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Reimagining the Middle East and its place in the world

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Students of the Middle East love to argue about where it is and what it means, but eventually they have to face the fact that it's just another part of the wider world. That's when things get really interesting. The ambiguity of the region's geographic scope confounds all efforts to pin down its supposed uniqueness. There are too many overlaps with neighboring lands and cultures—too many fluid frontiers—to sustain credible assertions of Middle Eastern exceptionalism. Indeed, that shifting and multi-textured nature explains much of the region's allure throughout history. It has motivated and sustained my fascination with the region over several decades.

My personal encounters with the Middle East were shaped by an early education that was eclectic and haphazard—a formation inspired by John Dewey and Robert Maynard Hutchins that encouraged experience over specialization and that instilled skepticism of received knowledge. Such environments breed spirits that are ill at ease in hierarchies and settled institutions, including universities, which tend to stifle as much as they stimulate. Fortunately, I learned to adapt. In time, I came to think of campuses as space stations—low-flying orbiters tethered to Mother Earth, but also launching pads for regular travel to distant stars. Initially, the star systems I explored were Turkey, followed by Egypt and the Arab world, and, then, the wondrous galaxy of Islamdom. Gradually, I managed to combine longer distances with perspectives from related disciplines—international law, world history, and complexity theory. In quick succession, my work took me to China, Qatar, Singapore, and back to China just as the New Silk Road began winding its way across Eurasia and Africa, traversing all of the lands I had lived in earlier.

Inevitably, these experiences altered my views of geography and its role in shaping human destiny. What we regard as regions are hewn by nature, reshuffled by states, and interwoven by history. At first glance, we might discern something like deep structure, but closer scrutiny suggests far greater randomness and impermanence—quantum clouds of probabilities and moving ranges or shape shifters that leave no lasting traces. The Middle East can be viewed through all of these lenses because, however we imagine its contours, it nurtured a great profusion of ancient and classical civilizations that combined with many others to create the globalized chain of human ecosystems we inhabit today. In this context, portraying the Middle East as a well circumscribed region is far less important than understanding its links to emerging megaregions in all directions on every continent. If new megaregions continue to coevolve and fertilize one another, then future generations are more likely to care about building common bonds and shared destinies instead of accentuating the spatial barriers and cultural divergences that traditional area studies tend to celebrate and preserve.

At a time of accelerating globalization, the greatest strength of Middle East societies lies in their ability to bond with other cultures in all directions and to promote mutually beneficial exchanges across distant continents and oceans. In other words, the most interesting feature of the region is its cosmopolitan nature: its people can blend in nearly everywhere when they want to. They are not a breed apart, nor inherently different from all others.

Although cosmopolitanism is a pervasive aspect of Middle Eastern peoples, different sectors nonetheless cultivate it in various ways and with unequal enthusiasm. Introversion and extroversion compete across all nations, classes, and generations with the balance frequently tilting to one side and then the next. The abiding split between the more outgoing and the more inward looking takes two major forms—more geographical in some instances, and more psychological in others. The geographic dimension contrasts the nations of the northern plateaus—Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan—with the countries of the southern plains—the Mashreq and Egypt. The northern group has moved quickly to the forefront of international politics and commerce, strengthening ties with rising powers across Asia and, most notably, with China. The

psychological dimension is most striking in the southern zones, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. In these countries, ruling elites are increasingly divided between those who are determined to retain entrenched monopolies of power—by force if necessary—and those who are eager to broker local power-sharing arrangements that would reassure prospective partners in foreign markets.

Geographic bifurcation as a recurring pattern

The growing economic and diplomatic influence of Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan is reshaping political alignments in the Middle East, across the Afro-Eurasian hemisphere, and between the great powers globally. The rising prominence of these three nations stems, in part, from recent worldwide shifts in wealth and power that they did not initiate and cannot control. They have benefitted from the rise of China and the reassertion of Russian ambition, combined with Europe's fragmentation and America's shrinking role in global governance. In addition, Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan also derive enduring strength from inherent advantages of history, ecology, and culture—advantages that frequently give their leaders substantial leverage in influencing the wider Middle East and guiding its relations with the rest of the world.

