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Governance and the Problem of Knowledge

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Chapter 5

A Perspective from the Middle East: Governance and the problem of knowledge

Nida Alahmad¹

5.1 Introduction

Is there a critical regional perspective from the Middle East on global governance? Focusing on the politics of the Middle East and the largest and oldest regional governance body - the Arab League, this chapter argues that while it is possible to speak about a ‘global’ or a ‘regional’ governance structure, speaking of a *critical* regional perspective is not possible. This is due to three reasons that are connected to the problem of the construction of knowledge. First, there is the problem of governance as a technology of ordering the world that requires the production of abstracted forms of knowledge about the objects that it tries to act upon. Second, a regional governance structure, might give an appearance of a coherent perspective through the policies and decisions of a governance body. However, this is not a critical perspective as it hardly reflects the perspective of the populations governed. While a region may seem like a coherent unit through policies and decisions of regional governance bodies, regional politics and life, which are the source of the critique, are not as clearly defined and thus cannot produce a unitary or coherent perspective. Third, a cultural (counter) perspective on governance is also extremely difficult to determine. This is because global governance is a techno-political rather than a geo-cultural form of ordering and perceiving the world. In the following sections, these three claims will be explained and expanded upon. At the most basic level a critical perspective that would reflect the demands, aspirations and cultural manifestations of the populations that

¹ The author would like to thank André Bank, Andrea Teti, Anna Triandafyllidou and the anonymous reviewer of this volume for reading earlier drafts of this chapter and providing insightful and helpful comments. The final version of this piece has benefited from Robert Vitalis’s critical reading and suggestions.

are governed, is one that can only be reflected through politics rather than perspectives that are channeled and produced by regional governance bodies.

The arguments extended in this chapter are mostly apparent in the context of the Middle East, although by no means should they suggest a regional exceptionalism. The non-exceptionalism of the Middle East shall be clear through comparative examples with other regions based on the works in this volume. At the same time, the main argument of this chapter, that a *critical* regional perspective is not possible to extract through regional governance bodies, but rather through empirical daily political lives of the governed, is mostly visible in the Middle East. This is due to the fact that the region has low integration levels and is currently witnessing a radical reconfiguration of power relations. This transitional moment means that regional governance structures are also witnessing a moment of reconfiguration and contestation over their function, meaning, and scope of governance.

5.2 The Current State of Affairs - The Arab Spring and the Iraqi experience as historical junctures in governance

A series of uprisings in 2011 across the Arab Middle East demanding political reforms and social justice, that came to be known as the Arab Spring² have been one of the catalysts for the this reconfiguration. While the full ramifications of the Arab Spring are yet to be known, it marked the entry of the region into a pronounced struggle to redefine regional power dynamics through a series of proxy wars³, inter-state interventions, and the emergence of numerous

² A comprehensive historical account of these uprisings that details their composition, political makeup and organization is yet to be written. However, for a collection of accounts of issues related to the Arab Spring and attempt to explain aspects of this phenomenon see McMurray and Ufheil-Somers (2013), Lynch (2014) and Gerges (2014).

³ The region has witnessed a number of proxy wars in the past 40 years in which regional and international powers compete for regional influence through providing financial, logistical or political support and occasionally physically participating in armed conflicts in a third country. For example, and most famously, the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) was fueled by Iranian, Syrian, Israeli and Arab Gulf interventions. More recently, Iraq and Syria offer prime examples in which major regional powers, such as Iran, Turkey and Arab Gulf countries, compete for

influential Islamist non-state-actors that in extreme cases rival states' control over means of violence and control of territory. These regional struggles were/ are animated by national dynamics. At one extreme there is the Syrian civil war (2011-present), which has been responsible for massive destruction of towns and cities, deaths among civilians and one of the biggest refugee crises in current history.⁴ On the other extreme, there is the Tunisian experience of national governance renegotiation through constitutional reforms and electoral democratization. Between these two extremes, deliberations and experiments with national and regional governance arrangements continue to take place.⁵

If the Arab Spring has ushered, among other things, a wave of governance re-design at the national levels, Iraq provided an example (to avoid) for these attempts to redesign political life and governance methods. Between 2003 and 2006, Iraq witnessed a massive governance experiment in a period of transition. The Iraqi example is useful to consider in order to illustrate the first problem that is of concern in this chapter: that of knowledge abstraction in governance practices. While the Iraqi case is a national case, not a regional one, its consequences, the lessons learned, and the expertise that has been built, have all had regional ramifications.

Less than a decade before the initiation of the Arab Spring, Iraq witnessed major transitional moments: from the US-led occupation in 2003 and the consequent collapse of the state institutions, to the eruption of the sectarian civil war 2006-07. Illustrating the extent of the

influence through supporting and arming different fighting factions in both countries. This is discussed further in the sections below.

