

Finding the Middle East of the Insurgent Global South

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What does decolonization mean in the Middle East, and how important is the Middle East in the global story of decolonization? My answers to those questions reflect my own particular intellectual trajectory, and my own understanding of those fuzzy terms, “decolonization” and the “Middle East.” I would describe myself as a global historian with a geographic focus on Africa and the Middle East, and a thematic focus on decolonization and international affairs. My first book, *Mecca of Revolution*, examined revolutionary Algeria’s support for anticolonial resistance movements elsewhere in the world in the 1960s. My current research explores the end of the socialist road in the postcolonial world, from Arab, African, and (to some degree) Indian perspectives. I am one of a growing number of scholars who examine international and national politics in various postcolonial contexts, emphasizing “south-south” connections that often cut across the different regions demarcated by the “area studies” paradigm. While I would not claim that this global approach to studying decolonization is superior to any other, I do think that it is an apt and necessary one. The “area studies” paradigm is itself a product of decolonization in that it stems from American efforts, in the mid-20th century, to comprehend (and master) a world of receding European domination.¹ For many anticolonial figures and postcolonial elites, breaking out of the geographical compartmentalization imposed by Western hegemony was both the means and ends of “decolonization.” In studying their endeavors, we must inevitably replicate their reimagining and reconfiguration of global connections and structures of power.²

The Middle East is a particularly vital part of the global story of decolonization because of real and imagined geographies. Because location and distance still matter, the Middle East helps interconnect the “Global South.” To give one specific example, the Suez Canal was a lifeline of British imperial power, but it was also a vital conduit for anticolonial activists and potentially as important to postcolonial economies in parts of Asia and Africa as it had been to British interests.³ During the crisis of 1956, the Indian government fretted that the closure of the Suez Canal might jeopardize their latest five-year national development plan, a consideration that informed Delhi’s decision to deploy

¹ Zachary Lockman, *Field Notes: The Making of Middle East Studies in the United States* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016); David L. Szanton, *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

² For an example, see Alex Lubin, *Geographies of Liberation: The Making of an Afro-Arab Political Imaginary* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

³ Travel through the Suez Canal facilitated Indian and Egyptian anti-imperial conversations, see Michele L. Louro, *Comrades against Imperialism: Nehru, India, and Interwar Internationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 241–46; Noor-Aiman I. Khan, *Egyptian-Indian Nationalist Collaboration and the British Empire* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

peacekeepers to the Sinai after the war between Egypt and Israel.⁴ Speaking more generally, the “Middle East” is illuminatingly unstable with respect to imagined geography, or geoidology. It is where Europe imagined the Orient began, and then became where the “Third World” began. The boundary of Europe has never been stable: Algeria seceded from the European Economic Community a decade before Britain joined it, while the European status of places like Turkey and Israel are intensely contentious questions.⁵ In short, the Middle East’s physical adjacency to Europe all the more vividly highlights the politics of difference and exclusion that have rationalized our changing international order.⁶ Recently, scholars such as Cemil Aydin and Ilham Khuri-Makdisi have deprovincialized and globalized histories of Middle Eastern radicalism and political imagination in a manner that underscores the region’s universal relevance.⁷

Decolonization is a paradoxical phenomenon. On the one hand, the word is synonymous with rebellion, liberation, and defiance of power. Present efforts to “decolonize” the academy reflect this sense that decolonization signifies anti-establishmentarianism, inclusion, and equality. In post-imperial Western societies, decolonization is an ongoing process of obtaining full equality for minorities and immigrants, battling exclusionary nationalism. Yet, in world-historical terms, decolonization was possibly the largest, most rapid ever creation of new elites and new structures of control, the most important of which was the sovereign nation-state that zealously asserted its authority. That is, for most of the world, decolonization *is* the establishment. For most people, decolonization has made borders more determinative of the course of one’s life.

It is inevitable, then, that growing interest in decolonization and the postcolonial era has contributed to the resurgence of interest in the history of elites—politicians, diplomats, intellectuals, and the cosmopolitan *milieux* of typically poor and agrarian societies. The drive for equality was a key facet of decolonization, and young historians of the Middle East are producing some of the most exciting work on the political economy of decolonization that is likely to be influential well beyond the circle of Middle Eastern studies.⁸ The study of decolonization and postcoloniality also obliges us to recognize

⁴ Swapna Kona Nayudu, “India’s Moment in the Suez Canal Crisis,” *Businessline*, 8 November 2016; see also Swapna Kona Nayudu, “The Nehru Years: Indian Non-Alignment as the Critique, Discourse and Practice of Security (1947–1964)” (PhD thesis, King’s College London, 2015), 128–48.

⁵ Muriam Haleh Davis and Thomas Serres, eds., *North Africa and the Making of Europe: Governance, Institutions and Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

⁶ In addition to the other contributions to this roundtable, see Laura Robson, *States of Separation: Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, 1st ed. (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017). For an example of recent work on migration and the construction of the Middle East, see Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, “Circassian Refugees and the Making of Amman, 1878–1914,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 4 (2017): 605–23.

⁷ Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860–1914* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013); Cemil Aydin, *Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

⁸ See for example, Aaron G. Jakes and Ahmad Shokr, “Finding Value in Empire of Cotton,” *Critical Historical Studies* 4, no. 1 (2017): 107–36; Aaron Jakes, “Boom, Bugs, Bust: Egypt’s Ecology of Interest, 1882–1914,” *Antipode* 49, no. 4 (2017): 1035–59; Kristen Alf, “Levantine Joint-Stock Companies, Trans-Mediterranean Partnerships, and Nineteenth-Century Capitalist Development,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 60, no. 1 (2018): 150–77.

that nations and nation-states have been, and continue to be, the most influential vehicles of political and social organization in the modern world. To neglect the study of the nation-state, as has been the trend in post-Cold War, North Atlanticist academia, occludes much of the recent history of the Third World/Global South.

