Africa and the Middle East: Beyond the Divides

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.
Introduction: A Transregional Approach to Africa and the Middle East

Hisham Aïdi, Marc Lynch and Zachariah Mampilly

Africa and the Middle East have been artificially separated into distinct regions in American political science and most area studies. Each region has its own professional associations, its own journals, its own disciplinary preferences and trends. This division of analytical labor has had significant implications for the ability of both fields to grapple with major real world issues. The Middle East Studies analysis of the 2011 Arab uprisings, for instance, was so struck by the novelty within the Arab world of Tunisia’s successful revolt that it failed to appreciate the African context of nearly a decade of episodes of major political contention. The African Studies analysis of wars and contested transitions in countries such as Sudan and Libya failed to appreciate the changing patterns of interventionism which had evolved in the post-uprisings Middle East and how that would affect the trajectory of those cases.

On February 28, 2020, just ahead of the COVID-19 global shutdown, a diverse international group of scholars focused on Africa and the Middle East convened at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs to address these questions. The papers, published in this collection, ranged widely over issues connecting West Africa, the Horn, the Sahel and North Africa thematically, politically, militarily and culturally. The day’s discussions ranged more broadly, exploring the possibilities for systematic and rigorous thinking across artificial regional divides. Together, they represent an initial foray into conceptualizing a transregional political research agenda. The goal of this volume is to get American political science to break down the barriers between academic subfields defined by regions and open the fields to new questions raised by scholars from and across Africa and the Middle East.

The impetus behind this is both intellectual and practical. As our framing essay explains, the fields of Middle East Studies and African Studies emerged out of very different ideological and scholarly circumstances, and evolved in very different ways in the decades since. Where African Studies grew out of the legacies of European colonialism and American racial politics, Middle Eastern Studies evolved from European Orientalism, the American Christian interest in the Holy Land, concern for Israel, and the intensity of Cold War strategic interests. Each area studies field passed through revolutionary moments, before moving into today’s professionalized, methods-driven and more disciplinary focused modes of political science. The divides between these fields are striking. Scholars within each field are far more likely to be conversant with and to draw upon research in that field than to reach out to the other for insights or comparative cases. Little effort is usually made to justify regional boundaries which are in fact quite arbitrary. Why, for instance, are the historical connections between the Horn of Africa with Yemen and Oman less significant than those with the African continent? The artificiality of this division is especially clear with the definition of African Studies in terms of Sub-Saharan Africa, which has left North Africa, Sudan and the Horn in an uneasy position relative to contemporary area studies.

This has real costs. Many present-day issues require a transregional approach to the study of Africa and the Middle East, as this volume demonstrates. The decomposition of the Libyan, Syrian and Iraqi states have strained assumptions about the supposedly higher capacity of Arab states which underpinned one political science claim of why North Africa was different than sub-Saharan Africa. The spectacular rise in the permeability of borders, non-state ideologies, privatization of state capacities, and proxy wars in Somalia, Libya and Yemen have all highlighted the interconnections across these ostensibly distinct regions. Each region has nurtured literatures which could better inform analysis in the other. The rise of cross-border non-state financial and ideological networks in Africa, which have produced what Alex de
Waal calls a rentier political marketplace, could benefit from a Middle Eastern comparative perspective. The state failure often associated with Africa below the Sahara, and the rentierism said to afflict Middle Eastern politics, are now widespread across both regions. So too are religious political movements, urgent questions of migration and population displacement, legacies of extreme violence, and the effects of global economic and environmental trends. All of this, and more, calls for a new approach that can make sense of such transregional dynamics without sacrificing depth of area knowledge and grounded research.

A transregional approach that rejects artificial boundaries can highlight the interconnections between labor, goods, capital, security, people, ideas and political dynamics across proximate space, while still recognizing the cultural, historical and economic differences between regions that shape such interactions. In such an approach, North Africa and the Horn become modal sites of study rather than unwanted outliers. Breaking down the divide between regions is not necessarily a progressive move. The War on Terror and the wars in Libya and Mali have brought the Sahara into the purview of American policymakers almost exclusively in security terms. As Islamist networks have expanded into the Sahel and Sahara, American, Britain and French drones and counter-insurgency operations have followed. Thinking through the connections between regions from within the same security-centered frameworks is likely to reproduce many of the problems with existing approaches.

The essays collected in *Africa and the Middle East: Beyond the Divides* touch upon a wide range of such themes. Together they represent a beginning rather than a culmination of a research agenda. Several themes emerged across the papers:

“The New Great Game”

There is a growing degree of cross-regional intervention in North Africa and the Horn which demands analysis that can take equally seriously the dynamics of Middle Eastern politics and local politics on the ground. As Federico Donelli describes, in recent years, a new security competition has been playing out in the region, involving the Gulf states, Turkey, and Iran, as well as China (as discussed by Lina Benabdallah), Russia and the United States. Their involvement layers new rivalries and ideological quarrels onto preexisting post-colonial conflicts that have yet to be resolved. For the purposes of this collection, the most intriguing development is the Middle Eastern scramble in the Horn of Africa - and increasingly into north and central Africa. The long-running Saudi/Iranian conflict has in many ways been overtaken by an intra-Sunni and Gulf quarrel (pitting Saudi Arabia and the UAE against Qatar and Turkey).

These rivalries are playing out not only across the Red Sea, where Gulf states have come to see the Somali coastline as their “western security flank” and an integral dimension of their disastrous war in Yemen, but also in North African states such as Libya and Tunisia. These regional geopolitical struggles driven by security considerations, ideological commitments and commercial interests – and aggravated by global warming and food and water insecurity – have spurred a wave of investment in military bases, ports and infrastructure in Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan. As Samar al-Bulushi describes, the United States, which controls the majority of the world’s foreign military bases, is facing stiff competition in the Horn as an “archipelago of military bases” expands across the region. But the Middle East scramble for Africa is also shaping civil wars, state formation and democratic transitions in, respectively, Libya, Somalia and Sudan.

This is not completely new. During the 1960s, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel were actively involved in African politics, with Nasser supporting liberation movements and socialist governments, and King Faisal, in line with US policy, backing opposition movements (like the Eritrean independence movement) that fought Soviet-sponsored regimes in East Africa. Egypt’s African role faded after Sadat came to power and the “Arab Cold War” ended,
although Cairo remained intensely interested in water issues related to the Nile. When King Salman assumed the throne in 2015, the African continent returned to the “priority list,” as Riyadh began looking for new theatres to push back against Iranian influence and as Saudi Arabia and the UAE sought strategic depth for the war in Yemen by building alliances along the Red Sea corridor.

Qatar began to play a role in the Horn of Africa initially as a mediator during the Darfur conflict in the mid-2000s. Once the crisis with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi erupted in June 2017, Doha was increasingly isolated on the continent as Mauritania, Senegal, Chad, Gabon, Niger, Djibouti and Eritrea sided with the Saudi-Emirati axis and downgraded diplomatic relations with Qatar. Shortly thereafter Qatar launched a diplomatic initiative targeting West Africa (the emirate already had strong ties with Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan and Kenya.) In December 2017, the Qatari emir traveled to Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire and Ghana opening several embassies. The intra-Gulf conflict has prompted a shift in alliances across Central and West Africa.

Turkey has also increasingly intervened in the Horn – mostly economically, as Ezgi Guner shows. Ankara was one of the earliest investors in Somalia. During the famine of 2011, Turkey was offering humanitarian aid, with Turkish civil society groups building schools and hospitals. When the Shabaab retreated from Mogadishu in 2011, Turkish businesses began appearing. In 2011, Erdogan visited Mogadishu – the first non-African leader to visit since George Bush in 1993. Shortly thereafter, Turkey re-opened its foreign embassy, establishing full diplomatic relations with the Federal Government of Somalia in August 2012. Ankara, like the Gulf states, is scrambling to gain a foothold in the Horn, which it views as an entry to the wider continent and its markets. Turkey is also trying to export its economic development model of “Organized Industrial Zones” to African states. Its recent military intervention in Libya against forces backed by Egypt and the UAE shows a harder edge to this soft power initiative in Africa.

This Middle Eastern interventionism into the Horn and Northern Africa signals the growing interconnections in security and political dynamics between the regions. Those interventions reflect Middle Eastern power and ideological struggles which may not map well onto African realities but which must be well understood by analysts seeking to make sense of those cases.

Land & Water

Land acquisition has been a critical aspect of the Middle Eastern scramble for Africa. Nisrin Elamin examines how, in the early 2000s, the Bashir regime in Sudan, while planning for a post-oil economy and the secession of South Sudan, began allowing foreign investors to lease Sudanese land. Saudi and Emirati companies would come to control over a million acres of land. Nowadays these companies ‘own’ more Sudanese land than all of Sudan’s domestic investors combined. The land-grabbing was accelerated by the intra-Gulf crisis. After June 2017, to shore up its own food security, Qatar began acquiring land in Sudan and Ethiopia. The Sudanese Revolution brought the question of “land justice” and dispossession to the fore as rural demands for land reform and urban calls for economic security converged. Similar concerns have been heard in numerous African countries about Gulf states’ acquisitions of fertile land.

The Nile is also a coveted resource for the Gulf states and “upriver” countries interested in tapping the river for water and electricity. Upriver countries (in particular, Ethiopia, Uganda and Kenya) are seeking to overturn the 1959 accord between Egypt and Sudan that gave Egypt the lion’s share of Nile water. Tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam – which is partly financed by China – have been rising as Beijing and the Gulf states are expanding into the Nile Valley, building dams to generate electricity and irrigate industrial farms to produce crops for export to the Middle East and China. Tensions over the use of the Nile River have been the focus of intense diplomacy in recent years, bringing Egypt more fully and aggressively into the politics to its south.
Civil War and Democracy:

Gulf states have played a positive role as a mediator in tamping down some regional conflicts: Qatar playing a mediating role in Darfur, and helping to negotiate a deal between Eritrea and Djibouti; Saudi Arabia facilitating the peace accord between Ethiopia and Eritrea, signed (memorably) in Jeddah in September 2018. The financial resources available to the oil states positioned them uniquely to support international mediation initiatives. But their preference for autocratic rule and the escalating conflicts over the role of Islamist movements in politics have raised questions about their role. The internationalization of the Gulf conflicts has had a negative effect across many cases.

Sudan, Somalia and Libya each suggest different pathways for such impacts. As Jean-Baptiste Gallopin observes, in Sudan, Saudi and Emirati backing to the Transitional Military Council (TMC) under the guise of “stability” threatened rather than supported hopes for a democratic transition. Within ten days of Bashir’s ouster, the UAE and Saudi Arabia had promised $3 billion of aid to the new regime. Their interference in the transition has alienated many Sudanese, leading some to even call for removing Sudan from the Arab League. Turkey and Qatar were poorly positioned to take advantage; however, since their identification with Islamist movements regionally represented a particular point of weakness in the context of a popular revolt against the Islamist Bashir regime.

The peace in Somalia is precarious, maintained by an African Union mission. Since 2012, Somalia has been divided into federal states ruled by a fragile central government based in Mogadishu supported by Turkey and Qatar. Somaliland, which declared independence in 1991 and is hoping to secede, has sought aid and investment from UAE, as has the state of Puntland. Analysts fear that the Gulf power struggles playing out in Somalia will undermine the UN-led effort to build a Somali national army, before the withdrawal of African Union peacekeepers in 2020. Here, Gulf competition feeds disunity and regional tensions.

The external role in Libya has been the most obviously damaging, as Wolfram Lacher details. The competing Middle Eastern states are backing disparate transnational networks and political actors. Turkey and Qatar are supporting the United Nations-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli, while the UAE and Saudi Arabia (along with Egypt, Russia and France) are backing the military commander Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army. His drive to capture Tripoli was fueled by UAE arms, while his recent military collapse came from direct and indirect Turkish military intervention. Gulf rivalries here have exacerbated the conflict and hindered efforts to consolidate a central state. Libya’s ongoing civil war has had broader cross-regional effects as well, destabilizing Mali and, as Zekeria Ahmed and Alex Thurston demonstrate, pushing Maghrebian regimes (Moroccan, Algerian and Mauritania) to be increasingly involved in the Sahel.

New Identity Movements:

The Moroccan and Algerian regimes “pivot to Africa” is prompted by numerous factors – the security dilemma in the Sahel post-Gaddafi, reduced access to European markets, and a desire to be China’s partner on the continent. The turn to Africa and the official embrace of pan-African discourse in Morocco and Algeria has created an opening for long-standing social movements that claim a non-Arab identity, in particular of “indigenous” (Amazigh) and “Afro” (black) identity movements that contest Arabist ideology, and challenge the Arab nationalist character of the North African states. As Aïdi reports, Amazigh movements in Morocco and Algeria face varying degrees of repression, but have achieved successes in terms of language and educational policy.

Their greatest impact may be at the level of discourse, as Amazigh activists press civil society and state officials to define Arab and Amazigh, and what constitutes an “Arab state.” In 2019, activists in the Maghreb keenly followed protests in Sudan against Gulf states meddling and the Nubian revival against Arab-Islamist hegemony. Noah Salomon describes how a decolonized archeology
is emerging in revolutionary Sudan aiming to dislodge the northern-centrism that has afflicted the country for generations, hoping to produce a more inclusive historical narrative. He notes the irony that while the Nubian/Kushite revival is a response to the dominant discourse of Islam and Arabism, the new archeology project is partly funded by the Emir of Qatar, a strong supporter of Islamist politics in Sudan.

The turn to Africa, increased migratory flows from West and Central Africa, and Tunisia's democratic transition have also inspired anti-racist campaigns in the Maghreb. In October 2018, Tunisia passed a law calling for the “Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination,” and defending the rights of the purported 10 percent of Tunisians who identify as black. Afifa Ltifi examines how the assimilationist and color-blind policies of the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regime have affected black Tunisians, focusing on names and naming practices as a legacy of slavery. In response to EU pressure and a desire for better relations with ECOWAS states, Morocco is trying to liberalize migration law, launching “regularization” campaigns in 2014 and 2017, whereby undocumented migrants gained residency cards. Algeria, in July 2017, began a similar regularization effort. In Morocco, there are television shows and radio programs trying to sensitize people to racism.

A Way Forward

The essays in this volume, and the POMEPS workshop on which they were based, represent only a first step towards sketching out a transregional approach. As Alex de Waal notes in the conclusion, more Middle East specialists now need to be brought into the conversation. More comparative research between “Middle Eastern” and “African” cases needs to be supported. The nature, intensity and significance of the flows of people, goods, capital, ideas and weapons need to be thoroughly integrated into the study of both sides of the alleged divide. And the right balance between methodological rigor and deeply informed field research needs to nurtured and sustained. The workshop and this collection, then, is only the beginning, with much more to be done to bring these scholarly communities into sustained dialogue.

Endnotes


And the Twain Shall Meet: Connecting Africa and the Middle East

Hisham Aidi, Marc Lynch and Zachariah Mampilly

In December 2018, a popular uprising erupted in Sudan with tens of thousands pouring onto the streets demanding change. For months, the largely youth-led Sudanese protest movement sustained a focused, nonviolent mobilization against the repressive regime of President Omar al-Bashir. Against the odds, protestors succeeded in forcing Bashir from power in June 2019, beginning a tortuous negotiated transition towards an uncertain future. Pressure from Middle Eastern states like the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt in support of the military, as the African Union tried to broker a transition to civilian rule, sparked a debate within Sudan on the costs of belonging to an Arab alliance system, on the merits of the decades-old Arab-Muslim national project, and on the need for a more inclusive national identity and historical narrative. Sudan’s uprising interacted creatively with Algeria’s contemporaneous Hirak movement, and sparked conversation in other North African states about who is Arab, who is African, and the benefits of being part of the African Union versus the Arab League.

