Regionalism Revisited in the Post-Arab Spring Middle East

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INTRODUCTION

> One hundred years after the rise of the post-Ottoman political order in the region, the Westphalian state system in the region is under increasing pressure, with an increasing number of fragile states, civil wars, violent non-state actors, sectarian tensions and new self-determination-seeking regions.

The rise of regionalism after the Cold War as a positive phenomenon – leading to economic, political and security cooperation in a geographically defined area – is waning with the rise of nationalist and protectionist trends in global politics, as evidenced by the election of Donald Trump and the United Kingdom's decision to leave the EU. Nevertheless, regionalism continues to occur in varying forms and varying degrees of complexity and deserves scholarly attention, particularly in times of dramatic change, as in the post-Arab Spring Middle East. The question of what types of regional order and governance have prevailed in the Middle East following the first demonstrations in Tunisia in December 2010 has become a global concern. Additionally, the questions of what is regional and what is global have become even more perplexing given that the post-Arab Spring conflicts, such as the Syrian civil war, opened a Pandora's box of worldwide challenges, such as trans-border armed groups, migration and proxy wars. One hundred years after the rise of the post-Ottoman political order in the region, the Westphalian state system in the region is under increasing pressure, with an increasing number of fragile states, civil wars, violent non-state actors, sectarian tensions and new self-determination-seeking regions. A power shift towards transnational, non-state and non-Arab actors has gained further prominence since the Arab Spring in 2011. Therefore, any review of regionalism in the Middle East must consider this growing shift along with the durability of most authoritarian states.

Considering the extent of change, with its global repercussions (such as the flow of refugees, and the rise of the Islamic State), the Arab Spring experience has also intensified academic discussions to better associate Middle Eastern developments with the main theoretical debates.[1] In addition, there is a strong trend not to limit the study of the Middle East to the confines of existing theories, including the study of regionalism there. In this regard, Louise Fawcet argues that viewing the region through either a realist or constructivist paradigm and then characterizing regional integration in the Middle East as "failed" because it does not exhibit "a Vinerian customs union or a Deutschian security community" is inappropriate.[2] Encouragingly, a new, open-minded view of regionalism in the Middle East that has adopted farther-reaching explanatory tools in the wake of the Arab Spring has gained ground. Currently, combining transnational networks and interactions with the old form of state-led regionalism seems the most viable means to elaborate the current state of regionalism in the region.[3] Has the role of the state in regionalism lost further ground since the Arab Spring? Have setbacks in interstate regionalism occurred with the rise of sectarian polarization since the Arab Spring? Are the usual operational patterns of regionalism changing with further fragmentation in the wake of the Arab Spring? Are new patterns of regionalization in the Middle East posing more varied and serious challenges to international society? All these questions represent important points of inquiry

that require multilevel and multi-actor explanations in the effort to characterize the state of regionalism in the Middle East.

FRAMING REGIONALISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The definition of "region" is essential for any regional analysis, including that of the Middle East. As with other regions, the Middle East is a constructed region whose geographical boundaries and level of *region-ness* are open to discussion. However, the most common geographical definition of the Middle East is the area that includes all the Arab states and three non-Arab states: Israel, Iran and Turkey. Because this paper addresses post-Arab Spring regionalism, the focus will be on the state of regionalism in the Arab Middle East. Similar to most regions of the world, the Middle East was first framed by strategic considerations and military concerns.[4] Considering Europe's colonial past, the course of the Cold War and the war on terror, it is hard to separate the idea of the Middle East "from the power and the knowledge created and imposed by the West on the rest of the world."[5] The Middle East was first mentioned by this name in a 1902 article entitled "The Persian Gulf and International Relations" by American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, who described the strategic value of the region for British imperial needs.[6] The term "Middle East" was adopted during the Second World War because the British referred to their forces in Egypt as the Middle East Command.