⁴ As of May 2016 there are 4.8 million Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR. Of this numbers there are 2.1 million refugees in Jordan, Egypt and Iraq and 2.7 million in Turkey (UNHCR 2016). As of December 2015, it has been estimated that among those who stayed in Syria there are 6.5 million Internally Displaced and 72% of the population has no access to clean water. For further details on the extent of the humanitarian crisis see the UN's Humanitarian Response Plan for 2016 (UNOCHA 2015).

⁵ Other countries that have went (or are still going through) constitutional reforms include Libya, Egypt, and Yemen.

weakening of the Iraqi state, due to over a decade of international sanctions in the 1990s⁶ and the consequent policies post-2003, in June 2014 a multinational Islamist militant group, the Islamic State, took control over a vast territory of the country's eastern and northeastern provinces. Inspired by the events of the Arab Spring, protests continue to take place in major Iraqi cities demanding better governance, social justice and democratic politics.⁷ Upon the US-led occupation of the country in 2003, Iraq became the object of an American state-building project. A main aspect of this project was the introduction of democracy as a governance method that would transform the country into a regional democratic model. Knowledge about the country and the region was translated into more 'governable' forms of information by international (and especially American) governance experts. The following section will draw on examples from the Iraq experience to illustrate the first point in the chapter's argument on the difficulties to extract a critical (regional) perspective on governance due to the nature of governance (national, regional, or global level) as a technology of ordering that requires the production of abstracted forms of knowledge about the objects that it tries to act upon.

5.3 Global Governance and the Processes of Translation - The Necessity of Abstraction

Global governance as an organizing term is a product of the post-Cold War era that came to reflect the internationalization of certain issues, for instance, democracy and human rights. While a conceptual and normative consensus on what the term means is absent, the underlying consensus is that the term tries to capture (attempts at) the creation and/or maintenance of a certain global order. The scale of such a process necessarily makes it difficult or impossible to render visible localized histories and politics. The possibility of having a counter-perspective seems to require the same or similar level of abstraction as the 'global'.

⁶ For an account of the sanctions regime as a form of intervention and its ramifications on the ground, see Sarah Graham Brown (1999).

⁷ More recently the Iraqi Parliament was stormed by protesters

The meaning of global governance at both the conceptual and normative levels has been contested by international relations scholars since its emergence in the 1990s.⁸ One of the earliest definitions is by James N. Rosenau who defined it as describing ‘systems of rule at all levels of human activity – from the family to the international organization – in which the pursuit of goals through the exercise of control has transnational repercussions’ (Rosenau 1995, p.13). The term has since been elaborated on. One of the latest, and perhaps most standard definitions, is by Thomas G. Weiss who understood global governance as ‘the sum of the informal and formal values, norms, procedures, and institutions, that help all actors – states, intergovernmental organizations, civil society, transnational corporations, and individuals – to identify, understand, and address trans-boundary problems’ (Weiss 2013, p. 2).

The normative and conceptual critiques of global governance as a practice and an organizing term are varied and are thoroughly discussed in Andrew Hurrell’s contribution to this volume and in his work *On Global Order* (2007). A number of these critiques are concerned with the inability of global governance to capture particularities that are themselves objects of global governance’s ordering:

the rhetoric of ‘order’ and ‘governance’ can easily lead to an exaggerated belief in the possibility of a neat, tidy arrangement of political life that is unlikely within domestic society and deeply implausible beyond it. It implies an image of politics that is very hard to reconcile with the immense complexity of the global system, with the multiplicity of logics — of power, of interest, and of identity — that operate within it, and with the dynamism and unpredictability of the forces that shape it (Hurrell 2007, p. 20).

This ‘belief in the possibility of a neat, tidy arrangement of political life’ is, we argue, a necessary condition for any intervention that aims at a large scale of ordering. To make possible the introduction of a method of governance that would connect various local points in a globalized, regionalized, or universalized form, it is necessary to abstract the local into

⁸ For an early discussion of the conceptual ambiguity and normative problems see Lawrence S. Finkelstein (1995). For a comprehensive and recent discussion, see Andrew Hurrell (2007).

measurable and knowable categories. This uniformity and standardization of categories is a necessary condition that allows the drafting of policies which embed methods of measuring impact and success. This is a practice that is essential for making decisions on, for example, how to channel developmental funds, or how to control and preempt the spread of epidemics, or how to best produce an environment suitable for seamless global market transactions.⁹ These processes of ‘translating’ local experience into abstracted and standardized policy objectives are not exclusive to ‘global’ or ‘regional’ governance processes, but are present in all forms of ordering collective lives.¹⁰

In Iraq, this process of translation took place around the same time as the US was preparing to intervene in the political structure of the country. Upon the US-led occupation of Iraq in 2003, the United States initiated a state-building project that ushered new possibilities, including the democratization of a country that was ruled for decades by an authoritarian regime.¹¹ The translation took place in academic as well as policy circles, abstracting knowledge that was produced by regional and country scholars into neat and tidy categories that can be compared globally.

