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## NEW REGIONALISMS

SPACE, SCALE, AND REGION: THINKING THROUGH  
THE NEW DYNAMICS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

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**SPACE, SCALE, AND REGION:  
THINKING THROUGH THE NEW  
DYNAMICS OF THE MIDDLE EAST**

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*Adam Hanieh*

# ABSTRACT

This working paper explores how we might think through the shifting, contradictory, and plural features of the Middle East as a 'region'. Engaging with a set of long-standing critiques of Area Studies, the paper will ask how recent debates in geography and critical political economy might inform new ways of thinking about the regional dynamics in the Middle East. As part of this, the paper highlights some of the key methodological issues involved in studying the region, including: (1) a focus on the various cross-border flows that serve to both upset state-centric approaches to the region, while also destabilising the particular conceptual categories through which we often think of social processes in the Middle East; (2) closer attention to borders, borderlands and transboundary processes in the Middle East, all of which contribute in powerful (yet often unexpected and unrecognized) ways to the making of the national and regional scales; and (3) a recognition that regional processes in the Middle East need to be considered as mutually-constitutive of a global totality, and that this necessitates a closer analysis of the various relations that exist between the wider world market and the regional scale. Taken as a whole, these perspectives not only open up a range of productive questions around the dynamics of the Middle East itself, but also signal some interesting ways that the study of the Middle East might contribute to broader social science debates.

## I Introduction

Recent years have seen unprecedented changes to the political, social and economic dynamics of the Middle East. Devastating conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and elsewhere 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. These regional struggles mediate and overlap with the on-going intervention of major 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 neighboring 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 that have been further intensified by the on-going Covid-19 pandemic.

Yet despite these deep changes throughout the region, much academic work on the Middle East, as elsewhere, continues to be trapped within frameworks that reify existing power arrangements and do not satisfactorily clarify the significant transformations unfolding across different scales. This includes a persistent methodological nationalism, which takes the nation-state as the basic analytical unit and downplays the significance of “cross-border [and] border-subverting” flows and connections (Van der Linden 2008, p.7). Such cross-border flows are immensely important to the making 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 beyond simply an additive function of discrete nation-states.

At the same time, we need much more sophisticated accounts of how regions such as the Middle East are constructed, transform, interpolate and intersect. Regions are often projected as political projects or imaginative geographies, and thus carry concrete implications for history and politics; but they are also cultural constructs that co-exist with counter-regional and alter-regional adversaries. There is an ever-present plurality that exists within regions, expressed through intra-regional differentiation and struggles based on race, gender, sexuality, and national identities that counteract any presumed homogeneity or shared interests within the regional space. Furthermore, any given region develops within – and is thus partially constitutive of – the hierarchies of a wider world market. For all these reasons, the term ‘Middle East’ itself needs to be understood as a contingent, contested (and indeed, colonial) category – not a fixed or static geo-cultural, geo-linguistic, or geo-political reality.

Given these contemporary trends, this paper explores how we might think through the shifting, contradictory, and plural features of the Middle East in ways that move beyond the constraints of competing nationalisms, geographical silos, and disciplinary boundaries. To this end, my main objective is methodological – an attempt to outline some of the key analytical perspectives that might productively frame a better understanding of the new regional dynamics of the Middle East. With this aim in mind, the paper begins by engaging with a set of long-standing critiques of ‘area studies’ – a scholarly endeavor that is most traditionally associated with the in-depth study and knowledge of particular world ‘regions’ or ‘areas’. Building on these critiques, I then turn to a (mostly) parallel set of debates in geography and critical political economy. These debates have

emphasized the importance of conceptualizing spatial categories (such as the region) as both a product and form of appearance of social processes, thereby capturing the fluid, ambiguous, and contested nature of how we perceive space. Simultaneously, this literature helps to focus our analytical attention on the various forms of social power and social hierarchy that underpin the making of space and scale (a term I discuss in some detail below). I suggest that there is much that can be learnt from these debates in how we might frame the Middle East as a region.

The second part of the paper turns to a more in-depth discussion of these themes in the context of the Middle East itself. I highlight three key methodological issues arising from the first part of the paper, and which might help us better understand contemporary regional dynamics: (1) a focus on the various cross-border flows that serve to both upset state-centric approaches to the region, while also destabilizing the particular conceptual categories through which we often think of social processes in the Middle East; (2) closer attention to borders, borderlands and transboundary processes in the Middle East, all of which contribute in powerful (yet often unexpected and unrecognized) ways to the making of the national and regional scales; and (3) a recognition that regional processes in the Middle East need to be considered as mutually-constitutive of a global totality, and that this necessitates a closer analysis of the various relations that exist between the wider world market and the regional scale. Taken as a whole, these perspectives not only open up a range of productive questions around the dynamics of the Middle East itself, but also signal some interesting ways that the study of the region might contribute to broader social science debates.

## ■ Critiquing Area Studies

Before addressing some of the more concrete issues associated with the contemporary Middle East, it is important to highlight a few of the main criticisms that question the validity of knowledge production centred upon a specific region (Bates 1997; Ludden 2000; Miyoshi and Harootunian 2002; Szanton 2004). These critiques encompass both the normative and instrumentalist dimensions of regional knowledge as a scholarly field, as well as theoretical and methodological issues related to how regions are understood, defined, and deployed in relation to one another. Thousands of pages from many different disciplinary perspectives have been devoted to these debates, and it is impossible to do full justice to them here. Nonetheless, it is useful to present a brief summary of these discussions, as they help to frame some of the core methodological issues relating directly to the study of the Middle East today.

First, as many scholars have argued, the institutionalization of modern Area Studies as a scholarly field needs to be situated in the specificities of the post-war period, which closely aligned the study of regions with the perceived needs of US foreign policy and security at the time (Cumings 1997; Palat 1996; Rafael 1994).<sup>1</sup> Accompanying the expansion of US institutions globally – including US businesses, military and intelligence apparatuses, and the new multilateral organizations that incorporated a distinctly American interest – knowledge about the ‘other’ took on increasing strategic importance for the US state. Similar in this respect to the genesis of International Relations (Vitalis 2015), the concerns of area studies scholars aligned with the requirement of US policy makers to better understand the objects of their overseas interests, particularly in the wake of the breakdown of British and French colonialism and the emergence of newly independent states across many parts of the world. This need was further reinforced by the realities of the Cold War, with East European and Russian Studies scholars cultivating expertise and knowledge of the inner workings of the Soviet bloc, while Asian and Latin American Studies assisted in combatting Soviet encroachment into areas identified as American ‘spheres of influence’. All of this was supported materially through various state funding agencies and large private foundations (such as the Ford Foundation). Through the sponsorship of research and direct financial assistance to

academic departments, these institutions helped cultivate what East Asian scholar Bruce Cumings was to describe as “astonishing levels of collaboration” (2002, p.262) between the US state and the particular concerns of area studies scholars.