The authors of China's New Silk Road initiative are keenly aware of these trends. They have spotlighted Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan as the central corridor joining the new land and sea routes that China is promoting to connect Atlantic and Pacific coasts in a single hemispheric market (Bianchi 2019). Seen from Beijing, these three countries form a continuous path from western China to southern Europe that advances several strategic goals at once. The overland route reduces dependence on the vulnerable sea lanes that the American navy can easily interrupt at choke points such as the straits of Malacca and Hormuz. It provides direct access to Caspian oil and gas that strengthens China's bargaining power with Russia and Middle East energy exporters. Moreover, all three countries have rail links to busy ports along the western maritime routes connecting the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea.

In combination, the land and sea corridors open multiple paths for Chinese commerce to flow north and south, as well as east and west. This intentional redundancy gives Chinese leaders alternative routes and workarounds in case of disruptions from wars or insurgencies. At the same time, traversing Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey also allows China to promote transcontinental corridors that bypass Russia and encircle India—joining commercial and strategic goals in a single plan.

China's approach is reminiscent of the Anglo-American effort to build a regional alliance system in the northern tier of the Middle East during the Cold War. The Baghdad Pact and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) were short-lived attempts to construct a military barrier between the Soviet Union and the Arab world (Cohen 2005). Washington feared that Great Britain's withdrawal from the Persian Gulf would create a vacuum that would empower Moscow and Arab nationalists to the detriment of Western allies in Israel and the oil-producing kingdoms. From its inception, the scheme was tainted by the heavy-handed role of John Foster Dulles, and it quickly unraveled when Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was overthrown in the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

In contrast, China's current outreach to the same countries is framed by a fluid multipolar environment that gives regional actors more control over their own fates and stronger leverage in managing great power rivalries. There is little sense in Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan that China is a hegemonic or neo-colonial threat comparable to the former Soviet Union or the United States. Instead, China appears to be vulnerable and overextended—militarily incapable of defending its far-flung investments and susceptible to domestic upheavals if cut off from foreign markets and resources. In this context, leaders in Ankara, Tehran, and Islamabad view China more as a potential coordinator or facilitator of collective action than as a would-be imperial master. If a counterpart to the northern tier corridor should emerge in these countries today, it will be a result of internal self-organization and popular choice rather than outside pressure and behind-the-scenes deals.

Sharp differences in topography and climate separate the northern and southern zones of the Middle East, creating a bifurcated landscape that has always promoted divergent social and political developments. In the more elevated plateaus and valleys to the north, rain-fed agriculture spawned a diversified economy that supported centralized states and powerful militaries. From about 1500–1800, the lands between Anatolia and northern India contained some of Asia's greatest agrarian empires, the Ottoman, Safavid, and Moghul realms.

Several historians have noted the critical role of these lands in shaping a cosmopolitan Islamic world and guiding its relations with Eurasia and Africa. Marshall Hodgson described these gunpowder empires as representing the highpoint of Islamic civilization in the pre-modern era, blending Arab science, Persian letters, and Turkish statecraft and controlling long-distance trade across three continents (Hodgson 1977). Cyril Black (1967) characterized these dynasties as early examples of defensive modernization—non-Western states that borrowed a steady flow of technical and social innovations from European adversaries in order to stave off their superior military power. Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1977, 2006), Fazlur Rahman (1979, 1982), and Şerif Mardin (2000) have traced the lineages of Islamic modernism to religious reformers in the same lands, including Shah Wali Allah of Delhi, the Young Ottomans, and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani.

The northern plateaus have been the targets of repeated Russian encroachments under the tsars and during the Soviet era. In response, their leaders have sought diplomatic and military alliances, first with Western Europe and, then with the United States. Modern conceptions of the Middle East as a geopolitical pivot arose hand in hand with anti-Russian anxieties over the Eastern Question, the Great Game, and Communist Containment. Thus, Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan—as well as the Islamic empires that preceded them—have been tightly enmeshed in global balance of power politics for most of the last three centuries. In the post-Cold War context, they have become increasingly assertive actors, less dependent on the United States and more open to collaboration with China in both commerce and diplomacy.

In contrast, the arid plains to the south have a much weaker agricultural base that depends on costly irrigation and careful management of water resources. With less diversified economies,

they are more reliant on trade and extractive industries which are vulnerable to fluctuations in foreign demand and competition. In the lands of the Mashreq—the Fertile Crescent and Arabia—central governments rarely control reliable surpluses or tax revenues that can support strong states or basic investments in human capital. Sparsely populated areas often have been isolated from mainstream commerce and culture, but vulnerable to invasion and occupation by stronger neighbors and Western colonialists.

