

# Strategies for Reviving the International Relations/Middle East Nexus after the Arab Uprisings

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Whereas the Arab uprisings first and foremost impacted the Arab world, they also left their mark on scholarship about Middle East politics in various ways. Since 2011, this has been reflected most obviously in how scholars have discussed the causes and nature of the Arab uprisings and their consequences for a “new Middle East.” Given that most scholars were taken by surprise in 2011 and many also agree that, at least to some extent, it is meaningful to speak about a “new Middle East,” the Arab uprisings also have given rise to a more inward-looking debate among scholars on their analytical implications for the study of Middle East politics as such. In other words, to grasp Middle East politics today, is it necessary to fundamentally rethink our approaches and assumptions and, if so, how is this supposed to take place?

This type of self-reflection has been visible within the field of Middle East comparative politics, which has witnessed considerable soul-searching and, at times, rather fierce debate about whether existing approaches have been undermined (Schwedler 2015; Valbjørn 2015). At the same time, this self-reflection also has given rise to new and innovative studies. These studies are based on a fertile dialogue between regional specialists and generalists and have enriched our understanding of not only the Middle East but also more general issues in comparative politics.

In view of the multiple changes of alliances in recent years, the outbreak of new types of violent conflicts, the emergence of novel forms of regional rivalry, and the rise of new actors, we would expect to find a similar pattern in the study of international relations of the Middle East. However, this subfield in the study of Middle East politics has not witnessed any significant degree of soul-searching and, compared to the comparative politics of this region, far less literature has been produced on how the Arab uprisings impacted international relations in a “new Middle East.” Furthermore, much of what has been produced has been of a different nature because it has involved far less engagement with the general field of IR theory (IR). Thus, only a few analyses explicitly ask how one or another IR theory can be useful in explaining a certain current phenomenon and/or how insights from the “new Middle East” also may provide important lessons for more general issues concerning international relations (theory). Instead, much analysis—some of which has been illuminating and

excellent—has been either quite descriptive, drawn on theoretically assumptions from IR only implicitly, or analyzed current dynamics through historical analogies, which is reflected in the debate about the extent to which it makes sense speaking of a “Struggle for Syria Redux” or a “New Arab Cold War” (Khoury 2013; Mohns and Bank 2012; Phillips 2016; Ryan 2012).

It may be tempting to attribute this limited degree of dialogue between the general field of IR and regional specialists to an insurmountable difference between these two fields of study as suggested in the “Area Studies Controversy” (Tessler et al. 1999; see also Valbjørn 2004; Bilgin in this issue). The recent experiences in the field of comparative politics and developments in the study of Middle East international relations in the decade leading up to the Arab uprisings, however, suggest otherwise. At that time, there were not only a growing number of calls for moving beyond the Area Studies Controversy in favor of more cross-fertilization between IR and Middle East studies (Korany 1999; Teti 2007; Valbjørn 2004). This era also produced numerous examples of innovative and sophisticated studies that combined state-of-the-art IR theories with deep knowledge about regional affairs, illustrating why and how the IR/Middle East Studies nexus can potentially improve our grasp of Middle East international relations while also helping us to think more creatively about international relations in general.

## THREE STRATEGIES FOR REVIVING THE IR/MIDDLE EAST STUDIES NEXUS AFTER THE ARAB UPRISINGS

Therefore, instead of asking whether it is possible to imagine a fertile dialogue between IR and Middle East Studies about changes and continuities in international relations of a “new Middle East,” it seems more relevant to ask how such cross-fertilization can be revived and to explore how the choice of strategy may lead this engagement in different directions. Thus, it is possible to imagine at least three strategies for this endeavor working at different levels of abstraction and addressing different types of questions.

### Using IR Theories to Solve Empirical Puzzles in a “New Middle East”

The first strategy takes its point of departure at the empirical level because the immediate purpose of entering the IR/Middle East Studies nexus is to address and solve specific

empirical puzzles in current Middle East international relations. The field of IR theory in this way provides analytical tools, which are designed to enable us to understand and explain a specific empirical phenomenon. Through this, we can contribute not only to a better understanding of the crucial dynamics of regional politics in a “new Middle East” but also to a kind of “de-exceptionalization” of what initially may appear uniquely Middle Eastern.