This “intimate relationship” between the institutional history of area studies and the “hegemonic ordering of the post–World War II world by the United States” (Dirlik 2010, p.8) is important to highlight, as it helped structure the intellectual concerns and methodological orientation of many scholars towards regional knowledge. Nonetheless, these kinds of critiques need to be tempered with the recognition that no site of academic knowledge production has been impervious to the influence of state, corporate, and military interests – and it makes little sense to exceptionalize area knowledge in this regard.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it is important not to flatten out the diverse array of historical actors and contradictory motivations that drove the development of area studies as a specific scholarly pursuit. As Zachary Lockman (2016) convincingly documents in the case of the US, much of the impetus for establishing Middle East studies came from outside of government – pushed by scholars motivated by a genuine desire to promote interdisciplinarity (particularly across the humanities and social sciences), and to encourage a deeper and more sympathetic understanding of non-Western societies. These laudable aims converged with a more radical critique of the US state through the 1960s and 1970s, and many area studies scholars were to participate in oppositional movements and consciously situate their academic research within a broader resistance to US foreign policy. Today, western-based scholars who openly oppose US or other government policies in the Middle East, or who express solidarity with struggles in the region (notably Palestine), are often subject to ferocious campaigns of silencing and harassment.

If area studies cannot simply be reduced to its role in American post-war expansionism, a second set of critiques has focused more on a range of methodological and conceptual problems that have shaped the dominant approach to this field. Reinforced by a reliance on state funding, area studies departments have often been dominated by political scientists and development economists seeped in the teleological tropes of modernization theory (Rostow 1960). Within this perspective, the newly independent states that emerged from colonial rule were urged to follow US-centered prescriptions for development, with the ‘West’ embodying the promise of technological advance and material prosperity (Mirsepassi, Basu, and Weaver 2003). Shaped in large part by the rivalries with the Soviet bloc, modernization theory advocated a stagist conception of development that was heavily tied to the idea of economic growth. As Goss and Smith note, “Knowledge was to be generated and applied toward an understanding of the processes of modern social change, particularly state building and economic development. Ultimately, all this was viewed through the lens of American economic, political, and strategic interests in particular parts of the world” (2010, p.iv).

Closely related to this particular framing of ‘development’, area studies scholarship has also been frequently critiqued for reinforcing “a static set of Orientalist conceptions of the world” (Koch 2016, p.809), in which the cultures of the ‘other’ were imbued with a timeless essentialism that was viewed as both distinct from, and inferior to, those of Western societies (Said 1978; Harootunian 2002). This critique overlaps with a more general problem with colonialist legacies of knowledge production, in which the non-Western world is perceived as a place “for fieldwork and theory-testing, rather than for discovery of new ideas and approaches” (Acharya 2014, p.2). In this respect, ‘local informants’ are considered as objects of study – the primary source for empirical, concrete, and raw material drawn from a particular place – rather than as active producers of knowledge (particularly at the level of theory and method). As Koch notes, all of this has meant that issues of positionality and “questions of representation” continue to be inherent and hotly-debated features of area studies scholarship (Koch 2016, p.807).

These kinds of critique certainly retain a strong validity, although matters are again more complicated than they initially appear. For one, a range of important research institutions and networks are now located outside of the Western academy and are actively involved in the development of new regional knowledge. Moreover, as critiques of the concept of 'Orientalism' have noted, a simple focus on the West can homogenize and flatten the very real social differences within countries and regions outside of the core, leading to an 'Orientalism in reverse' (al-Azm 1981) or a privileging of non-Western elites as the authentic voice of the 'other' (Ahmad 1992). Furthermore, as King highlights in a perceptive review of several key area studies texts, it is very difficult to neatly demarcate "what constitutes local versus non-local scholarship ... or address the complexity of distinguishing between 'local' and 'foreign' scholars", particularly in a world marked by large diaspora communities who hold multiple and overlapping forms of belonging and identity (2012, p.315).

A further prominent strand in critiques of traditional area studies concerns its alleged lack of theoretical self-reflexivity or disciplinary focus. A former president of the Association for Asian Studies would claim over two decades ago that "there is no theory of area studies or area-specific knowledge; there is only a set of institutional, personal, and fragmented disciplinary, market, and professional interests that converge primarily on funding" (Ludden 2000, p.17). In the absence of a clear engagement with specific social science debates, area studies scholars have failed "to describe, let alone to theorize, area-specific knowledge as such" (Luddens 2000, p.17). Closely overlapping with the turn towards rational choice and quantitative methods in political science, area studies scholars were criticized for being overly focused on qualitative research and displaying a lack of theoretical and methodological rigor (Bates 1997; Kollner 2018).

Amitav Acharya has described this "area studies versus the discipline" controversy as a "peculiarly American debate" (Acharya 2014, p.9), pointing out that in many other parts of the world, scholars seek to combine a deep understanding of particular countries or regions with a commitment to theoretical and methodological engagement. Nonetheless, the explicit interdisciplinary aspirations of area studies can manifest as a "truculent antitheoretical empiricism" (Dutton 2002, p.504) or a narrow positivism. Area studies departments can be particularly prone to these kinds of methodological problems, as they often bring together scholars working across vastly different historical time periods. Such historical breadth can certainly be positive and productive, but it can also essentialize and imbue a false sense of transhistoric permanence to a particular region, in which supposedly unique cultural, political or social features end up as timeless explanations for change across a very long duree. As Middell and Naumann note in respect to the perception of 'Asia', the particular region under study becomes "an age-old cartographer's fantasy", which imposes "an artificial unity on highly diverse peoples and regions, distorts their internal structuring, and ignores the unities of historical networks and social relations [across different world regions]" (Middell and Naumann 2010, p.158).

While these critiques certainly identify many of the methodological pitfalls of conventional area studies, we should nonetheless be careful not to confuse the lack of a clearly articulated disciplinary or theoretical perspective with an absence of theory. There is no such thing as 'theory-less' social science – the underlying ontologies employed by researchers might certainly go unspoken, but they are nevertheless present in the choice of basic assumptions, objects of analysis, and conceptual categories. In this vein, Munck and Snyder are correct to note that "blanket characterizations of area studies research as atheoretical or 'merely descriptive' are simply misleading" (2007, p.25). The conceptual assumptions and methods that can mark area studies research – including empiricism, positivism, and an essentializing Orientalism – are also widely found across other social science disciplines. The challenge is to make such ontologies explicit, and to further elaborate and clarify them through criticism and debate.