Consequently, the southern lands of the Middle East have been less capable of self-defense and self-rule. Their people have endured a long series of exploitative overlords, including foreigners such as the Ottomans, British, and French, as well as post-colonial monarchies and military regimes. Authoritarian and patrimonial rulers have also impeded reformist Islamic currents by fostering rigid conservatism under royal families or radical secularism under revolutionary parties. Stifling modernist Islam has paved the way for more violent movements that target liberal and non-conformist Muslims, as well as religious minorities and foreigners.

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring uprisings of 2010–2011, much of the Mashreq and North Africa has been involved in civil war, insurrection, and diplomatic feuding. These conflicts have invited outside intervention from several directions, including great powers such as Russia, Europe, and the United States, as well as neighbors in Iran and Turkey. Meanwhile, foreign investment has dropped sharply, except for Chinese firms which have increased their activity in the Persian Gulf states. However, even the relatively risk-friendly Chinese have shifted attention northwards, pouring huge sums into New Silk Road projects in Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey.

A similar type of bifurcated politics has arisen in the Middle East on other occasions, but seldom has it been so pronounced as the current split between the rising powers of the north and the fragmenting societies of the south. Nations in the northern zone are enhancing their positions on the world stage and attracting external support for domestic development. Meanwhile, their

southern neighbors seem to be tearing themselves apart and allowing foreigners to exploit their misfortunes.

The three northern powers have responded quite differently to growing turmoil in the Mashreq. Iran has steadily expanded its influence and alliances from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean and in Yemen. In contrast, Turkey has suffered multiple blows—absorbing thousands of refugees, battling an upsurge in domestic terrorism, and facing new Kurdish-controlled enclaves on its borders. Pakistan has debated several paths for dealing with Iranian-Saudi quarrels. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's government proposed military aid for Riyadh, but opposition parties quickly vetoed the move. Meanwhile, Pakistan's security services focused on trouble spots at home and on shoring up their alliances in nearby Afghanistan.

Tehran, Ankara, and Islamabad also differed in adjusting their wider relations with the great powers. Of the three, Iran was by far the most versatile negotiator. The Iranians teamed up with Russian military forces in Syria, took center stage in China's New Silk Road program, and moved to the head of the line of new candidates for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. At the same time, Tehran managed to preserve its nuclear pact—despite American efforts to derail it—while horse trading with European and Asian investors preparing to reenter the Iranian market. Pakistan enjoyed far less room for maneuver, but steadily strengthened its hand by steering away from Washington and closer to Beijing. Entering a virtual alliance with China helped Islamabad in several ways—gaining enormous resources for economic development and enlisting powerful support against Indian pressures on its borders and in Afghanistan.

Turkey's behavior seemed erratic and self-defeating by comparison. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan quarreled with all of the major powers at once. He accused the United States of instigating a failed coup against his government and harboring the man who masterminded the conspiracy. Beijing, he said, was violating the human rights of Chinese Muslims and forcibly repatriating Uyghur refugees who were really Turkish citizens. As Turkey repeatedly changed its attitude toward the Syrian conflict, Ankara described Russia and Iran as enemies one day and partners the next. Erdoğan was particularly mercurial in dealing with European governments,

helping them manage refugee flows—in return for generous financial aid—but also denouncing them for limiting his supporters' political demonstrations in Western cities.

Protracted conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa enhanced the relative influence of the northern tier countries, but their leaders did not coordinate their actions in anything that looked like an emerging alliance with one another or with great power partners. Iran was the most assertive in taking advantage of events to extend its sphere of influence, but Pakistan chose the opposite path by concentrating on its own borders and immediate neighbors. Turkey oscillated between intervention and retrenchment—trying to take the initiative when threatened in Syria, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf, but then turning inward to stem violence in its cities and southeastern provinces. Diplomacy with powerful states outside of the Middle East was similarly varied. Iran gained credibility and leverage in several directions at once, Turkey strained relations to the breaking point with all parties, and Pakistan settled ever more firmly into a pro-Chinese orbit.

