

Cross-Regional Approaches to Middle East Studies: Constructing and Deconstructing a Region

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The Middle East is deconstructing—that is, the concept of a coherent geographic entity with the label “Middle East.” A Thematic Conversation on this subject began at the 2005 MESA Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C., and will conclude at the 2007 meeting in Montréal. These discussions grow out of efforts in the 1990s to rethink area studies globally, spurred by programs at the Ford Foundation, the Mellon Foundation, and the Social Science Research Council, among others. A variety of scholars have taken up these issues with regard to the Middle East specifically over the past decade¹, including the Carolina Center for the Study of the Middle East and Muslim Civilizations at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which organized this Thematic Conversation.

As background to this discussion, it is worth recalling that the concept of a region called “the Middle East” is a relatively recent and unstable construction. This is not news to Middle East specialists.² The term was coined at the beginning of the 20th century by Alfred T. Mahan, the theorist of U.S. naval power, to refer to territories along the sea route from the Suez Canal to Singapore, that is, the path to the Far East (Figure 1).³

During World War II, the US Department of State adopted the term Middle East, by which it meant the territory from Iran to Burma; previously, this region was included in the Division of Near Eastern Affairs, which also covered Greece, Turkey, the Levant, and all of Africa except Algeria and South Africa (Figure 2).⁴

After World War II, the category “Middle East” started to take the form that we still use today. Although the margins are disputed—which parts of northwest Africa, the Horn of Africa, Asia Minor, the Caucasus, South Asia, or Central Asia to include, for example—the definition is generally similar to the one adopted by the Middle East Institute on its founding in 1947 (Figure 3).⁵ As Nikki Keddie observed more than 30 years ago, the inclusion of the Maghrib in the Middle East region raises the question: what “East” is Morocco in the middle of?

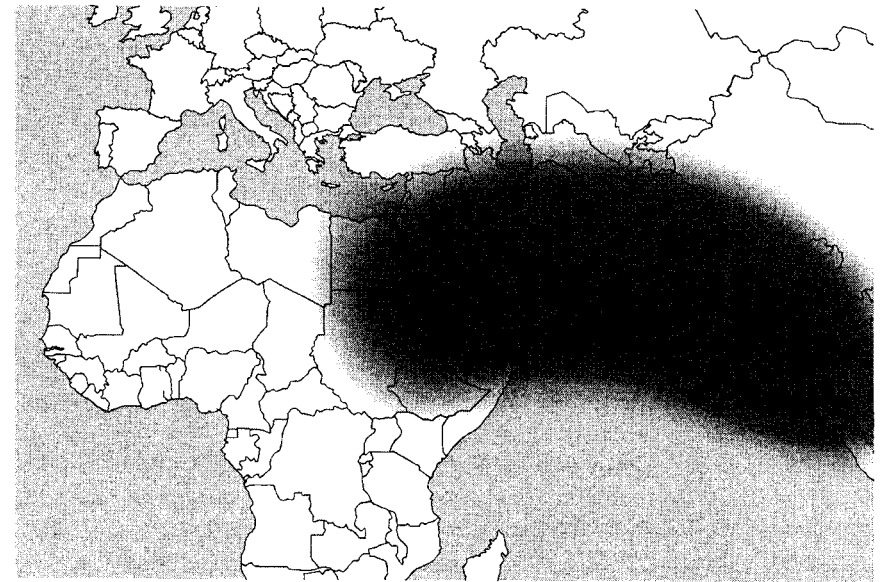


Figure 1: A.T. Mahan, “The Persian Gulf and International Relations,” *The National Review*, September, 1902, pp. 38-39.

While North American academics migrated toward the term “Middle East,” other partially overlapping geographic entities emerged as well. In 1973, the 29th International Congress of Orientalists, held in Paris on the 100th anniversary of the first such conference, voted to remove Orientalism from its name, replacing it with “Human Sciences in Asia and North Africa.” Since the 1970s, many international agencies have adopted the terms “Southwest Asia” or “West Asia,” sometimes in combination with “North Africa” or the “Arab states.” The US military established its Central Command (Centcom) in 1983, encompassing northeastern Africa, Egypt and the Arab-majority countries to its east, Iran, Pakistan, and a decade later, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Central Asia.