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There has been a tendency to deemphasize the geographic elements of regions while focusing on political and ideational characteristics. According to J. Peter Katzenstein, regions are "socially constructed and politically contested."[7] In defining regions, scholars underscore various qualifications for being or becoming a region. For instance, Bruce M. Russett emphasized factors such as geographical proximity, social and cultural homogeneity, political institutions, and economic interdependence.[8] In contrast, Louis J. Cantori and Steven L. Spiegel regarded geographical contiguity; common historical, cultural, and linguistic bonds as well as international interactions as necessary to the definition of a region.[9] Based on these qualities, where the Middle East stands is not clear. Considering cultural and religious commonalities, the Middle East has the potential to be regarded as a region. Various studies, such as the Arab Human Development Report 2002, have suggested that "perhaps no other group of states in the world has been endorsed with the same potential for cooperation, even integration, as have the Arab countries" given that the area has a common historical experience and that the supranational Arab-Muslim identity represents a relatively high degree of cultural, religious, and linguistic homogeneity.[10] The region has also been defined by a significant degree of interaction based on extensive family ties across borders and the presence of transnational actors, including Islamists, migrants, and informal business links.[11] In addition, the emergence of transnational Arab media such as al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya has created a new Arab public space.[12] However, there is a broad consensus in the literature that regionalism in the Middle East in the sense of social and political cohesiveness or economic interdependence – or the existence of region-wide institutions – is not a strong phenomenon.[13] A scarcity of regional cooperation in the area has led to the Middle East being labelled "the region without regionalism" or a space of weak regionalism. The Middle East is often viewed as exceptional, resisting

global trends of economic and political liberalism as well as regionalism in the age of globalization[14] For a long time, the absence of viable states, the authoritarian nature of Arab states, and external penetration have been generally accepted as the reasons why region-building in the Middle East has been difficult. Intraregional trade in the Arab Middle East also displays a lack of complementarity as trade patterns consist of raw materials and agriculture. The large difference in GDP per capita between the Gulf states and the rest of the Arab countries is also regarded as one of the reasons for failing economic unity.[15]

REGIONALISM OR REGIONALIZATION

Since WWI, the concept of an enduring national Arab state has formed the basis of regional cooperation in the Middle East at the expense of sublevel or supra-level cooperation. However, after the Arab Spring, the fragmentation of states, as in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, and the adverse impact of such fragmentation on neighbouring states weakened regional cooperation at the state level. Protecting the territorial nation state gained even more urgency than previously. In addition, external initiatives that promoted regional schemes with the aim of coordinating regional security, such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership or the Greater Middle East, lost credibility and influence

as alternatives to regionalism. However, in the early days of the Arab Spring, the diffusing effects of street protests against autocratic rulers in Tunisia and Egypt on other Arab countries raised hopes that the Arab Middle East would see the beginning of a new era of regional unity. At the time, with a wave of synchronized demonstrations occurring across the region, the Arab world seemed more unified than nearly any other time. This interconnectedness also revealed the numerous modes of engagement possible in the region, ranging from blog writing, artistic expression, and mass participation in demonstrations to transnational mobility.[16] This interconnectedness through varied forms of networking among trans-state actors in the region has continued. Concurrently, viewing the state of regionalism in the Middle East in terms of the *New Regionalism Approach (NRA)* has become even more relevant to comprehending current and future forms of regionalism in the Middle East.[17] As Björn Hettne and Frederick Söderbaum observe, the NRA's definition of the region as a space open to reconstruction and the approach's acceptance of a multiplicity of actors and different forms of regionalism could offer a better perspective from which to consider the Arab Middle East.[18] It seems that certain distinctions made in the literature regarding the conduct and processes of regional cooperation – such as regionalism and regionalization – are relevant to better comprehending regionalism in the context of the Arab Middle East. In

discussing the multifaceted experience of regionalism in various regions, regionalism and regionalization are two concepts that are often used to characterize different forms and stages of regional cooperation and interaction. Examining intra-regional relations beyond the state has become particularly necessary and more explanatory since the Arab Spring. Studying the intensity and variety of transnational interactions as opposed to worsening inter-state cooperation in the context of weakening territorial nation states, scholars have begun to understand the Middle East as an area of dynamic regionalization but also as a poor example of interstate regionalism.[19] While regionalism is generally understood as a state- or states-led project designed to reorganize a particular regional space along defined economic, institutional, and political lines, regionalization, in contrast, defines more spontaneous, bottom-up, endogenous processes, which involve non-state actors in a variety of networks.[20] The two concepts are interwoven and hard to differentiate. However, regionalization and regionalism are perceived differently in terms of the actors who are involved, their inclusion of top-down or bottom-up initiatives, and their attention to the outcome or procedure. Nevertheless, there is no such thing as state-led regionalism as opposed to non-state-led regionalism. Regional orders encompass both regionalization and regional institutions. Therefore, the question is no longer whether regionalism occurs in the Middle East but what form it is adopting or what characteristics it displays.