This is a far cry from the coherent northern tier that the British and Americans had envisioned as a bulwark against the imaginary partnership of international communism and Arab nationalism. Instead of shielding Western friends and assets, Tehran, Ankara, and Islamabad are freelancing and improvising according to their shifting interests—acting as patrons and local strongmen when possible, aiding outsiders as brokers and gatekeepers if the price is right, and standing on the sidelines when prudence requires. On the other hand, the northern states are not battling one another for control over their troubled neighbors or joining great power blocks with neo-colonial agendas. For the time being, at least, they are eschewing hegemonic ambitions and global alliances, waiting to see if the Arab world can pull itself back together and keeping their options open for the future.

Competing metaphors and possible futures

Although bifurcation is a recurrent pattern in Middle Eastern relations, it is not a permanent state or a dominant tendency. Even when observers describe the region in terms of dichotomous cleavages, they generally point to other splits that transcend the northern-southern division such as the Arab-Israeli conflict or ideological struggles between monarchists and republicans, secularists and Islamists, and Sunnis and Shi'ites (Sharabi 1992; Nasr 2007; Wright 2008; Lee 2009). Instead, a variety of non-dichotomous models have enjoyed wider currency among scholars and commentators who have interpreted the region for decades.

Three approaches stand out as particularly influential in shaping perceptions among policy makers and the general public. These metaphors can be described as symbiotic diversity, polycentric rivalry, and pervasive disorder. Compared to the pattern of bifurcation, these views portray the region as substantially more coherent or more fragmented—prone to greater balance and harmony on the one hand, or more intense violence and disruption on the other. When looking beyond current Middle East cleavages to imagine the region's possible futures, these alternative views naturally come to mind. But none of them seems likely to reemerge—and, in retrospect, their supposed prevalence might have been exaggerated all along.

Leading proponents of the view that Middle Eastern society formed an integrated mosaic include the American anthropologist Carleton S. Coon and the French geographer Xavier de Planhol. Coon stressed the interdependence of urban, farming, and nomadic communities comprised of multiple ethnic groups that he saw as descendants of ancient Mediterranean peoples who had invented civilization (Coon 1951). De Planhol highlighted the unifying role of the Islamic city which cast a web of constant economic and cultural exchanges across vast territories, nurturing a transnational integrity that survived countless shifts in political structure (de Planhol 1959). Both writers were inspired by Fernand Braudel's depiction of the Mediterranean as an enduring zone of human ecology, but they imagined the Middle East as a fixed and self-perpetuating organism instead of a debatable metaphor with more or less support in reality (Braudel 1996). Such expectations of a cohesive and self-sufficient megaregion seem

increasingly out of touch with the recurrent conflicts and crises that have been unleashed by generations of colonialism, revolution, and globalization (Abu-Lughod 1987).

The idea that the Middle East constitutes an autonomous international system derives primarily from the writings of Leonard Binder and Malcolm H. Kerr. Binder argued that the region's politics had a life and logic of their own beyond the control of great powers that usually dominated world affairs elsewhere (Binder 1964). Kerr emphasized the multipolarity of the system in which several rival power centers struggled for preeminence. Both authors highlighted the primacy of Egypt over would-be competitors—an advantage that Binder attributed to inherent strengths of Egyptian culture and social solidarity, but that Kerr identified with the leadership and charisma of Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir (Kerr 1971).

Binder and Kerr underlined the importance of entrenched local norms in supporting a fluid equilibrium of regional interactions—norms that outside powers ignored or violated at their peril. Their insights have resonated widely in recent international relations theory, particularly thinking about the emergence of international society, transnational regimes, and regional institutions (Bull 1977; Katzenstein 2005; Buzan and Lawson 2015). Ironically, however, the notion of a rules-based and self-balancing Middle East seems more implausible than ever after the recent spread of religious extremism and repeated military interventions from several foreign powers. As for Egypt's pivotal role in regional diplomacy, it withered steadily following the Camp David accords and nearly vanished after General Sisi's brutal suppression of the Arab Spring.

Especially since the 9/11 attacks and the aftermath of the Arab Spring, we have become accustomed to far more disparaging views of the Middle East as a cauldron of conflict and violence that menaces its neighbors in all directions. There are many examples of this approach, but we can point to the writings of Richard N. Haass in the United States and Gilles Kepel in France as among the most influential. Haass sees a fundamental design defect in the region as a whole that insures constant turmoil. In his view, the Sykes-Picot Agreement paved the way for meaningless boundaries and feeble states in the former Ottoman lands. No improvement can

occur unless political communities are redrawn to reflect the underlying realities of popular sentiment and military power. But, for Haass, such a prospect is decades away, and in the meantime, the region will continue to flounder and radiate malignance (Haass 2016).