By the early 2000s, a “perceived crisis in area studies” (King 2012) was reflected in both a drying-up of funding to academic programs and a deeper conceptual crisis around how to theorize the territorial category of a ‘region’ and ‘area’. As Dirlik points out, scholars began to question the “utility of spatializing the world into areas that were products of its Orientalist legacies, reinforced by post–World War II geopolitical assumptions” (2010, p. 5). Numerous books, mostly focused on Asia (or its sub-regions), sought to ‘locate’, ‘rethink’ or ‘reconceptualize’ these spatial categories (King 2012, p.315). Partly this reflected a larger epistemological critique of the oft-unspoken Orientalist and essentializing representational frames that were used to think about particular locations. But the existential crisis of Area Studies was also deeply connected to a seeming shift in the wider global order – the onset of an era of ‘globalization’ which, at both an academic and popular level, was met with claims of a new borderless world, a space of flows, and the alleged demise of the nation-state as an organizing principle of the world market.<sup>3</sup>

For area studies scholars, the forces of a new globalism and the apparent weakening of the nation-state presented a serious analytical challenge. From its early history, Harry Harootunian points out, Area Studies had been “founded on the privilege attached to fixed spatial containers” in which the model was “undoubtedly ... the nation state” (2012, p. 8). Such an approach had corresponded neatly with the perceived reality of the post-war order, where decolonization had created a patchwork of discrete parcellized territories “that were often the relatively recent product of European imperialism and contained within their boundaries a bewildering variety of social, economic, and cultural forms” (Goss and Wesley-Smith 2010, p.xi). Not only did area studies scholars uncritically adopt nation-states as the basic “units of scholarship”, but they also tended to specialize in a handful of larger and more influential states within particular regions, rather than the region as a whole (Dirlik 2010).<sup>4</sup> A major consequence of this state-centrism for the direction of area studies research was a lack of attention to cross border and transnational flows – connections that were now positioned center-stage within processes of globalization.

In this context, a range of interesting contributions sought to reframe the study of regions and regional knowledge in light of the new global processes (Mirsepassi, Basu and Weaver 2003; Basedau and Kollner 2007; Sidaway 2013). Scholars called for renewed attention to the ‘meso-scale’ (Murphy and O’Loughlin 2009), ‘regional worlds’ (University of Chicago 2000), or a ‘world regions’ approach, which recognized the significance to not only how regions “self-organize their economic, political, and cultural space, but also how they relate to each other and shape global order” (Acharya 2004, p.4). A key feature of these contributions was their focus on trans- and intra-regional interactions, which emphasized the “political, social, and economic entanglements” that connected different zones across the world, and sought to elucidate the transcultural connections and extensive flows of goods, people, and ideas that historically linked regions too often thought of as impermeable bounded territories (Middell and Naumann 2010, p. 159). Throughout all of this, an important shift in emphasis was evident – an attempt to situate the regional as a constitutive part of the global, not as an opposing or dichotomous sphere.

From the vantage point of late 2020, these contributions have gained even more relevance. The supposed overcoming of the nation-state heralded by many participants in the ‘globalization debates’ now appears as highly anachronistic, overtaken by the reemergence of sharp inter-state rivalries and an increasingly unstable and fragile global order divided along national lines. While it is surely incorrect to read these contemporary trends as a simple reversion back to the pre-WW2 forms of inter-state conflict and heightened national protectionism, the claim that a putative globalism had superseded the nation-state form has proven equally misplaced. Instead, national states remain critical to the making of the contemporary world – key sites of governance and policy-making, territorial centers of economic production and consumption, and the core vehicle for the expression of particular ideologies (such as right-wing populism, xenophobia, and nativism).

At the same time, however, a striking feature of the current moment is the heightened prominence of other spatial units – most particularly the regional – to the making of both the 'national' and 'global'. This can be observed in the increased weight and fast-changing dynamics of regional processes throughout areas such as Latin America, Central Asia, South-East Asia, and the Middle East, as well as the emergence of new tensions and interdependencies (not necessarily expressed at the state-to-state level) within and between these various world regions. Such region-level processes are occurring alongside – and in tension with – wider global changes, and substantially impact individual countries as well as the contours of global power.

Given this context, and notwithstanding the various critiques that have been made of area studies over recent decades, a concern with deeply grounded area-specific knowledge gains a potentially new and reinvigorated relevance. This requires, however, a break with the state-centric and methodologically nationalist perspectives that have long marked traditional approaches to area studies, and which have taken "borders as boundaries of knowledge ... [and have turned] political into epistemological boundaries" (Middell and Naumann 2010, p.158). It also demands a deeper theorization of what a 'region' is, and its relation to the making of the global. A series of complex questions remain, many of which have troubled area studies since its inception: what makes a particular territory a 'region' or 'area'? How do we demarcate one region from another? Where does a sense of 'regional-ness' come from? And, perhaps most challenging, why do we see the world in this manner, and how and why does this perception change over time?

## ■ The Production of Space and Making of Scale

In thinking through questions such as these, there is much that can be learnt from the late 20th century 'spatial turn' of social science – an epistemic shift that has generated a range of useful conceptual debates around the nature of space and its essential importance to social processes (Harvey 2000, 2001; Brenner 2005; Smith 2008). Crucial here is the recognition that our perceptions of space and the various spatial forms through which we cognitively comprehend the world are not natural or pre-given – rather, they are produced through the everyday practices of human beings (Lefebvre 1991). As such, we need to move away from viewing various spatial units – urban, national, regional and so forth – as fixed territories bounded by static borders. Instead, the key challenge becomes one of mapping the social relations, processes and functions that act dynamically to produce these territorial arrangements in our consciousness.

The notion that our perceptions of space are socially produced social draws explicit inspiration from the work of French philosopher Henri Lefebvre. Posing the question "what exactly is the mode of existence of social relationships?" (1991, p.129) Lefebvre argued that we needed to move away from a view of space as an absolute, a priori empty container, to one that sees space as a product, or form of appearance, of a particular set of social relations. Social relations "have a social existence to the extent that they have a spatial existence; they project themselves into a space, becoming inscribed there, and in the process producing that space itself" (1991, p.129). Failure to fully recognize this 'spatial existence' of social relations would, according to Lefebvre, imprison our analytical categories "in a realm of 'pure' abstraction".