Those debates were remarkably opaque to the field of Middle East Studies. Despite Sudan’s long tenure in the Arab League, its formidable Islamist movement, and involvement in many long running regional political issues, MENA specialists largely ignored Sudan until the eruption of its revolution. The country is rarely included in the grand narratives of Middle East politics: barely mentioned in accounts of the 2011 Arab uprisings, left out of most studies of political Islam, and ignored in studies of Arab authoritarianism and attempted democratization. Nor did African Studies do much better with Sudan, partly due to its Arab dominated north and membership in the Arab League. This dual neglect led to the creation of a distinct Sudan Studies Association in 1981 to bring scholarly attention to the country, which prior to the country’s partition was the largest in both regions.

Sudan is not unique. Middle Eastern Studies and African Studies have difficulty dealing with a whole set of states that are part of both African and Middle Eastern political ambits. The Red Sea creates an arbitrary divide between the Horn of Africa and the coastal states of the Arabian Peninsula. Northern African states are metaphorically removed from a continent defined as “sub-Saharan” despite the permeability of the Sahara Desert. Sudan’s revolution offers a good moment to reflect on its liminal status between the Middle East and Africa and the costs of academia’s ossified, artificially-bounded regional studies.

What is the real methodological basis for and analytical value of inherited categories such as “sub-Saharan Africa”, “North Africa”, and “the Middle East”? What are the foundations of the intellectual tradition that treats regions that exist within overlapping space and share deep historic ties as ontologically separate and distinct? What has been lost analytically and politically in adhering to these intellectual silos? How can we move towards an approach that foregrounds these transregional connections across time and space?

In this framing essay for the collection, we trace the origins of the Africa-Middle East separation – the view of the Red Sea and the Sahara as racial and civilizational boundaries – to European Enlightenment thought and early colonial expansionism. We also show how postcolonial authoritarian regimes, Cold War rivalries, and nationalist currents in Africa, the Middle East and the United States would reinforce these divides. Finally, we lay out the intellectual and analytical costs of this divide, and point the way towards an urgently needed transregional alternative approach.

Geographies of Race

The late Kenyan political scientist Ali Mazrui, who wrote extensively about relations between Africa and the Middle East, coined the neologism “Afrabia.” Madagascar, which is separated from the African continent by the 500-mile wide
Mozambique Channel, is considered part of Africa, and yet Yemen – which is only “a stone’s throw,” and linguistically and culturally tied to the Horn of Africa – is not. Mazrui’s observation informs our understanding of the artificiality of the conceptual divide between “Africa” and “the Middle East.” European decision makers turned the Red Sea and the Sahara into artificial divides. Today, these categories are being reimaged as myriad states, and non-state actors treat the Sahara and the Red Sea as connectors instead of barriers. Scholarship should reflect these realities.

Imagined divisions between regions have evolved over time. The purportedly Berber word *Ifriqiyya*, from where we get the name “Africa,” once referred to the Tunisian coast and Northwest Africa, but now generally signifies Africa below the Sahara. The migration of the name reflects historic struggles within Africa itself over how to not only define a specific geographic space but also how to assess the appropriate boundaries of various cultural, political and economic phenomena. Where the lines are drawn has important political, social and cultural implications, defining not only boundaries of citizenship and inclusion but also patterns of racial exclusion and domination.

The European view of the Sahara as a line dividing Africa is often traced to Hegel, who famously declared that “Africa... is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit.” The German philosopher divided Africa into three regions: North Africa, which he called “European Africa;” northeast Africa, which he termed “the land of the Nile;” and then “Africa proper,” the land to the south and the west. He considered North Africa and the Nile Valley to be extensions of Europe and Asia respectively. Of “Africa Proper,” the land to the south and west, which provided slaves for the transatlantic trade, Hegel opined: “Africa proper, as far as history goes back, has remained for all purposes of connection with the rest of the world – shut up...” He concluded: “In the interior of Africa proper... the mind of the African remains shut up within itself, feels no urge to be free and endures without resistance universal slavery.” He segmented Africa, and separating the northern tier from the rest the continent would shape colonial policies, academic disciplines and generations of scholarship.

Even African scholars reproduced Hegel’s designations. In *The Invention of Africa* (1988), the seminal intellectual history of African philosophy, the Congolese thinker Valentin Mudimbe argued that knowledge production in Africa was dependent on Western languages and on the “colonial library,” which provided conceptual frames for post-colonial African thought. Yet as the Senegalese scholar Ousmane Kane observes, Mudimbe could only reach this conclusion by ignoring northern Africa and the “Islamic library” – the multitude of texts written in Arabic and ‘ajami across the Sahel and the Sahara, from the 16th century onward.

As the progenitor of racial science, Immanuel Kant had taken these divisions even further in the 18th century. The German philosopher developed a formalized racial hierarchy underscoring the importance of skin color as evidence of superiority and inferiority. He divided humanity into four categories: ‘1/ the white race; 2/ the Negro race; 3/ the Hun race (Mongol or Kalmuck); and 4/ the Hindu or Hindustani race.’ Arabs, Moors, Persian, and Turkish-Tatars are included as sub-categories of the white race. Kant’s elaborate hierarchy of race reflected ambivalence about Arabs and Muslims. While denigrating the Oriental races, white and non-white, he wrote positively about Islam and the Arabs, whom he considered white.

This ambivalence about North Africa would ripple across the centuries. Kant and Hegel were equivocal about the racial status of North Africans (alternatively called Moors, Arabs, Berbers), but they did see them as different from the people below the Sahara. European racial scholars could never agree on the specific criteria for defining race let alone the correct order of the hierarchy. Whether emphasizing “skin color, facial features, national origin, language, culture, ancestry” or public sentiment and political opinions, the exact racial position of North Africans was always contested. It was generally agreed that
they sat below the European and above the Black African. These racial distinctions would then inform colonial patterns of rule. Segregating races according to their presumed racial-civilizational capacity became the logic of 19th century colonial governance. In North Africa, deep into the 1930s, French colonial administrators wrote tomes claiming that Arabs and Berbers were distinct races, with the latter deemed white, indigenous, and secular, thus more amenable to the French *mission civilisatrice* than the Oriental Arab settlers. Sudan would become a flash point for colonial administrators, as a territory straddling both North and Central Africa, with a long history of ethnic mixing. The British began to separate populations into categories of “Oriental Arabs” and “native Africans” and developed a policy of native administration in which North and South were governed according to different logics ostensibly reflecting the natural abilities of the two regions. This culminated in 1930, when the British adopted the “Southern Policy” that sought to regulate movement and interaction between the country’s “African” south and “Arab” north to protect the South from the nefarious economic and political intentions of their northern countrymen.

The colonial conceptual separation of the North African (Moorish, Berber, or Arab) from the sub-Saharan (Negro), would make its way across the Atlantic. On the American plantation for instance, whether a Muslim slave was of North African or Sahelian origin and Arabic speaking, or from “Black Africa” and not Muslim, determined their place in the plantation’s pecking order. As historian Michael Gomez has argued, the role of Muslim slaves and Islam in colonial and antebellum America “in the process of social stratification within the larger African American society... contributed significantly to the development of African American identity.” An estimated ten percent of the slaves brought to America were Muslim, many of whom were of Fulbe, Mande and Senegambian background, whose features, according to the colonial Hamitic thesis, were thought to be closer to those of Europeans than of Africans. American slave owners saw Muslim slaves, “as more intelligent, more reasonable, more physically attractive, more dignified people.” Because of this thinking, Muslims slaves in the United States were often placed in positions of power over other non-Muslim slaves, earning the distrust of other Africans and reinforcing the social construction of their difference.

Slavery and colonial policies thus reinforced the Sahara as a racial marker and geographic divider. In the United States, the segmenting of Africa and “whiteness” of Arabs would be reinforced as Christian Arab immigrants from the Levant began trickling into the US, and lobbied for white status, emphasizing their cultural and geographic proximity to Europe and distancing themselves from Americans with African or Asian origins. The early Syrian migrants were so successful in demonstrating their whiteness that Arabs (and Iranians) would be unaffected by the Immigration Act of 1917, also known as the Asiatic Barred Zone Act, whereby Congress designated a geographical area demarcating the boundaries of western Asia and specifying areas from which the U.S. would accept immigrants. Fragments of the modern-day Arab world were included in the “barred zone”—such as slivers of modern-day Saudi Arabia, Somalia, and Yemen—but North Africa and the Levant, the vast part of the Arabic-speaking world, along with Iran, were left out. Since then, the American Census Bureau has considered people from the Middle East and North Africa as white.

**Race Against Empire**

How have these legacies shaped the academic study of “Africa” and “the Middle East”? Scholars in the West continue to adhere to these divisions but almost never probe their origins nor question their intellectual merit. More commonly, scholars point to differing levels of economic development; religious and linguistic variation; perceived differences in political regimes; competing pan-Arab and pan-African political projects; divergent political views vis a vis issues such as Israel/Palestine as the primary distinction. The distinctions are taken as obvious, or accepted in the name of pragmatism or tradition.

Yet, each of these proclaimed logics of division have proven
problematic. The refusal to name race as the core logic of division is puzzling, if unsurprising. As recently as 1962 the anthropologist, Carleton Coon, a former President of the American Association of Physical Anthropology who taught at Harvard and Penn, released his book, *The Origin of Races*. Coon was not only a proponent of racial hierarchy and racial science, but particularly invested in the divide between “Berbers” and “Negroes.” He had made his name as an ethnographer of the Amazigh population of northern Morocco, collecting hundreds of blood samples and body measurements, and concluding in *Tribes of the Rif* (1931) that the Riffian Berbers were “white men” of Nordic descent more capable than other degraded Mediterranean’s or Negroes. The popular and legal sorting of Africa’s diverse populations to fit America’s racial hierarchy continue to shape academic knowledge production.

A glance at how these varying dynamics have shaped the study of Africa and the Middle East historically, especially within the social sciences, can help illuminate the racial origins of the enduring divide.

African Studies has its genesis within the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) set up to educate formerly enslaved Americans in a still racially divided country. Heavily influenced by Pan-Africanism, scholars at HBCUs such as the historians Leo Hansberry and Merz Tate (Howard University), the political scientist Ralph Bunche (Howard University), and the sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois (Atlanta University), first began to study African cultures in the 1920s. At the time, due to the widespread racial prejudice against Black scholars and the general assumption that Africa was of little interest intellectually, their works were given little attention in the broader academy. As Robert Vitalis has shown, Black political scientists of the “Howard School of International Relations” would link the condition of African Americans with that of the non-white population in the colonized world, offering a critique of the early American international relations as well as of Enlightenment thought. For example, in *Africa in the World* (1947), Du Bois directly confronts Hegel’s partitioning of Africa and the argument that Africa had no history. While recent work has explored how American international relations “racialized” Black people, less has been done with how North African and Middle Eastern populations were categorized by early American political science.

In the same decade, Syrian scholars (like Philip K Hitti) began establishing scholarly centers for the study of Arabic and the Middle East in American universities and colleges. These departments and programs focused on languages, and often connected smoothly to Christian interest in the Holy Land. Many Middle Eastern scholars were anti-colonial nationalists like their Africanist counterparts. Their emerging academic projects were on parallel tracks, only to be eclipsed by much bigger “area studies” projects with the Cold War.

The dominant focus of African Studies on Africa south of the Sahara began to take form after Melville Herskovitz, a white scholar who began his career at Howard, moved to Northwestern University in 1927. Unlike the Pan-Africanists who included all of continental Africa as well as the Diaspora within their purview, the emerging field of African Studies embraced the colonial practice of partitioning so called “Black Africa” from the rest of the continent based on supposed civilizational differences. Herskovitz would later help found the African Studies Association and served as the first President. Support and direction from the Social Science Research Council, private foundations such as Ford and Carnegie, and the U.S. government over the following decades pushed African Studies to abandon the continental approach in favor of one that focused solely on Africa south of the Sahara.

The Cold War brought new resources to the area studies field in the name of national interest. Both Middle Eastern and African Studies grew as the U.S. government sought to counter the Soviet Union by supporting the development of area studies through the Title VI program of the National Defense Education Act on 1958. Reauthorized in 1965 with the passage of the Higher Education Act, the Title VI program provided funding for language and culture training. This funding flowed primarily to predominantly white research universities.
while HBCUs were left bereft, weakening the reach of their continental and diasporic approach. As Pearl Robinson notes, this division was not limited to an intellectual debate around what should be included in the study of Africa, but eventually came to produce two different paradigms altogether, one based at HBCUs that embraced a continental approach while the other, based at predominantly white institutions, excluded the North from its ambit: “Each of these worlds has its own complex sociology of intellectual pace-setters, respected elders, epistemological debates, citation conventions, overlapping memberships, and identity politics configured around a mix of symbolic and substantive association with the production and validation of knowledge about Africa.”

Middle East Studies was not shaped by diaspora or immigrant politics to the same degree as African Studies had been. Instead, as Timothy Mitchell notes, many leading American universities relied on European scholars, more versed in colonial discourses and practice than in American racial politics, to orient the field and to provide it with intellectual heft. European émigré scholars like Bernard Lewis, Annemarie Schimmel, and H. A. R. Gibb would help set up centers for the study of Islam and the Middle East at Princeton and Harvard. This would lead to some fascinating intersections between intellectual traditions and Cold War policy. For instance, some of these scholars advanced the old colonial argument that Sufi Islam – present in parts of Africa – was more moderate and flexible, and more compatible with liberalism, than the versions of Islam prevalent in the Middle East.

By the 1960s, these distinct worlds of African Studies and Middle East Studies had concretized, though not without controversy. In 1969, Black Power activists disrupted the annual meeting of the African Studies Association in Montreal due to the exclusion of Egypt from its ambit. Both Egypt and Algeria had been central to the Non-Aligned Movement and the broader tradition of Third Worldism, offering a clear ground for rejecting Western-dictated divisions. Of equal concern, though typically shunted to the background, was the specific racial logic that underpinned the position of Africa within the area studies approach. As Robinson explains, “The Cold War rationale for area studies—with its geopolitical criteria for establishing priorities—gave us a world of regional hierarchies calibrated by relative power, levels of culture, and ideological cleavages. From the perspective of the area studies establishment, Africa’s place at the bottom of those hierarchies was never in question.”

Middle East Studies in the United States was shaped more profoundly by its intersections with the demands of Western foreign policy agendas which defined the region as a core national security interest. Oil, competition with the Soviet Union, and support for the state of Israel dominated Washington’s approach to the Middle East. During the Cold War, this dynamic shaped the relationship between the academic field, funders, and the policy apparatus. This only increased as the Middle East became ever more central to American national security concerns as Washington’s role in the region escalated through multiple Arab-Israeli wars, the OPEC oil embargo, the Iranian revolution, multiple wars with Iraq, and 9/11.