Kepel also identifies a basic flaw as the source of disorder, but, in his case, it is religious and indigenous rather than legal and externally imposed. For Kepel and similar commentators, the collapse of mainstream religious authority has allowed fringe groups to manipulate piety and exploit poverty, producing a radical Islam that is anti-social and a political Islam that veers toward totalitarianism. Imprisoning religious extremists—in Europe as well as the Middle East—merely exacerbates the problem by providing breeding grounds for globalized networks of criminals posing as jihadists (Nossiter 2016; Worth 2017). Writers of this genre promote a dystopian view of the region that discounts important examples of democratic consolidation, capitalist development, and religious modernization in the Middle East and across the Islamic world as a whole (Bianchi 2013, 2015).

None of these metaphors grasps the reality of current politics in the Middle East, and none appears to offer a plausible vision of the future. Middle Eastern societies are most likely to strengthen their political influence if they grow closer to the other megaregions that surround them instead of focusing on supposedly exceptional characteristics that distinguish them from everyone else. Paradoxically, the region as a whole might increase in stature if its leaders think and behave less like a special transnational interest group and more like equal partners in an evolving community of megaregions across Afro-Eurasia.

How might we describe the contours of such a Middle Eastern future? It would be less self-centered and inward looking, less dominated by outsiders competing to control vital resources and transit routes, and more firmly enmeshed in mutually beneficial exchanges with neighboring regions in all directions. In other words, a more open Middle East would follow the path of the northern plateau countries—Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan—rather than the southern societies of the Mashreq—particularly Syria, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula.

The prospect of greater hemispheric integration radically transforms the surrounding environment for all Middle Eastern countries. The region is rapidly being encircled by a web of transcontinental routes across Eurasia and Africa, as well as transoceanic links between the Pacific, Atlantic, and Arctic seas. In this world, the most valuable assets of Middle Eastern societies are their geographic centrality and their cosmopolitan cultures. Their distinction lies in their talents for fitting in everywhere—not in their ability to stand apart. By bonding with multiple megaregions, they can promote and benefit from a constant flow of trade, people, and ideas between the largest and most rapidly developing countries on earth.

Throughout history, the Middle East has enjoyed broad overlaps and profound interpenetrations with all of the surrounding megaregions—with Europe and Africa in the west, with Central Asia and South Asia to the east, and even with Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific. Today those links are stronger than ever, as growing connectivity unites the lands between Istanbul and Shanghai and the waters from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Iran and Pakistan sit astride the midpoints of both corridors, joining the northern overland routes and the southern maritime lanes like a pair of cloverleaf junctions. China's New Silk Road aims to create a hemispheric community with an integrated market and the Middle East is its crossroads—the region with the most to gain by promoting transcontinental exchanges and the most to lose by obstructing them.

The field of Islamic finance illustrates the opportunities and the costs of bungling them. Middle Eastern countries are losing the race to lead the development of lucrative markets in banking and investments that appeal to pious Muslims who want to manage their money in line with their religious principles. The centers of the industry are Kuala Lumpur and London, with Dubai and other Persian Gulf contenders lagging far behind. Malaysia and Britain have created the know-how and infrastructure to meet growing demand for commercial and consumer products that cover nearly every economic activity. They have tailored the offerings to suit the varying preferences of Muslims from different cultures and age groups, accommodating many levels of economic risk and moral strictness. Most of all, they have earned a reputation for

professionalism and consistency that has encouraged trust in a fledgling industry where fears of fraud can be hard to overcome (Bianchi 2007).

In this high-stakes and competitive environment, the bankers and judges of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have made a number of needless gaffes that will inflict lasting damage on Islamic finance in their country and the rest of the region. A major Emirati energy company had issued a Sharia-compliant security—an Islamic bond or sukuk—and was making regular payments to the purchasers. The company and its legal advisers had gone to considerable expense and fanfare to prove that the arrangement conformed to industry standards—that it was both legally enforceable and religiously acceptable. Suddenly, however, the company asked a court in the emirate of Sharjah to declare the security invalid on the grounds that it violated Sharia precepts.