While Lefebvre's core arguments have been most prominent in work on cities and urbanization, globalization, and state theory (see Harvey 2001, 2003; Soja 1989; Brenner and Elden 2009; Kipfer, Saberi and Wieditz 2013; in the Middle East, see, for example, Fawaz 2009; Kanna 2011; Elsheshtawy 2008, 2013; Al-Nakib 2014), it can also provide powerful insights into many of the foregoing area studies debates. Drawing upon Lefebvre, the geographer Neil Smith (2010) observes that: "At the very least, the lesson from [his] work is that the definition of areas employed

in area knowledge has to be supple and open to change as global patterns of spatial differentiation themselves change" (p.28). This involves asking "how do certain kinds of areas and borders get constructed, others eroded, still others reconstructed in the context of specific, shifting, and intensified transnational flows associated with a new globalism?" (Smith 2010, p.26).

In addressing these questions in the context of area studies, Smith suggests that the concept of scale can be a particularly useful way of thinking about the production of the regional alongside other spatial forms. This concept captures the wide variety of "levels of spatial representation" (Van Schendel 2002, p.659) – such as the global, regional, national, urban, household, and body – through which social relations are territorialized, institutionalized, and comprehended. These scales are "simultaneously an outcome and condition of social process" (Smith 2010, p.29), and are thus continually shifting in response to new political and economic configurations, including social struggles that "change the importance and role of certain geographical scales, reassert the importance of others, and sometimes create entirely new significant scales" (Swyngedouw, 1997, page 169). Geographers describe these continuous transformations as one of 'rescaling', where the relative weight and power of certain scales change in relation to one another (Brenner 2005).<sup>5</sup> Work on scale has thus emphasized the importance of power, struggle, and social hierarchy, opening up new insights into the differentiated geographies of class, race, gender, and sexuality (Gilmore 2002; McKittrick, 2011; Amar 2013; Shabbaz 2015).

In this manner, a focus on the fluidity, dynamism, and multiplicity of scale can help move us away from the methodological nationalism found in much social science scholarship (Harvey 2007, p.57). Instead of taking the nation-state as the basic analytical unit and "self-evident container of political, cultural, and economic relations" (Goswami 2002, p. 794), our attention is drawn to the "ever-changing forms of territorial or geographical organisation and ... territorially shifting forms of governance" (Swyngedouw 1997, p.32) that mark the world today. This does not mean that the nation-state form is no longer important – rather, it points to how a proliferation of sub- and supranational processes, including those encountered at the regional scale, are producing new forms of territory and space that are equally fundamental to the making of the global (Brenner 1999). We need to avoid reifying these spatial forms as distinct or separate levels that interact in an external fashion; the relations between these scales are understood instead to be jointly formed and co-constituted. The challenge is to examine these relations and the ways that they evolve over time. Echoing Lefebvre, these dynamics express the 'spatial existence' of political and economic hierarchies and are thus concrete forms of social power. In this manner, an attention to scale can be an important part of developing a critical social science scholarship, in which relations of power are placed front and center (Koch 2016).

## The Regional Scale and the World Market

Almost two decades ago, South East Asian scholar Willem Van Schendel pointed out that much of the work on scale has tended to prioritize investigation of the urban, national, and global – and latterly the household and the body – while "the scales between the national and the global remain underexposed" (2002, p.660). By and large, this evident epistemological bias in the work on scale remains the case today, and overlaps with a more general preponderance of work on North American and European sites of knowledge production. For this reason, closer attention to the regional scale is not simply a matter of interest to specialists of particular world areas, but also presents an opportunity to further develop a more general analytical understanding of the place of regions within the contemporary global order. Why is it that the regional scale appears to have taken such a prominent role within global capitalism today? How do we understand the making of the regional scale as part of the "specific, shifting, and intensified transnational flows associated with a new globalism?" (Smith 2010, p.26). What

might this mean for contemporary global politics more generally?

The first issue to highlight in thinking about these kinds of questions is the danger of reifying the regional scale as a discrete 'level' that exists a priori or separate from wider global processes. In doing so, we run the risk of substituting methodological nationalism with a kind of 'methodological regionalism' <sup>6</sup> – where, ontologically, the regional scale is treated like a jigsaw puzzle piece, i.e. understood as a self-contained territorial unit that can be removed and examined in isolation from the whole of which it is an integral part (i.e. the global). Such an approach ends up replicating one of the problems with conventional area studies – a tendency to disregard the ways that areas are mutually-formed alongside, and inseparable from, global processes.

An alternative approach requires us to center the ways in which the regional scale is jointly formed and co-constituted as one element of a wider totality – the capitalist world market (Hanieh 2018). As Dale Tomich, who draws upon a similar framework in his highly perceptive work on the development of colonial slavery, notes: "The whole [i.e. the global] is understood as being formed and reformed by the changing interactions among its constituent elements. Each particular element derives its analytical significance through its relation to the totality ... Each contains, encompasses and expresses the totality of world-economy while the totality expresses, unifies, and gives order to the relations among the particulars" (Tomich 2016, pp. 30–31).

From this perspective, regions such as the Middle East, Central Asia, South-East Asia and so forth emerge as particular (spatial) instantiations of global processes that they themselves help constitute – they are produced by, and simultaneously produce, the global itself. Regions, in other words, are seen as 'connected yet distinctively different nodes in globally interconnected historical geographies ... sites in the production of global processes in specific spatio-historical conjunctures, rather than as just recipients of them' (Hart 2016, p. 3). Our attention is directed to processes, practices, and interconnections between these spatial scales, rather than the supposedly bounded, self-contained and discrete spatial units through which we are accustomed to viewing the world.

Such an approach helps us avoid treating every local particularity as simply an unmediated outcome of the global (Hart 2016, p. 2). In this respect, it moves us away from frequently Eurocentric and top-down views of the world market – where events and processes in non-Western parts of the world are simply reduced to outcomes of 'geopolitics' or the actions of the dominant world powers. Instead, heterogeneity and difference are seen as a necessary part of what actually produces the whole. To paraphrase Gillian Hart, the regional scale becomes a "vantage point" that can actually open up new ways of "grasp[ing] the coming together and interconnections" of the global (Hart 2016, p. 19). In this manner, situating the regional dynamics of areas such as the Middle East as co-constitutive of global processes can potentially reveal fresh insights into the contemporary world system itself – insights that may otherwise have been missed if the study of the 'area' was methodologically divorced from the study of the 'global'.