Regional borders are necessarily somewhat arbitrary, since cultural, economic, and population flows often permeate the boundaries in all directions. In the Middle East, for example, longstanding historical ties bridge North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, Turkey and the Balkans, Iran and Central Asia, and the entire Indian Ocean basin. At the same time, regional boundaries may be useful for the systematic organization of international studies, even if they throw uncomfortable bedfellows into the same area studies departments and associations. The categories may come to create their own reality if people come to adopt the ascribed identities. The term “Middle East” has been translated word for word in the region, though the term is used more widely in some languages than others: al-sharq al-awsat in Arabic, mizrah ha-tikhon in Hebrew, khavar-i miyanah in Persian, and orta doğu in Turkish.

In the late 20th century, however, a number of scholars concluded that the traditional area studies boundaries have become hindrances to international studies. It is becoming commonplace in academia to emphasize that peoples and civilizations are not discrete entities, geographically static and analytically separate from one another. Rather, they interact, borrow, ally, and clash both within

¹Mark Tessler, with Jodi Nachtway and Anne Banda, eds., *Area Studies and Social Science: Strategies for Understanding Middle East Politics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).

²Roderic H. Davison, “Where Is the Middle East?” *Foreign Affairs* 38 (1960): 665-75; Nikki R. Keddie, “Is There a Middle East?” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 4 (1973): 255-71.

³Alfred Thayer Mahan, “The Persian Gulf and International Relations,” *The National Review* 40 (September 1902): 27-45.

⁴United States Government Manual (Spring 1942), p. 149, and (Summer 1944), p. 191.

⁵*The Middle East Journal* 1 (1947), map facing page 1.

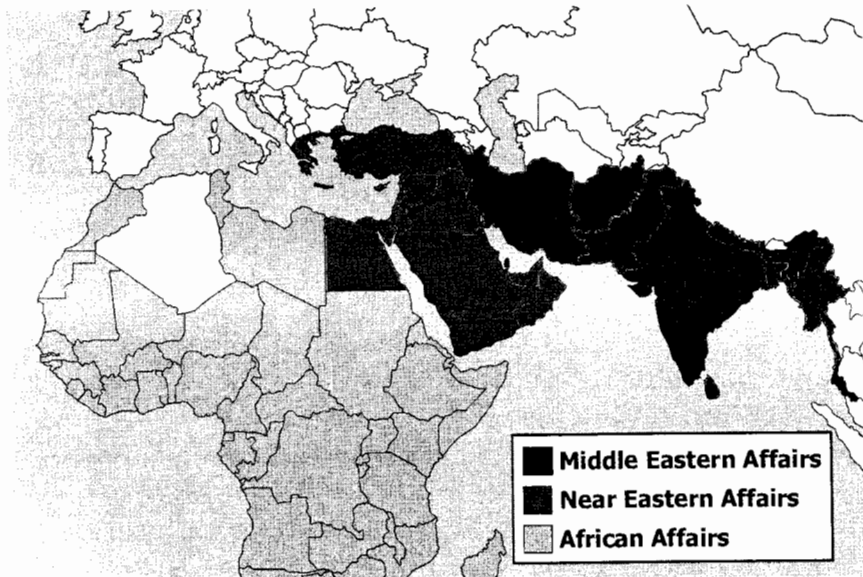


Figure 2: US Government Manual, Summer 1944, p. 191.

and across these supposed divides, redefining themselves in the process. Certain political and cultural movements may wish to mark and maintain regional boundaries, but to do so these movements must ignore or punish the large body of interactions that escape regional definitions.