Decolonizing Area Studies

Decolonization and Cold War politics influenced the trajectories of both Middle Eastern and African Studies. Key “Middle Eastern” actors on the African continent, such as Nasser’s Egypt, Muammar al Qaddafi’s Libya, and the Front de Libération Nationale’s (FLN) Algeria, viewed themselves within an African context, as did many Third Worldist intellectuals and publics. Upon coming to power, for instance, Gamal Abdel Nasser would famously declare that Egypt falls within “three circles” – Arab, African and Islamic. In 1953, he wrote: “If we consider…the continent of Africa—I may say without exaggeration that we cannot, under any circumstance, however much we might desire it, remain aloof from the terrible and sanguinary conflict going on there today between five million whites and 200 million Africans. We cannot do so for an important and obvious reason: we are in Africa.” The Egyptian president aligned Cairo with the Soviet Union through his two decades of rule, and supported liberation movements from Algeria to Rhodesia to the Zanzibari revolution, where
Africans rose up against Afro-Arab ruling class. Most newly independent African states, led by Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia had a vision of pan-Africanism that included North Africa. And from 1963, when the Organization of African Unity was founded, until 1967, Egypt was the largest contributor to the OAU Liberation Fund.

To be sure, Nasser’s policies faced some opposition within the continent. The Egyptian leader, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Sekou Touré of Guinea belonged to the more radical Casablanca school which called for African unity, a pan-African army, and supported the FLN against Algeria. Opposed to them were the more conservative Monrovia school – which included Nigeria, Senegal and Cameroon – that stressed African statehood over pan-nationalism, and backed France in Algeria. Kamuzu Banda of Malawi was wary of Nasser’s interventionism, and wanted a “sub-Saharan pan-Africanism.” Israel also competed with Egypt for the favors of African leaders. Nkrumah, an ally and competitor – was advised by the Trinidadian ex-Communist intellectual, George Padmore, who was sympathetic to Zionism and favored forging ties with Israel to check Egyptian ambitions; he invited Golda Meir to address the All African People Conference in Accra in 1958.

Egypt’s Nasser also proclaimed solidarity with the Black Freedom Struggle proclaiming solidarity with African Americans suffering in the “pure white democracy” of the US and offering scholarships to Black students in the South. The Nasserist regime cultivated warm ties with a range of Black groups including the Nation of Islam and Black leaders including Malcolm X and Du Bois. When the latter was barred from foreign travel, Nasser invited the eighty-two-year-old scholar and his wife Shirley Graham to settle in Cairo, offering them a home on the Nile. Algiers, too, became a hub of revolutionary global activism which included a number of prominent African American leaders from the Black Panthers including Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver.

African American intellectuals also disagreed on whether North Africa was part of Africa. Some in the Black nationalist camp were wary of Arab civilization, and of how North Africans in America had honorary white status. Booker T. Washington, in his autobiography Up From Slavery (1901), scoffs at how a “dark-skinned man...a citizen of Morocco” is allowed into a “local hotel” from which he, “an American Negro,” is banned. There was strong sympathy among some African American leaders for the Zionist cause and Israel, from nationalists like Marcus Garvey, liberals like Bayard Rustin, and to radicals like the younger Du Bois (prior to the Suez War). Martin Luther King was similarly sympathetic to Zionism, but would develop a more nuanced view after visiting Jerusalem in 1959 and meeting with Palestinian leaders. King was aware of how American racial politics intersected with the Israel-Palestine conflict. He needed Jewish political support, but saw how critical the growing Black Power movement was of Israeli policy. King planned a large pilgrimage of American Christians to Israel and the West Bank in 1967 that would culminate in a sermon on the Mount of Olives in East Jerusalem. These plans were scuppered after hostilities broke out in 1967. King did not want to be portrayed as endorsing Israel’s conquest, nor seen as a dove on Vietnam, but a hawk in the Middle East.

At any rate, as long as Egypt supported the African American struggle (and independent Algeria hosted the Black Panthers), the pro-Arab Pan-African vision was ascendant in African American Studies. Shirley Du Bois would write a biography of Nasser and pen a widely-circulated manifesto titled “Egypt is Africa.” Stokely Carmichael would echo that statement, adding that Palestine was the “tip of Africa.”

In the US, domestically, this Pan-Africanist perspective faced sharp opposition from two quarters: from neo-conservative scholars, who disliked Black Power’s talk of Afro-Arab solidarity against the West and Israel, and from Afrocentrists, who saw Arab civilization as just as racist and as anti-Black as the West. In 1971, Bernard Lewis would publish Race and Color in Islam, an influential polemic on racism in Islam, that directly responded to Malcolm X’s talk of Islamic colorblindness, saying that although “Malcolm X was an acute and sensitive observer...
the [Islamic] beliefs which he had acquired...prevented him from realizing the full implication of ‘the color pattern’ he saw” in the Arab world. Rather than an “interracial utopia,” Lewis argued, a quick reading of *The Arabian Nights* showed the “Alabama-like quality” and “Southern impression” of Arab life.

The valences of these political definitions began to change as key Arab states shifted away from the Soviet Union in the early 1970s. In 1972, the Black Panthers were expelled from Algeria by the then Foreign Minister Abdelaziz Bouteflika, as Algeria moved to normalize ties with the US. With Anwar Sadat’s arrival to power, and his subsequent crackdown on the left and move towards peace with Israel and an alliance with the United States, Cairo would turn its back on Africa. Riyadh, Cairo’s new patron, began funding myriad anti-socialist movements on the continent from Eritrea to Angola. Sadat, ironically Egypt’s first and only Nubian head of state, would tell journalist Barbara Walters that he never liked the way the Soviets treated Egypt, like it was some “central African country.”

The African American left stopped receiving support, moral or political from the Arab states. African American expat intellectuals such as Shirley Du Bois, David Du Bois, and Julian Mayfield left Egypt. The North African regimes’ crackdown on non-Arab minorities and languages, and suppressing all discussions of racism would further alienate African American opinion. By the 1970s, when scholars in the field now called Black Studies alluded to Africa, it was to “Black Africa.” If North Africa came up, it was generally depicted negatively as a land of invaders, an occupied territory. In 1971, Chancellor Williams published *The Destruction of African Civilization*, which would emerge as one of the founding texts of the Afrocentrist movement. Williams described how since the time of pharaonic Egypt, Arabs had attempted to conquer Africa while Nubians and Ethiopians heroically resisted the white “Arab-Asian” effort to destroy the single black kingdom which originally extended from the shores of the Mediterranean to the source of the Nile. By the 1980s, in Afrocentric circles, the Sahara had become a divider again, the color line running like a belt across the continent’s girth. Temple University scholar Molefi Asante’s popular book *Afrocentrism* (1985) captured the zeitgeist. “The Arabs, with their jihads, or holy wars, were thorough in their destruction of much of the ancient [Egyptian] culture,” he wrote, but fleeing Egyptian priests dispersed across the continent spreading Egyptian knowledge.

Starting in the early 1960s, the Pan-African academic project would find a home in African universities, specifically at Makerere University in Uganda and the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania (and to a lesser degree, the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Committee in Zamalek, Cairo). The differences between the Makerere School and the Dar School were personified by the sharp debates between Kenyan political scientist Ali Mazrui and Guyanese economic historian Walter Rodney, published in *Transition* magazine. They differed on the role of the national university, the African intellectual, and epistemological frameworks, but both embraced all of Africa within their intellectual agenda. The University of Dar es Salaam would become an incubator for one of the most important early trans-regional approaches—world systems theory. Marxist theorists Samir Amin, Immanuel Wallerstein and Giovanni Arrighi would all spend time in the Tanzanian capital during the peak of the Dar school in the 1960s and 1970s. Rodney would purposely try to shift the unit of analysis from nation-states, highlighting instead the inter-connected global system. World systems theory emerged in light of these discussions, as Wallerstein in his work shifted the focus from state actors to the larger world system. Both Wallerstein and Mazrui would take this trans-regional approach to SUNY-Binghamton where they eventually took up positions.

With Egypt’s shift into America’s orbit and the rise of Sadat, Egyptian Pan-Africanist Marxists like Samir Amin looked to Dakar where working with the Malawian scholar, Thandika Mkandawire and others, he helped establish the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in 1973. Amin worked closely with historian Hilmi Sharaway (who was Nasser’s point person for African liberation movements in the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) to translate key works into Arabic and
to engage Arab scholars. During the Cold War, CODESRIA struggled to gain reach outside of Africa, in part due to Western prejudice against what was perceived as politically biased scholarship.

The divide between North Africa and Africa was institutionalized even more fully as international institutions adopted and made policy based upon the category of “sub-Saharan Africa” (in lieu of the earlier “Tropical Africa” and “Black Africa”). Despite critiques from African scholars, it would form the basis of the United Nations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund’s approach to the continent. The United Nations still considers 46 of Africa’s 54 countries as sub-Saharan – excluding Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan and Tunisia. For some reason, Eritrea is considered sub-Saharan but neighboring Djibouti is not. Language, race and ethnicity, geographic features, as well as level of economic development have all been put forth as reasons for how a country is classified, yet these rarely match the actual sorting of countries. For the World Bank, Mauritania, which is located largely in the Sahara, is classified as “sub-Saharan.” Somalia and Djibouti located in the Horn of Africa are categorized as Middle East. It’s worth recalling that the World Bank once placed apartheid South Africa in the MENA category, but once the country transitioned to Black majority rule, it was put in the “sub-Saharan” box. African organizations—such as the OAU and the African Development Bank—have since the 1960s tried to push back against such externally-imposed designations, preferring to speak instead of regional organizations like the East African Community and the Economic Community of West African States as its “building blocks.”

In political science, both international relations and comparative politics have long treated North Africa as separate and distinct from “sub-Saharan Africa.” Realism sidelined Africa in general, with their focus on the international system’s leading states – states “that make a difference,” in Kenneth Waltz’s memorable words. IR scholars felt comfortable analyzing the alliances and balance of power maneuverings of Egypt and the Arab states, in part because they were seen as central to the American national interest but also because, unlike sub-Saharan states, they were seen as strong states with the capacity to project power across state borders. African states, by contrast, were viewed through the lens of state weakness, permeability, and regime security. Jackson and Rosburg’s influential study “Why Africa’s Weak States Persist,” for example, began from the premise that Black Africa’s states were shell-states which lacked empirical statehood. North African states, by contrast, were assumed to be more “real,” with higher capacity than sub-Saharan states. Samuel Huntington’s Clash of Civilizations (1996) assumes that the Sahara is a civilizational fault line, a bloody border separating a North African Islam from a sub-Saharan African civilization—a distinction only possible if one erases sub-Saharan Islam.

Both African Studies and Middle East Studies would experience uprisings in the 1970s and 1980s, but in different directions. The publication of Edward Said’s Orientalism in 1978 marked a significant rupture within Middle East Studies and area studies generally. Said was not the first to critique the intellectual orientation of the field—among others, the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) had been founded by critical scholars in 1971. But Said’s intervention raised questions about the epistemic assumptions of Middle East studies in ways that continue to roil the field today. A similar insurrection took place in African Studies, in that case, against foreign policy and intelligence interests shaping the research agenda. While these (ongoing) critiques did much to upend the epistemological and ontological assumptions behind area studies, they did not challenge the political-racial logic of dividing North Africa (the Maghreb) from Africa itself. The reformists in Middle East Studies were not clamoring to integrate Africa in their research agenda; and in African Studies to this day when North Africa is discussed, it is mostly in the context of slavery, racism and diaspora communities.

With the end of the Cold War, leading African scholars with ties to CODESRIA such as Mahmood Mamdani and Achille Mbembe (both former presidents) took
up positions in prominent Western universities. In an influential article published in 2000, Mbembe argued for a cosmopolitan (Afropolitan) approach to the African experience, starting with a reconfiguring of the geographies that continue to define the study of the continent. Mbembe argues that the rise of globalization upends national sovereignty, rendering debates around the strength or weakness of African states moot. Instead, he calls for a recognition of how globalization “proceeds by way of the material deconstruction of existing territorial frameworks, the excision of conventional boundaries, and the simultaneous creation of mobile spaces and spaces of enclosure intended to limit the mobility of populations judged to be superfluous” (284). For Mbembe, such evolutions in sovereignty reflect long-standing practices of territoriality and control that defined Africa and the Middle East prior to the advent of European colonial rule.

In particular, he calls attention to the long history of exchange that ran through multiple ancient corridors connecting North Africa to sub-Saharan Africa despite, or more accurately, because of the Sahara desert. In contrast to colonial-inflected scholarship that assumes the Sahara as a natural barrier between Africa and the Middle East, Mbembe shows how North African countries like Morocco and Egypt have enduring religious, commercial and political ties to the countries located below the great desert. He also highlighted the role of ethnic diasporas and creole populations—Lebanese merchants in West Africa, religious networks spanning multiple regions, West African migrants in the Maghreb—that confound assumptions of regional isolation.

Demographic shifts and developments in the US after 9/11 have also blurred these domestic and academic borders. North African migration to the US – including from Sudan, Morocco and Algeria has grown exponentially since the introduction of the Green Card lottery in 1995. This in turn changed the composition of the academic field, bringing new identities and interests into the fold. Increased engagement by North African and Middle Eastern Americans in racial politics, joining people of color coalitions, engagement with Africana Studies, lobbying the Census Bureau to stop categorizing MENA communities as white, and increased interest in the history of racism in northern Africa region have all begun to erode these disciplinary and area studies borders. Joint panels were organized when MESA and ASA overlapped in the same city but again mostly on racism and slavery in North Africa.

Since the end of the Cold War, the area studies have gone through multiple crises, affecting African and Middle Eastern Studies differently but with some common themes. The massive U.S. national security investment in the Middle East after 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq created huge incentives for the study of security issues such as terrorism while pushing other traditional themes of the field towards the sidelines. In political science, at least, both fields turned towards professionalism and methodological sophistication. Rising cohorts of well-trained political scientists working in the Middle East and Africa alike increasingly wrote for general disciplinary audiences, prioritizing the methods, questions, and paradigms prevalent in the broader field. While this may on its face seem to downgrade the significance of the ideological battles and racial underpinnings outlined in this essay, in fact those foundational assumptions have permeated academic approaches to the region—with the artificial divide between Africa, North Africa and the Middle East only one of the most readily apparent.

Transregional Studies

Increased mobility of capital, people, goods and ideas should now be pushing scholars away from conceptualizing regions as bounded entities towards a transregional approach that foregrounds their interconnections. New fields such as Global Studies have begun to supplant area studies both in terms of scholarly interest and financial resources. Rather than a replacement for African and Middle East Studies, however, the new emphasis on transregional studies promises a middle path. Such an approach would recognize the value of a regional approach while resisting the siloization that once typified area studies scholarship.
In the last decade, a number of initiatives have emerged on the African continent – in Dakar, Johannesburg, Rabat and Kampala – that are trying to connect African Studies with Middle East Studies, so as to bridge the Saharan divide. In African universities, social scientists have been doing comparative work across the Saharan divide, and asking questions not asked in North American or European universities. Why are Senegal and Ghana democracies, but not Morocco and Algeria? Why are Rwandan and Ethiopian economies growing at much faster rates than North African states? Few American universities have been involved in these initiatives.

There are signs of change. New York University recently held a conference called “Africa in the Middle East, the Middle East in Africa” and Harvard University organized a two day conference on “Africa and the Maghreb.” Cornell is launching The Africa Hall in Sharjah, which aims to study historic ties – especially migratory and cultural flows – between Africa and the Arab world, while Columbia’s Department of Middle East, Africa and South Asia Studies seeks to push beyond traditional area studies boundaries altogether. But these initiatives are driven by historians, cultural studies scholars and some anthropologists – not social scientists. This POMEPS workshop bringing together scholars of Africa and the Middle East aligns with those efforts to get American political science to begin addressing questions raised by their counterparts in Africa and to break down the barriers between academic subfields defined by regions.