WEAKENING STATE-LED REGIONALISM VIS-À-VIS INCREASING NEW FORMS OF REGIONALIZATION

Prior to the Arab Spring, globalization had already strained nation-state capacity in the Middle East, as it had everywhere. After 2011, it became even harder for authoritarian Arab states to control the flow of ideas, goods and people through porous borders. The Arab Spring split the regional states into three: "The Arab Spring countries (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria), the countries that withstood the Arab Spring (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar)" and the countries that introduced constitutional reform (Morocco, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain).[21] Meanwhile, interstate regionalism in the form of regional organizations had to come to terms with the unprecedented outcomes of the Arab uprisings. Following the uprisings in 2011, the two leading representatives of inter-state regionalism, the Arab League and the GCC, initially reassessed their standing and tried to improve their image while adjusting themselves to the region's changing political dynamics.[22] The first formal regional organization in the Middle East – the Arab League – came into being in 1945. The Arab League was initially founded by Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen. It currently has 22 member states and is based on a shared culture and language with the aim of serving the common good of all Arab states. State-centred regionalism in the Middle East has always been on the

defence vis-à-vis strong sub-state (i.e., sectarian, ethnic) and supra-state (i.e., Arab, Muslim) identities. However, for example, having the feeling of *Arabness* has not led to a common understanding regarding common norms that each Arab state should adopt. Even the strong appeal of Arab nationalism (Pan-Arabism) during Gamel Abdel Nasser's reign did not result in cross-national unity. As Michael Barnett notes, shared supra-state identities do not necessarily promote regional cooperation as long as inward-looking state survival takes priority.[23] As a regional organization, the Arab League was awarded only limited autonomy by its member states, which preferred not to delegate any supreme role to the organization at the expense of national sovereignty. As stated in the Charter of the League, state sovereignty was a priority for any member state, and each state undertook not to intervene in one another's regime-related issues.[24] The existing cooperation among the authoritarian states of the Arab League is defined as "authoritarian regionalism" or "regime-boosting regionalism," in which the status, legitimacy, and general interests of Arab regimes are strengthened through the League at the expense of genuine regional cooperation.[25] Regarding these circumstances, Charles Tripp states that leaders who are unwilling to make compromises with domestic constituencies appear similarly unwilling to make compromises with neighbouring states.[26] Other than its rare contribution to regional cooperation, the Arab League has generally remained incompetent in resolving regional crises. With the exception of the Israel issue, League members are also rarely united on critical issues. The League's capabilities in terms of regionalism were put to a new test by the Arab Spring.

When the Arab uprisings erupted in 2011, the major concern of the member states was how to stop these waves of public empowerment. Although resistance to authoritarianism was evident, there were no mechanisms to inspire or support democratic transition in the area, as experienced in the relationship between the European Union (EU) and post-Soviet Europe in the aftermath

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of 1989. Their own stability and national security became the leading concern for the member states of the League. For instance, when the Libyan crisis erupted, the League first seemed quite engaged and took a radical decision to become involved in the internal affairs of an Arab country at the expense of its charter, subsequently taking the matter to the UN Security Council. This decision resulted in UN Resolutions 1970 and 1973, which authorized military intervention against the Qaddafi regime. Despite this unusual over-involvement at the expense of non-intervention, the League has been gradually sidelined by superior US and European involvements, including the massive NATO bombardment of Libya. The Arab League was initially also active with respect to Syria, suspending Syria's membership based on Assad's policy towards Syrian civilians and dispatching joint observer missions with the UN in 2012 and 2013.[27] It also proposed a peace plan for Syria. However, it fell short of providing an Arab solution to the Syrian civil war, and Syria increasingly became "a disgrace" to the League after its early engagement.[28] As the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Iran, Russia and other external forces were gaining defining influence in Syria, the League remained ineffective. The League focused on protecting the surviving regimes among its member states and their allies. Consequently, the League announced the formation of a joint military force consisting of approximately 40,000 troops in 2015, which was a novelty in the face of increasing security concerns in Yemen.[29] Saudi Arabia heavily supported this decision. Saudi Arabia's desire to return to the pre-Arab Spring status quo caused it to intervene in Bahrain in February 2011 and Yemen in 2015 and also to extend support to local opposition groups in Syria.[30] These Saudi-led military interventions were overlooked by the Arab League regardless of the non-intervention principle that is addressed in the Charter of the League. As shown by the Saudi case, regional power intervention and outside-power intervention in

Arab conflicts, directly or indirectly through proxy groups, have gained momentum.