The company directors had no interest in the broader legal issues; they simply wanted to strongarm their creditors into accepting a new security at half the value of the one they had purchased. The same lawyers who had attested to the bond's Islamic integrity when it was issued now asked the court to nullify it. Amazingly, the judges agreed—they blocked claims for payment pending a later deliberation on the merits. The ruling ignited a chain reaction of legal challenges in several countries that undermined confidence in Islamic finance—and judicial impartiality—in the Emirates, as well as its neighbors (Vizcaino and Barbuscia 2017).

The company's gambit was clear to everyone. It was having cash flow problems because it had overvalued assets in Egypt and Iraq. The company wanted to force bondholders to share the losses while protecting its shareholders, who included several members of the government and the royal family. The Sharjah judges knew they had to share authority with British courts because the contract was governed by English law, but the underlying assets were subject to UAE law (Sharif 2017; Parket 2017). The company was playing for time. It wanted a breathing spell to threaten creditors with a possible default unless they settled for half a loaf. Emirati courts and bigwigs tagged along, hoping the mess would be sorted out in private before the judges in London blew their cover. Islamic bankers in Malaysia and England were unfazed by these antics.

In public, they expressed confidence that the industry's markets would shrug off the blip. Privately, they delighted in the prospect that the Emiratis' own goal would send more Persian Gulf cash to Asian and European markets.

A better-known instance of self-inflicted damage was the Saudi and Emirati effort to isolate Qatar for its alleged support of Islamic terrorism. The boycott campaign backfired badly, earning the Qataris solid endorsements from Turkey and Iran as well as the American military and diplomatic establishments that contradicted their own president's declarations on the matter. In retrospect, it seemed that the combined animus of Prince Mohammad Bin Salman and Donald Trump was an invaluable asset to Qatar in defeating its neighbors. The countries that tried to stigmatize Doha found themselves isolated in the end, as several European and Middle Eastern capitals dispatched mediators to put out the fire.

In these struggles, Qatar greatly benefitted from its wide-ranging influence in Asia's energy and financial markets—advantages that its foes could not match. Qatar's immense supplies of natural gas and its ability to deliver liquefied quantities over long distances insure it a privileged position for Asian customers trying to lessen their dependence on oil and coal. A large part of Qatar's gas wealth lies in underwater reserves that it shares with Iran—making the two countries inseparable commercial allies. Moreover, both Qatar and Iran are closely attuned to the interests of Russia—which holds the world's largest reserves of natural gas—and of the biggest importers in Japan, China, and South Korea (International Gas Union 2016).

Qatar's Asian alliances also include direct foreign investments through its sovereign wealth fund—one of the world's most diversified—and rising inbound investments from state and commercial banks in China. Ironically, the Saudi-Emirati attack on Qatar froze deliberations for a free trade agreement between China and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The pact was nearing completion after years of bargaining, but it required the unanimous endorsement of GCC members. Seeking to cripple Qatar economically, the Saudis and Emiratis unwittingly handed it a veto that stymied their own hopes for new trade and investment (Hollingsworth 2017).

Transcontinental commerce is particularly critical for Saudi Arabia and the UAE as they try to wean themselves from dependency on falling oil revenues. Jeddah and Dubai have emerged as the twin gateways for long-distance trade and migration across the breadth of Africa and Asia, spanning every country between Senegal and the Philippines. The magnets for this network are the religious festivals of *Hajj* and *Umra*, which attract a constant flow of pilgrims, tourists, merchants, migrant workers, and refugees from every corner of the Muslim world. During their visits to Mecca and Medina, these travelers pass through the emporiums of the Red Sea and Persian Gulf, where they purchase huge amounts of Asian imports; then, they ship this merchandise back home and resell it in supply chains that extend from modern shopping malls to shops and stalls in thousands of small towns and villages.

A keystone of current Saudi economic planning is to make the *Umra* a year-long attraction that will allow foreign tourists to visit—and shop—throughout the kingdom and neighboring countries (Bianchi 2017). But there is plenty of competition for this business, including smaller ports such as Doha. When Saudi and Emirati leaders tried to cut Qatar's commercial lifelines, several Asian shippers began rerouting their cargos directly to Doha—bypassing the usual destination in Dubai. Port authorities in Doha reported an instant spike in business and adopted ambitious expansion plans to handle the greater traffic (*The New Arab* 2017; *Daily Sabah* 2017).