Future workshops will develop the themes raised in this introduction, but will also look at the comparative role of the Arab League and the Africa Union; how de-carbonization will affect Gulf states policies in Africa, and the response of Sahelian states. We will discuss refugee and migration flows between Africa and the Middle East, LGBT and feminist movements; how concepts of “indigenous” and “settler” can be used across the Saharan divide. We will also look at the role of Islamic humanitarianism, the comparative legacy and memory of the Ottoman Empire in these two regions, and the trajectories of the “rentier state” and “failed state” concepts, that were developed to explain the politics of the Middle East and Africa.

Endnotes

1 After the partition of the country in 2011, the association was renamed the Sudans Study Association.
4 As recently as 1965, Oxford historian Hugh Trevor-Roper would say declare that “Africa was enveloped in darkness – like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America, and darkness is not a subject for history. Adding: “Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa.”
5 Ousmane Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa* (Harvard University Press 2016) p.18
6 See Charles W. Mills, “Kant’s Untermenschen” in *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism*
7 Christie Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference* (Routledge 2007) p.75-77
13 In his book *Prince Among Slaves*, about the life of another prominent Muslim slave, Ibrahima Abdal Rahman, Terry Alford notes that Muslim slaves were used as “drivers, overseers and confidential servants which their numbers did not justify.” Terry Alford, *Prince Among Slaves* (Oxford University Press 1986)

42. Coone would write, “The few Riffians having even a trace of Negroid blood are engaged in ironworking trade, and the men...holding offices...are apt to be of Nordic-Alpine type...and the men noted for bravery but not for political ability, are more apt to be purer Nordic.” See Warwick Anderson, “The Anomalous Blonds of the Maghreb: Carlton Coon Invents African Nordics,” in Martin Thomas and Amanda Harris, eds., *Expeditionary Anthropology: Teamwork, Travel and the "Science of Man"* (Methodology & History in Anthropology Book 33) (Berghahn Books 2018).


53. The Egyptian diplomatic cable stated: “Greetings to the Free Negroes from Free Egypt, and from all Free Men.”


63. “What is sub-Saharan Africa?,” *The Economist* (March 7 2019)

64. Kenneth Waltz Theory of International Politics (1979) p.73


66. Mitchell 2004: 16

'Beyond regime change':
Reflections on Sudan’s ongoing revolution.

_Nisrin Elamin, Columbia University_

The ‘Arab Spring,’ the label widely used to describe a wave of popular anti-government uprisings that took place across North Africa and the Middle East between 2010 and 2012, is often described as having failed. The uprisings are viewed as having failed to usher in a new era of electoral democracy and failed to have facilitated social change and economic stability, particularly when compared to the series of transitions that took place in Eastern Europe between 1989-91. Instead of thinking about the Arab Spring in terms of failure, the Lebanese socialist writer Gilbert Achcar urges us to understand these uprisings as the beginning of a protracted revolutionary process that moves beyond regime change and “would necessarily go through ups and downs, revolutionary upsurges and counterrevolutionary setbacks.”

I take a similar approach here to thinking about the ongoing revolution in Sudan, as the beginning of a transformative process that moves beyond the removal of the former regime and ruling party.

My aim here is to consider the revolution on its own terms, within the context of Sudan’s own history of repression and resistance, not as a late-comer to the Arab Spring, but in relation to a wave of revolutions and uprisings that have taken place across the African continent over the last decade. As a member of the Sudanese diaspora, my hope is to raise a few questions rather than to offer a comprehensive analysis of the revolution. How can the grassroots organizing that allowed the revolution to take hold, inform our understanding of its dynamics? How do the ‘radical elements’ of Sudan’s revolution reveal some of the limitations of mainstream framings and analyses of popular uprisings on the African continent?

**Sudan in its African Context**

As Zachariah Mampilly points out, there have been a staggering 90 popular uprisings in more than 40 African states since 2005. Their causes and demands are often reduced to ethnic tensions or bread riots, thereby obscuring calls for a radical overhauling of existing arrangements of power. This reductive framing highlights the ways African popular uprisings represent the limits of revolutionary action as opposed to its promise.

The popular uprising that took place in Ethiopia between 2015-2016 is a case in point. It first emerged in opposition to a government plan to extend the capital’s administrative control into 1.1 million hectares of Oromo land through massive land seizures and the displacement of farmers. Popular protests led by students and farmers coalesced around a comprehensive set of issues including land grabs, reparations, the rising cost of living, the jailing and disappearance of political dissidents and stolen elections. And yet in many cases, mainstream media analysts reduced the uprising to ethnic violence or tensions between the Oromo on the one hand and Tigray elites on the other.

The activist and scholar Merera Gudina argues that this served to obscure demands for genuine political reforms aimed at an equitable re-organization and overhauling of existing arrangements of power. Instead, this framing played into the hands of the Ethiopian government, which had been pushing an ‘Ethiopia Rising’ narrative of fast neoliberal economic growth and development that had been threatened by these protests. As Elleni Centime Zeleke aptly points out, we need new discourses and questions to understand the recent protests in Ethiopia, ones that move beyond the center-periphery paradigm and can “explain the contradictions of inserting the Ethiopian nation-state into global capitalist relations”.

The discourse around Sudan’s ongoing uprising similarly draws upon a center-periphery paradigm that fails to take into account the transnational and geopolitical dimensions of the injustices to which protesters are responding. As in Ethiopia, narrowly framing the uprising as bread riots
triggered by a temporary economic crisis has obscured the deep-seated inequities that protestors seek to undo. The creation of Sudan's current transitional government, which is made up of elite representatives of the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) and several of the former regime's military leaders, is thus viewed as marking the end of the revolution, despite the fact that one of the revolution's principal demands - a transition to full civilian rule - has yet to be achieved. Declaring a successful end to the December revolution, has in fact been integral to the political marginalization of the more radical, grassroots elements of this revolution: the neighborhood resistance committees, farmer, factory worker and tea vendor unions and youth and feminist groups, whose membership is more popular and extensive than that of the SPA. Members of these groups have largely been left out of the transitional government and continue to engage in civil disobedience to hold those in power accountable to the original demands of the revolution. Their organizing persists, as they mobilize thousands of people across the country, many of whom believe that the revolution has simply entered a new phase.

When the revolution first began, international analysts struggled to understand how a movement that seemed leaderless and by extension disorganized, had managed to mobilize millions across Sudan’s ‘urban-rural divide’ and across ethnic and class lines. Unlike the 1964 and 1985 revolutions that successfully overthrew military regimes, the December revolution began in Sudan’s rural, marginalized areas before taking hold in Khartoum. And yet, what makes the ongoing revolution so powerful, is that it is leaderfull rather than leaderless. It emerged quite purposefully outside and in some ways in opposition to the failed leadership of entrenched, male-dominated opposition parties and relied instead on a sophisticated level of organization and coordination at the level of neighborhoods, schools, markets and workplaces.

A parallel can be drawn to anti-government protests that took place in post-Mugabe Zimbabwe last year, which were described in the media as leaderless, disorganized and chaotic, in part because they were led by a group of trade unions as opposed to the main opposition party the MDC (Movement for Democratic Change). In January, “the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions and the #ThisFlag social movement called for a 3 day general strike or “stayaway” (Kademaunga 2019, 43) after President Mnangagwa announced a 150% increase in fuel prices. On the first day of the stayaway, protests erupted that were brutally suppressed by security forces. The international media largely focused on the ‘pent-up anger’ of protesters burning tires, as opposed to the state violence they were met with. This tendency to highlight the lawlessness, ‘violence’ and ‘looting’ of protesters, served to downplay the brutality of the security forces that sought to repress them. It also overshadowed the transformative power of ordinary Zimbabweans organizing and coordinating revolutionary action outside the political space occupied by the MDC. It is through this organizing that youth and others disillusioned with the opposition redefined resistance in their defiance of the new Mnangagwa regime.

Sudan’s experience is thus well in line with recent protests in Zimbabwe and a larger trend across the African continent where people in countries like Algeria, Ethiopia and the Gambia have been mobilizing at the grassroots level - often after the ouster of a long-standing head of state - to demand more radical political and social changes than had been previously thought possible. These changes move beyond regime change to include issues such as constitutional reform, land justice, reparations, and a restructuring of national economies and transnational relations. The demands for these changes are emerging from a politicized base of youth and workers, who have been excluded from more formal political spaces dominated by opposition parties and civil society.

**Organizing Sudan’s Uprising**

My 82-year old father, who participated in the protests that took place in Khartoum between December and April, believes that the neighborhood resistance committee members which built barricades after security forces raided and attacked people’s homes represent one of the most radical elements of the revolution. These committees are “informal, grassroots, neighborhood-wide networks of
residents who opposed al-Bashir’s rule,” which emerged in urban areas in the mid 2010s to coordinate grassroots civil disobedience actions. Using graffiti, marches, strikes and other tactics, they mobilized people at the neighborhood level against government land seizures, cuts in fuel and food subsidies and lack of access to water. By the end of 2016, several of these committees had come together as a coalition to coordinate city-wide actions and campaigns. To my father, the barricades they rebuilt after each attack represented people’s determination to function autonomously without intervention or support from the state, until a government that represents the people is elected.

It is this autonomy and willingness to ‘take matters into their own hands’ that ultimately poses the biggest threat to existing arrangements of power. As one person active in a neighborhood committee in Khartoum explained to me: “Beyond regime change, this is about creating the kind of society we are fighting for at the very local level, between neighbors...where everyone belongs and nobody is left behind...yaani in terms of the basic things you need to live, you see...and we will continue to resist until we have a government that provides this for everyone.”

Over the course of our conversation, it became clear that he is less interested in what their organizing will produce in a concrete, teleological sense, as he is in the process of building alternative ways of being within the context of a political system and national economy that has “left people behind” for a very long time. The revolution has in fact been filled with examples of grassroots mutual aid efforts, from elderly people opening up their homes to shelter protesters to street vendors organizing food and tea drives, to artists reclaiming public spaces as they commemorate their martyrs. The strength of this revolution, as my father explains, lies precisely in people’s willingness to sacrifice and support one another as they build towards a more secure and just future for all.

**Land Reform and Restorative Justice**

The December revolution gained mass support and participation in part because of a convergence of decades-old grievances against state violence and marginalization in peripheral areas, with rural demands for land reform and urban calls for justice and economic security. At the center of these demands and grievances is land, the right to live on and off it, the right to return to it and the right to benefit from the resources that lie above and beneath it. Given that close to 70% of Sudan’s population relies on agriculture-based production for their food and income, land reform is integral to many people’s understanding and articulation of what justice should look like during and after Sudan’s transitional period. My research, based on fieldwork carried out in central Sudan between 2013 and 2018, explores how different stakeholders talk about and define what land, land ownership and land justice means to them. It asks: what does land justice look like for people whose livelihoods depend on access to and movement through land?

These land issues are linked to broader questions of restorative or transformative justice. While international attention may fixate on the prospect of former president Omar Al-Bashir facing trial at the International Criminal Court, a larger debate is taking place in Sudan about what restorative justice should look like during the country’s political transition. The focus has rightfully been on demands for justice for the massacres and crimes against humanity the former regime committed. In marginalized areas however, (and increasingly in rural areas of central and northern Sudan), land dispossession is very much linked to these forms of state violence. The violent displacement of communities in Darfur, the Nuba Mountains and South Sudan for instance, was part of a strategy used by the former regime to bring communal lands under state control in order to extract natural resources. The ongoing debate around what justice means during this transition raises several questions that Kamari Clarke explores in *Affective Justice* and that Jok Madut Jok addresses in a recent op-ed: What does transformative justice for survivors look like and what are the mechanisms through which it can be achieved? In what ways does the law, at various scales, reproduce particular kinds of inequalities and embody spaces where global inequality can play out?
Many of the farmers and agricultural workers I spoke with over the years viewed land justice as integral to addressing deep-seated inequities that predate the former regime. Several argued that justice will depend on a radical transformation of the existing legal system, which has protected the interests of the state and those of landed elites for generations. And yet, Sudan’s constitutional charter, drafted by members of the new transitional government, says very little about land, land rights or land reform. The word land itself appears only twice under “essential issues for peace negotiations” in a line that reads “issues of land and tribal lands (hawakir).” It is unclear what this means within the context of ongoing peace negotiations and whether the right of return for war-displaced communities, and the right to the resources that lie beneath their land will be protected.

There are numerous examples of the connection between land justice and pre-revolutionary mobilization. For many whose livelihoods are tied to land, the revolution did not come as a surprise and was instead seen as a response to the grievances and injustices they have been organizing around for years. In the Gezira, for example, about 60% of the agricultural labor is carried out by landless workers (many of whom are originally from western parts of Sudan or northern Nigeria), who constitute almost 40% of the population. In 2018, an association known as the Kanabi congress formed to represent the approximately 2.5 million people who work as planters and harvesters and live in Kanabi (worker communities) across the region. The congress was established after a series of home demolitions and targeted attacks were carried out by the former regime on several of these worker communities in the aftermath of a land dispute. Originally formed to demand better housing and living conditions, the congress and the communities it represents have increasingly become politicized. An active member of the Kanabi congress explained to me during a phone conversation in late 2018, that land justice is not simply about better living and work conditions for agricultural workers, but about challenging generational landlessness and a system of land ownership and land use that has long marginalized their communities. Ultimately, he insisted “it is about giving workers rights to the land they have worked on for generations.” In other words, it is about challenging the way land ownership and access to land is defined and protected by the law.

Similarly, women harvesters have been organizing to demand higher wages and better work conditions by threatening to strike. Just a few months before the revolution began, a group of harvesters mobilized against their employer’s excessive use of toxic fertilizers and pesticides, linking land justice to the way food is grown on large-scale farms. The use of these toxins has led to rising rates of cancer, asthma and reproductive health problems among harvesters and farm managers and has contaminated potable water sources.

Another example is the case of Um Doum, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Khartoum where a 2013 deal between Sudanese government elites and a Saudi billionaire over communal land that pastoralists and farmers had been utilizing for generations, was successfully reversed through coordinated civil disobedience. In the aftermath of the reversed deal however, a community of settled pastoralists was excluded from the land redistribution process, because they could not trace their ancestry back to Um Doum’s founding fathers. The deal Um Doum activists had negotiated with government elites relied on notions of land ownership tied to ancestry, inheritance and burial practices that are not only classed but also gendered and racialized. This particular notion of land ownership as tied to ancestry necessarily marginalizes pastoralists and other mobile communities such as seasonal agricultural workers. This conception of property is in turn protected by land laws that were created by the British colonial government to facilitate ongoing processes of accumulation by dispossession.