Policy experts and scholars identified Iraq’s dependency on oil revenues as the country’s main obstacle to establishing a democratic system.¹² Iraq, like many other countries in the Middle East, was considered a ‘rentier state’: a state that relies on oil revenues as the main source of its

⁹ For a discussion on how knowledge about a particular locality is produced and translated into abstract facts and hypotheses along the policy pipelines of local actors, international consultants and international organizations in the context of development, see Richard Rottenburg (2009).

¹⁰ This is true of state methods of ordering, including the census, urban planning, public health policies and so on. For examples see: on the state-led mega projects and the connection between the modernist epistemology of ordering and state power, see James Scott (1999); on the politics of the census and the creation/ politicization of racial identities in the United States and Brazil, see Melissa Nobles (2000); On the relation between modern statistics and knowledge and power of government see Alain Desrosières (2000).

¹¹ See for example memoirs of participants in the Coalition Provisional Authority such as Bremer (2006); Stewart (2006); Diamond (2005).

¹² See for example a roundtable that brought together some of the most prominent experts on Iraq and on oil rentierism (Open Society Institute and the London School of Economics 2005).

income. Oil revenues are considered a form of rent because they do not involve any elaborate form of economic production activities. The rentier states of the Middle East inspired an approach among scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, generally known as the Rentier State theses. The general claim of this approach is that oil-dependent states are not democratic because oil rent allows them to be autonomous from society, thus unaccountable via taxation, and allows them to use oil funds to either buy consent through populist policies or patronage, or suppress and deter opposition through state violence that is funded by oil money.

Originally this framework emerged to address problems of economic growth within the framework of state-led development in Iran during the 1960s and 1970s (Mahdavy 1970). It later developed to include problems with authoritarianism in the Arab world as they were linked to questions of economic development (Luciani 2001; Beblawi 1990).¹³ Others have looked at the role of oil in the construction of state autonomy above social networks (Skocpol 1994), and another trend focused on oil's historical role in the production of weak institutional state capacity (Chaudhry 1997). This literature, originally produced mainly by political economists of the Middle East, was revisited by US-based political science scholars in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Their findings were published in very prestigious mainstream American political science journals. The claim of the existence of a link between oil and authoritarianism was subjected to large-N regressions that tested whether oil 'hinders democracy'.¹⁴ Democracy and the 'oil economy' were broken down into multiple variables that can be represented by numerical indicators and placed on regression charts to test the correlation between oil and democracy across a number of countries spread across the world. This was done in an attempt to legitimize the claim and incorporate this literature into a wider range of works on the resource-curse and democratization (Ross 1999; 2001; Smith 2004).¹⁵

¹³ Beblawi became the Egyptian Interim Prime Minister (2013 – March 2014) after the 2011 Egyptian uprising

¹⁴ I am borrowing the title of Michael L. Ross's article (2001).

¹⁵ The rentier state theses have been argued to be one of the very few theoretical contributions of Middle Eastern Studies to the discipline of political science (Anderson 1987). However, what I refer to here is the adaptation of conclusions from this literature into mainstream political science studies as part of larger global concerns with democratization and democratic politics rather than the recognition of this literature in political science and political economy works on the resource curse.

The translation of knowledge that is required by the large scale intervention of democracy builders is very clear. In their 1970s and 1980s versions, the rentier state theses were written with a heavy qualitative interpretation relying on particular contexts. As such they often stayed within the realm of Middle Eastern studies. Only in the late 1990s and early 2000s did we witness their discovery by mainstream US political science scholars. Their discovery was not accompanied by further investigation of the region's history, rather the conclusions of the earlier studies were broken down into variables that were then subjected to regression tests which fed into additional variables from other studies of oil rich countries. The histories and the particularities were no longer necessary in face of statistical calculations that affirmed and/ or negated correlations. It is now a story that is universally understandable – as long as one is able to read regression charts. This interest in renewing 'old' Middle Eastern studies concepts was probably a response to the pressing questions facing US policy-makers regarding Iraq and the Middle East. It was also around the same time, in 2003, that President George W. Bush initiated his administration's 'forward strategy of freedom' to promote democracy throughout the Middle East. Democracy promotion was an official policy funded by State Department projects.

