

ROUNDTABLE
SOVIET–ARAB LINKAGES AND MIDDLE EAST STUDIES

Soviet– and Russian–Arab Linkages: A Dimension of Global Middle East Studies

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The roots of the Arab world’s current Russian entanglements reach deep into the tsarist and Soviet periods. However, this shared history has fallen through the cracks of academic structures that approach the two regions separately. This roundtable, part of a growing scholarly effort to heal the area studies divide, expands and reflects on the recently published book *Russian-Arab Worlds: A Documentary History*, which we co-edited with historian Eileen Kane.¹

Our research on Arab–Russian and Arab–Soviet ties joins other new research working to expand the scope of transregional and transdisciplinary research about the Middle East. Earlier scholarship has worked mainly to highlight the vexed history of imperialism and American involvement and to critique (while often replicating) the structures of Orientalism, modernization theory, and Westernization. However, the past fifteen years have seen exciting new work on unexpected intellectual and political vectors tying the Middle East to South Asia, Africa, and Latin America. These studies include political, intellectual, and social exchanges along the “South-South” axis that are not limited by an implicit postcolonial framework.²

Meanwhile, other cross-regional studies of “inter-Asian” linkages in the Middle East and parts of Asia have uncovered solidarities that make it easier to appreciate the distorting “campist cartographies” of the Cold War, illuminating the areas that the Bandung order had shaded out.³ Especially productive for undermining historical assumptions about both

¹ Eileen Kane, Masha Kirasirova, and Margaret Litvin, eds., *Russian-Arab Worlds: A Documentary History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023).

² Mostafa Minawi, *The Ottoman Scramble for Africa: Empire and Diplomacy in the Sahara and the Hijaz* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016); Roy Bar Sadeh, “Debating Gandhi in al-Manar during the 1920s and 1930s,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 38, no. 3 (2018): 491–507; Esmat Elhalaby, “Empire and Arab Indology,” *Modern Intellectual History* 19, no. 4 (2022): 1081–1105; John M. Willis, “Burying Mohamed Ali Jauhar: The Life and Death of the Meccan Republic,” *Arabian Humanities* 17 (2023), <https://journals.openedition.org/arabianhumanities/9806#text>; Laure Guirguis and Maru Pabón, eds., *Art and Politics between the Arab World and Latin America in the Twentieth Century* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

³ The term “campist cartographies” was used by Mohammed Alsudairi and critiqued in Alsudairi, “Forging an Anti-Bandung: Saudi Arabia and East Asia’s Cold War,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 43, no. 3 (2023): 412–26. Similar critiques drawing on the inter-Asian frameworks include Enseng Ho, “Inter-Asian Concepts for Mobile Societies,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 76, no. 4 (2017): 907–28; Lorenz Luthi, *Cold Wars: Asia, the Middle East, Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020); and Rosie Bsheer and Mohammed Alsudairi,



Soviet and Middle Eastern exceptionalism have been parallels with other Asian regimes, especially the USSR's long-lasting and powerful competitor, China.⁴ By looking together at all three sides of an imagined triangle with vertices in the Middle East, Russia/Eurasia, and East Asia, global historians can now think more comparatively about intellectual, social, and environmental history as well as about communism, empire, and the intellectual legacies of the Cold War. Such comparisons encourage problem-oriented research on topics such as the environment or legacies of communist and socialist development, and also facilitate more analytically rigorous scholarship about connections and exchanges across these regions. Our exploration of Arab–Russian/Soviet ties contributes to this broader collective effort to globalize the study of the Middle East, which also helps fully recognize the agency and interlocutors available to Middle Easterners.⁵ The Arabic sources we highlight will help push scholars of global leftist culture, for instance, to include Arab voices as part of the “polycentric cosmopolitanism” they study.⁶

Our 2023 anthology aimed to map the new and now thriving subfield of Russian–Arab studies. The book presents annotated primary sources translated from Russian, Arabic, Armenian, Persian, French, and Tatar. The sources show how various Russian/Soviet and Arab governments sought to nurture political and cultural ties and expand their influence, often with unplanned results. They illuminate transnational networks of trade, pilgrimage, study, ethnic identity, and religious affinity that state policies sometimes fostered and sometimes disrupted. Above all they give voice to some of the resourceful characters who have sustained, embodied, and exploited Arab–Russian contacts: missionaries and diplomats, soldiers and refugees, students and party activists, scholars and spies.

The anthology began to build an infrastructure for studying Arab–Russian and Arab–Soviet ties, forging personal contacts between scholars traditionally siloed in separate disciplines and area studies fields, and connecting visual artists with traditional academic scholars. It worked to unsettle the monolithic image of “Arab” societies on one side and “Russian” or “Soviet” on the other, reckoning with the internal diversity of each and the global context of both. It brought new sources, a focus on borderlands and in-between individuals, and a commitment to multiperspectival research often carried out by multilingual pairs of scholars. It showed how religious ties are systematically cultivated, not natural, and it mapped the reach of Russia's Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society (both its one-hundred-plus schools in the Levant and its extensive set of branches inside the Russian Empire) for the first time. It examined not only bilateral exchanges between Arab and Soviet states, but also the history of Russia and the Soviet Union as multinational empires in their respective global contexts.