Moreover, ideas, commodities, and people have flowed past supposed regional markers for so much of human history that no region can be studied in isolation. Contemporary flows follow this pattern as well. For example:

- Large portions of the Middle East economy are dependent on markets that are global in scale. This is true not just for oil and the subsidiary markets it has generated, such as migration and remittances to and from oil-producing areas, but also for other export industries, such as cotton and olives, as well as massive import markets, such as the thousands of television sets and millions of kilos of rice that are sold into the region each year.
- Words and concepts flow within and across linguistic regions. In addition to outright transfer of terms from one language to another, terms may change in response to cross-regional interaction. The Arabic-derived terms *ada*, *dawla*, *shura*, and *siyasa*, for example, have shifted their meaning in conversation with the Latin- and Greek-derived terms *tradition*, *state*, *consultation*, and *politics*.⁶
- Several societies of the Middle East are composed heavily of immigrants from outside of the region: large communities of laborers from South and Southeast Asia in the Gulf, for example, or Russian Jews in Israel, and return migrants from the Americas and Europe throughout the region. Migration of Hadhramautis to and from Yemen has marked Indian Ocean populations for centuries.⁷

⁶See, for example, the "Words in Motion" project organized by the Social Science Research Council, http://www.ssrc.org/programs/mena/words_in_motion.

⁷Engsing Ho, *The Graves of Tarin: Genealogy and Mobility Across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006).

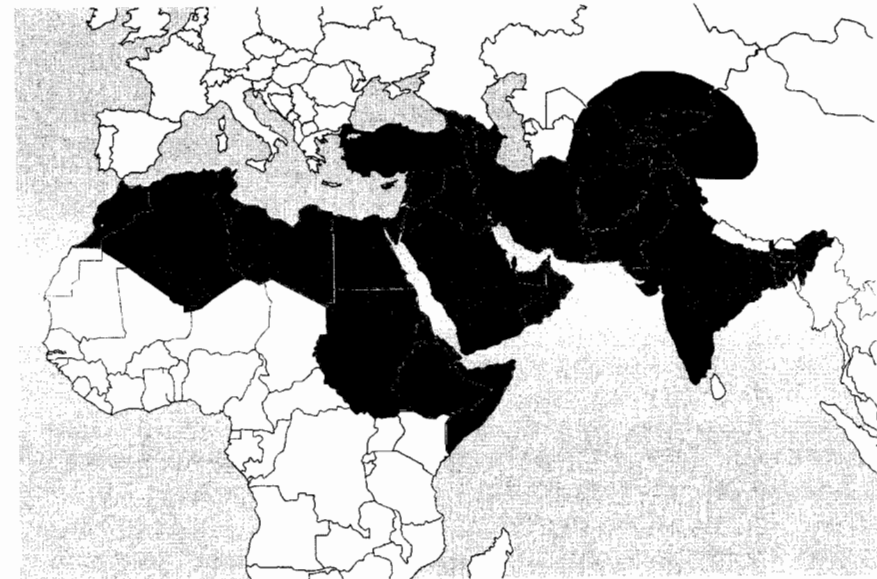


Figure 3: *The Middle East Journal* 1 (1947), map facing page 1.

• Religious movements reverberate between the Middle East and Muslim communities across the globe. One dramatic image of this phenomenon is ripped from the headlines: If al-Qa'ida terrorists move from Saudi Arabia or Yemen to Pakistan or Malaysia, must Middle East studies stop studying them? Less hyperbolically, but involving far larger numbers, the transregional character is crucial to some Sufi orders.⁸

• Educational centers such as al-Azhar in Cairo and Islamic colleges in Mecca and Medina attract students from around the world, drawing on Islamic traditions of traveling studies that date back more than a millennium. Indonesian nationalism, for example, emerged in large part in the dormitories of Cairo and Arabia.⁹

• Global communications are actively consumed via the Internet and satellite television in many parts of the Middle East. In Iran, for example, despite the government's periodic attempts to crack down on satellite dishes, contraband DVD's, and Internet usage, many young people are more familiar than U.S.-based academics are with the oeuvre of Jean-Claude Van Damme and other Hollywood immigrants.

Yet scholars who wish to address these cross-regional flows frequently face institutional challenges of various sorts, as reported by participants in the Thematic Conversation:

- Language skills. It's hard enough to learn one or more Middle Eastern languages; must we learn the languages of all the regions we study? And how should language instruction be organized, if not along regional lines?

