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

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The Middle East is deconstructing—that is, it 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 Montreal. These discussions grew out of efforts in the 1990s to reframe area studies globally, spurred by grants from 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 decade, including the Carolina Center for the Study of the Middle East and Islam at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which organized this Thematic Conversation. As background to this discussion, it is noteworthy that the concept of a region called "the Middle East" is a relatively recent and unstable construction. It is not new to Middle East specialists. 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).

During World War II, the US Department of State adopted the term Middle East, by which a 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 Libya (Africa) (Figure 2). 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). As Niki Keddie observed more than 30 years ago, the inclusion of the Maghreb in the Middle East region raises the question: what "East" is Morocco in the middle of?

*Mark Tessler, with Judy Nakhleh and Amor Barca, eds., Area Studies and Social Science: Strategies for Understanding Middle East Politics (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).
*Rodica H Dunlop, "Where is the Middle East?" Foreign Affairs 33 (1956), 685-705; Niki K. Keddie, "Is There a Middle East?" International Journal of Middle East Studies 4 (1973) 255-73.
*The Middle East Journal 1 (1947), map facing page 1.

While North American academia migrated toward the term "Middle East," other partially overlapping geographic entities emerged as well. In 1973, the 2nd International Congress of Orientalists, held in Paris on the 100th anniversary of the firm such conferences, voted to remove Orientalia 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 necessary somewhat arbitrary, since cultural, economic, and population flows often permeate the boundaries in all directions. In the Middle East, for example, longstanding historical and religious bridges between 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 areas.

The categories may come to create their own reality if people come to adopt the inchoate identities. The term "Middle East" has been translated word for word into the region, though the term is used more widely in some languages than others: aslan al-arab in Arabic, iran hoton in Hebrew, khvar-i mirjan in Persian, and ordu douğu 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 and analytically separate from one another. Rather, the interest, borrow, ally, and clash both within
and across these supposed divides, deluding 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 adu, duwa, shura, and shura, for example, have shifted their meaning in conversation with the Latin- and Greek-derived terms tradition, state, consultation, and politics.2
- 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 Brahmanutrs to and from Yemen has marked Indian Ocean populations for centuries.2

2See, for example, the "Words in Motion" project organized by the Social Science Research Council, http://www.ssrc.org/programs/motion/words_in_motion

Tapping Into The Genealogy of Gender, Class, and Mobility Across the Indian Ocean (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000).

- 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-Qaeda terrorists move from Saudi Arabia or Yemen to Pakistan or Malaysia, must Middle East studies snap studying them? Less hyperbolically, but involving far larger numbers, the transregional character is crucial to some "soft orders."3
- Educational centers such as al-Azhar in Cairo and Islamic colleges in Mecca and Medba 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.4
- 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 crackdown on satellite dishes, concealed DVDs, and Internet usage, many young people are more familiar with US-based academics and other Hollywood immigrants.

3Yet 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?

4Curt W. Evers and Bruce B. Lawrence, Soft Martyrs of Love: The Osbourn Order in South Asia and Beyond (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

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 Pensylvania, the Turkish Studies Association, the Israeli Studies Association, etc., 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 are 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 connections. 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.

- Institutionizing networks of scholars who are interested in cross-regional work, perhaps through ongoing seminars, research collaborations, and book series.

- Seeking 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 SERC's IDEB program.

It is likely that the current regional definitions, including the Middle East, will persist as core 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.