The revival of the interest in producing knowledge about oil and democracy was at the same time occurring in the more critical scholarship of Middle Eastern studies. These studies often point not to oil rent, as the direct cause of non-democratic politics, but to processes of oil production and circulation as they connect with global historical conjunctures and possibilities of democratic politics. For example, democratic struggles in which oil workers played a critical role in Saudi Arabia (1950s and early 1960s) were systematically crushed by ARAMCO, a Standard Oil company, in collaboration with the Saudi government, directly borrowing techniques that were used in Jim Crow America¹⁶ (Vitalis 2007). Another study illustrates how methods of organizing the coal industry made possible the emergence of militant labor movements in Europe that were able to successfully employ methods to jeopardize wealth production (such as the general strike and sabotage). These labor movements consequently led

¹⁶ The Jim Crow system refers to policies of racial segregation in the United States that lasted from the 1890s until the 1960s. For a history of this era see C. Vann Woodward (2002). I thank Daniel Kato for suggesting this reference.

to European mass democratic politics. In contrast, methods of social organization that are made possible by the production, distribution and circulation of oil and oil wealth, forms of financial networks, militarism and technologies have undermined the success of democratic movements in oil producing countries. Oil extraction, unlike coal, does not rely upon workers developing closely-held experiential knowledge about how to extract it, and oil can be transported in various ways (pipelines and tankers on ships and trucks) that are less vulnerable to organized collective action and sabotage by labor (Mitchell 2011). An older but a classic study of Iraqi political and social movements illustrates that contrary to a rentier state thesis regarding the cooptation of contentious politics by the state's employment of oil rent, Iraq witnessed a series of labor and political battles, with democratic demands, that involved attempts to disrupt the flow of Iraqi oil (Batatu 1978, pp. 866-936). Once we shift our analytical attention from oil rent to the political economy and history of oil, it appears that what oil hinders is the success of these democratic movements rather than their emergence in the first place.

More fundamentally to the questions of governance, what these critical studies show is that the knowledge that is would allow us to understand the particularities of power relations in global processes (such as the political economy of oil) and to see the articulations of politics of descent and critique, requires empirically detailed, localized and historicized investigation. In other words, it requires a process of *de-translation*, i.e. a process of undoing the abstract. The knowledge that is needed to introduce and maintain order requires a translation of local knowledge into abstracted and universalized categories that are comparable across all objects of that ordering thus loosing along the way the critiques. In other words, any knowledge that offers a counter perspective or a critical perspective to the global is un-governable, not conducive to the imperatives of governance. As such, to speak of a regional governance perspective is to place one set of abstractions alongside another, not to produce a critical perspective. Consequently, a critical perspective is necessarily un-governable.

5.4 A Problem of Representation

This section addresses the second part of this chapter's argument: that a regional governance structure, might give an appearance of a coherent perspective. However, this is not a critical

perspective as it hardly reflects the perspective of the populations governed. While a region may seem like a coherent unit through policies and decisions of regional governance bodies, regional politics and life, which are the source of the critique, are not as clearly defined and thus cannot produce a unitary or coherent perspective.

Regional governance bodies tend to reflect the *inter-state dynamics within a region, rather than critical perspectives of the governed*. This is clear from the other contributions in this volume. For example, in Tiekou and Gelot's account of an African perspective on global governance, it is clear that despite attempts to codify and incorporate popular participation in regional governance within the African Union, matters that are considered of strategic importance are all decided upon by representatives of the member states rather than by channels of popular participation. Thus, extracting a perspective from the Union's actions will necessarily reflect that of the member states rather than those who are governed. A perspective of governance bodies rather than those who are governed, I suggest, cannot be critical. Both of Belokurova's account of a Russian perspective and Thapan and Sharma's account of an Indian perspective highlight the significance of hegemonic regional politics in understanding a regional perspective. In both accounts we see the dominance of a regional super power's agenda of maintaining a certain regional order. These dynamics are ones that hardly reflect the perspective of the governed, and is more telling of inter-state politics. This is also clear in Sanahuja's contribution to this volume on Latin America, where the persistence of nationalism and national sovereignty of each state complicates regional integration and governance. A counter-hegemonic perspective, for example, to a competing regional power like China in the case of India or the perceived "West" in many other regional examples, is not necessarily a critical perspective.¹⁷ It is especially the case that if we look for a counter perspective in governance practices or structures that counter-hegemonic perspective generally attempts to replace one hegemonic discourse by another rather than offer a critical perspective.

In terms of governance structures, the Middle East has often been understood to have relatively low levels of regional integration, thus making it difficult to recognize a counter-hegemonic regional perspective. Focusing mainly on the Arab League, the region's oldest and biggest

¹⁷ I am indebted to Nehal Bhuta for alerting me to this point.

regional governance body, one widely cited argument attributes low regional integration in the Middle East to a problem of political will of member states. These states, on this view, are more interested in asserting regional hegemony and preserving sovereign power leading them to draft and maintain an institutional design which is un conducive to regional integration (Barnett and Solingen 2007). But in a classic study, Ian S. Lustick argues that cases of high regional integration, like Europe, were historically conditioned by wars of conquest that lead to the emergence of regional hegemons. It is the inability of any state in the Middle East, rather than the lack of political will, to emerge as a regional hegemon that has led to these levels of low regional integration. Historically, regional hegemons emerged as a result of cross-border warfare. The Middle East states, due to historical sequencing, like other post-colonial states arrived at an international system that is already populated with powerful actors and international norms that make the recurrence of wars of conquest, that have historically helped consolidate the powers of many western states, unthinkable (Lustick 1997).