Tracing these inter-relationships between the regional and global is even more imperative given the large-scale transformations and the multiple crises that are apparent within the world system at the present moment. In this respect, Todd Gordon and Jeffery Webber note that scholarly debates around the nature of the world market have reached somewhat of an 'impasse' in recent years, divided between theories of Empire (Hardt and Negri 2000) and various notions of transnational capital and a transnational state (Carroll 2010; Sklair 2005; Murray 2017; Robinson 2003); alternative claims emphasizing the continued relevance of the nation-state and associated rivalries within a globalized world order (Wood 2005; Panitch and Gindin 2012); or attempts to theorize the 'dual logics' of economic and geopolitical competition between states (Harvey 2005;

Callinicos 2009; Arrighi 2010). One of the problems with these competing perspectives is that they tend to reproduce dichotomous views of the national and global scales, with arguments emphasizing one side or another of this alleged separation. As a way out of this impasse, Gordon and Webber suggest the concept of a 'complexly stratified world system' that seeks to capture both the unity and interdependencies of a single world market, but simultaneously recognizes the persistence of multiple states, and the sharp hierarchies and unevenness within the global.

Although Gordon and Webber's perceptive argument does not attempt to fully theorize the place of regions within the global, I want to suggest that one of the key features of this 'complex stratification' is a process of rescaling, in which the regional scale has come to take on an increased importance and weight within the making of the global and the national. This can be observed not simply in the Middle East, but also through the growing significance of regionalism and regional processes in other areas of the world – Latin America, Central Asia, South-East Asia and so forth. In light of this, binary models of the world system – where national spaces are simply juxtaposed to the global – do not adequately capture the determining role of the regional scale in shaping the tempo and direction of social processes at all scales today. Once again, in the spirit of Gordon and Webber's argument, this growing weight of the regional scale should not be viewed as dichotomous to global processes or undermining of a fictive 'globalization' – but actually part of how the global is being constituted today.<sup>7</sup>

Crucially, however, these regionalizing processes are marked by the appearance of new hierarchies within the regional scale. At one level, these emerging regional hierarchies are expressed politically through the dominance of individual states or blocs of states internal to the region. This dominance is often linked to new (formal and informal) political alliances or the re-purposing of older regional institutions for new regional aims. Such dominance, however, is typically contested and subverted by rival regional projects or movements with competing regional visions (including movements that are not organized at the level of the nation-state). These alternative regionalisms may advocate different political pathways or new institutional arrangements – they may also hold opposing perceptions of how the region is to be defined and governed. All of these regional hierarchies partially mediate and express global rivalries – between, for example, the US, EU, China, and Russia – but they do so in complex and unstable ways, defying any straightforward projection or mapping of geopolitical influence onto the regional scale.

Importantly, however, the rescaling processes expressed through the growing weight of regions and regionalisms also reflect particular dynamics of capital accumulation and class formation within the global political economy. This point is often overlooked, but one of the key features of global commodity chains today is the regionalized nature of production, circulation and consumption. Each of these moments within the circuit of capital is organized at the regional scale but simultaneously embedded within – and thereby helps to constitute – 'the encompassing accumulation imperatives of a world market' (Albo 2012, p.12). This is one reason why the study of circulation and its infrastructure, including logistics networks, can reveal so much about how regional and global processes are mutually-formed (Khalili 2020; Ziadah 2019; Cowen 2014).

This regionalized nature of contemporary capitalism points to the need for better theorization of political economy processes within the regional scale. Essential to such theorization is more detailed empirical investigation of the patterns of cross-border ownership and control that are present in the region. The new social relations formed through these cross-border capital flows are a key element to the production of the regional space – we need to know 'who owns what', how this control over wealth is expressed institutionally, and how it is connected to patterns of accumulation in other parts of the world. And as part of mapping such new regional hierarchies, there is also a need to more clearly understand how political and economic power relates to one

another at the regional scale. This kind of empirical work opens up space to revisit, engage, and extend earlier attempts to theorise how accumulation and power is spatially organized within the world market – including theories of dependency, world systems, and imperialism, as well as concepts such as sub-imperialism.

## ■ New Regionalisms and the Study of the Middle East

Given this wider theoretical framing of space and scale, the discussion that follows seeks to suggest a few themes and associated questions that relate to the study of regionalisms and the new regional dynamics of the Middle East. At the outset though, it is necessary to emphasize once again the importance of retaining a degree of ambiguity, fluidity, and contingency to how we think of the regional scale. Precisely because there is no natural, pre-given, or enduring stability to the production of space and the making of scale, we need to avoid reifying 'the Middle East' as some kind of permanently defined and neatly bordered territory. In this sense, and in contrast to the terminological anxiety that often characterizes discussion of the region, the (interesting) question is not so much what is the 'Middle East' (or whether it should be called something different) – but the more processual questions of how and why this region has come to take on a real existence in our consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

The first issue to highlight in mapping the new regional dynamics of the Middle East is the wide proliferation of different kinds of cross-border flows within the region. These include, for example, the devastating cross-border displacement of populations as a result of various wars and conflicts. Indeed, as the most conflict-affected region of the world today (OECD 2016, p.41), the Middle East has recently witnessed the largest forced displacement since the Second World War (World Bank 2017, p. 26). This displacement has an enormous impact on social processes in the Middle East itself, a fact that is often forgotten in popular framings of the supposed 'migration crisis' as a mostly European concern. In addition to the unprecedented numbers of people who have been forced to move across borders, millions of non-citizen migrant workers (from both in and outside of the region) are also located in the Middle East. In the Gulf Arab states, for example, more than half of the labor force is made up of non-citizens, with more migrants working in the Gulf than any other region in the Global South (Khalaf et al. 2014). Quite remarkably, Saudi Arabia alone ranks as the second-largest source of remittances in the world (after the US).

Beyond the movement of people, the Middle East is also a significant site of cross-border capital flows. My own research has explored the ways in which economic liberalization in the Middle East over recent decades has been closely bound up with the internationalization of Gulf capital throughout the wider region (Hanieh 2013; 2018). Gulf capitalists now dominate key economic sectors of many neighboring countries, including real estate and urban development, agribusiness, telecommunications, retail, logistics, and banking and finance. In this sense, the neoliberal reforms articulated in various structural adjustment packages through the 1990s and 2000s did not just reconfigure structures of class and state at the national scale, they also led to new regionalized circuits of accumulation superintended by Gulf business conglomerates. One consequence of this is that Gulf capital has become interiorized in the class structure of many Arab states, and the political economy of the wider region is increasingly pulled around the dynamics of accumulation in the Gulf (Hanieh 2018).

