern security community. In the absence of re-stabilization, such positive selections are, however, mainly a semantic change that might (or might not) precede future structural changes. In evolution theoretical terms, such selections, if successful, can be understood as pre-adaptive advances. Social evolution theory has shown that many evolutionary advances in human history tend to emerge first on the level of semantics and only then in structure. By enabling positive selections “2011” might operate as such a pre-adaptive advance for a more peaceful, democratic and socially inclusive future political order in the Middle East, both nationally and regionally/globally.

However, this is far from certain, because such positive
selections still occur within the broader regime of truth of a deeply held belief in an almost natural “macro-securitization” of Middle East politics. That renders it likely that negative selections, which remain bound to the genealogical lineage of frozen crossings and hot contestations, maintain a high degree of legitimacy and factual validity. Negative selections are discursively compatible with this entrenched regime of truth, and therefore celebrate manifold comebacks, e.g. the revival of paternalistic authoritarianism in Egypt, the intensification of offensive nationalism in Israel and Turkey, the persistence of Orientalism in the West and post-colonial anxieties in the region, or the belief in a fundamental Shia-Sunni divide at the regional level. As long as such negative selections endure, the widened pool of variations associated with ‘2011’ might as well dry out. In that scenario, Middle East politics remain a deeply antagonistic discursive area of world politics, co-evolving with a global political system that governs the Middle East as one if its conflict regions through containment and alliance-building, trying to avoid spill-overs into other world regions. A world that manages Middle East conflicts but has no belief in the possibility of resolving them.

For the time being, both types of selections shape the post-“2011” order and thereby mark a difference to the underlying discursive dynamics of political communications in and on that region prior to “2011.” In that sense, “2011” is a benchmark date. It triggered a communicative variation that can lead to both positive and negative selections, but it is a date that cannot, for the time being, be easily ignored in societal communications in and on the Middle East. As long as this is the case, “2011” ignites a permanent revolution—al-thawrah al-mustamarrah (Dabashi 2012: 253)—that nervously oscillates between positive and negative selections and renders any smooth re-stabilization of order in the post-2011 Middle East, either in the form of a breakthrough of polyarchy or a rejuvenation of the ancien régime, unlikely. In evolution theoretical terms, “2011” functions as a “constraint” (McKitrick 1993) to the re-stabilization of either type of selection. And this comes in addition to a general difficulty in our globalized world, which cherishes a neo-liberal ethos—or fetish—of speed, flexibility and adaptability, to distinguish between variation and re-stabilization (Luhmann 2012), a dynamic that not only in the Middle East leads to “ever more daring non-adaptations” (ibid.).

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Brunkhorst, Hauke (n. d.): “Rechtsevolutionen: Die soziale Evolution der Weltgesellschaft”


International relations theory and the new Middle East: three levels of a debate

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The Arab uprisings have not only impacted the Arab world but also scholarship about Arab politics. Much of the debate, in particular in the beginning, was about identifying the initial and underlying causes of the unexpected and dramatic events that began in 2011. However, the debate has increasingly also concerned broader questions regarding the implications for a future “new Middle East” and for the future study of Arab politics. The latter issue, concerning the analytical implications of the Arab uprisings, has been demonstrated in (self) reflections about whether we got it all wrong before 2011 and whether there is a need for completely new kinds of theories and approaches; or, alternatively, whether our “old” theories have been vindicated now that the dust has begun to settle again.1

While most scholarship about Arab politics has been impacted by the Arab uprisings, it is also clear that the degree and kind of impact differs among various fields of study.

The Arab Uprisings and the Comparative Politics of the Middle East

Comparative politics of the Middle East is among the fields of study that have been most impacted. This has not only been reflected in a considerable deal of soul-searching, critique and rebuttals, particularly related to the question of whether or not the literature about authoritarian resilience has been undermined.2 It has also been reflected in a huge amount of new and innovative literature about the comparative politics of the Arab uprising. Thus, the dramatic and unexpected developments since 2011 have given rise to very productive and fertile dialogue and engagement between regional specialists and scholars of comparative politics who are not Middle East specialists. Theories and approaches developed elsewhere have been applied to the Middle East, and the region has been compared with other regions and earlier transitions.3 Generalists appear, at the same time, to have become much more interested in the Middle East and in some of the theoretical debates that previously took place mainly between Middle East specialists.4

International Relations Theory and the New Middle East

A somewhat different picture emerges if one turns to the field of international relations of the Middle East. Contrary to the field of comparative politics, the air has not been full of claims about how the existing approaches have been undermined nor has there been any significant degree of soul-searching. At the same time, a similar amount of (theoretical) literature has so far not been produced about

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4 On this point see also Bank, André (2015). “Comparative Area Studies and Middle East Politics after the Arab Uprisings”. META: Middle East - Topics & Arguments, no. 4. Available at: http://meta-journal.net/article/view/3529/3463
international relations following the Arab uprisings and that which has been produced has been, to some extent, of a different nature. Much of the literature has concerned specific events, identified winners and losers among the regional powers,5 or revolved around the broader question about to what extent it makes sense to speak of a “new Middle East”6 — or “new new Middle East.”7 Other authors have debated if we are instead witnessing some kind of movement “forward to the past” in terms of a “New Arab Cold War,” “a struggle of Syria redux” or a “new Thirty Years’ War.”8 On the one hand, much of this is excellent and illuminating analysis of current dynamics. On the other hand, IR theories are often only used implicitly. Rather few of these analyses thus ask how one or the other IR theory can be useful in explaining a certain current phenomenon and/or how insights from the “new Middle East” may also provide important lessons for more general issues concerning international relations (theory).