The unexceptional case of the Arab League can also be seen through an empirically based survey of the League's effectiveness in mitigating conflict resolution in wars and violent conflicts in the Middle East over the span of 60 years (1948-2008) (Pinfari 2009). The study offers an extensive review of the literature on the weakness of the Arab League as a regional conflict mediator and compares the evidence used in this literature to the results of its survey. Contrary to the popular argument that the institutions of the League were built to fail, the survey shows that the League had more successes than is normally attributed to it in conflict mitigation. The League succeeded in promoting at least partial settlement in 40 percent of boundary wars and political crises. Its failure is mainly in mediating most inter-state wars in the region because "one of the major warring parties was not, with few exceptions, a member state [of the League]." (Ibid., p. 2) The dominance of regional power dynamics over the ability of the League to intervene is also obvious in its failure to intervene in civil wars when a regional power was involved. This point is consistent with Lustick's argument regarding the predominance of establishing regional hegemony historically prior to the establishment of constraints that would allow for regional integration.

The League is the oldest regional governance body in the Middle Easter. It was founded in

March 1945 by six states: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt). Today, the League includes twenty two states making it the largest regional governance body in the region in terms of its membership size. Clearly, the organization is not inclusive of the whole region. Three of the regional powers are not Arab countries and are thus not members of the League: Iran, Israel, and Turkey. While the League was initiated as a pan-Arabist organization, its politics, scope, meaning, and actions over time reflected the regional dynamics that went through considerable changes. These developments included the shift of focus on security issues after the 1948 war and the establishment of Israel, the suspension of Egypt's membership for eleven years due to its unilateral decision to sign a peace agreement with Israel in 1979. The 1980s have also witnessed the emergence of sub-regional governance bodies highlighting the decline of a pan-Arabist project in favor of arrangements that are not motivated by ideological reasons.

The Arab Spring has brought more changes at the regional scene, including the emergence of new regional actors and the weakening of others. These processes, it can be argued, were already in motion prior to the wave of 2011 uprisings. In 2010 André Bank and Morten Valbjørn wrote of the necessity of incorporating the local level when studying the regional politics of the Middle East. Their study led them to conclude that the region was now in a New Arab Cold War (Bank and Valbjørn 2010).¹⁸ Signs of this New Cold War became apparent in the aftermath of the 2006 Israeli war in Lebanon, which produced opposing and differing responses in the Arab Middle East. The war “did not translate into much consensus on the exact nature of regional politics” and revealed that ‘[s]ocietal actors, not upstart republics, now represent the challenge to the regional status quo’ (Bank and Valbjørn 2010, pp. 311-12).

¹⁸ The height of pan-Arabism was in the 1950s and 1960s when new revolutionary republican regimes took power in a number of key Arab states, including Iraq, Egypt and Syria. These republics generally upheld Arab nationalism as one of their main defining political identities and ambitions. However, during this period, the region witnessed a major split between these republics and traditional, conservative monarchies. The two camps were far from being internally unified, especially at the republican end where competition over regional influence defined the politics of the time. This period is now known in academic circles by a term coined in 1965 as the Arab Cold War (Kerr 1971).

This term has circulated since then to describe the increasingly complicated regional scene post-2011. The region has been immersed in an unprecedented large number of internal and inter-regional conflicts in its modern history. This is particularly the case in the Arab Middle East which has seen a civil war in Syria, increased sectarian tension in Iraq and Lebanon, two separate governments in Libya, political instability in Egypt, Bahrain and Yemen, and continued tensions and violence on the Palestinian-Israeli front as well as between Israel and the armed wing of the Lebanese Hezbollah party along the Israeli-Lebanese borders. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Iran have emerged as the main regional powers and have been involved in battles over spheres of influence in the region. The alliances among these countries have not been consistent – while two countries may support one political faction in a third country, they may differ in whom they support (logistically and financially) in a fourth country and can be involved in a proxy war. While shifting alliances exist in all regions, in the current Middle East, they have resulted in flaring armed violence, civil, proxy wars, and even direct military interventions most notably the on-going Saudi-led Arab coalition that has been carrying air strikes in Yemen. At the same time, the increasing numbers and power of cross-national political religious groups, of different Islamic sects, that have been recruiting volunteers and fighters of different nationalities (including European) to fight most visibly in Syria, Iraq and Libya have also added an additional layer to the regional power scene. These groups have emerged as new players, alongside states, in the battles to redefine the political map of the Middle East.¹⁹ The massive regional political upheaval's impact on the scope and meaning of regional governance is still to be determined, leading a number of scholars to stipulate the new nature of the new emerging regime (see for example, Beck 2015). Whatever the new regional regime might result in in terms of amending regional governance bodies, it will, as argued above in connection to other contributions in this volume, only reflect the perspective of the emerging powers within the member states rather than of those who are governed.