These kinds of flows – to which could be added other kinds of cross-border movements, including aid and humanitarian assistance (Ziadah 2019), as well as illicit or unregistered flows of finance, weapons, and contraband (Erami and Keshavarzian 2015; Abboud 2017) – upset the state-centric ways in which we often approach the Middle East. Not only are these various flows important to

the construction of wealth and power in the region, they are underpinned by a variety of new forms of territorialisation – including free trade zones – that express both a logic of accumulation as well as the contingent “desire[s] of coalitions of elites to engage the world economy in particular ways that blend particular political concerns and economic objectives” (Keshavarzian 2010, p. 283). We need much more detailed empirical work that concretely maps these various cross-border flows, their impact on social processes, and the new institutional configurations that enable them.

We also need better theorization of what these cross-border movements might mean to how we perceive standard social science categories such as class, nation, state, ideology, economy, and politics. Foregrounding the Gulf, for example, as a central axis of regional capital accumulation, pushes us to look at the interaction between processes of class formation at the national and regional scales. Do nationally-bound concepts such as the ‘patriotic bourgeoisie’ – *r’as al mal al watani* – make sense today, given the pronounced interiorization of Gulf capital in the class structures of other Arab states? Or how do we think through categories such as a ‘national labor force’ in ways that are cognizant of the many millions of people (in some cases a majority of national populations) who are temporary migrant workers lacking in citizenship rights, or who work in the region but are displaced from their national territories? Where do we place the significant diaspora bourgeoisies – Palestinian, Iraqi, Syrian, Lebanese and so forth – who may be deeply connected to their national politics but whose centers of accumulation lie firmly outside of their national territories? What new forms of political or economic power might be emerging alongside these regional cross-border flows?<sup>9</sup> How do we understand concepts such as financialization – where individuals, households, firms, and states increasingly depend upon financial markets for their day-to-day reproduction – when approached from the regional scale? And how are all these regional processes bound up with the development of other scales – including, crucially, urban and city spaces – across the Middle East?

### Borders, Borderlands, and the ‘Political Economy of the Margins’

In thinking through the ways that regional cross-border flows might upset state-centric ways of looking at the Middle East, we should also be wary of homogenizing the national scale as an undifferentiated spatial unit. In this respect, scholars working on the political economy of conflict have highlighted the importance of the ‘political economy of the margins’ – a recognition that national-level processes, institutions, and actors should not be taken as representative of state territories as a whole (Goodhand 2013; 2018). This has direct methodological implications for our research, including the need to place greater emphasis on sub-national variation (Parks et al. 2013; OECD 2016), and a more critical approach to aggregate national-level data that often obfuscates the profound spatial differentiation found within state territories (Rustad et al. 2011). In respect to the latter, for example, it may be necessary to reinterpret data in ways that go beyond standard administrative ways of dividing territory (such as urban, municipal, or local jurisdictions), in order to better capture the inherent unevenness of the national scale.

Working in other regional contexts, some scholars have suggested that a greater analytical appreciation of sub-national variation requires particular emphasis on ‘borderlands’ – regions located on the peripheries of at least two national states, and straddling an international border (Meehan and Plonski 2017; Lind and Luckham 2017; Goodhand 2013, 2018). Borderlands – particularly in situations of conflict – are often sites of chronic violence and marginalization, where vulnerable populations may depend upon a mix of informal, illicit, or criminal activities (Megoran et al. 2005; Meehan 2011). They are typically marked by different kinds of social and political fragmentation, with multiple state and non-state groups contesting for power (Goodhand 2018). And because of the economic asymmetries that often arise as a result of borders, borderland economies may also create economic incentives and risk premiums that

are tied in complex ways to the making of national political settlements (Van Schendel and Abraham 2005; Abboud 2017).

As sites of intense interconnectivity – highly dependent upon cross-border flows and yet sitting outside state-centric frameworks – borderlands are critical to the making of national and regional processes (Goodhand 2013; Korf and Raeymaekers 2013). In the Middle East, the importance of these areas is clearly evident – for example, the various border zones of Syria with Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan (Abboud 2017); Palestinian cities such as Jerusalem, and the various border areas of the West Bank (Al-Khalili 2017); Yemen's land and sea connections with Saudi Arabia and Oman; the dense cross-border linkages found across North Africa; and the newly emerging and overlapping sovereignties encountered in waterways such as the Red Sea. Nonetheless, there is a notable lack of grounded research that situates these borderland spaces in the making of the regional scale. What are the patterns of accumulation and forms of livelihood that exist in these and other borderlands, and how may they be connected to political and economic power elsewhere in the Middle East? What role do borderlands play as nodes in new regional flows of finance, commodities, and aid – and how might this shape emerging hierarchies at the regional scale? Who are the new political and economic actors – often described as 'brokers' in the borderlands literature (Meehan and Plonski 2017; Bliesemann de Guevara and Kostic 2018) – who mediate and bridge these complex cross-border linkages? And how might spaces of apparent stability, security, and prosperity in the Middle East (e.g. the financial and real estate markets of Dubai), be relationally connected to dynamics of violence and instability in borderland areas?

More attention to the role of borders, borderlands and transboundary issues is not merely a necessary element to thinking through the Middle East as a region, but can also offer significant opportunities for contributing to debates in wider social theory. It is well-recognized that borders act as generators and markers of social difference and inequality, and are thus fundamental to the workings of subjective identities and ideology (Novak 2016; Hanieh 2018b; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy 2019) – but what can we learn about these bordering processes from the vantage point of the Middle East? Categories of race and racialization, for example, are essential to how social power and notions of citizenship are constructed in the region – yet they typically work differently in the Middle East than they do in the US and European contexts where most of the scholarship on these matters remains focused. Relatedly, what does the Middle East's position as a global laboratory for contemporary practices of border management and control – including the extra-territorialization and externalization of borders<sup>10</sup> – mean for both regional dynamics and how we understand borders more generally today? What can we learn about the much discussed rise of non-state actors and the drafting of citizen populations into the surveillance and management of migrant populations in the West, when we acknowledge that these practices have a long history in the Middle East, and are fundamental to how state-citizen relations are constituted in the region? These kinds of questions demand a shift in perspective – seeing the Middle East as a site for genuine innovation in theory rather than simply a case study or place to test theoretical claims developed elsewhere.

## The Middle East, Regional Hierarchies, and the Global

The importance of transnational flows, borders, and borderlands highlights the need to understand the Middle East as more than a simple agglomeration of national territories. But as noted earlier, any theorization of the regional scale also needs to be situated in relation to a wider totality: a capitalist world market marked by the seeming relative decline of longstanding centers of power in North America and Europe – and the concomitant rise of new zones of accumulation and growth in other parts of the world. This increasingly unstable hegemonic order is underpinned by a complex set of cross-border interdependencies and inter-state



rivalries. Accompanying this is an associated rescaling of spatial structures across the world market, including an increased prominence to the regional scale and the emergence of new regional processes, identities, and hierarchies.