There is also a Middle East regional political dimension to the conflict over land. Beginning in the mid-2000s, Sudanese government elites devised a plan to revive the country’s post-oil economy following South Sudan’s likely secession, by attracting foreign investments in agriculture. Approximately 32 land deals have been signed with foreign investors over the last decade, for periods ranging from
20–99 year leases. To date, these deals have brought over 5 million acres of Sudanese land under the control of domestic and foreign agribusiness investors primarily to produce crops for animal consumption on dairy farms. Of the investors, (which include Jordan, Egypt, Qatar, Lebanon, Turkey and Syria) Saudi and Emirati companies have signed the largest number of leases for over a million acres of Sudanese land, bringing more land under their control than all of Sudan’s domestic agribusiness investors combined. Land reform will necessarily require Sudan to reverse many of the land deals signed over the last decade, as it reconsiders its relationship to the Gulf and builds new investment partnerships with other countries. The task ahead, for farmers and others whose livelihood is bound to land, is to ensure that the transitional government puts investment regulations in place that will protect their rights and access to their land and to the natural resources that lie above and beneath it.

The Coming Stage

Over the past few months, people in Sudan have continued using civil disobedience tactics and marches to protest fuel shortages and corruption, the exclusion of women from peace negotiations, the illegal disposal of toxic waste by mining companies, the dismissal of army officers, who supported the uprising and the continued targeting and killing of activists and protestors, particularly in Darfur. In many cases, a strike or action in one part of the country has garnered the support and solidarity of people elsewhere. The transitional government has been slow to respond to people’s demands for justice, repeating an assumption made by the former regime that delay tactics will eventually quiet people down. Underlying this assumption is the idea that the December revolution has run its course and that the creation of the transitional government represents its conclusion. For many however, including my father, the demands of the revolution have yet to be met. As long as the material conditions, state violence and unequal arrangements of power that fueled this revolution persist, people will likely continue to mobilize and hold the transitional government accountable to their original demands. If we understand the revolution as part of an ongoing process of transformation, then it could in fact take years or even decades to unfold.

Endnotes

6 The Sudanese Professionals Association is a union comprised of lawyers, professors, doctors and engineers formed initially in 2016 around demands to raise the national minimum wage. They form part of the Forces for Freedom and Change, a group of 23 civil society, grassroots community and opposition groups who were signatories of a declaration outlining the demands of the revolution.
8 The #ThisFlag movement is a Zimbabwean hashtag campaign turned pro-democracy social movement that was sparked by pastor Evan Mararire in April of 2016. It utilizes social media to mobilize people against state violence, corruption and poverty under the former and present ZANU-PF regimes.
I rely here on Zeleke’s definition and critique of the term civil society in African contexts as a “supremely political space, but that the specificity of its politics lies not so much in its structural defects but in the crystallisation of a form of power that continually reproduces the binaries of rural vs. urban, customary vs. modern, tribal vs. civilised, etc.” (2019, 229).


Interview conducted over the phone, April 17, 2019.

Source: Food and Agriculture Organization.


https://www.nation.co.ke/oped/blogs/620-5454162-ihe0rwz/index.html

Interview conducted via phone, November 4th, 2018.

See Schwartzstein, Peter. “One of Africa’s most Fertile Lands is Struggling to feed its own People.” Bloomberg. April 2, 2019.


The Great Game of the UAE and Saudi Arabia in Sudan

Jean-Baptiste Gallopin, European Council on Foreign Relations

After failing for years to decisively woo Omar al-Bashir to their axis, the UAE and Saudi Arabia took advantage of the revolutionary uprising of 2018-2019 to bring Sudan under their influence. They have done so by supporting military and paramilitary figures under the guise of “stability” and coopting elements of the revolutionary coalition. Emirati and Saudi support to the Transitional Military Council that replaced al-Bashir emboldened the generals in the critical weeks that followed his downfall, enabling the TMC’s repression of demonstrators on 3 June 2019, stymying revolutionary demands for civilian rule, and enabling the emergence of a power-sharing agreement in which the generals play a dominant role.

The revolutionary period marks an inflection point in Sudan’s relationship with these Gulf countries. Despite long-standing economic ties, the regime of Omar al-Bashir — an offspring of the Muslim Brotherhood — maintained, from its early years, a close alliance with Iran. Al-Bashir’s government also enjoyed privileged relations with the two regional backers of the Muslim Brotherhood: Qatar, which mediated the Darfur peace talks, and Turkey. In the 2010s, Khartoum, strapped for cash after the loss of most of its oil reserves in South Sudan’s secession, began a rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Within a few months of the start of the 2015 Saudi-led offensive on Yemen, Sudan committed an estimated 10,000 troops to support the coalition – the bulk of the infantry deployed – in exchange for the payment of soldiers’ salaries, direct deposits to the Sudanese state’s coffers, and subsidies on basic commodities. By 2018, UAE officials estimated that they had injected about $7 billion in Sudan’s economy.

This newfound patronage came with strings attached: Saudi Arabia and the UAE expected Khartoum to come on their side in their rivalries with Qatar and Iran. In 2016, Bashir eventually cut ties with Tehran. He reportedly promised the Emirates to sideline Islamists from his government. But it’s unclear whether Bashir was ever strong enough to follow through on his promise. At a time when erstwhile allies were plotting to remove him, Bashir’s shift away from Sudan’s traditional allies exacerbated divisions within his fractious ruling circle and further weakened his standing within the ruling National Congress Party, a key pillar of his regime, alongside the military, the security services, and the paramilitary militia known as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

This domestic pressure likely accounted for Bashir’s decision in June 2017 to stay neutral in the Qatar crisis, angering the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Riyadh, in retaliation, stopped paying the salaries of Sudanese soldiers. Egypt, a close ally of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, kept up the hopes of bringing Bashir into the alliance, encouraging him to remove Islamist officers. But he continued to play one side against the other. In March 2018, he received UAE subsidies and a $2 billion loan from Qatar. This balancing game convinced Saudi Arabia and the UAE that Bashir was unreliable and should be replaced.

In December 2018, the UAE reportedly halted fuel shipments to Sudan. Faced with an acute shortage of foreign exchange, a deep deficit and crushing debt, Bashir cut subsidies on bread, triggering the first demonstrations of what would become the Sudanese revolution.

The opportunity of the 2018-2019 uprising

As the uprising unfolded, al-Bashir lost his few remaining allies. None of his foreign sponsors came to the rescue. On December 24, when Gen. Mohammed Hamdan Daglo, known as Hemedit, the head of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, came out supporting demonstrators’ demands, it became clear that the loyalty of the military and security apparatus was shaky. In mid-February, as demonstrations continued unabated, the head of the security service Salah Gosh and the UAE reportedly...
offered al-Bashir an exit plan, which he refused. The Emiratis began to reach out to opposition groups; so did Gosh, who visited prominent leaders in prison. On 7 April 2019, a day after revolutionary demonstrators began a sit-in in front of the military’s headquarters, Gen. Jalal al-Dine el-Sheikh, the deputy head of the security service, headed a delegation of military and intelligence officials to Cairo, where he sought the support of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE for a coup against al-Bashir. The three countries then reportedly reached out to Abdelfattah al-Burhan, a military general who had coordinated the Sudanese military’s operations in the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, and Hemedti, who had also deployed there as head of the RSF. Egypt offered Bashir exile in Saudi Arabia. Again, he refused. A few days later, on 11 April, leaders of the military and security apparatus, including al-Burhan and Hemedti, overthrew him, installing a Transitional Military Council (TMC) to rule the country. This coup gave an opportunity for the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt to finally bring Sudan into their axis. They threw their weight behind the TMC, and in particular Hemedti, who had already acquired considerable financial resources in the last year of al-Bashir’s rule thanks to the deployment of the RSF in Yemen and his exports of Sudan’s gold to Dubai. Within ten days, the UAE and Saudi Arabia had promised $3 billion of direct aid to the new regime. Yet even as revolutionaries showed signs of radicalizing, the Emirates worked discretely to co-opt the opposition. In late April, senior members of Sudan Call, a central component of the FFC, met with Emirati officials in Abu Dhabi. Upon their return, Sudan Call officials began to speak positively about the role of the military, the UAE and Saudi Arabia in the transition. By early May the softening of Sudan Call’s position prompted revolutionary activists and other armed groups to speculate about the UAE’s “suitcase diplomacy.” In private, Sudan Call officials now acknowledge that “handsome compensations were being thrown around.” On 3 June, after a visit by Hemedti to Riyadh, Cairo and Abu Dhabi (Crisis Group 2019:12), RSF and police forces cracked down on the Khartoum sit-in, killing more than 130 people and sparking indignation in Sudan and abroad. The event prompted the US and the UK, after weeks of passivity, to pressure the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Emirati and Saudi officials, reportedly concerned that Hemedti had gone too far and was precipitating instability, used their influence on the TMC to push for a deal with the opposition. They began to publicly call for “dialogue”, and
to work behind the scenes alongside the UK and the US to broker a deal.27

The massacre failed to discourage grassroots revolutionaries, however.28 On 30 June, the resistance committees — a network of neighborhood groups — and the Sudanese Professionals’ Association, a coalition of unions, gathered hundreds of thousands of people on the streets in a “march of the million”. The show of force took the TMC by surprise.29 It showed that the junta’s strategy of repression and stalling had failed, and that mobilization could continue for many more weeks. But rather than using this renewed popular support to extract more concessions, the leadership of the FFC compromised.

**Sabotaging civilian rule**

In the power-sharing agreement that emerged five days later, the generals retained considerable influence: Gen. Abdel fattah al-Burhan, the head of the TMC, would act as the head of the new sovereignty council – and as de facto head of state – for the first 21 months of the transition.30 The “constitutional declaration” signed in August between the FFC and the generals planned for a cabinet led by a FFC appointee, but military leaders kept the control over the crucial ministries of defense and the interior. Hemedti became deputy head of the sovereignty council.

After the signing of the constitutional declaration, which laid out a roadmap to a constitutional conference and elections, the UAE and Saudi Arabia provided support to the new government, funneling $200 million monthly in cash and commodity subsidies to the government for the second half of 2019.31 In line with this new alignment, the Sudanese government, though desperate for cash, turned down an offer to send a delegation to Qatar in exchange for $1 billion in financing.32

Domestically, the new alliance between the FFC and the former TMC members dramatically reconfigured the Sudanese state at the expense of the NCP, in line with Gulf backers’ hostility towards the Muslim Brotherhood. Top NCP representatives faced jail and their assets were seized. Al-Burhan, who had served as the military’ coordinator with the ruling party,33 pivoted to please his patrons and purged many who were too clearly identified as Islamists from the military and the security service.34 UAE influence came to pervade the Sudanese political scene. Hemedti, whom a diplomat described as “the agent and the proxy of the Emirates”,35 consolidated his position as a central player thanks to his ability to buy off potential dissenters and competitors.36 Sudan Call’s leaders, such as Yasir Arman and Sadig al-Mahdi, the leader of the Umma Party, continued to express public support to the participation of the military in the transition and worked to marginalize leftist groups not affiliated to the UAE.37

Since late 2019, the Saudis appeared to have taken a step back, leaving the management of the Sudan file to the Emiratis. In spite of their official policy of support to the transition, the UAE have maneuvered to undermine the civilian wing of the government by propping up the generals. Three developments illustrate these efforts.

First, the Emiratis have sponsored a peace process that puts the generals front and center. The constitutional declaration was unclear about who, in the new power configuration, should be in charge of negotiations with armed groups from Darfur, Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile – a priority for the transition.38 The generals seized on this ambiguity. Hemedti and Gen. Shamseddine al-Kabbashi, another former member of the TMC, wrested the process from the cabinet, heading government delegations in Juba, where the negotiations have been taking place with financial backing from the UAE. Abu Dhabi has used its influence with armed groups to push for a deal that would put the generals in the positions of peacemakers, though internal divisions between the RSF and SAF and the FFC’s belated effort to join the talks have been stumbling blocks (by the spring of 2020, Hemedti was happy to leave the file to al-Kabbashi).39

Second, the UAE in February 2020 brokered a meeting between the head of the sovereignty council Gen. al-Burhan and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in which they discussed normalization of bilateral ties.
The move earned al-Burhan an invitation to Washington by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, baffling American observers, since it appeared to contradict the official US policy to support civilian rule. A senior Sudanese military source told the media that Sudan hoped the meeting with Netanyahu would convince the US to lift the designation of State Sponsor of Terrorism, which Hamdok has sought – and failed – to secure for months, and which stymies investment and debt relief. The source also revealed that the Saudi and Egyptian officials knew of the upcoming meeting, which had been in the works for months, but that the civilian Minister of Foreign Affairs was not notified.

Third, the UAE have lobbied to put Hemedti in the driving seat of Sudan's economic policy. In March 2020, Hemedti was briefly appointed the head of a new emergency economic committee – a powerful ad-hoc body. But in the face of opposition from the FFC, he was forced to step down and become a simple member, leaving the seat to Hamdok. In April 2020, amid intense rumors of a potential coup from the military, the FFC operated a rapprochement with Hemedti, whom they came to see as a protector. Following intense lobbying from the UAE, the FFC relented to Hemedti becoming the head of the committee, consecrating his role as the key decision-maker on economic policy. The UAE and Saudi Arabia officially ended their direct support to the Sudanese government in December 2019 without an explanation, having disbursed only half of the $3 bn they had promised; Hemedti, however, has been making a show of depositing hundreds of millions of dollars to the Central Bank to stabilize the economy.

Conclusion

Sudan's international realignment has been swift. Within less than a year, the clients of Qatar and Turkey in Khartoum lost any role in policy. Financial support from Saudi Arabia and the UAE gave the generals crucial leeway to resist popular demands for civilian rule, shaping a lopsided balance of power that allowed the generals to navigate a period of mass mobilization. The Emirates’ covert financial flows subsequently earned them unparalleled leverage across large segments the political spectrum, which helped the generals, and in particular Hemedti, consolidate their power.

As the influence of Qatar and Turkey has faded, emerging political fault lines within Sudan are a source of disagreements within the Arab Troika. The Egyptian government, traditionally close to the Sudanese army, sees Hemedti with suspicion and has cultivated a relationship with al-Burhan. A rivalry between the two generals has become more apparent since April 2020; it suggests that the current power arrangement is unstable and could affect the relations between Egypt and its Gulf partners. Now that the fate of Sudan has become tied to the games of influence of the Arab Troika, its domestic politics may come to impact the Troika itself.
Endnotes

1 This paper relies on interviews with actors and observers of the Sudanese political scene, and on an analysis of public or semi-public documents, including news articles, press releases and statements from political actors.


4 These included $1.4 billion in the Central Bank’s foreign exchange reserves and 871 million dollars in fuel subsidies.

5 Interview with a minister under Bashir, Khartoum, April 2019.

6 He further alienated his new patrons by sacking his head of cabinet Taha Osman al-Hussein — who had emerged as the central figure of Sudan’s foreign policy — after it emerged that al-Hussein had taken Saudi citizenship. Al-Hussein left the country went on to become an adviser to Riyadh.

7 Interview with an observer of Sudanese politics, Berlin, June 2018.

8 Interview with a Western diplomat in Khartoum, April 2019.

See also Crisis Group 2019.


10 Interview with a diplomat working for a Western mission in Khartoum, April 2019. On Chad, see also De Waal 2019.

11 See also Crisis Group 2019.


13 These included Mariam al-Mahdi, of the Umma Party, leaders of the Sudan Congress Party, but also rebels of the Sudan Revolutionary Front, including Yasir Arman, of the Agar branch of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement – North, the Justice and Equality Movement, and Minni Minnawi, the head of a branch of the Sudan Liberation Movement, a Darfur rebel group. Hosting Darfur rebel groups allowed the UAE to weaken Qatar, which had previously sponsored peace negotiations on Darfur.