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Gause’s contribution to this symposium can be perceived as an example of this first strategy. His analysis begins with the observation that Iran “is the undoubted winner in the past decade of Middle East upheaval” (Gause in this issue). Against this background, he asks why we have not seen effective blocking or balancing by other regional powers against Iran. Whereas neither sectarianism nor pure balance-of-power logic can account for this example of underbalancing, Gause argues that the current alignment patterns appear far less puzzling if we consider Haas’s theory of “ideological polarity,” which originally was developed based on insights from European great powers after the Napoleonic Wars and in the inter-war years. Whereas Gause shows how it can be useful to apply a specific IR theory to an empirical puzzle in the “new Middle East,” Hinnebusch (2015) provided another example of this strategy. Based on the view that the problem with IR theories is not that they do not apply to this region but rather that they capture only one aspect of Middle East international relations to the neglect of others, Hinnebusch argued that only a “multivariate synthetic approach” can adequately guide analysis of the region’s complexity. In his nuanced analysis of international relations of the “new Middle East,” therefore, he drew on a range of general IR theories, including neo-classic realism, constructivism, English school theory, historical sociology, and neo-Gramscian international political economy (IPE). In his study, Lynch (2016) similarly combined constructivist emphasis on ideas, a realist focus on states and proxy wars, a fair amount of network theory, civil wars and insurgency theory, and several domestic–international linkages.

### **The Middle East as a Testing Ground and Theory Generator**

Although the first strategy may be the most prevalent among those that have drawn explicitly on IR theories in the debate about Middle East international relations after the Arab uprisings, it is not the only way to promote stronger cross-fertilization. A second strategy, which operates at a first-order theoretical level, considers how insights into and studies of the “new Middle East” can contribute to the academic field of IR and enrich our general understanding of international relations. This type of engagement assumes a number of forms.

One variant is to use the Middle East as a “most/least-likely” case to test allegedly universal IR theories. As Halliday (2005, 22) noted, we should ask of any theory what it contributes to the study of Middle East international relations. If it cannot explain this region, then it cannot be considered an IR theory of general scope. Thus, the “new Middle East” provides a number of cases and new material with which to explore classic IR controversies and to test the alleged

universality of theories developed on the basis of experiences from elsewhere, as follows:

- (1) The change of heads of state in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Yemen, Egypt (twice), and Tunisia may contribute to the classic “first-image” debate about whether, when, and under which circumstances individuals matter in foreign policy making (Byman and Pollack 2001).
- (2) The important role played by tiny Qatar in regional politics reopens the classic debate about whether a general IR theory should focus only on great powers (Waltz 1979).
- (3) Moreover, the Qatari example provides material for the general discussion about the importance as well as the limits of nonmilitary sources of power to which Iran also would be of interest. Whereas its “hard” power may not have changed significantly because of the Arab uprisings, its “soft” power derived from its popularity among Arab populations in the mid-2000s largely appears to have been lost. Does this matter? What does it reveal about the relative importance of various forms of power (Barnett and Duvall 2005; see also Stein in this issue)?
- (4) The regional surge of Shia and Sunni sectarianism provides material for the general discussion about whether and how ideas—and ideology (see Stein in this issue)—matter in international relations (Tannenwald 2005) and the related debates on primordialism, instrumentalism, and constructivism (Hasenclever and Rittberger 2000; see also Gause and Salloukh in this issue) as well as on whether religious identities differ from other forms of identity politics (Sheikh 2012).
- (5) Similarly, the obvious but complex interplay between domestic and regional/international politics during the Arab uprisings should be of interest to the classic debates in IR on “inter-mestic” affairs, “second image reversed,” and the international dimension of domestic revolutions (Gourevitch 1978; Rosenau 1969; Walt 1996; see also Bush and Salloukh in this issue and Lynch 2016).
- (6) The current realignments among regional states provide new material to classic alliance discussions about balance of power/threat, bandwagoning, omnibalancing, material/ideational balancing, and underbalancing (Snyder 1997; see also Gause in this issue).

- (7) The multiple examples of (un)successful attempts of securitization (e.g., Bahrain, Syria, and Egypt) and the plurality of notions of (in)security among various global, regional, and local (non)state actors also provide new insights into the debate in critical security studies about conceptualization and construction of (in)security (Buzan et al. 1998; see also Bilgin and Hazbun in this issue).

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develop new IR theories of general scope. Generally speaking, the Middle East has usually simply been a testing ground for allegedly universal theories (and, if they did not fit, it has been the Middle East rather than the theory that somehow has been considered wrong). Alternatively, the scope for new theoretical approaches based on experiences from the Middle East has been limited to this particular region instead of claiming to be general theories about a certain international phenomenon as such. However, if Europe can be 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 a similar manner? For instance, could insights about the regional influence of tiny Qatar be used as a point of departure for a new general theory about “subtle power” (Kamrava 2013)? Does the idea of “hedging,” currently being discussed in relation to the small Gulf states (Guzansky 2015), also deserve attention from non-Middle East aficionados? If we are witnessing a “global resurgence of religion” with a “return of religion from exile” in IR (Petito and Hatzopoulos 2003), then the Middle East also may be an obvious place to develop new approaches to religion—rather than narrowly Islam—in international relations. As suggested by Hazbun in this issue, the Middle East likewise may be a useful place to develop a new general theoretical approach toward understanding the heterogeneous nature of security environments composed of diverse state and non-state actors that are embedded in transnational security relationships.