These global shifts are crucially important for any study of the Middle East. Long recognized as a 'crossroads' for world-scale processes, the region today plays a major role in mediating new global networks of trade, logistics, infrastructure, and finance. It is noteworthy, for example, that the busiest airport in the world for international travel is now located in the Middle East – Dubai International Airport, which surpassed London's Heathrow Airport in 2015 (Ulrichsen 2016, p. 151) – as well as the world's fourth largest port operator, DP World, whose international footprint extends across Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Americas (Ziadah 2018). As a 'global super-connector' linking different zones of the world market, the Middle East plays a critical role in circulatory processes and the making of global production and consumption chains across the planet (Khalili 2020).

Closely related to these circulation processes are the Middle East's financial markets. Historically, financial surpluses emanating from the region – particularly the Gulf States – have been crucial to the making of financial power and the wider architecture of global finance. This includes the emergence of the so-called Euromarkets<sup>11</sup> in the late 1950s and 1960s, and the rise of the US dollar as 'world money' in the second half of the 20th century (Spiro 1999). These global connections were mediated through various financial markets in the Middle East (e.g. Beirut and Bahrain), which helped position the Middle East as a key element to the eventual global dominance of Anglo-American financial institutions. Today, while the Middle East remains deeply connected to the leading centers of international finance, several new dimensions of the region's global financial role are now evident. These include its position as the financial headquarters for China's BRI activities across Central Asia, Africa, and South Asia; the prominence of Middle East offshore financial zones in money laundering, tax evasion, and the sheltering of illicit wealth from nearby regions; and the region's global leadership in alternative forms of finance and financial markets, notably Islamic Finance (Hanieh 2019). These new global connections – coupled with the enduring importance of the Middle East to Western financial markets and institutions – are crucial to locate as part of the reconfiguration of the regional scale today.<sup>12</sup>

The Middle East also plays a pivotal role in the global movement of coercive technologies, techniques, and doctrines. This role encompasses not simply the region's position as the single largest export market for weapons and military hardware in the world, but also its centrality to the testing of new security technologies, including emerging forms of surveillance and population control. A number of authors have pointed to the complex transnational circuits underpinning the arms trade and surveillance industry in the region, including the circulation of War on Terror logics, military technologies, personnel, training manuals, cross-border operations, police forces and Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) (Stavrianakis 2018; Marshall 2012; Moore 2017; Khalili 2011; Amar 2013). All of these make the Middle East a key node in the global diffusion of new norms of securitization and militarism. At the same time, these global connections powerfully shape the dynamics of conflict in the region itself, and the differential ways that militaries have become embedded in political and economic structures at both the national and regional scales (Owen 1978; Sayigh 2019). Once again, however, it is striking to note how this dimension of the region is largely occluded in the wider literature on surveillance capitalism, securitization, and the new technologies of state control.

Of course, these global connections remain firmly tied to the fundamental role of the Middle East's oil and gas supplies within the world market. Despite the recent rise in so-called 'non-conventional' oil produced from US and Canadian shale fields,<sup>13</sup> the Middle East remains the central axis of world

hydrocarbon markets, with the region's total share of global oil production standing at around 40% in 2019.<sup>14</sup> Historically, these supplies underpinned a major transformation in the world energy's regime through the mid-20th century, with oil and gas supplanting coal as the primary fuel for global transport, manufacturing, and industrial production. More recently, the Middle East has been essential to meeting the increased demand for oil and gas that followed China's move to the center of global manufacturing. In this sense, the key structural shift in the global political economy over the last two decades has been predicated on closer (and rapidly changing) ties between the Middle East and Asia (Hanieh 2018). All of this, moreover, has positioned Middle East oil producers as key protagonists in climate change debates and any future energy transition away from fossil fuels.

Placing these kinds of global transformations and circuits in the Middle East helps illuminate the on-going regional interests of world powers such as the United States, the European Union, Russia, and China. Throughout most of the last century the US has been the dominant foreign power in the region, with American hegemony resting principally upon deep political, economic and military ties with Israel, on one side, and the Gulf Arab states, on the other. More recently, however, this longstanding hegemonic position has been undermined by the multifaceted crisis of the Middle East state-system, and the increasingly conspicuous challenge to US hegemony presented by rival powers. This has precipitated a range of new foreign interventions including direct involvement in the region's wars and conflicts, as well as backing to the various governments, movements and armed militias that have emerged in the wake of the Arab uprisings. In assessing these new inter-state rivalries and forms of intervention, it is essential to look beyond simply the military dimension. In this respect, one underexplored aspect is the plethora of new trade, economic, and investment agreements that are currently under negotiation. Such agreements are explicitly aimed at drawing Middle East countries into the orbit of particular economic blocs outside the region, and are also closely tied to a range of new bilateral and multilateral aid packages. They are thus a major driver of new regional dynamics.

In addition to shaping the trajectories of numerous wars and conflicts in the region, the Middle East's co-constitution with 'the global' is critical to understanding the sharp internal hierarchies and political antagonisms that have come to mark the regional scale over the last decade. The struggle for regional power is generating severe tensions and new alliances between various countries – including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Iran, Turkey, and Israel. New forms of regional power projection are emerging alongside the intensification of these rivalries. These include attempts to shape discursive narratives through the control over media and associated infrastructures (traditional and online); a reshaping of the political economy of cultural production, including the decline of earlier geographical centers of art and music; and the strategic extension of citizenship and residency rights to foreign political and economic elites. All of this overlaps with new cross-border flows of development and humanitarian aid that fundamentally depend upon – and help to create – emergent infrastructures and logistics networks (Ziadah 2019). Once again, it is important to stress that all of these innovations have spatial and scalar effects; they work to produce the region as a region, and need to be conceptualized outside of state-centric frameworks.

In mapping all of these connections, we must remember to look beyond simply the relationships between the Middle East and the core centers of global power. As a fluid and constructed space, the Middle East is dynamically formed through complex and contradictory interactions with other nearby regions. A range of recent innovative historical work has illustrated the value of thinking about the Middle East through this lens (for example, through the networks and relations of the Indian Ocean) (Alpers 2014; Hopper 2015; Bishara 2016, Mathews 2016). This is also extremely important to the contemporary moment, given the deep and rapidly changing connections

between the Middle East and other regions such as Central Asia, South Asia, East Africa, and the Mediterranean. We need to be much more attentive to these kinds of inter-regional relations (Amar 2013) – including those that involve oceans and waterways (Ho 2006) – and also ask what we might learn from comparing regions that are often assumed to be ‘incomparable’ (Koch 2015).