“Introduction: Inter-Asian Cold War Linkages: The Middle East in the World,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 43, no. 3 (2023): 337–42. Inter-Asian scholarship that incorporates the Middle East but focuses on earlier (pre–Cold War) periods includes Eric Tagliacozzo, *Southeast Asia and the Middle East: Islam, Movement and the Longue Duree* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2009); and Hyunhee Park, *Mapping the Chinese and Islamic Worlds* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁴ Gangzheng She, “The Cold War and Chinese Policy toward the Arab–Israeli Conflict, 1963–1975,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 22, no. 1 (2020): 125–74; Elizabeth Holt, “Resistance Literature and Occupied Palestine in Cold War Beirut,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 50, no. 1 (2020): 3–18; Ying Huang and Yanling Yang, “The Role of Sino–Arab Film Collaboration on Cultural Diplomacy during the ‘Seventeen Years,’” *Transnational Screens* 15, no. 2 (2024): 137–56; Mohammed Alsudairi, “Arab encounters with Maoist China: Transnational Journeys, Diasporic Lives and Intellectual Discourses,” *Third World Quarterly*, 42, no. 3 (2020): 503–24.

⁵ For examples of a consciously “global” approach to Middle Eastern studies, see James Gelvin and Nile Green, *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014); and Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

⁶ This gap is evident in otherwise excellent projects such as Amelia M. Glaser and Steven S. Lee, eds., *Comintern Aesthetics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020).

Continuing the anthology's work, this roundtable examines transregional networks across space, transimperial continuities across time, and intrepid border-crossing individuals. However, this roundtable also reaches beyond the anthology. Contributors ask how the experiences of particular in-between people and groups interacted with fertile and contested larger concepts such as hijra and minority. They explore how Arab–Soviet connections shaped politics in distant North Africa rather than just the Middle Eastern regions where Russia or the USSR possessed borderland contacts or convenient coreligionists. They move beyond the 20th century to ask how Russian Orientalism and gendered Arab Russophilia still linger, reappearing (respectively) as a key subtext of contemporary Russian propaganda about the war in Syria and an object of parody in 21st-century Arabic literature. They introduce digital humanities methods to analyze social media messaging. And they open up questions about transdisciplinary research, asking, for instance, what happens when we juxtapose the environmental history of megadevelopment projects, the economic history of Soviet foreign aid, and the cultural history of Arab film censorship.

Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky examines the phenomenon of hijra, or Muslim refugee migration, from the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union to the Middle East. His contribution offers a transnational approach to the study of forced migrations that redrew demographics and created new diasporas in the Ottoman Empire, Iran, and Afghanistan. Muslim displacements from Crimea and the Caucasus in the 18th and 19th centuries and from Central Asia in the 1920s and 1930s had similar origins. They stemmed from tsarist or Soviet conquest, ethnic cleansing, and social and economic reforms transforming those regions. Hamed-Troyansky suggests that the study of those migrations can do powerful work for Middle Eastern studies: they foreground refugees' stories and role in connecting the Middle East with Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia; illuminate distinct geographic units of analysis such as the Russo-Ottoman Muslim world, the Black Sea world, and the Black-Caspian-Aral Sea world; and open up new avenues for oral, public, and environmental histories.

Roy Bar Sadeh explores Moscow's ethno-territorial concept of sovereignty and the alternative it posed to the post-Versailles international order. His essay opens in 1926, when an official delegation of prominent Soviet Muslim scholars visited Mecca for an international Muslim congress convened by the newly crowned Ibn Sa'ud. The delegation, representing the avowedly atheist Soviet Union, declared that Ibn Sa'ud had "purified the [Islamic] holy lands" from the rule of his predecessors, the Hashemite dynasty. Exploring the reasons for this, Bar Sadeh finds that the Soviets were not only practicing realpolitik but also applying the Soviet notion that "minority rights" were unreliable: a polity needed a majority population defined by a common ethnicity and language, and diversity was to be addressed by pigeonholing populations into ever smaller autonomous areas. Whereas previous scholars have not asked how Soviet-born concepts helped shape state formation in the post-World War I Middle East, Bar Sadeh's essay offers a non-European, non-Wilsonian genealogy for the now-ubiquitous concept of "minority."