⁸Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

⁹Michael Francis Laffan, *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The Umma Below the Winds* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

- Job definitions. Disciplines such as Anthropology, History, Political Science, and languages and literatures often create positions based on regional boundaries, creating "Middle East" job openings that may be a poor fit for specialists working across regions.
- Disciplinary priorities. Middle East-based cases may not be considered important to the discipline at large; or the only Middle East-based issues that are considered important have to do with oil or violence.
- Funding agencies, especially the regional definitions used by the US Department of Education's Title VI National Resource Center competition. The top universities in the US, which produce a significant portion of the country's area studies scholars, are encouraged to organize their programs along Title VI regional boundaries in order to improve their chances of institutional funding.
- Book publishing. Editors, encyclopedias, and librarians often develop their book lists along region-based lines, creating constituencies for work that fits these categories.
- Professional associations. The Middle East Studies Association and other area-studies associations are invaluable settings for expertise and training, but they necessarily limit scholarly interactions along regional boundaries.
- Flawed alternative geographic conceptualizations. The "Muslim world," for example, is as much an invention as the "Middle East," since it suggests that Muslims live apart from members of other faith traditions, and that Muslims are to be defined primarily by their faith.

Despite these institutional challenges, discussion in the Thematic Conversation noted several scholarly approaches to studying the "Middle East," or any place, for that matter, while recognizing its interconnectedness with other places:

- Studying flows and linkages across regional boundaries. Research that focuses on the movement of ideas, cultures, people, and goods in and out of the territory defined as "Middle East" follows the subject of study wherever it may lead.
- Studying our subjects' geographic visions, whether these may be regional, network-based, diasporic, or religious.
- Regional boundaries as a subject of study. The construction and maintenance of regional definitions are themselves worthy of research, especially the ways in which places and peoples come to be included and excluded.
- Redefining regions as cores without boundaries. In practice, the Middle East Studies Association is moving in this direction, embracing work that is tangential to the core areas of the Middle East while maintaining its primary focus on the lands and peoples that are central to the post-World War II definition of the region.
- Comparison of cases in different regions. The particularities of any single place can only be identified by contrast with other places. Collaboration teams of scholars may be necessary in order to explore such contrasts systematically.
- Exploring questions of interest to multiple regions. Rather than research subjects of interest exclusively or primarily to Middle East specialists, scholars may engage in disciplinary and interdisciplinary debates that are central to broader intellectual circles.

All of these approaches, it should be noted, are consistent with the Social Science Research Council's International Dissertation Research Fellowships program, which "promotes research that is at once located in a specific discipline and geographical region and engaged with interdisciplinary and cross-

regional perspectives."¹⁶ This invaluable program is a model for the encouragement of research that transcends regional ghettos.

In addition, the Thematic Conversation considered several paths for institutional change that would permit and promote cross-regional approaches:

- Abandoning MESA and other area studies associations in favor of linguistically based regions, such as the Arab Studies Association, the Association for the Study of Persianate Societies, the Turkish Studies Association, the Israeli Studies Association, etc.; or in favor of disciplinary or interdisciplinary associations based on the subject or method of study. This path is unlikely to be popular, since the area studies associations have a tradition and identity that even cross-regional specialists appreciate.
- Amending the mission statements of MESA and other area studies associations to define regions in terms of core territories rather than in terms of boundaries, and to encourage intellectual exploration of connections both within and beyond the core.
- Broadening spaces in professional associations for cross-regional conversations. This might involve joint meetings among area studies associations, panels at MESA meetings that include specialists from multiple regions, or coordinated panels at MESA and other area studies association meetings.
- Institutionalizing networks of scholars who are interested in cross-regional work, perhaps through ongoing seminars, research collaborations, and book series.
- Working within universities to create cross-regional curricular and research programs, or to facilitate students and faculty whose work involves multiple area studies fields.
- Proposing that private foundations, the US Department of Education, and other funding sources to develop cross-regional programs, or to open up existing area studies programs to cross-regional work, perhaps on the model of the SSRC's IDRF program.

It is likely that the current regional definitions, including the Middle East, will persist as central organizing categories for academic study in North America of the world outside of North America. However, it is also likely that these regional definitions will become increasingly mismatched with accelerating global flows and broadening intellectual horizons, unless we take steps to keep up.

¹⁶ Social Science Research Council, <http://www.ssrc.org/programs/idrf>.