In addition to the Arab League, another institutionalized regional actor required to test its capacity by post-Arab Spring conditions and display its ability to counter the challenges of this new regional architecture was the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The GCC was founded as a sub-regional organization in 1981 as a result of security concerns regarding possible adverse impacts of the 1979 Iranian revolution. Until the recent Saudi Arabia-Qatar confrontations, the GCC, which includes Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman, had been accepted as the best example of interstate regionalism in the Middle East.[31] However, this transformation was destined to fail in the post-Arab Spring period. After the weakening of the political status of Egypt and the fragmentation of Libya and Syria after the Arab Spring, the Gulf region has increasingly become the dominant subregion in the Middle East.[32] Nevertheless, this development did not boost regionalism in the Gulf but gave way to new political tensions and exacerbated old sectarian tensions between neighbours.

Saudi Arabia attempted to mobilize Sunni Arab countries under its hegemony against the rise of the Iran-led Shia bloc, particularly in the context of the regional sectarian divide (i.e., the so-called New Arab Cold War), but failed to succeed. The sectarian clash with Iran did not result in intra-Sunni unity either. Diverging threat perceptions regarding Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood created the most serious rupture between Saudi Arabia and Qatar within the GCC and put the most-praised regional organization into the worst disarray in its 38-year history. Not only the sectarian divide but also the fragmentation among Sunni Muslims regarding support for the Muslim Brotherhood or Salafi groups distorted Sunni Arab solidarity and undermined Islam as a source of unity for the region. Qatar declined to designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization despite the contrary views of Saudi Arabia and the GCC. In 2017, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE announced that they had cut all relations with Qatar and imposed a boycott against the country. Meanwhile, bilateralism has gained further importance in the region at the expense of regionalism. Riyadh turned to the US and sought to strengthen its military ties with Washington.[33] Not only regional states but also their Western interlocutors, the US and the EU increasingly, prefer bilateralism to multilateralism in the region at the expense of regionalism. Contrary to its enthusiasm regarding the Arab uprisings in their early months, the EU soon perceived the authoritarian regimes of the MENA region "as indispensable allies in the fight against terrorism and irregular migration by Europeans."[34] The nation state's prioritization of its own security and the increasing securitization of regional affairs have undermined the already weak state-led regionalism even further.

REGIONALIZATION IN THE POST-ARAB SPRING MIDDLE EAST

Since the onset of the Arab Spring, a new type of regionalization based on the increase in refugees, non-state armed groups and trans-border sectarian identification has gained momentum in the region. At the beginning of the Arab uprisings across the region, there was an emerging hope regarding the region's improvement in terms of adopting the international liberal order as individuals from all walks of life, including young activists, trade unionists, members of the middle class, women, students and Islamists, united to raise their voices against economic deprivation, political repression, corruption and injustice. The slogans that addressed bread and freedom in Tahrir Square were nearly identically echoed in the main squares of other Arab Spring countries.[35] Surveys conducted at the peak of the demonstrations in 2011 revealed that a vast majority of respondents believed in "the existence of a united Arab nation bond."[36] The Arab Spring was not the work of any particular political or ideological orientation, and the eruption of the Arab Spring was not a moment of victory for either the pan-Arab or Islamist trend.[37] It is also important to note that this uprising was a bottom-up phenomenon that was quite different from previous uprisings led by particular authoritarian leaders or military officers.[38] Meanwhile, in addition to the classically organized forms of civil society, such as well-known NGOs in the area, new forms of civil society activism were observed and awarded the new name "activated citizenship" throughout the Arab Spring protests.[39] Traditional, long-standing civil society groups were not as active as expected in the anti-regime demonstrations. The emergence of civil society activism in the Middle East during the 1990s was regarded as a positive sign of democratization, but such activism remained ineffective in challenging state authoritarianism. Civil society organisations either remained under the direct control of "respective governments as government organized NGOs or operate within tight governmental supervision."[40] During the Arab Spring, it was also clearly demonstrated that "open and horizontal" features of social media provided previously marginalized groups, such as youth, women and ethnic minorities in the MENA region, a new "Arab public sphere."[41] Unfortunately, the widening Arab space that was enthusiastically greeted during the Arab Spring did not become a smooth, negotiated form of regional cooperation for a common cause. The Arab streets lacked a common leadership, means and even a common vision with which to create a real transformation. In contrast, in the wake of the Arab Spring, conflict has also become an important cause of the increasing mobility of individuals from all social classes and professions. For example, the post-Arab Spring developments have enforced a new