16 These efforts paid off at first, but Egypt failed to prevent the AU’s Peace and Security Council from suspending Sudan after the 3 June massacre. De Waal 2019.

17 Interview with a diplomat working for a Western mission in Khartoum, April 2019. On Chad, see also De Waal 2019.

18 https://twitter.com/AnwarGargash/status/1123470302317621248

19 Interview with a Minister under Bashir, Khartoum, April 2019.

20 Interview with organizers and activists at the Khartoum sit-in, 1-3 May 2019.

21 Ibid.


23 These included Mariam al-Mahdi, of the Umma Party, leaders of the Sudan Congress Party, but also rebels of the Sudan Revolutionary Front, including Yasir Arman, of the Agar branch of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement – North, the Justice and Equality Movement, and Minni Minnawi, the head of a branch of the Sudan Liberation Movement, a Darfur rebel group. Hosting Darfur rebel groups allowed the UAE to weaken Qatar, which had previously sponsored peace negotiations on Darfur.

24 Interview with an official from the SPLM-N / al-Hilu branch, Khartoum, April 2019.

25 Interview with a leader of JEM, Khartoum, May 2019. Interview with a SAF officer, Khartoum, April 2019. Also see Sudan Tribune, Sudan’s opposition, UAE officials discussed peace and issues of mutual concern: Arman, 18 June 2019.


27 Al-Quds al-Arabi on 29 May 2019.

28 Phone interview with a Sudanese activist, May 2019.

29 Under Secretary of State David Hale took the unusual step to not only call the Saudi Deputy Defense Minister Khalid Bin Salman and UAE Foreign Minister Anwar Gargash, but also to make his messages to them public. "Under Secretary Hale's Call With Saudi Deputy Defense Minister Khali-l bin Salman", Readout from U.S. State Department Office of the Spokesperson, 4 June 2019; "Under Secretary Hale's Call With Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash of the United Arab Emirates", Readout from U.S. State Department Office of the Spokesperson, 6 June 2019.


32 Phone interview with a Sudanese activist, June 2019.


Interview with a Sudanese cabinet adviser, May 2020.

Interview with a former SAF officer, May 2020.

PAX Sudan Alert, Actor Map, 5 June 2019.

Sudan Tribune, Sudan reforms military command structure, 30 October 2019.

Sudan Tribune, Sudan relieves over 60 security service officials, 25 November 2019.


Interview with a Western diplomat, April 2020.

De Waal reports that Hemedti handed out money to striking policemen, tribal chiefs, teachers, electricity workers, and officers of the Sudanese Armed Forces' High Command (2019a:21).

Sudan People’s Liberation Movement – North (Agar branch), 6 February 2020.

The document states that the sovereignty council had “sponsorship” or “custody” over the peace process (رعاية العملية السلام مع الحركات المسلحة), but lists as the cabinet’s second competency a “work to stop wars and conflicts and build peace” (عكف على إيقاف الحروب والنزاعات وبناء السلام). For the text of the constitutional declaration, see http://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/Sudan%20Constitutional%20Declaration_Arabic_Final.pdf

Among the armed groups negotiating with the government, some, such as the Justice and Equality Movement or the Sudan Liberation Army – Minni Minnawi, have been under Emirati patronage since their involvement as mercenaries alongside Khalifa Haftar, an Emirati client, in Libya. The Agar branch of the Sudan’s People Liberation Movement – North, as mentioned, operated a rapprochement with the UAE in April 2019, alongside other groups of Sudan Call. The UAE is working to bring the Sudan Liberation Army – Abdelwahed al-Nur and the Abdelaziz al-Hilu branch of the Sudan’s People Liberation Movement – North, the two groups that actually control territory within Sudan, into a deal. Al-Hilu travelled to the UAE in December 2019.

Phone interview with a Sudanese activist, December 2019.

Radio Tamazuj, Sudanese rebel al-Hilu concludes visit to the UAE, 31 December 2019.


US diplomats have been eschewing meetings with the military branches of government.

Prime Minister Hamdok also denied having been informed of the meeting, although Shafi’a Khiddir, one of his informal advisers, said that the Prime Minister had received a 48h notice. Interview with a DC-based analyst of US foreign policy, February 2020.


On that occasion, the UAE also sought to impose a new leader for the security service: Gen. Abdelghaffar al-Sharif, one of the most influential spy chiefs under al-Bashir, who has since lived in exile in the UAE. Al-Burhan, Hemedti and the FFC refused. Interview with a Sudanese observer, April 2020.

Hemedti interview to Sudan 24, 24 May 2020: https://youtu.be/glpMPQI670w?time=2287
The Sudanese revolution of 2019 that overthrew the nearly 30-year rule of 'Umar al-Bashir and the Islamist government that backed him has sparked debate not only on what system of governance is most appropriate to represent the will of people, but also on what resources Sudan might draw to unify a nation fractured by decades of conflict. While the answer of the previous regime to this perennial question was a “Civilization Project” (al-mashri’ al-hadari) that derived its resources from Islam, and that of colonial forces before it a “civilizing mission” imposing Victorian values on Sudan’s diverse landscape, revolutionary actors have made a very different sort of salvo into the tense debate over the appropriate civilizational storehouse from which to build to a better future, turning to Ancient Nubia (c. 2450 BC-364 AD, popularly framed as Kush) as a proud time in Sudan’s history that once was and could be again. While such gestures towards this ancient past are not unprecedented in modern Sudan, at no time in its recent history has this particular past been so distinctly drawn upon in order to ground its present, and to imagine its future, as it is today. Might Ancient Nubia/Kush overcome its particularisms to become a unifying narrative for Sudan, and how might it address competing narratives for Sudanese identity building from Islamism, to Arabism, to Pan-Africanism?

This essay will explore the place of Kush in contemporary imaginings of Sudan that have occurred both in and following its 2018-19 revolution. Here, Kush serves not as an erasure of the recent past, or as a means of embracing some imagined pre-modern utopia, but rather as a creative and critical way of assessing recent Sudanese history. With an eye towards surfacing buried narratives and material cultural forms, as well as ensuring forms of solidarity that might loosen the grip of the alliances that have led the country into so many dead ends, Kush has become a powerful paradigm. Yet, to do so, it has had to shed a series of earlier associations; its purchase on the revolutionary present has not come easily.

Unearthing I: Nubia in Emergent Egyptology

In 1913, George Andrew Reisner, father of modern Egyptology and leader of the joint excavation team of...
the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) and Harvard University, received a commission from the government of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan to begin excavating a series of sites in what came to be known to archeologists as Ancient Nubia. Reisner was most famous for his work at the Giza pyramids outside Cairo and his interest in Nubia stretched little beyond what it could tell him about the extent of Egyptian power up the Nile. The cultures of Kerma, Napata, and Meroe—often popularly lumped together as Kush, echoing a Biblical narrative of which Reisner, trained initially as a Semiticist, would certainly have been familiar—were virtually unknown at the time, either in or outside Sudan, or at least we have little record of any such knowledge. Interested mainly, or so it is said, in increasing the MFA’s collection of Middle and New Kingdom Egyptian art, Reisner approached what we might today call his Sudanese project as an element of larger Egyptian history, seeing his major find at Kerma, for example, as evidence of an important Egyptian trading post.

In the early 20th century, Sudan’s British rulers were still unsure of whether Sudan was to be a distinct possession or rather some part of a larger Egypt. Thus, Reisner must have had little notion of the contributions he would make decades later to another sort of archeological project, one in which it was not the sands of the Nubian desert that were to be moved (or at least not only that), but rather the sands of time. Today’s unearthing of Ancient Nubia, while built on the architecture of some of Reisner’s key findings, challenges his conclusions in important ways and employs them to new ends, and not always those we might expect. Though such revivalist movements of the ancient past (neo-Phonecianism, neo-Persianism, neo-Assyrianism, neo-Pharoanism in Egypt) are often read and articulated as secularist or anti-religious, and although there is undoubtedly an anti-Islamist reaction to the prior regime in this present Kushite revival, we too quickly ignore the ontological commitments that are also at stake in this turn to the ancient past. Indeed, in rubbing against these ancient histories, a new sort of inspired present is being excavated from the sands, as a way both to make sense of today’s challenges and to imagine a more just future.

Unearthing II: The December Revolution

Lion god Apedemak in protest pose, Al-Jazeera television still, unknown location, unknown artist.

Pyramids join the sit-in at the gate of the Armed Forces Headquarters, wall mural, Khartoum2, unknown artist (photo by author, Dec. 2019).

How does one make the past present, giving it voice and personhood in a series of matters that it never could have imagined? How does the past itself come to limit current possibilities through its material presence, resisting instrumental retrievals? What sorts of necromancy are required to resuscitate this ancient past and what sorts of deaths in the present make such subsequent resurrections seem so necessary?
Like the actual monuments themselves emerging from the sands, mentions of Kush poke out in various places throughout the history of independent Sudan: in wedding music and popular songs, in theater; in school books, on television programs, in the works of intellectuals. Still, for most Sudanese, the history of Ancient Nubia has been buried. This state of affairs occurred for several reasons, due to the inaccessibility of many of the key sites to visitors because of lack of infrastructure, the Islamist government’s insistence that Kush was a past to be transcended, leading to a lack of education on this period in Sudan’s history, and because many archeologists of Nubia were interested in Kush only to the extent that it tells us about Egyptian history, and not Sudanese. For these reasons, the fact that images from ancient Nubia were to emerge, and so vividly so, during the revolution that began in December 2018 is remarkable and raises a number of important questions about what role such histories might play in Sudan’s post-revolutionary period.

In the two images above, we can see some of the ways Ancient Nubia has been employed in imaginings of this revolutionary moment. In the first image, we see the lion god, Apedemak, assuming the pose of the December Revolution protestor, marching, arm raised and fingers v-ed in a victory salute. Apedemak is an apt choice as he is a truly Nubian deity in that, unlike many of the other Gods worshipped, he is unique to Kushite culture, arising only after Egyptian influence had eroded in the 3rd century BC, and thus represents indigeneity in addition to strength. This image is likely inspired by the stunning temple dedicated to him at al-Musawarat al-Sufra (2nd half of 3rd century BC, resurrected 1970) where he is described in the Meroitic script as the “Lion of the South” and the “head of Kush.” In the mural in the second photo above, we see the sands, and the pyramids that populate them, literally encroaching on the military headquarters ready to bury it at any instant. The image is meant as a reminder, perhaps, of the civilizational permanence of this monumental past and its values in comparison to the transience of the plexiglass present of the buildings the previous regime erected.

Arriving at the Visitors’ Center for the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums, Island of Meroe World Heritage Site, one is greeted by a handwritten banner that reads as follows: “Tirhaqa is my direct grandfather (tirhaqa jiddi ‘adil), my grandmother is a kandaka. Welcome, welcome to the revolutionaries! The free revolutionaries who are the descendants of Tirhaqa: The land of the kandakas welcomes you!” Reflecting the new-found interest in the site from supporters of the revolution, who have been flocking to it in large numbers in recent months, the sign cites both a famous revolutionary poem and the two most recalled figures of Kushite history: the 7th century BC pharaoh Tirhaqa, who not only pushed back Egyptian rule, but established an independent empire that stretched all the way to the Mediterranean; and the figure of the Nubian queen, the kandaka. If it is true that the finds of Sudanese archeology impacted the revolution, it may be even more so that the revolution is transforming Sudanese archeological science, both instilling its work with new-found relevance and pushing it to think about how to apply the goals of the revolution to its program.
I met Dr. Mahmoud Suliman Bashir, Director of Regional Antiquities for River Nile State, in early January 2020 in his office only a few days after he had organized a major conference at the Visitors Center entitled, “The Role of Antiquities and Tradition in the Promotion of Peace,” in which a whole series of papers were delivered on the topic of how the archeological services could be employed to further the revolutionary agenda. He told me:

This [new interest in the ancient history of Sudan that we are seeing] is the offspring of the Revolution (walidat al-thawra)...The thing that happened at the Qiyada [the nickname for the military headquarters where the sit-in took place] is that people from all directions of Sudan unified themselves under one slogan, that this [ancient civilization] is the civilization of all of us...This is one of the things that unified the people, I mean [at the sit-in you find] this person is reading [Qur’an], this person is drinking alcohol, this person has his hymns, ....there is diversity, there is incredible diversity, but all are unified in the story of Tirhaqa...

Up until the Meroitic Period [332 BC-364 AD] there was a unity [across what we today call Sudan]...I mean the same pottery that you find [here], is found in eastern Sudan, in Blue Nile State, and in Kordofan. This is one of the things [people have not realized]. So we want there to be mobile exhibitions (ma’arid mutanaqqila) [travelling around Sudan] so that people in all parts of Sudan can see the artifacts, especially those people that have not seen them before...This is one of the ways that we apply the slogan of the revolution: freedom, peace, and justice. This is justice. This is a part of justice, [ensuring] that all the people of Sudan come to know [their history]...Justice means that all the people of Sudan know about Sudanese civilization, that they were a participants in it and part of it. And justice means that we research the antiquities in a way that expresses equality [in selecting diverse locations across Sudan].

Much has been written about the place of archeology in projects of nation building, exclusion, and in the rewriting of history. Yet, the sort of decolonization of knowledge that Dr. Mahmoud is suggesting for his revolutionary archeological project, while certainly nationalist in nature, takes us in a rather different direction. Here, the digging will take place not to cement a particular group’s claim to the land, but rather to dislodge one: a northern-centrism that has plagued Sudan since colonial times, if not before. This is a reading of history, enforced by scholars like Reisner, that has claimed the north, Nubia included, as the engine of Sudan’s historical achievements and that has seen those groups from other regions as people without history and thus with little standing to define Sudan in the present. By searching for an ancient past in the neglected regions of Sudan, Dr. Mahmoud’s decolonizing archeology sought to tell a different story. Yet, to what extent is Nubian history universalizable and what challenges might arise as history asserts its own agenda on the matter of Sudanese unity?

Kush in Macrocosm, Kush in Microcosm (Nubia for the Nubians, Nubia for the Sudan/s)

Still from a YouTube advertisement for Nubian radio station "Kadantikar." "Together for a Creative Nubian Nation (umna)."
The images of Ancient Nubia that became popular during the December 2018 revolution had their origin in another set of uprisings. In 2007, protests erupted around the proposed construction of the Kajbar dam in Northern Sudan that was to flood a major part of historical Nubia, washing away countless antiquities, not to mention the homes and livelihoods of so many Nubians themselves.14

The YouTube still I have included above advertises a pirate radio station that made use of such images in its publicity, while the image directly above is of the ubiquitous graffiti I observed on a trip to Nubia in 2017, one of the few places in Sudan in those days where one saw any oppositional graffiti at all. Can a very particular history like that of Nubia be universalized,15 especially when discursive knowledge about it can only be traced back to the early 20th century, even if links in the chains of its material history have remained unbroken? The idea of Kush as all-of-Sudan has a precedent, and not just among northern Sudanese. Echoing the Biblical classification, evangelically-oriented Southern Sudanese floated serious proposals to name the soon-to-be-independent South Sudan “Kush” in 2011. Reading Southern Sudanese as the true heirs of this ancient civilization mentioned in the Bible, and today’s Nubians as usurpers, these Southerners saw it fitting as their first act of independence to reclaim “Kush” for the South. But, of course, this christening did not come to pass.