5.5 A Cultural Perspective?

¹⁹ For a discussion of the alliances and new politics of the Middle East in light of the New Arab Cold War and post-Arab Spring, see for example: Khoury (2013); Ryan (2012); Gause (2014).

As Andrew Hurrell argues in this volume, a concern with cultural perspective, important as it is, does not help us understand power relations as they operate both in the academy and in practices of governance. While acknowledging a form of western hegemony in dominant historical and theoretical narratives about the world, he importantly points out that often times critiques that attempt to de-centre the west, end-up with static categories of space and a unified representation of western power, US hegemony and neo-liberal globalization. Focusing on the politics of culture, as suggested by Hurrell, this section illustrates how in the context of the Middle East, culture has been a site for political contestation in academic as well as policy hallways. These contestations also illustrate how culture, as it relates to governance practices and knowledge production, is not simply specific to geographical boundaries, but can also assume a professional identity – the culture of experts in this case.

Before turning into the discussion on culture in the Middle East, it might be useful to elaborate on the invention of the Middle East as geographical space. This innovation, as will become clear, has always been connected to attempts to create governance space rather than to reflect a natural geographic space. To say that the Middle East was invented should not imply that the invention covers something that is ‘more authentic’. What it means is that once what constitutes a certain region is investigated empirically, a less coherent picture emerges making it difficult to speak of a perspective on governance that stems from that supposedly obvious entity.

The precise contemporary geographical region that the term ‘Middle East’ refers to varies according to the source. Egypt, for example, is included in the UN’s map of the Middle East region but not of that of the CIA World Factbook.²⁰ A standard academic textbook on the history and political economy of the Middle East defines its regional boundaries as:

the twenty states of the Arab League (less Mauritania and Somalia), Iran, Israel

²⁰ The CIA World Factbook (2013) includes the area between Georgia, Azerbaijan and Iran on the east to Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey in the west and north west as well as the whole Arab peninsula. The UN’s map (2011) of the region stretches from Egypt in the west to Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan in the east, Turkey in the north to the Arab peninsula, Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia in the south.

and Turkey. This is more or less the same region known in Britain as the Near and Middle East until the Second World War, after which reference to the Near East was officially dropped in Britain ... following a wartime lead from Winston Churchill. (Owen 2004, p. x)

This ambiguity of what states the Middle East region includes, which is true for other regions in the world including Europe, could arguably be due to the fact that the term is constantly defined by techno-political agendas rather than clearly defined and/ or pre-existing cultural or geographical parameters. The term was first coined in 1902 by an American navy captain, Alfred Thayer Mahan, who referred to the Persian Gulf as the ‘Middle East’ — a region that Britain had to secure if it wanted to protect the paths that link the Suez Canal to India. This was seen as important because of increased German and Russian influence in this region, including a German plan to build a railway line connecting Berlin to Baghdad (Scheffler 2003, p. 264). Concern about how this railway might affect India’s secure geopolitical position was what a year later gave birth to the term the ‘Middle Eastern Question’. The *London Times* published a series on this topic discussing the dangerousness of Russian and German advances in the region. The Middle East, this time, included a larger number of countries, including Persia and Nepal among others, countries that seemed to provide a ‘security belt’ for India. Scheffler describes how the region was labeled:

Defined like this, the “Middle East” was not a “historical region” in itself, but rather an abstract space encompassing a heterogeneous blend of landscapes and countries, the common denominator of which happened to be their location at the western and northern approaches to India. (Scheffler 2003, p. 265)

The first official institutionalization of the ‘Middle East’ as a term was during the First World War when Britain saw it necessary to break-up the Ottoman Empire and replace it with new entities that would be under the British sphere of imperial influence. But having to adhere to the principle of national self-determination that had become a popular international norm at the time, the new space that would replace the Ottoman Empire had to be constituted by independent entities. In 1921 the British Secretary for Colonies, Winston Churchill, created the

Middle East Department which was to supervise Iraq, Palestine, Trans-Jordan and Aden. During World War II, the British Army established the 'Middle East Command' in 1939 that had authority over an expansive area that also included Greece, Crete, Malta and Iran among others (Scheffler 2003, pp. 265-68).