form of regionalization via the increasing number of refugees. The neighbouring countries of the conflict regions in the Middle East have faced large numbers of forced migrants, as has been most evident after the Syrian civil war. In addition, regionalization in the form of expanding cross-border radicalization is on the rise. Both cooperative and conflictive regional dynamics are simultaneously in play. All political and military developments in nearly all critical regional issues are heavily influenced by several non-state armed actors, including Hamas, Hezbollah, ISIS, the PKK and the PYD. The proliferation of non-state actors and transnational armed groups and the rise of multi-layered tribal, ethnic and sectarian identity beyond the state has resulted in a search for new forms of organization and cooperation for the Middle East. The rise of new modes of regionalization driven by civil wars through transnational armed groups and unprecedented refugee flows pose additional security challenges for territorial nation states in the Middle East. The on-going civil wars and their region-wide repercussions have made the region more interconnected in a negative sense since these repercussions are deeply felt and observed not only in the region but also around the world. However, signs of cooperative intraregional mobility should not cause one to overlook the dual character of regionalization. The regionalization of cultural productions in the Arab world, such as Arab literature and cinema, are continuing to make Arab peoples increasingly more aware of the Arab regional space. In addition, migrant workers remain an important bond among Arab states. As Leila Vignal notes, constraints on transnational mobility in the Middle East "by the lack of physical transportation infrastructures, by limited personal financial resources and by border regimes, conflicts" are tough, but regionalization is on the move.[42]

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CONCLUSION

It seems that regionalization is increasing at the expense of regionalism in the Arab Middle East. While the Middle East might not be a region without regionalism but one of increasing human contacts, transnational movements and a variety of non-state actors, it seems that these signs of high-level regionalization are failing to contribute to better regional cooperation for a common cause but, rather, to conflict and tension. The Arab Spring has made the region more interconnected despite the on-going civil wars and their region-wide repercussions. Meanwhile, the old form of state regionalism, the Arab League and the GCC, has continued to underperform and remain ineffective. Different regional players have different visions of regional order. ISIS is seeking a caliphate that would abolish all nation-state borders, whereas borderland regions are becoming quasi-independent by asking for self-determination. Non-Arab regional states, such as Iran and Turkey, have started to become more involved in Arab affairs, as clearly indicated by their intervention in the Syrian civil war. Despite too much talk of Islam and Islamism inside and outside the region, both the sectarian divide between Shia and Sunni and the fragmentation among Sunni Muslims have distorted Islamic solidarity. Traditional issues of common regional concern, such as Palestine, have been sidelined by increasing attention paid to larger issues, such as Syria.[43] Witnessing great-power rivalry, such as US-Russian tests of strength over Syria, is causing polarization among regional states by pressuring them to take sides. For the foreseeable future, multifaceted, novel forms of regionalism may continue to appear with multilayered levels of regional cooperation, transnational diffusion or unwanted forms of regionalization in the region. In this context, the Middle East continues to be a region not easily associated with cooperation or integration. Considering all the uncertainties and challenges ahead for the region, we would do well to recall Fawcett's reminder that "there is no ideal region, nor any single agenda to which all regions aspire. Regions, like states, are of varying compositions, capabilities aspirations."[44] ∎

NOTES

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- **Karen Pierce**
  British Ambassador
  to the United Nations

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Regionalism Revisited in the Post-Arab Spring Middle East

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The Arab Middle East may be coming together as never before, but so far that's inviting more confrontation than cooperation. In this Strategic Update, Professor Ayşegül Sever explores the new forces of regionalization and crises of regionalism in the world's most contentious corner.