With all of these claims on Sudanese history still active, can Kush be the future of a more equitable Sudan in this post-revolutionary period? Multiple histories of Kush today jostle against one another, twitching back to life after many years of dormancy: universalizing macro-histories of Kush as Sudan; micro-histories of Kush as Nubia; and niche histories, such as the recent movement to revive the Kushite kingdom in the terra nullius (land claimed by no state) of the 2000 square kilometer Bi’r Tawil region, between Egypt and Sudan. What other claims to this past might emerge from beneath the sands?

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14 No to DAL [services company]; No to Kajbar [dam]; No to the obliteration of the Nubian Identity,” graffiti near Kerma Sudan, (photo by author, Dec. 2017).

15 Youtube stills from the declaration of the movement to revive the Kingdom of Kush in Bi’r Tawil: “We announce the re-establishment of the kingdom as it was before and as it was meant to be, and as it has been mentioned in the first historic books and even in the religious books…”
Martyrdom and the Traces of the Islamic

The revival of Kushite themes in post-revolutionary Sudan as a resource for imagining national identity comes at the heels of a state-initiated project that used Islamic resources to do very much the same, whose vanguards were overthrown as a result of the December Revolution. With this in mind, it would be tempting to read the emergence of Ancient Nubia onto the contemporary scene simply as a return of a buried presence of the true Sudan, an African autochthony engulfed by years of Arab and Islamic artifice.

Complicating such a reading, however, is that this recent rise of Kush has been made possible in great part due to the sponsorship of the archeological sites by the Emir of Qatar, who was also one of the foreign leaders most supportive of the Islamist trend in Sudan. Indeed, even with Kush on the rise, the frame of the Islamic remains present in post-revolutionary action, sometimes braided into the Kushite heritage itself. At times this frame is in direct challenge to conservative readings of the Islamic tradition, such as in the image on the below left where the well-known, but disputed, Islamic scholarly judgment “sawt al-mara’a ‘awra” (“the voice of the woman is nudity,” i.e. that it must be covered), is played in rhyme as sawt al-mara’a thawra (“The voice of the woman is revolution”) using the image of protester Ala’ Salah, known popularly as “the kandaka,” to drive home its point. Yet, in the image on the above left, and in the haunting image below, we can see the way that the mourners of the martyrs of the revolution have taken on an Islamic legal framework as their own, echoed in the now ubiquitous chant “al-sha’b yurid qisas al-shahid,” “[the people want the retribution provided for in sharia for the death of the martyr]. The tableau below with the images of the martyrs from the Organization of the Families of the Martyrs building in Khartoum equally takes on this frame: “blood for blood, we don’t accept blood money; “Freedom, peace, and justice; blood in qisas for blood.”
Embodying Tirhaqa, Living Kandaka

What still lies beneath the sands? In what ways will Sudan’s ancient history be embodied in its present? Can the inert statues of pharaohs and kings be animated to solve the problems of Sudan at its current juncture? In what ways can the kandakas—the now ubiquitous term to describe women revolutionaries—rise again and what might still stand in their way? The photo above depicts just one of the many images of kandakas that one sees in the revolutionary art that adorns the walls of Sudanese cities across the country, and not just in Khartoum. In this striking mural, a queen stared pensively over the pyramids at Meroe as a braceleted fist, adorned with hieroglyphic script, erupts behind her. This is a far cry indeed from the unearthings of Egyptologists, such as Reisner, whose Lady Sennuwy became the image of Nubian womanhood.21 The narrative in which the European archeologist rescued artifacts of Nubia’s kings and queens has been turned on its head with this archeology of presence. It is now the descendants of the Nubian queens who are doing the rescuing, reanimating those ancient images of female power carved into the walls of the pyramids one visits at Meroe. Yet, on this mural one also notices graffito commemorating the Pro-Bashir counter-revolutionary action of the “green crawl” in December 2019, reminding us that all is far from settled.
And what about the dead, those who sacrificed their lives for this revolution, how might they be remembered? How do ancient memorials like the Kushite monuments help strengthen contemporary ones? In the image on the previous page, four monumental statues discovered at Kerma in 2003, and currently standing at its museum, fix their steely gaze on the Sudanese visitors and European adventure tourists who pass them by each day on their journey to the Western Defuffa, the so-called oldest building in Africa, that stands outside the museum. In the image on the left, in a poster I came across at a petrol station not far from the museum, the statues have been repurposed, their heads replaced with those of four martyrs from the Kajbar protest of 2007 at Kadantikar, advertising an event to commemorate both their martyrdom and that of the fallen of the December 2018 Revolution. Symbols of permanence, monuments that have survived millennia, seem a fitting location in which to inter the memories of martyrs of the December Revolution and those that came before, so that they too survive the blowing sands of history. The pyramids, the tombs of the pharaohs, have come to stand-in as solid monuments to the immortality of spirit of a people in a time in which so many have gone missing, with no graves to mark their passing.

Endnotes


3 Jeremy Walton’s Empires of Memory project at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen has been an inspiration for me in thinking through this question. Indeed, germinial seeds of some of the ideas in this essay were first planted in conversation with project members at a lecture I delivered there in December 2019. In particular, I have found Walton’s critique of the “memory studies” literature most persuasive and helpful to think with, in that it takes seriously the material, epistemological, and ontological relations between past and present that give history an ambivalent status in political projects of retrieval, rather than merely seeing such relations as purely a means to an end. See Walton, Jeremy. 2019. “Textured Histories and the Ambivalence of Imperial Legacies,” History and Anthropology, 30:4.

4 From wedding songs (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6pavv0iIU), to the pop songs of Muhammad Wardi (https://www.alkoba.net/459491)، Kush was a persistent theme in mid 20th century music.
kandaka is an example of an Islamic reading of Ancient al-kandaka bayn al-madi wa-l-hadir. Dr. Su’ad Uthman; and "Shared Cultural Features among the Sudanese"

The most widely discussed instance of this neo-Kushite interpretation of revolutionary action occurred around the much circulated image of activist Ala’ Salah assuming her theatrical pose on top of a car in the midst of the sit-in, wearing the gold earrings that mirror the ancient sun symbols used in Ancient Nubian arts and reading a poem that is generally shorthanded with the title “My Grandfather is Tirhaqa and my Grandmother is a Nubian Queen (kandaka)”. I have written on this image, its reproduction, and the associated poem in “New Histories for an Uncharted Future in Sudan,” Africa is a Country, May 17, 2019.

Information gathered from the exhibits at the Visitors Center of the Island of Meroe World Heritage Site as well as two visits to the temple in 2006 and 2015.

See endnote 8 above.

Among the titles of the papers: “Inspiration to Political Opposition Provided by Popular Tradition, The December Revolution as an Example” (“istillham al-turath al-shababi fi al-ma’rifa al-siyasa wa-thawrat disimbir mumduhan”) by Ahmed Muhammad Hamadatu; “The Kandaka between the Past and Present” (“al-kandaka bayn al-madi wa-l-hadir”) Dr. Su’ad Uthman; and “Shared Cultural Features among the Sudanese” (“al-musharikat al-thaqafiyya bayn al-sudanin”), as well as several papers that discussed the findings of recent archeology in regions of Sudan that have not traditionally been a focus of archeologists, such as the east, west, and south, providing evidence of a broader reach for Kushite culture than European archeology has assumed, and thus the seeds of a post-revolutionary Kush-Sudan equivalence thesis.

Nadia Abu El-Haj’s landmark Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) is an essential resource for those who want to think about the links between colonialism, nationalism, and archeological practice, while previous works have explored the politics of archeology in other nationalist contexts. See, for example, the essays included in Kohl, Philip L. and Clare Fawcett, eds. 1995. Nationalism, Politics, and the Practice of Archeology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

This still is pulled from the following video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UzTFjXMhyuM.

This generation of Nubian rights’ movements was founded a few years earlier, however. One of them, harakat tahrir kush al-sudaniyya (the Sudanese Movement for the Liberation of Kush), has taken on particular prominence in recent years. Adopting “Kush” in its name has also led to struggles within the movement over the particularity versus the universality of this ancient history (whether it applies only to Nubia or to all of Sudan, that is). Its leader discusses this topic in the following interview: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKop3qYqEE.

Nesrine Malik’s insightful Guardian essay also asks this question: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/24/icon-sudan-revolution-woman-in-white.

The full videos can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THeK5Jumps8 and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkh7b3ezEY.

The deconstruction of their institutions (tafakkir al-nitham) has been a major point of debate in Post-Revolutionary Sudan https://www.bbc.com/arabic/amp/middleeast-50604375; For a critical outline of these debates, see Magdi El Gizouli’s recent wa li-l-huriya abwab…al-salahfa al-hurra maydanahu (https://stillisudan.blogspot.com/2020/01/blog-post.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+Stillsudan+%28StillSUDAN%29). For a discussion of the early days of this process see Salomon “New Histories for an Uncharted Future in Sudan,” cited above.

See the informative website of the Nubian Archeological Development Organization (Qatar-Sudan) (munazamat tanmiyat athar al-nubiyya—qatar-sudan), qsap.org.qa. Dr. Mahmoud told me that beyond funding the work of the archeological missions and tourist infrastructure, the Qataris have little practical involvement in the day-to-day operations of archeological practice in Nubia.

Al-Nayl Abu Qurun’s Nahin Bilad al-Sudan (The Arab Center for Studies and Publication: 2011) is an example of an Islamic reading of Ancient Nubia, where the story of Moses and Khidr from the Qur’an is emplaced in Sudan during the kingdom of Kush, sacralizing Kush with an Islamic narrative. I thank Azza Mustafa Babikir Ahmed for sending me this book, which she also cites in her wonderful essay, “Making Sacred Places—The Case of the Holy Meeting at the Junction of the Two Niles,” in Religion and Space: Perspectives from African Experiences (Bayreuth African Studies Working Papers 15), edited by Serawit Bekele Debele and Justice Anquandah Arthur.

See endnote 8 above.

Though Lady Sennuywy is from Asyut, and thus not Nubia proper, it is this image that has taken special place in depictions of Reisner’s Nubian work, for example adorning the cover of the MFA's Unearthing Ancient Nubia: Photographs from the Harvard University-Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition (Boston: MFA Publications, 2018).

39
Making Sense of the East African Warscape

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In January 2020, the Somali militant group Al-Shabaab launched an attack on Manda Bay, a military base in northeastern Kenya that houses Kenyan and American troops and that serves as a launch pad for U.S. drone strikes in Somalia and Yemen. Three Americans were killed when the Shabaab fighters fired a rocket-propelled grenade on a plane piloted by contractors from L3 technologies, an American company hired by the Pentagon to carry out surveillance missions in Somalia. Due to Kenyan government secrecy about the loss of its own troops in the war with Al-Shabaab, it remains unclear how many Kenyans lives were lost.

This was unprecedented: Al-Shabaab had never launched a large scale assault on a military installation within Kenyan territory. While the group has targeted military sites within Somalia, most of its targets in Kenya have been on civilian spaces, with the 2013 attack on Nairobi’s Westgate Mall as the most notable, and the 2019 Dusit hotel attack (also in Nairobi) as one of the more recent. As analysts familiar with the region have observed, Al-Shabaab’s actions are a likely response to the United States’ rapidly expanding undeclared war in Somalia, where American drone strikes have killed between 900-1,000 Somalis in the past three years alone, and where the American troop presence now exceeds 500.1

More broadly, the January attack directs our attention to the growing U.S. military presence on the continent. As of 2019, the U.S. Military Command for Africa (AFRICOM) maintained 29 bases in 15 different countries or territories in Africa.2 Analysts increasingly acknowledge that violence and instability have been on the rise since the founding of AFRICOM in 2007.3 Yet mainstream reporting continues to attribute violence and militarism to ‘local’/African forces, obscuring the ways in which the ‘local’ is irrevocably tied to wider patterns and practices. The very fact that Kenya’s Manda Bay military base serves as host for U.S. drone and surveillance operations points to wider entanglements, and is an important reminder of the Kenyan state’s imbrication in America’s expanding war on Somalia.

Geographies of the East African Warscape

East Africa is the birthplace of the so-called War on Terror. As Faisal Devji traces in Landscapes of the Jihad, it was in the aftermath of the 1998 attacks at the U.S. Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam that Al-Qaeda first emerged as a global network, and it was not long before Kenya and Tanzania were ushered into a different global network, the anti-terror coalition led by the United States.4 My research has focused primarily on Kenya’s relationship to the U.S.-led War on Terror. Already a regional hub for multinational corporations and the United Nations, Kenya’s position on the Indian Ocean afforded the U.S. unhindered access to South Asia and the Middle East. In the wake of the embarrassing exit of U.S. forces from Somalia in 1993, Kenya’s shared border with Somalia was of equal interest to American leaders. The Kenyan government was quick to capitalize on this interest: at $88 million USD, Kenya received the biggest share of President Bush’s East African Counter-Terrorism Initiative (EACTI)—representing nearly ninety percent of the total for the region.5

The U.S. deployed Marines to the Kenyan naval base at Manda Bay in 2003. Following the 2002 Paradise Hotel bombing in the coastal city of Mombasa, American security officials grew increasingly preoccupied with potential threats emanating from the Kenyan coast, and from the northeastern provinces. The small Marine contingent in Manda Bay was soon augmented with military advisors, civil-affairs units, and Special Forces teams, all serving under the command of the Defense Department’s Combined Joint Task Force for the Horn of Africa, or CJTF-HOA.

Kenya’s security partnership with the United States has led it to participate in transnational policing and
militarized counter-terror operations in the wider region. Following the U.S.-backed Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in December 2006, Kenya temporarily closed its borders to civilians fleeing the violence and worked closely with U.S. officials to arrest and interrogate over one hundred and fifty people who managed to cross over into Kenya, in some cases facilitating their rendition to detention sites in Mogadishu and Addis Ababa. At this time, American forces in Kenya also began to use the military base at Manda Bay as a launch pad from which to conduct air and ground operations in Somalia. The U.K. based monitoring group Airwars reports that the first known U.S. airstrikes in Somalia occurred in 2007 under President George W. Bush, but it was under the Obama administration that drone strikes increased significantly.

Just as the U.S. military began to police Somalia from above, the United Nations authorized an African Union-led “peacekeeping” mission known as AMISOM. While AMISOM’s initial rules of engagement permitted the use of force only when necessary, it gradually assumed an offensive role, engaging in counterinsurgency and counter-terror operations. Rather than weaken Al-Shabaab, however, the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia observed that offensive military operations exacerbated insecurity. According to the UN, the displacement of Al-Shabaab from major urban centers in Somalia “has prompted its further spread into the broader Horn of Africa region.” What began as a small deployment of 1,650 peacekeepers progressively transformed into a number that exceeded 22,000 as the architects of the intervention soon battled a problem of their own making.

AMISOM’s donors (including the U.S., E.U., and other actors) have been able to offset the expense and public scrutiny of maintaining their own troops in Somalia by relying on private contractors and African forces. This dispersal of power has enabled the U.S. in particular to replace images of its own, less credible, military adventurism with seemingly benign actors that are focused on ‘state-building.’ Entities like Bancroft Global, Adam Smith International, Dyncorp, Pacific Architects and Engineers, Engility, and the Serendi Group have tactically positioned themselves for contracts focused on logistics, capacity building, and security sector reform. Like the private contractors, troop contributing states (Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Djibouti, Burundi) have financial incentives to maintain instability in order to justify the continued need for foreign intervention: AMISOM troops are paid significantly higher salaries than they receive back home, and their governments obtain generous military aid packages in the name of fighting Al-Shabaab.