In that spirit, my work situates the Middle East in the Global South, highlighting in particular how activists and politicians in the former helped to create the latter. To take the Algerian example, on achieving their independence in 1962, the country's new leaders positioned Algeria as a bridge between multiple geoideological domains. They sought to connect Europe to the Third World, Arabs to Africans, Cuba to Afro-Asia. In fact, even before 1962, anticolonial fighters from several colonial territories in western and southern Africa trained in the camps of the Algerian *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN), and this program expanded after Algeria's independence to include revolutionaries and militants from Palestine, Latin America, Western Europe, and North America. The Algerian authorities liberally issued passports to their revolutionary guests and facilitated onward voyages to Belgrade, Peking, and other potentially supportive capitals around the world. For a time, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they permitted airplane hijackers from the United States and Palestine to treat Algiers as a sort of default destination. The Algerians encouraged these movements to support one another and to find a shared ideological coherence.

Revolutionary Algiers seems to have made a particularly strong impression in certain Western circles, perhaps because of its close association with the Francophile left, notably Frantz Fanon, and because it attracted prominent Western dissidents such as Malcolm X, the Black Panthers, and Irish republicans.⁹ But there were other important hubs of anticolonial militancy and solidarity in that era, including Cairo, Accra, and Dar Es Salaam, that scholars have been reassessing in exhilarating ways.¹⁰ While there have been some tremendous studies in recent years of anticolonial mobilization and cooperation in European metropolises, I feel that it is vitally important that we continue to shift our attention to anticolonial activism in postcolonial contexts. The postcolonial context offers more scope for complexity, to explore the tensions and incompatibilities that lay behind the rhetoric of solidarity and commonality. The pursuit of linguistic and cultural "authenticity" did not always align smoothly with the imperatives of diplomatic, economic, and geopolitical independence. In the 1960s, many Arabs and sub-Saharan Africans were skeptical that they should care equally about one another's struggles, that Palestine and Angola were one and the same, or that either mattered as much as improving life in their own countries.¹¹

In the 1970s, Libya became North Africa's most enthusiastic supporter of openly subversive and armed movements, but Algeria started to supplant Egypt, post-Nasser, as the

⁹ Elaine Mokhtefi, *Algiers, Third World Capital: Freedom Fighters, Revolutionaries, Black Panthers* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2018); the Algerian archives contain records of communications and support for groups such as the Irish Republican Army, Quebecois separatists, and black American radicals.

¹⁰ Reem Abou-El-Fadl, "Building Egypt's Afro-Asian Hub: Infrastructures of Solidarity and the 1957 Cairo Conference," *Journal of World History* 30, no. 1 (2019): 157–92; George Roberts, "The Assassination of Eduardo Mondlane: FRELIMO, Tanzania, and the Politics of Exile in Dar Es Salaam," *Cold War History* 17, no. 1 (2017): 1–19.

¹¹ See chapter four of Jeffrey James Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization and the Third World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Arab world's most notable participant in the Third World diplomatic project.¹² The country was one of the prime movers in the Non-Aligned Movement, the Group of 77, and the UN Conference on Trade and Development grouping, and was also the launchpad for the New International Economic Order in 1974. My current research concerns, in part, how Arab members of OPEC struggled to hold together the solidarity of the developing world following the great oil price increases of the 1970s, which were debilitating to oil-less poor countries.¹³ Plainly, at the level of both the subversive politics of the underground and the most formal global diplomacy, Middle Eastern actors were driving forces in decolonization, the Third World project, and the construction of our present world order.

Decolonization contains multitudes and paradoxes. The Middle East has always been central to this unfinished process, in part because of its position between North and South, East and West.¹⁴ The end of Ottoman rule over predominantly Arab territories and the resultant contentions over League of Nations Mandates helped initiate discussion of what a postimperial international system might look like. However, a century later, these very same post-World War I debates have been renewed: the Islamic State contests the Mandate borders, as do Kurdish nationalists, while senior American figures openly propose that not all peoples, notably the Palestinians, deserve sovereignty. In between, this region has displayed all of the varying facets of decolonization. Abdel Razzaq Takriti's 2013 *Monsoon Revolution* brilliantly brings to life the classic revolutionary era of anticolonial struggle.¹⁵ Yet other new scholarship, such as Alden Young's *Transforming Sudan*, Chris Dietrich's *Oil Revolution*, and Giuliano Garavini's history of OPEC, remind us that sometimes the most impactful and transformative revolutionaries were those who wore suits and carried briefcases.¹⁶ Indeed, in many respects, postcoloniality proved to be a surprisingly conservative new world. But revolutions do tend to have unexpected outcomes.

¹² Reem Abou-El-Fadl, *Foreign Policy as Nation Making: Turkey and Egypt in the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

¹³ Umut Özsu, "'In the Interests of Mankind as a Whole': Mohammed Bedjaoui's New International Economic Order," *Humanity* 6, no. 1 (2015): 129–43.

¹⁴ On unfinished decolonization, see Tareq Baconi, *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

¹⁵ Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965–1976* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); see also Matthew James Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive: The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁶ Alden Young, *Transforming Sudan: Decolonization, Economic Development, and State Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Christopher R. W. Dietrich, *Oil Revolution: Anticolonial Elites, Sovereign Rights, and the Economic Culture of Decolonization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Giuliano Garavini, *The Rise and Fall of OPEC in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).