The missteps over Islamic finance and Persian Gulf diplomacy stem from a crippling psychological weakness—a fatal blind spot concerning the Middle East's place in the world at large. In both cases, authoritarian leaders failed to appreciate the value of transnational relationships and the feelings of trust that sustain them. Determined to gain the upper hand in commercial and political squabbles with their neighbors, they sabotaged the assets that mattered the most to everyone else—their reputations for honesty and reliability. Worse yet, they intentionally put religion at the center of the disputes, claiming the authority to decide unilaterally what was genuinely Islamic and what was beyond the pale. In the Muslim world and

beyond, observers quickly saw these tactics as self-dealing rather than as principled differences over religious and cultural values.

The Saudi and Emirati governments wanted to stand apart from—and above—the rest of the region and the international community in general. They hoped to legitimate their positions by claiming a kind of Middle Eastern—or Arabian—exceptionalism based on supposedly unique aspects of regional tradition and history. But in today's world, being too exceptional makes the Middle East weaker and less competitive. The region's chief advantages stem from its multivalence and cosmopolitanism—the shared experiences and overlapping identities that allow its people to bond with far-flung societies that might not connect directly with one another. The steady integration of Afro-Eurasia favors the entrepot over the oasis—the extroverted Levantine with partners in distant ports over the self-possessed patriarch resting on the family fortune (Mansel 2012).

The Middle East in a world of interdependent megaregions: notes for young scholars

As citizens of Middle Eastern countries define their worlds more broadly, their neighbors across Asia and Africa are doing the same. Regional identities are constantly expanding as younger generations—who are increasingly mobile and highly educated—rethink their relationships with lands and cultures that no longer seem as remote or exotic as their parents and grandparents once assumed. Transregional exchanges are more rapid and pervasive than ever with far-reaching implications for every aspect of social and political life. As the world's oldest and most central crossroads, the Middle East is being profoundly transformed by these forces—absorbing them and contributing to them at the same time.

The most important change is the broad challenge to entrenched authority in all its forms—especially familial, religious, and political. For most people, the effects are both liberating and disruptive. The greatest beneficiaries are youth, women, educators, journalists,

artists, religious liberals, and non-conformists of all stripes. The most threatened interests are those who believe that the Middle East should nurture a distinctive tradition that privileges patriarchy, orthodoxy, and ethnic solidarity. Although freedoms and rights are expanding, there are huge disparities in the abilities of social classes to exploit these advantages. Poorer and less educated groups still lack the resources needed for effective organization and collective action—the skills that Alexis de Tocqueville (2002) called the art of association. This means that even when Middle Eastern societies achieve a greater degree of power sharing, they still suffer from an urban middle-class bias that favors business and professional groups over peasants, workers, and migrants.

The Middle East's relative position in the Islamic world is also changing rapidly. The majority of Muslims live outside of the region in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa. Mecca remains the spiritual center of Islam, but that role is largely symbolic. In terms of economic dynamism and political influence, the Muslim world encompasses at least a dozen modern cities that consider themselves as global leaders. Most of them have built extensive networks of Islamic learning that equal or surpass the once dominant schools of Arabia and Egypt. The practice and interpretation of Islam is freer and more pluralistic than ever. Educated Muslims tend to make their own decisions on matters of faith, instead of deferring to traditional religious leaders who often have less access to scientific and professional knowledge.

In the global flow of Islamic opinion, Middle Easterners are listening to and learning from other regions as much as they are teaching them. In fields such as Islamic finance, democratic theory, women's rights, and international law, the most influential thinking is coming from places like Malaysia, Indonesia, Nigeria, Senegal, and Western Europe (Arkoun 2002; Nasr 2004; Kull 2008; Diagne 2011). These realities have demolished the outdated notion that Islamic lands are divided between a core area of authentic practice and outlying peripheries where pre-Islamic customs prevail.