## Conclusion

An underlying theme of this paper has been its emphasis on the relations, connections, and flows that help to constitute the region as a particular type of spatial representation through which we perceive our social and material existence. As such, regions are indeed abstractions – but they are “real geographical abstractions”, in the sense that they are conceptual categories “determined by historically and geographically specific practices”, and which function with practical, concrete effects (Loftus 2014, p.367; see also Toscano 2008). By focusing on the relations between various scales such as the urban, national, regional and global – treating those relations as internal to the making of these scales, not as external factors – we stress the dynamic, contradictory, and processual manner through which scalar representations of space are produced as ‘forms of appearance’ of social reality.

In relation to the Middle East, the paper has foregrounded the inherent unevenness and profound socio-economic polarization that marks the production of the regional scale. This sits in sharp contrast to older narratives of ‘Arab unity’, or more recent pan-regional visions promising mutually-beneficial outcomes through closer political and economic integration. The normative assumptions that typically underpin these kinds of market-led ‘regionalisms’ (Hanieh 2015) should be rejected; instead, we should recognize how patterns of marginalization and dispossession in some parts of the region are both produced by – and simultaneously help to generate – the accumulation of wealth and power in other parts. The reality of this divergence and unevenness runs against homogenizing accounts that flatten the Middle East as a region in uniform ‘decline’ or ‘crisis’. In contrast, the deep inequalities and social differences encountered in the region are co-produced alongside zones of tremendous prosperity, security and stability. Following Lefebvre, the social relations underpinning these processes necessarily take on a spatial inflection, and mapping the ways that social polarization cascades through a multiplicity of variegated scales is essential to understanding the contemporary regional dynamics of the Middle East.

In setting out a research agenda around these themes it is useful to once again reiterate the potential contributions that detailed ‘area studies’ knowledge and analysis of regions such as the Middle East can bring to wider social science debates. A few of these – by no means an exhaustive list – have been noted in passing above. These include: an understanding of global processes that moves away from a singular focus on the ‘commanding heights’ of the world economy; the role and nature of borders and borderlands; processes of racialization and the nature of citizenship practices; debates around infrastructure, logistics, and global circulation; and concepts such as financialization that have been developed with virtually no consideration of spaces outside core zones of the world market.

Perhaps most importantly, however, closer attention to the regional scale as a particular instantiation of world processes opens up new avenues for thinking about the Middle East in relation to, and alongside, other key ‘areas’ – Latin America, South-East Asia, South Asia and so forth. In this respect, the relative lack of genuinely inter-regional work involving the Middle East is perhaps the most problematic legacy of traditional approaches to the region. Closer study of these relationships can potentially reveal interesting theoretical and empirical insights into the character of regions and regionalism more generally – an objective that is particularly pressing

given the interdependencies of different regions that are increasingly configured across East/West and South/South lines, and which are shaping the world system in new and unpredictable ways.

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## Endnotes

1 Of course, outside of the US academy, detailed knowledge of diverse regions of the world had a longer pedigree closely connected to colonial ambitions of Britain, France, and other European powers. Here, we saw a mastery of local languages and a detailed understanding of place-specific histories, cultures, and politics become institutionalized in particular academic institutions established to train future colonial administrators. See, Kolluoglu-Kirli, Biray. 200

2 There is, for example, a well-known history to the relationship between the ‘hard’ sciences and the priorities of military research in the US and elsewhere, including the development of new weapons’ technologies. The dominant tone of disciplines such as political science, law, sociology, and economics have also long been aligned with state and corporate interests, providing an academic justification for repressive, racist, and conservative social policy across all spheres of society.

3 Of course this historical moment was also marked by major political and economic shifts, including the rapid collapse of the Soviet bloc, the integration of China into the global economy, and the apparent emergence of a unipolar world order steered by the US as the leading global power.

4 Moreover, as Benedict Anderson notes in his brilliant survey of the genealogy of Thai studies, the principal selection of which of these countries to study -- as well as the ways in which they were understood politically and sociologically -- was significantly molded by differing trajectories of colonialism (Anderson 1978).

5 One example of this can be seen in the ways that functions previously concentrated at the national scale may be rescaled upwards to supranational bodies (e.g. the European Union), or devolved downwards to smaller sub-national units such as urban or metropolitan spaces (as expressed in state strategies of decentralization).

6 I am indebted to Arang Keshavarzian for this particular formulation in his comments on a much earlier draft of this paper.

7 It is beyond the scope of this paper to speculate why this might be the case, but to note this important question further confirms the centrality of detailed regional knowledge to any understanding of the global.

8 This formulation derives from my attempt to paraphrase an observation of David Harvey in his *Social Justice and the City* (1973): “the problem of the proper conceptualization of space is resolved through human practice with respect to it. In other words, there are no philosophical answers to philosophical questions that arise over the nature of space—the answers lie in human practice. The question ‘what is space?’ is therefore replaced by the question ‘how is it that different human practices create and make use of distinctive conceptualizations of space?’” (1973, pages 13-14).

9 One interesting example of this in the Middle East is a recent innovation of the Gulf States, where foreign reserves holdings of the Gulf are placed in the central banks of neighboring countries.

10 These terms refer to the ways that borders and the control of migrant movement has been pushed back onto the countries of origin and transit, rather than the countries of destination. To this end, the EU has signed a number of agreements since 2016 with countries in the Middle East and Africa, aiming to engage these non-European states in the control over migrant movement. Such policies have effectively seen the wide scale enlistment of security and military forces across Africa and the Middle East into the policing of European borders. The close cooperation of these forces with the EU acts to exacerbate the root causes of migration, strengthening military regimes and authoritarian states and adding international legitimacy to those governments willing to act as gendarmes for European migration control (Hanieh 2018).

11 These are financial markets that lie outside national regulatory systems and which allow banks and companies to deal in currency denominations that differ from their domestic markets (Gibson 1989; Norfield 2016). Euromarkets were an important element to the global expansion of multinational corporations during the post-war period, and Gulf petrodollar deposits played a significant role in providing liquidity for these markets.

12 Regional financial markets are also a critical part to how the urban scale in the Middle East is being configured (Buckley and Hanieh 2014).

13 These are oil and gas reserves that are difficult and significantly more expensive to extract than conventional fossil fuels. Of particular relevance here is US shale, crude oil that is held in shale or sandstone of low permeability and which is typically extracted through fracturing the rock by pressurized liquid (hence the term 'fracking'). Consistently high oil prices across most of the first two decades of the new millennium helped to attract large investments into shale field development.

14 Production of Crude Oil including Lease Condensate 2019 U.S. Energy Information Administration.

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