Masha Kirasirova uses Soviet films about the Aswan High Dam to connect the material and visual histories of this iconic Soviet-Egyptian modernization project. Gamal Abdel Nasser's framing of the Arab-Soviet relationship as "a friendship between two great revolutions" invited a broad package of material, scientific/technical, and cultural agreements. This essay approaches these multilayered exchanges through the life and work of Soviet documentary filmmaker Mark Troyanovsky, who was initially charged in 1956 with negotiating and coproducing the first Egyptian-Soviet documentary film and later made a series of other films about Egypt, including about Khrushchev's 1964 state visit for the ceremonial inauguration of the High Dam. Analyzing these images and the material contexts of their coproduction requires connecting separate subfields of political, economic, environmental, and cultural histories of Egypt; histories of Soviet economic development; and

global Cold War history. This analysis invites new questions about the legacies of Soviet domestic development and empire-building in both Soviet international development and postwar Middle Eastern state-building. Such questions help us write a more comprehensive global history of the Anthropocene that accounts for noncapitalist forms of development as well as capitalist ones.

Constantin Katsakioris helps remedy one of the limitations of the *Russian-Arab Worlds* sourcebook, namely its restriction to Egypt and the Mashriq. Katsakioris focuses on Algeria, exploring the significance of its relationship with the USSR into the 1960s and 1970s. Seen in this light, Algeria belongs to “postsocialist” as well as “postcolonial” space. Looking to the Maghreb, Katsakioris argues, allows us to see that the Soviet economic model remained influential for longer than in other Arab countries, including Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, especially in terms of investments in the steel industry as a foundational sector of the industrial economy. Consequently, Algeria’s socialist history pushes historians to further broaden and recalibrate our approaches to state socialism and its collapse.

Margaret Litvin lays out some patterns in the way 21st-century Arab writers portray Russia and the USSR in their novels. Revisiting the transnational entanglements occluded by the Cold War’s end, these novels (including many by female writers) use Russian or Soviet material to do four main things: mock the 20th century’s “friendship of nations” ideology by showing the gritty shared spaces of international student dormitories; satirize the “Russian girlfriend fantasy” that underpins much Arab romanticization of the USSR; humanize Islamists and even militant jihadists by pitting them against an unlikeable Russian or Soviet regime rather than a liberal state; and speak beauty to power, including Russia’s devastating military power in Syria’s civil war. Attention to these Russian or Soviet settings and themes broadens the picture of modern Arabic literature, helping future students to see it in its proper, complicated place in world literature.

Elise Daniaud Oudeh analyzes thousands of social media posts by Russian war reporters embedded in Aleppo during Russia’s fierce pro-Asad military campaign of 2015. These embedded journalists (*voennii korrespondenty*, or *voenkor*) blur the lines between their reporting for *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, REN TV, VGTRK, Russia-24, and Abkhazian outlet ANNA News on one hand, and their “personal” social media feeds on the other. Tracking nine war reporters between 2015 and 2020, Daniaud Oudeh finds that they experiment with many tools to create bonds and trigger feelings in their followers. Images of violent destruction alternate with beautiful views of Syria; the latter draw on a long history of Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet involvement in the region to activate audiences’ emotional ties to the Syrian landscape, Orientalist lore, and related gender tropes. This essay uses visual analysis, which several chapters in the *Russian-Arab Worlds* anthology do as well, and also harnesses digital humanities methods to explore the efficacy of Russian mythmaking about the Middle East.

Together, these six brief essays demonstrate how parallel phenomena that are usually studied separately light up with new insights when studied together. Of course, there is much left to do. In pursuing transregional studies of the Middle East, we also are working to include places and people marginalized within Middle Eastern studies.⁷ Among these are the Arabian Peninsula (highlighted in the anthology with chapters on Saudi Arabia and Kuwait) and North Africa, discussed in this roundtable. Because the Soviet Union’s cultural and political activities were not limited to socialist-leaning countries, future work should explore the histories and legacies of Marxist and leftist movements in Yemen, Oman, Saudi

⁷ We pursue this work in Masha Kirasirova, *The Eastern International: Arabs, Central Asians, and Jews in the Soviet Union’s Anticolonial Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024); Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, *Empire of Refugees: North Caucasian Muslims and the Late Ottoman State* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024); Roy Bar Sadah, *Muslims and the Minority Question: A Global History, 1856–1947* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming); and Margaret Litvin, *Red Mecca: The Life and Afterlives of the Arab-Soviet Romance* (in progress).

Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain; Tunisia and Morocco; as well as in the better-known cases of Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Iraq.⁸

We hope that scholars interested in the Middle East's Eurasian and other linkages will be inspired to join us in forming multilingual teams of researchers with complementary regional expertise and backgrounds in history, social sciences, humanities, and the arts. Such diverse and flexible collaborations will help advance the field toward a truly global vision of Middle East studies. Today's violently entangled regional landscape makes this task more plainly urgent than ever.

⁸ Research that shows the way includes Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965–1976* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013); Toby Matthisen, "Saudi Arabia and the Cold War," in *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia*, ed. Madawi al Rasheed (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), 217–33; Rosie Bsheer, "A Counter-Revolutionary State: Popular Movements and the Making of Saudi Arabia," *Past and Present* 238, no. 1 (2019): 233–77; Laure Guirguis, ed., *The Arab Lefts: Histories and Legacies, 1950s–1970s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020); and Alice Wilson, *Afterlives of Revolution: Everyday Counterhistories in Southern Oman* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023).

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