

Concept Note

Shifting Regional Dynamics of the Middle East: Hierarchies New and Old

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Recent years have seen unprecedented changes to the regional dynamics of the Middle East. Devastating conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen have displaced millions of people within and across borders, disrupting existing territorial arrangements and making the region the site of the largest forced displacement since the Second World War. New political antagonisms underpin these conflicts, with struggles for regional influence generating complex patterns of inter-state rivalries and alliances between various countries in the region – including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Iran, Turkey, and Israel – and the on-going intervention of global powers like the United States, the European Union, Russia, and China. Closely coupled to these shifting political dynamics is a reconfiguration of trade, finance, and investment flows, with new relationships evolving between Middle Eastern states and neighbouring regions such as East and West Africa, South Asia, and the Balkans. All of these regional trends are framed within an increasingly unstable and fragile global order, marked by the rise of new powers such as China and Russia; the resurgence of right-wing populism, xenophobia, and protectionism in the US, Europe and elsewhere; and a rapidly mutating array of political, economic, and ecological crises across the globe.

Yet despite these intense changes, much academic work on the Middle East, as elsewhere, continues to be trapped within frameworks that reify existing power arrangements and do little to clarify the significant transformations unfolding different scales. This includes a persistent *methodological nationalism*, which takes as its basic ontological starting point the assumption “of the nation-state as the self-evident container of political, cultural, and economic relations” (Goswami 2002, p. 794). By positing the nation state as a self-contained and discrete repository of social relations – which exists *a priori* and analytically separable from other spatial scales – we lose sight of how social relations are necessarily constituted through “cross-border [and] border-subverting” processes (Van der Linden 2008, p.7). Such cross-border flows of people and capital are immensely important to the making of the regional dynamics of the contemporary Middle East, and act to disrupt the assumed national-boundedness of many standard social science concepts. For this reason, the current moment points to the importance of understanding the region as much more than simply an additive function of discrete nation-states; approaching the *region as a region* is essential to any assessment of future political and social trajectories.

At the same time, we need much more sophisticated accounts of how regions are constructed, transformed, interpolated and intersecting. Regions are economic and political structures but they are also cultural constructs co-existing with counter-regional and alter-regional adversaries and imaginaries. Furthermore, any given region is inserted within – and partially constitutive of – both global processes of capital accumulation and the hierarchies of the current international political system. Thus the “Middle East” as used in this text should be understood as a contingent category and not a given reality.

For example, while imperialism and traditional global rivalries continue to shape regions in profound ways, the dynamics of the Middle East cannot be simply reduced to an outcome of foreign military and political intervention, or the role of oil in the global economy. We need to better understand how the Middle East’s co-constitution with ‘the global’ is generating its

own internal hierarchies, as well as new patterns of marginalisation and dispossession, including those that dismantle the boundaries of the region itself. Part of this involves recognising the Middle East’s significant role in mediating emerging global networks of trade, logistics, infrastructure, and finance, all of which remain understudied and overshadowed by a focus on war and conflict. This is not just a matter of more empirical work and a closer mapping of the region’s political economy. A study of the Middle East’s regional dynamics can potentially reveal interesting theoretical insights into the character of the global system as a whole: including the growing role of regions and regionalism, the nature of emerging East-West and South-South relations, and the changing forms of imperialism and exploitation. Understanding these questions necessitates a reengagement with earlier political debates around concepts such as imperialism, sub-imperialism, dependency, and development, as well as more comparative work with other areas of the world market.

All of this points to the need for a collaborative rethinking of the Middle East region, in ways that can capture the shifting dynamics of the regional scale yet move beyond the constraints of analytical perspectives based on competing nationalisms, geographical silos, and disciplinary boundaries.

This working group, organized by the Arab Council of Social Sciences (ACSS) aims at bringing together leading researchers on the Arab countries, Iran and Turkey (as well as adjacent and non-adjacent geographies as appropriate), to explore concepts of the region, its changing dynamics, and its connections with other parts of the global system. The eventual aim is to set up a working group that is interdisciplinary and open-ended in the kinds of questions it asks and the themes it explores. The project hopes to strengthen and support the specific, individual research interests of people working on various aspects of the region, through collaborative thinking and discussion. As with the other ACSS working groups, we hope to challenge conventional ways of thinking about Middle East social science, and help define a critical research agenda that is grounded in rigorous empirical work and can also speak to wider theoretical concerns beyond the study of the Middle East. At a later date, we hope to expand this work in dialogue with scholars working on other regions.

Some of the potential questions could include:

- What are the features of the current regional power struggles in the Middle East – particularly in relation to states such as the GCC countries, Iran, Turkey, and Israel – and how do these intersect with the internal social, political, and economic dynamics of these states?
- How are the Middle East’s linkages with other countries and regions evolving in the contemporary period? This may include traditional relations with places such as the European Union and the United States, as well as less studied connections to neighbouring regions in Africa and Asia.
- How can we understand the role of sectors such as logistics, infrastructure, finance, telecommunications, energy (including renewable energy), and so forth, in shaping the Middle East’s regional accumulation patterns and its connections to other parts of the world market?
- How do the various forms of ‘crisis’ currently unfolding in the region – and the ways in which these crises are represented at a discursive and policy level – play into the

potential trajectories of the regional scale? This may include issues such as migration and displacement, conflict and violence, food systems, and the impact of ecological change.

- What do we mean by a ‘region’, and how do we situate the regional scale vis-à-vis other spatial scales such as the national, sub-national, and urban? Can such a lens help in overcoming the limits of nationalist, sectarian, or ethnocentric frameworks towards the Middle East?
- How can we think about the region in a serious manner whilst avoiding a kind of ‘methodological regionalism’ or the potential pitfalls of conventional Area Studies approaches?
- What is it about the contemporary moment that has seen the apparent rise of the region to a position of significance in global capitalism, e.g. Europe, East Asia, or South America?
- How can a study of the region inform our thinking around concepts such as imperialism and national liberation? Is there any utility to terms and concepts from earlier debates (such as Marini’s notion of ‘sub-imperialism’ or ideas of ‘internal colonialism’) in rethinking these new regional dynamics?
- How can a move beyond methodological nationalism, and a more attentive focus on the regional scale, challenge the ways we think about categories such as capital, labour, and state formation in the Middle East?