

## ROUNDTABLE

### **The Technopolitics of War in the 20th and 21st Centuries**

#### **Introduction**

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For much of the modern era the Middle East has been beset by war. From imperial intervention to regional struggle, the reach of war has left few untouched. The region's geography, the rise and fall of its most powerful institutions, and the pressing challenges of daily life remain entangled with war and its legacies. Middle Eastern wars are most often explained in terms of struggles for land and other resources, autocratic machinations, and clashes over identity and religion. All of these are true. But war is never the same everywhere. In important ways these broad frameworks hollow out the complexity and scale of war, and why it matters so much. What else is there to say about "war"? Rather than the political forces that drive it, the essays here are interested in and suggestive of the productive power of war, the ways it has transcended the battlefield and become normalized socially, politically, and environmentally. In particular, the contributors reflect on the role of experts, technical expertise, and the science of war in the making of new social, political-economic, and cultural relations across the region in the century following the start of World War I.

For many scholars, the deep impact of war has long been of interest. The essays that follow suggest lines of inquiry and expansive ways to think through wars past and present, their consequences, and the ways they have been employed as instruments of power. Paying attention to the role of machines, material practices, knowledge, expertise, disease, and even cellular-level forces in shaping outcomes, the contributors examine the ways in which war has become quotidian and unbounded. A technopolitical approach challenges what experts most often say about themselves, most importantly that they are apolitical. These essays open up multiple lines of inquiry, focusing on the role of experts and expertise in using war as a framework for remaking everything—from societies to landscapes to bodies—scientifically and technologically or, alternatively, for deflecting criticism from the material effects of violence.

At both the regional and local levels, modern war has become normalized, seized upon by a broad range of powerbrokers, especially modern experts, to pursue their own interests and discipline citizens. War is no longer something that takes place only on the battlefield. It is slow, pervasive, and increasingly entangled in practices and discourses that on the surface seem disconnected from conflict. Reestablishing these connections

and exploring both how and why they were made is a common thread running through the contributions here. Our approaches and interests suggest a broad range of ways to think about the enduring role of war in the region. These include thinking through how war became embodied and managed through dietary practice and expertise in Palestine (Seikaly); how British experts understood and treated disease in Egypt (Derr); how weapons and the destructive powers of war, particularly its toxic effects, have settled into landscapes, bodies, and the environment in Iraq (Jones); and the ways these have been contested. War has also given rise to peculiar forms of American military culture (Davis), proven useful to regimes like Saddam Husayn's in seeking to discipline citizens (Khoury), and inspired the rise of a Western expert class committed professionally to "crisis-management" (Kosmatopoulos).

It is no longer enough to say that there is privilege, profit, and power in war. The questions of how and why this has come to be so should be, and are becoming, central to the new study of war in the Middle East.