Prior to 1914 what came to be known and 'institutionalized' as the Middle East, was more commonly referred to as 'Asiatic Turkey'. A government funded propaganda machine was put in charge of representing 'Asiatic Turkey' as the 'Middle East' — a region of 'oppressed historical nations, the Arabs, Jews, and Armenians, who were on the verge of a remarkable renaissance following their liberation and future tutelage by Britain and the entente. ... Nationalism was thus brought to the very centre of justification for empire' (Renton 2007, p. 647).

The effort to destroy the Ottoman Empire was led by British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, who was interested in protecting the Suez Canal and the path to India as previously mentioned. In 1917 he ordered the initiation of a propaganda campaign, named 'The Turks Must Go', in Britain and in the Allied and neutral countries as well as in the region itself. Nationalism, the framing idea of this campaign, not only was an adherence to the principle of national self-determination, but also a counter to German and Turkish backed pan-Islamic and anti-British propaganda (Renton 2007, p. 247-8; 651). Most of this propaganda was managed by Sir Mark Sykes, who was convinced 'that the principle of nationality was the only basis for a stable post-war Near East'. He had popularized the term 'Middle East' which while geographically ill-defined at the time, was significant for what it represented, 'a revived nationalized landscape between East and West, that was to be free from Ottoman despotism and would achieve redemption under Allied protection' (Ibid., p. 652-53). The propaganda campaign, which accompanied British advancements in Ottoman territories included inventions of objects of national symbolism where they did not exist. For example, the Arab national flag that was eventually adopted by the Arab army, led by Sherif Hussein of Mecca, during the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans.

The British invention of the Middle East took a life of its own very quickly. Anti-British revolts

emerged in Iraq, Palestine and Egypt within less than five years of the initiation of the propaganda campaign. While a governable region from the British perspective did not emerge, regional politics emerged very quickly partly as a result of the British intervention and partly due to political movements that were occurring before and/ or independent of this intervention. The invention, elaboration and popularization of the term ‘Middle East’ was a product of international imperial struggles. But the invention of this space does not mean that it hides something that is more authentic. It only highlights the phenomena that once what constitutes a certain region is investigated empirically, a less coherent picture emerges making it extremely difficult to speak of a perspective on governance that stems from a supposedly obvious entity.

‘Culture’ like ‘region’ is not a pre-existing object, but rather a construct of knowledge *or* governance. The emergence of culture as a unit of study is part of the trajectory of the emergence of disciplines in the social sciences, particularly anthropology. The politics of culture in the context of the Middle East is connected both to the politics of academic productions and of political interventions. For instance, in the Middle East, as elsewhere, the role of the CIA during the Cold War in exerting influence over cultural production (such as sponsoring academic projects and public cultural productions such as magazines and periodicals) is now known and documented (Mitchell 2002, pp. 7-15).

The politics of connecting culture to a specific spatial imaginative is perhaps most apparent in what came to be known as ‘area studies’. While British imperial ambitions at the turn of the twentieth century have contributed to the construction of the ‘Middle East’ as a region, the rise of American global power made it an important hub for the study of the Middle East. What is known as area studies – interdisciplinary academic studies of world regions, typically non-Western, have a long and well documented history in the United States.²¹ Middle Eastern

²¹ For examples on works on the history of area studies and their connection to the emergence of disciplines see Szanton (2002) and Rafael (1994). For a historical account on the emergence of Middle Eastern studies see Lockman (2009). For a theoretical treatment of Middle Eastern area studies see Teti (2009), wherein Teti argues that area studies can only emerge simultaneously with disciplines as part of social sciences’ specific organization of knowledge production.

studies went through a number of significant shifts that illustrate the strong intersection of the production of knowledge, culture and politics.

The 1967 war, in which Israel occupied Gaza and the West Bank, led to a dramatic change in the configuration of Middle Eastern studies in the US that targeted, among other things, what is understood as the ‘culture’ of the region. A group of US scholars of Arab origins realized in the aftermath of the war that ‘the scholars speaking about the Middle East in the United States, even the minority who seemed sympathetic to the Arab world, were not from the region and did not speak for the region’ (Mitchell 2002, p. 12). These scholars set up a new regional studies association and an affiliated journal. Notably among these scholars were Ibrahim Abu-Lughod and Edward Said who published the *Arab Studies Quarterly* ‘and supported research that defined the Arab world, rather than the Middle East, as the region of a study. *Their aim was [to] challenge the premise of Middle Eastern Studies that ‘The Middle East’ was a single cultural region*’ (Ibid., p. 12).²² The assumption that the Middle East formed a cultural unity in Middle Eastern studies was drawn from its scholarly predecessor – Oriental Studies. This assumption, among many other aspects of studying the Middle East, came under severe scrutiny by the late 1970s (Mitchell 2002, pp. 12-15).