Perhaps as a consequence of this, the degree of dialogue between the general IR debate and the debate among regional specialists appears to have been more limited regarding international relations in a new Middle East compared to the intense cross-fertilization in the debate about the comparative politics of the Arab uprisings. Thus, in comparative terms, it appears that regional specialists within the field of comparative politics have been able to attract more attention from generalists than have regional specialists dealing with Middle East international relations. As an anecdotal indication, it is striking how few panels concerned international relations at the annual meeting of the American Middle East Studies Association (MESA) in 2013; and while the Middle East was quite well-represented at the International Studies Association (ISA) the same year, it is striking to observe how many of the panelists were (excellent) comparatists with a particular interest in the international dimension of comparative politics rather than scholars who draw on IR theory.

An emerging and fertile debate about IR theory and the Middle East — before the Arab uprisings

It might be tempting to explain this difference in the way the Arab uprisings have impacted these two fields of study with an argument about how cross-fertilization is more likely within the field of comparative politics than international relations. However, a quick look at scholarship about Middle East international relations before the Arab Uprisings will reveal that this does not seem to be the case. Following a growing number of calls for moving beyond the “Area Studies Controversy” in favor of more cross-fertilization between IR and Middle East studies (MES),8 the decade before the uprisings saw plenty of examples of excellent and sophisticated studies that combined state-of-the-art IR theories and a deep knowledge about regional affairs in fertile and original


7 During the last couple years there have been plenty suggestions about the nature of a more or less new Middle East and whether or not it resembles earlier eras. Some have talked about a new sectarian Middle East, e.g., Abdo, Geneive. (2013). “The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi’a-Sunni Divide”. Brookings Inst. - Saban Center Analysis Paper. No.: 29 (April 2013); some have made comparisons to the European 30-years war, e.g. Haas, Richard (2014). “The New Thirty Years’ War”. Project Syndicate. July 21; and some have made analogies to the 1950/60s Arab Cold War and the ‘Struggle for Syria’ e.g., Khoury, Nabeel A. (2013). “The Arab Cold War Revisited: The Middle East as a Subordinate International System”.

ways and illustrated why and how the IR/MES nexus can potentially enrich not only our understanding of the Middle East but also international relations in more general terms.⁹

There is thus no reason as such why the debate about Middle East international relations after the Arab uprisings should be different from what is happening with regard to the comparative politics of the Arab uprisings; nor is it impossible per se to have a fertile engagement between IR and MES that improves our grasp of the international relations of a new Middle East and at the same time helps us to think more creatively about international relations in general.

**Three clusters in the debate about IR theory and the New Middle East**

Instead of engaging in a discussion about whether or not it is possible to imagine a fertile dialogue on IR Theory and international relations in a New Middle East, it seems more relevant to ask how this kind of cross-fertilizations can be promoted and the associated potentials be realized. In this endeavor, it is useful to be attentive to (at least) three clusters of questions working at different levels of abstractions, all of which seem to be relevant for an investigation into the nexus between IR theory and the New Middle East.

The first cluster, which operates at a more empirical level, concerns the question of how Middle East international relations have been affected by the Arab uprisings and relates to the debate about the “newness” of the “new Middle East.” Halliday once remarked—in the context of September 11, 2001—that, “there are two predictable, and nearly always mistaken, responses to any great international upheaval: one is to say that everything has changed; the other is to say that nothing has changed,”¹⁰ and he emphasized, against this background, the need for simultaneous attention to the continuities in the obvious changes and to the more subtle changes in the apparent continuities. Along these lines, there is a need to identify what has actually changed in a New Middle East and what has not, including patterns of alliances, threat perceptions, the role of regional norms and ideas, the nature of rivalries, the emergence of new issues and persistence of old ones, etc. Here it is relevant to ask and explore to what extent and in which ways IR can help us to grasp both dimensions of continuity and change, and through this contribute to the production of new insights about current dynamics and perhaps also “de-exceptionalize” what at first sight might appear uniquely Middle Eastern.

The second cluster, which operates at a first-order theoretical level, is about how insights on and studies of the “new Middle East” can contribute to the academic field of IR and enrich our general understanding of the international relations. This kind of engagement can take a number of forms.