As Middle Easterners spend more time traveling and living abroad, they realize that their region is just one of many crossroads in a world where borders are porous and populations are

constantly on the move. They gain firsthand experience with multicultural and multiracial societies where Muslim communities coexist and interact with Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Confucians, Hindus, and Daoists. Across Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas, these groups are sharing religious festivals, political struggles, businesses, and family problems on a daily basis. Inevitably, these experiences reverberate back home—for better and for worse—reshaping Middle Eastern views of ethnic and sectarian relations in an explicitly global and universal context. The so-called clash of civilizations inspires vigorous counter-movements to promote dialogues and joint ventures among all traditions. Middle Eastern voices are increasingly prominent in these efforts, in both the popular media and scholarly circles (Ikeda and Tehranian 2003; Salvatore and Eickelman 2004; Ahmed and Forst 2005; Bulaç 2006; Nasr and Weiming 2010).

Emerging megaregions are transforming one another through direct exchanges between people and social groups that act independently of—and, often, contrary to—their governments. Power and information are too widely dispersed for state authorities to contain, no matter how much they ramp up investments in censorship and surveillance. Popular impatience is infectious, particularly among the young and marginalized. China's leaders are trying to orchestrate Afro-Eurasian integration through their New Silk Road initiatives, but they are quickly realizing that they have unleashed potent forces they cannot control—even among their own citizens. In the Middle East and elsewhere, China's prospective partners are pursuing independent strategies to expand their regional and global influence in ways that no great power can prevent.

Middle Eastern peoples face a new landscape of interdependent regions and widening identities that offers them multiple paths for the future. Islam, the Arab world, Eurasia, South-South alliances, and Afro-Asian ties beckon simultaneously to a region that has constantly reimagined itself in terms of shifting currents in world history.

Young scholars can benefit from these trends and advance them at the same time, but this requires self-consciously pushing your investigations outside the normal comfort zones of current scholarship on the Middle East. In particular, it means more decisive movements in two

directions. Geographically, scholars should turn their attention outward to include the host of surrounding societies that are becoming more enmeshed with the Middle East as they form transcontinental networks that feed off one another and generate ripples of change around the world. Sociologically, they should shift attention downward—away from elites and formal institutions toward newly empowered citizenries who are revolutionizing the political arena and stressing the urgency of justice and harmony with nature.

If you think you know where the Middle East is, then go to its outer limits and learn about the neighboring regions. After that, explore the neighbors of those neighbors and ask what sort of patterned disorders you detect in the wider configurations. If you've studied a major Middle Eastern language, learn another from the same family—a sister or cousin—and, then, use it to learn others, as well. Notice how overlapping languages often point to parallel connections of culture, psychology, and social organization.

Use a similar strategy for subregional political systems and emerging markets. Move away from the current power elites and centers of wealth to locate the less visible forces that will shape the regimes and transnational economies of tomorrow. Ask your informants to introduce you to colleagues and allies in other networks. Follow the links until you can trace the outlines of the wider chains and webs they comprise.

If you have a specialization, put it aside for a while. Send it on vacation and, when you meet again, introduce it to a related field—an unknown sister or cousin in whom it can see just enough of itself to spark a desire for closer contact. Change your mind—routinely. Play with your ideas. Keep turning them upside down and inside out until it becomes habitual. Enjoy discovering writers in other fields who organize grand ideas across disciplines, cultures, and eras—synthetic thinkers such as Robert Bellah (2011) on religion, Enrico Coen (2012) on evolution, Arthur Danto (2013) on aesthetics, and many others.

Find some facts and make them your friends. Learn enough statistics to create an intelligible graph or table. Then, make a simple scatter plot showing the covariance of two variables that particularly intrigue you. Be careful not be too impressed with the main trend line.

Focus on the outliers and anomalies; they're usually the surprise discoveries that will overturn your assumptions and lead you to new insights.

If your inquiries are bounded by natural features such as mountains, seas, or deserts, then imagine them as crossroads instead of barriers—as porous membranes instead of hardened fences. Trace the movements of diasporas, merchants, pilgrims, and adventurers who circulate innovation between cultures, shrinking distance and compressing time in every era.

Ibn Battuta in Malacca and Quanzhou, Evliya Çelebi in Europe and Mecca, Zheng He's armadas in Aden and Zanzibar, the Hadhramis of Java and Singapore, the Kadoories of Bombay and Shanghai—in different ways, all were Middle Easterners who never viewed themselves as such. Their experiences were unusual for their times, but commonplace today. The relentless interpenetration of markets, audiences, and aspirations makes emerging megaregions more evident every day. And that, in turn, invites wider and more critical perspectives on the imagined regions they are both invigorating and superseding.

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