While histories of social sciences and their origins in particular Western cultures are documented by a number of scholars (Chakrabarty 2000), questions about governance as a current technology of ordering collectivities can also be addressed through a focus on the culture of ‘experts’. In the fall of 2003, few months after the invasion of Iraq, US President George W. Bush gave a speech in which he initiated a ‘forward strategy of freedom’ in the Middle East. In his speech, he addressed cultural questions,

Some skeptics of democracy assert that the traditions of Islam are inhospitable to the representative government. This ‘cultural condescension’, as Ronald Reagan termed it, has a long history ... Time after time, observers have questioned whether this country, or that people, or this group, are ‘ready’ for democracy – as if freedom were a prize you win for meeting our own Western

²² Emphasis added.

standards of progress. In fact, the daily work of democracy itself is the path of progress ... It should be clear to all that Islam – the faith of one-fifth of humanity – is consistent with democratic rule. (Bush 2003)

One could object to the idea that Islam is *the* culture of the Middle East or that Islamic cultures are uniform. But what is additionally interesting is the translation of this strategy into scientific knowledge. By constructing large database sets, cultural attitudes towards democracy, among other ‘variables’, were measured and represented in statistical terms by the leading investigators of the Arab Barometer Project. This project was established in 2005 by scholars in the Arab World and the United States, including the universities of Michigan and Princeton in the US and academic, policy and statistical centers in Jordan, Palestine, Morocco, Algeria and Kuwait. Two of the main leaders of this project are Amaney Jamal and Mark Tessler—political scientists at the universities of Princeton and Michigan respectively. In a co-authored article, they wrote that a successful project of democratization, ‘requires a citizenry that values democracy and possesses the elements of a democratic political culture’ (Tessler and Jamal as cited in Mitchell 2011, p. 4). Culture, democratic culture to be precise, is now not only subject to measurement, but is also assumed to be a cause for democratic politics. However, there is no historical evidence that democracy was ever made possible due to cultural attitudes. According to Mitchell, ‘In many cases, the civic virtues that dominant political classes possessed provided the grounds on which to oppose democratization’ (Mitchell 2011, p. 4).

Culture is a terrain of conflict in which attempts to define and fix it necessarily stem from contending political positions rather than a pre-existing reality. Taking a cultural perspective does not necessarily clarify in any way a perspective that is critical or more representative of a region. As illustrated by the move of Arab-American scholars in the late 1960s, a politically more critical perspective of culture is one that sees it as not unitary but as multiple. Relying on cultural representations to seek or clarify paths for political action (of which governance is one) can also, as pointed out by Mitchell and Hurrell, lead to positions that are complacent with the status quo that one seeks to change.

5.6 Conclusions

The main argument of this chapter is that a *critical* regional perspective is not possible to extract through regional governance bodies, but rather through empirical daily political lives of the governed, is mostly visible in the Middle East. While a regional counter (hegemonic) perspective might be available through the actions of regional governance bodies, a critical perspective that reflects the political aspirations and cultural manifestations of those who are governed, cannot be extracted at a scale as large as a “region.” While this argument is mostly apparent in the Middle East due to the relatively weak regional integration and the recent regional upheavals, once put in a comparative historical perspective it becomes clear that it does not reflect a Middle East exceptionalism but rather a more general observation.

The problem is fundamentally connected to the politics of knowledge about the world. Governance, like any other form of ordering politics and lives, can only rely on abstracted forms of knowledge about the objects that it attempts to order. Each level of abstraction involves a certain kind of translation (of particularities into abstracts). We attempted to illustrate how in order to understand the particularities of power relations, which are key to constructing a counter perspective, an empirically detailed, localized and historicized investigation is required. This process of *de-translation* renders the knowledge produced necessarily un-governable, especially at a level as abstract as a ‘region’.

A region as a geographical space is not a clear or a pre-existing object. A region may seem like a coherent unit in policy terms, however, regional politics and life are not as clearly defined and thus cannot be the source of a coherent perspective. The Middle East as a distinct region was imagined in the early twentieth century as a product of international imperial struggles. It was imagined, not as a reflection of a preexisting reality, but as a governance construct. The invention of this space does not mean, however, that it hides something that is more authentic. As the history of the region shows, colonial interventions were quickly challenged by some of the arrangements that they have initially set-up or encouraged. The intervention became *part of* the history and politics of the region and not simply an intruding episode. In short, even though the ‘region’ can be traced to a colonial representation, the Middle East as a political space is neither meaningless nor artificial. The meaning of its regional politics and geographical

boundaries are constantly subject to contestation. As such drawing a coherent regional perspective, based on regional politics, becomes an extremely difficult task.

Finally, adopting a cultural regional perspective is politically problematic. Culture is hardly a unified or clear category and is a terrain of contestation. Trying to define a regional cultural perspective on governance does not clarify or give a more representative view of a region. Fixing a terrain of contestation would necessarily lead to a form of status quo which is exactly what one tries to avoid when interested in a democratic and de-centered governance outcome.

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