One variant will be to use the Middle East as a “most/least likely” case to test allegedly universal IR theories. As Halliday once noted, one should ask of any theory what it can contribute to the study of Middle East international relations, and if it cannot help to explain this region then

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it cannot fly as an IR theory of general scope. Thus, the Middle East can be used to test the alleged universality of theories developed on the basis of experiences from elsewhere. In a similar way, the “new Middle East” provides a number of cases and new material with which to test and explore classic IR controversies and issues including: a) the “1. Image” debate about whether/when/under which circumstances a change of head of state matters for foreign policy making (e.g., Iran, Saudi-Arabia, Qatar, Yemen, Egypt twice, Tunisia); b) the classic debate about the international dimension and implications of domestic revolutions; c) the important role played by tiny Qatar in regional politics, which reopens the classic debate about whether IR should mainly focus on great powers while small states can largely be ignored as once suggested by Waltz; d) closely related is the even more general debate about the sources and forms of power in international relations, including the question about fungibility and the relative importance of different kinds of power. Not only Qatar—pointing to the importance but also limits of non-military sources of power—could be of interest here, but also for instance Iran. While their “hard” power may not have changed much because of the Arab Uprisings, their “soft” power derived from its popularity among Arab populations in the mid-2000s appears to have been largely lost, but does this matter, and what does this tell about the relative importance of various forms of power?; e) the obvious but complex interplay between domestic and regional/international politics during the Arab uprisings should in a similar way be of interest to the general debates in IR on “inside/outside,” “inter-mestic” affairs and the “permeability of the state,” just as f) the current realignments among regional states provide new material to classic alliance discussions about balance of power, threat, bandwagoning, omnibalancing, material/ideational balancing, underbalancing etc.

Another variant—instead of applying and testing IR theories developed elsewhere in the Middle East—would ask how a new Middle East could be a place for the development of new IR theories of general scope. So far, it has frequently been the case that either the Middle East has simply been a testing ground for allegedly universal theories (and if these did not fit, it has often been the Middle East rather than the theory that has been considered somehow wrong) or that the scope for new theoretical approaches based on experiences from the Middle East has often been limited to this particular region instead of making claims to be general theories about a certain international phenomenon as such. But if Europe can be used as a place to build allegedly universal theories that are subsequently tested in other parts of the world, why can the Middle East not be used in similar way? For instance, could insights about the regional influence of tiny Qatar be used as a point of departure for a new general theory about power, and does the idea of “hedging,” currently much discussed in relation to the small Gulf-

states, also deserve attention from non-ME aficionados. If we are witnessing a “global resurgence of religion” with a “return of religion from exile” in IR, then the Middle East might also be a place for the development of new approaches to religion—rather than narrowly Islam—in international relations.

Lastly, a third and final cluster concerns a range of questions of a more meta-theoretical second-order nature. The first of these questions takes its point of departure in the classic universalism/particularism debate. As Halliday explained, this relates to a “very fundamental issue much debated in contemporary social thought on whether it is possible, or desirable, to analyze and evaluate different parts of the world on the basis of similar criteria, or whether we should accept that they are marked by different and distinct dynamics precluding any universalist ‘narratives,’ maybe necessitating a spatial and temporal differentiation of a plurality of concepts and logics.” Halliday’s famous “take” on this was to divide universalism and particularism into “analytical” (epistemological) and “historical” (ontological) dimensions and then combine “analytical universalism” with “historical particularism.”

While there are a range of excellent examples of studies succeeding in doing so, it has at the same time also been clear that it can be a challenge to transform Halliday’s ambitious strategy into practice. This classic question about how to avoid being blind to or blinded by regional particularities is also important to reflect upon when we discuss international relations in a “new Middle East.”

Another question recognizes how a discussion about the international relations of a new Middle East should be based on cross-fertilization between IR and MES but at the same time directs attention to the need for a “dialogue about dialogues.” Thus, dialogues between different fields of study can take place in various ways, as they can be based on very different ideas about the purpose, procedure and product of this dialogue. By looking at how the engagement between disciplines such as IR and area studies like MES has previously taken place, it is possible to identify quite different kind of dialogues. Sometimes the exchange has taken the form of a hierarchical dialogue, in which Middle East specialists are perceived as little more than assistant junior partners providing local data to a superior IR. At other times, the exchange has been more like a reflexive dialogue, in the sense of a two-way conversation between peers engaged in reflexive rethinking and contextualization of own categories, theories and concepts, leading to changes within both academic fields.

And at still other times, the aim of the exchange has been to make a transformative dialogue, in the sense of promoting a radical transformation of the existing meta-boundaries in academia by establishing new fields of study that would rest on completely different ways of organizing knowledge. Against this background, it appears necessary not only to call for more cross-fertilization between IR and MES but also to consider the terms of a dialogue about the international relations of a new Middle East.

A third question goes from asking how a dialogue will take place to between whom it will take place. As a consequence of the debate about “geo-cultural epistemologies” that has

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been going on for more than a decade within IR, there has been growing attention to how IR—at least in some ways—has been “an American social science” and how “IR might be quite different in different places.” In other words, (Middle East) international relations might in other parts of the world be perceived, discussed and thought of in ways different from the predominant U.S. version(s) in academia. It is therefore relevant to engage voices of different scholarly training and origin and examine whether and how the interplay of the IR/MES nexus differs in American, European or Middle Eastern contexts and what this means for the prospects of a productive cross-fertilization that enriches not only our understanding of the “new Middle East” but also international relations in general.

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.