#### **Meta-reflections on the Study of the New Middle East “Out There” and “In Here”**

A third strategy operates at a second-order meta-theoretical level. Its point of departure is in the observation of how a debate about the study of international relations in a “new Middle East” also involves broader questions of a more philosophical and sociology-of-knowledge nature, which should be addressed as part of a cross-fertilization between IR and Middle East Studies.

One of these concerns is the classic universalism/particularism problem. As explained by Halliday (1995), this

refers to the question of whether it is possible, and desirable, to analyze and evaluate different parts of the world on the basis of similar criteria. Conversely, should we accept that they are marked by different and distinct logics precluding any universalist “narratives,” perhaps necessitating a spatial and temporal differentiation of a plurality of concepts and logics? Halliday’s own “take” for getting beyond the pitfalls of both universalism and particularism—as well as the type of parochial universalism referred to by Bilgin in this issue—was to make a distinction between the “analytical” (i.e., epistemological) and “historical” (i.e., ontological) dimensions

of the two and then combine “analytical universalism” with “historical particularism.” Whereas many—including some contributors to this symposium—may subscribe to Halliday’s strategy, it also has been clear that transforming this ambitious approach into practice can be demanding. Therefore, more reflection is needed about whether and how a stronger engagement between the universalistic IR and the more particularistic Middle East studies can promote a study of international relations of a “new Middle East,” which is neither blind to nor blinded by regional particularities.

This discussion is related to another general question concerning interdisciplinarity. Dialogues between different fields of study can occur in various ways and be based on different ideas about their purpose. By examining how the engagement between IR and area studies such as Middle East studies previously occurred, it is possible to identify different types of dialogue (see also Valbjørn, forthcoming). The exchange often assumed the form of a *hierarchical* dialogue in which Middle East specialists are perceived as little more than junior partners providing local empirical data to a theoretical 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. Furthermore, the aim of the exchange also has been to achieve a *transformative* dialogue in the sense of promoting a radical transformation of the existing meta-boundaries in academia by establishing new fields of study based on completely different ways of organizing knowledge. Against this background, it is important not only to call for increased cross-fertilization between IR and Middle East studies but also to consider the terms and purpose of a dialogue about the international relations of a “new Middle East.”

In addition to asking about how a dialogue should occur, it is relevant to specify between whom this is supposed to take place. In view of the complex interplay between regional and domestic scenes in Middle East politics (see Bush, Salloukh, Snider, and Stein in this issue), this consideration,

for instance, could begin by revisiting Katzenstein's reflections two decades ago about the need for a new type of area studies that bridge the world of comparative politics and IR and breaks the sharp distinctions between rationalism and culturalism (Kohli et al. 1996). However, we also could begin

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this reflection about likely dialogue partners by revisiting the discussion about "Global IR" and the sociology of a not-so-international discipline (Acharya 2014; Tickner and Wæver 2009; Wæver 1998). A rich literature exists on identities "out there" in the Middle East. However, so far, only little has been addressed about the role of identities "in here" in the sense of whether scholarly identities—of not only a disciplinary but also of a cultural–institutional and geographical nature—matter for how we are approaching, theorizing, discussing, and evaluating Middle East international relations. Hence, it may be time to ask whether Wæver's (1998, 723) remark that "IR is quite different in different places" also applies to the study of the "new Middle East" and, following Hazbun (in this issue), to consider the wider implications of Cox's (1986) famous statement about how "theory is always for someone and for some purpose. There is...no such thing as theory in itself divorced from a standpoint in time and space." As highlighted by both Hazbun and Bilgin in this issue, this would involve, for instance, inquiries into conceptions of the international and (in)security among various actors in the Middle East as well as attention to how places such as Beirut have become a "hub for innovative field research, scholarly knowledge production, and institutional development about issues of security in Lebanon and the wider Arab world." As indicated in Snider's discussion in this issue of American versus British IPE, it is also important to pay attention to the various approaches to the Middle East outside of the region. In addition to bringing greater awareness to the different types of parochialism mentioned by Bilgin in this issue, stronger attention to how Middle East international relations are studied in different places may contribute with new answers to well-known questions and give rise to a completely new type of questions about the "new Middle East." In this way, it may enrich our understanding of Middle East international relations "out there" and the working of IR and Middle East studies "in here."

So far, the Arab uprisings may have led to less cross-fertilization between regional specialists and generalists on Middle East international relations compared to the field of comparative politics, in which this dialogue has given rise to numerous innovative studies. However, there is no reason to believe that this should not be feasible. As shown in this article, it is even possible to imagine a number of strategies working at different levels of abstraction through which such a revival

of the IR/Middle East studies nexus can occur. Because the three outlined strategies are considered as ideal types—as illustrated in other contributions to this symposium—it may be possible to combine them. At the same time, it is important to be aware of how they are preoccupied by

different types of questions and therefore also may lead the future study of (Middle East) international relations in different directions. ■

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