Kenya is an important example of a ‘partner’ state that has now become imbricated in the business of war. The combination of political, economic, and military support from the U.S. has emboldened the Kenyan state to engage in its own ‘war on terror’ at home and abroad. In October 2011, the Kenya Defense Forces (KDF) invaded southern Somalia with the declared intention of addressing the threat posed by Al-Shabaab. The African Union’s readiness to incorporate Kenyan troops into its so-called peacekeeping mission was a strategic victory for Kenya, as it provided a veneer of legitimacy for maintaining a military presence in Somalia. To this end, the Kenyan state has actively worked to cultivate an image of itself as a regional leader in multilateral peace and stabilization efforts.

In practice, however, Kenya has become increasingly invested in war. In 2016, the government purchased a Boeing-manufactured ScanEagle drone and acquired eight Huey II military helicopters in what was described as the United States’ “largest single security cooperation initiative ever undertaken in sub-Saharan Africa.” That same year, Kenyan military spending rose to a new high of US$993 million, a figure that stood at more than double the spending of neighboring Ethiopia and Uganda combined. Meanwhile, the military has maintained a separate contingent of troops in Somalia that act unilaterally. A December 2017 United Nations report, for example, alleged that unauthorized Kenyan air strikes had contributed to at least 40 civilian deaths in a 22 month period between 2015-2017. In an earlier report, the non-profit Journalists for Justice observed that Kenya’s allies in the UN, U.S., and U.K. were “very frustrated” with
the fact that “the KDF network is facilitating Al-Shabaab’s profiteering from illegal charcoal and sugar smuggling in contravention of United Nations sanctions and Kenyan law.”16 But because American and European forces rely on Kenya to grant them access to military bases in the region, they “cannot force the issue;” the United Nations is compelled to “work around the problem, sponsoring Somali government efforts to interdict smugglers, withholding intelligence from KDF and pursuing al-Shabaab targets on their own or with Somali Special Forces.” These realities serve as a crucial reminder of the divergent interests that often characterize security alliances, as the Kenyan government—much like other actors that currently operate in Somalia—has continued to pursue its own political and military objectives.18

Within Kenya, the security apparatus has overseen the disappearances and extra-judicial killings of Kenyan Muslims who are deemed to be suspicious. As the hunt for Al-Shabaab militants has spilled over into Kenyan territory, Muslims living in Nairobi, on the coast, and in northeastern Kenya have been subject to the whims of the Anti-Terror Police Unit, a Special Branch of the Kenyan police that was erected in 2003 with funding and training from the governments of the United States and United Kingdom.19 The ATPU has since become notorious in Kenya for its plain-clothed death squads that operate with impunity. On good days, missing relatives or neighbors eventually appear in court; on bad days, their bodies are found in unmarked graves outside of town. What I refer to as the East African warscape therefore turns critical attention to the spatiality of the so-called “War on Terror” in East Africa, as targeted operations against purported terror suspects are unfolding not only in the ‘war zones’ of Somalia, but equally in ‘peaceful’ urban centers like Nairobi and Mombasa.20

Transregional Dynamics

Anthropologist Catherine Besteman characterizes Somalia as a space of imperialist experimentation—as a site of multiple, interlinked security regimes that are designed to protect U.S. security concerns.21 Without disputing the argument that the U.S. is actively working to secure its own interests, the grounded geographies of this warscape point not to a unitary power that is at work, but to overlapping, often competing players and political formations. In particular, this warscape bridges conventional imaginative divides between Africa and the Middle East in ways which demand attention to transregional dynamics.

Although the United States continues to control the vast majority of world’s foreign military bases, it is facing stiff competition in the Horn, where political leaders are involved in what Paul Amar would describe as a transregional pattern of ‘military capitalism,’ renting out public land to foreign militaries.22 Foreign military bases increasingly define the landscape of countries located along the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, with Djibouti hosting more bases than any other country. China has set up its first overseas naval base in Djibouti alongside Japan, France, Italy, the U.S. and the European Union. The United Arab Emirates maintains a base in the self-declared republic of Somaliland and operates a hub for its Yemen operations from the Eritrean port of Assab, while Turkey has set up its largest foreign military presence in Mogadishu. Russia has initiated talks with the leadership in Somaliland about building a multi-use air and naval base in Port of Berbera, and is exploring a logistics base in Eritrea. Meanwhile, Somalia has become a battleground between Qatar and the UAE, with each government providing weapons or military training to rival Somali factions. While piracy, Iran-GCC tensions, and the war in Yemen served as a pretext for many of these states’ initial involvement in the region, the bulk of these actors appear to have long-term, if not permanent, visions for securing their respective political and economic interests.23 As Alex de Waal observes, “Today, the Horn of Africa increasingly resembles the ‘great game’ of 19th century colonial power projection as regional and world powers scramble for naval bases.”24

While UN officials insist on the importance of restoring stability to Somalia, the geographies of this warscape extend well beyond Somalia’s territorial boundaries. In what may best be interpreted as a message to its
geopolitical rivals, the U.S. military has launched more drone strikes in Somalia in the first four months of 2020 than it did during Barack Obama’s eight-year term in office. But the question remains whether these spectacular demonstrations of U.S. power from above can compete with the range of political and economic deals being made on the ground. As Turkey and the Gulf states assume particularly influential roles, the challenge lies in looking beyond the imaginative boundaries of area studies and the nation-state in order to theorize these transregional power formations as they unfold.

Endnotes


3 Nick Turse, “Violence has Spiked in Africa since the Military Founded AFRICOM, Pentagon Study Finds” The Intercept.


10 Nick Turse, “Violence has Spiked in Africa since the Military Founded AFRICOM, Pentagon Study Finds” The Intercept.


13 Nick Turse, “Violence has Spiked in Africa since the Military Founded AFRICOM, Pentagon Study Finds” The Intercept.

14 Nick Turse, “Violence has Spiked in Africa since the Military Founded AFRICOM, Pentagon Study Finds” The Intercept.


18 Nick Turse, “Violence has Spiked in Africa since the Military Founded AFRICOM, Pentagon Study Finds” The Intercept.


20 US hands over six Hueys to Kenya – two more on the way,” Defence Web. 5 December 2016.


26 Djibouti’s economy in particular is increasingly dependent on rents from foreign military bases—it brings in over $300 million a year in rental agreements with foreign militaries, including $63 million USD per year to lease the land occupied by the U.S. military at Camp Lemmonier.


28 Prestholdt, “Kenya, the United States, and Counterterrorism.”

29 I draw on Carolyn Nordstrom’s notion of the warscape, as it allows for consideration of the range of actors (military strategists, arms suppliers, soldiers, mercenaries, powerbrokers, think tanks, development actors, etc.) that operate across time and space. Carolyn Nordstrom, A Different Kind of War Story (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).


32 Djibouti’s economy in particular is increasingly dependent on rents from foreign military bases—it brings in over $300 million a year in rental agreements with foreign militaries, including $63 million USD per year to lease the land occupied by the U.S. military at Camp Lemmonier.


Magnates, Media, and Mercenaries: How Libya's conflicts produce transnational networks straddling Africa and the Middle East

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War transforms societies and their boundaries. How it does so depends on the particularities of a society and the forces at work in a conflict. The nationalist mobilization of the first and second world wars provoked a forced displacement of millions that turned diverse empires into ethnically homogeneous nation states. The Rwandan genocide and ensuing Tutsi takeover triggered refugee movements that led to a series of conflicts in eastern Congo and deeply transformed that region's social makeup. The transnational networks formed during the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union laid the groundwork for several generations of jihadist movements. The Algerian civil war was first and foremost the traumatic experience of a nation, but the flight of small remnants of the insurgency to northern Mali planted the seeds of what would eventually become wholly indigenous jihadist movements in the Sahel.

It is not surprising that Libya’s conflicts since 2011 should act as a melting pot of transnational networks straddling the Middle East and Africa. Among North African societies, Libya has long been the most deeply integrated with sub-Saharan Africa. This integration partly stemmed from previous conflicts: for example, Ottoman and Italian campaigns in the 19th and 20th centuries twice forced the Awlad Suleiman to flee to what is now Chad, where they settled and intermarried with locals. After Qadhafi’s takeover in 1969, elite figures linked to that tribe’s Saif al-Nasr family again escaped to Chad and helped establish the exiled opposition there. Qadhafi, in turn, hosted rebel groups from across the continent and recruited thousands of young men from Sahelian states, including for foreign military adventures.

But the connections created through Libya’s conflicts since 2011 transcend historical patterns. This is partly due to the inherent tendency of violent conflict to tear people apart from each other or force them to stick together; the chaotic twists and turns of war often leaving them with little choice between the two. More fundamentally, new patterns emerge because the international environment of the past decade differs from previous eras. The relative decline in Western influence and the rise of regional powers have produced a multipolar disorder. That disorder has promoted the emergence of intersecting regional conflict formations centred on Syria, Libya and the Horn of Africa. If the examples above are any indication, the networks created in such wars can form the basis of conflicts for decades to come.

Qadhafi’s Legacy and the Present

If it had not been for Qadhafi’s penchant for meddling in African conflicts along with his idiosyncratic Pan-Africanism, Libya might well have turned its back on sub-Saharan Africa in the decades of postcolonial nation-building, much as its neighbours did. Whether it was intentional or not, Qadhafi’s policies forged transnational ties that have retained relevance since the demise of his regime. His persecution of opponents, elite families and intellectuals forced thousands of Libyans into exile, where many built ties with the leadership of states that were, at varying times, opposed to Qadhafi, such as the leaders of Algeria, Sudan, Chad, and Morocco. He encouraged members of Libyan tribes who had settled in Chad and Niger – and some communities whose Libyan ancestry was more doubtful – to “return” to Libya. There, they were highly dependent on state patronage, and formed a pool for military recruitment. His support for African rebel groups and recruitment of men from Sahelian countries brought specialists in violence from across the continent to Libya. It also allowed many of Qadhafi’s intelligence operatives and military officers to develop networks among these groups.
Such networks played an important role in the 2011 civil war. Libyan exiles in the West lobbied the US, UK and French governments. Libyan businessmen and religious scholars with longstanding ties in the Gulf states used their connections to mobilize support, thereby building relationships that would have a lasting impact over the following years. Qadhafi not only deployed the Tuareg soldiers of Sahelian origin in his Maghawir Brigade, but also reached out to former Tuareg rebels in Mali and Niger to mobilize additional recruits, and hired Darfur rebels who had found refuge in Libya. African leaders who had benefited from Qadhafi’s support led the African Union (AU) to oppose the NATO intervention in Libya, and would later host senior former regime officials.

Middle Eastern Connections

Two main dynamics drove actors in Libya’s conflicts to establish ties in Middle Eastern states: the mobilization of support for the war against Qadhafi in 2011, and the formation of new Libyan diasporas as a result of the 2011 war and the conflicts that followed it.

In 2011, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) both supported the war against Qadhafi. But as Libyan factions competed for their support, these two states ended up backing disparate Libyan networks. The National Transitional Council’s “prime minister” Mahmoud Jibril and the businessman-cum-Sufi scholar Aref al-Nayed both leveraged their connections in Doha and Abu Dhabi. But the Islamic scholar Ali Sallabi, a close associate of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Doha-based religious authority Youssef al-Qaradawi, eventually won the favour of Qatari officials. Through Sallabi, Qatar increasingly channelled its support to Islamist-leaning groups, including former leaders of the defunct Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). In addition, former LIFG leaders who had spent time in Sudan during the 1990s used their connections to oversee weapons shipments from Sudan, some of which were financed by Qatar. Separately, rebel leaders from Misrata also established ties with Qatar to obtain arms. Meanwhile, Nayed and Jibril channelled shipments from the UAE. In the Nafusa Mountains, UAE support went to groups from Zintan, while groups based in Nalut benefited from Qatari assistance.

The formation of new communities of Libyan exiles created additional transnational networks. Just as thousands of exiles returned to Libya in support of the revolution, hundreds of thousands of people associated in one way or another with the regime fled abroad, most of them to Tunisia or Egypt. Former senior regime officials mostly converged on Egypt, eventually settling down after the July 2013 military coup removed the threat of extradition to Libya. In Cairo, they established the satellite channel al-Jamahiriya al-Khadra’ (“Green Jamahiriya”), and Qadhafi’s cousin Ahmed Qadhafeddam reactivated ties with the Egyptian security services forged during long years of acting as Qadhafi’s envoy to Egypt.

From mid-2014 onwards, many western Libyan opponents of the Libya Dawn militia coalition moved to Cairo, including members of the Tobruk-based House of Representatives. In Cairo and Abu Dhabi, those who left Libya in 2014 gradually mended ties with exiled former regime supporters. As Khalifa Haftar advanced in his Benghazi military campaign during 2015, some former regime officials began returning to eastern Libya and joining Haftar’s operation. In Abu Dhabi, the Palestinian politician Mohamed Dahlan oversaw Emirati support to Haftar, working with the former right hand of Qadhafi’s son Saif al-Islam, as well as with Qadhafeddam and the super-rich Benghazi businessman Hassan Tatanaki in Cairo – the latter a former business associate of Saif al-Islam turned supporter of the 2011 revolution, then proponent of the eastern autonomy movement.

Conflict in Benghazi and Tripoli also forced groups on the other side of the political divides into exile. Dozens of thousands of people fled the war in Benghazi, many of them members of families that were forcibly displaced by Haftar’s armed groups because of their western Libyan origins. Most settled in Misrata or Tripoli, but many also left to Istanbul. The Istanbul-based Benghazi diaspora included leaders of armed groups and prominent businessmen who supported the fight against Haftar. They
ranged from ordinary people pushed into opposition to Haftar by their family ties or their belief in the 2011 revolution, to Islamists and jihadists.

From 2016 onwards, Islamists seeking refuge from the changing political climate in Tripoli and Misrata joined the Benghazi exiles in Istanbul. In Tripoli, a handful of militias expanded their control over much of the city in 2016-17, while growing increasingly hostile to political Islamists, including the former LIFG leaders. In Istanbul, these senior figures mingled with the Benghazi diaspora, as well as with exiled Islamists from Egypt and Syria. But they also kept in touch with former regime officials exiled in Cairo and elsewhere, with whom they held repeated meetings in Istanbul and Doha from 2015 onwards, in an attempt from both sides to break their political isolation. Key go-betweens in these efforts were the aforementioned Ali Sallabi as well as an immensely wealthy former companion of Qadhafi from Misrata, Ali Dabeiba, both of whom spent more and more of their time in Istanbul.

The media was one domain through which exiles exerted political influence in Libya. After the fall of the regime, political entrepreneurs in Tripoli launched several privately owned TV channels directed at a nationwide audience. But successive attacks by armed groups forced these channels to close down or relocate abroad. In Libya, only channels that enjoyed the protection of a particular local constituency or armed group remained. Abroad, influential figures established highly successful TV channels and media outlets, relying on their own money or foreign sponsors.10

As the political landscape split in two opposing camps in 2014, Ali Sallabi took over the Doha-based TV channel Libya li-kull al-Ahrar, forcing its previous head, the former NTC official Mahmoud Shammam, to move to Cairo. There, Shammam established the al-Wasat website, which was broadly sympathetic to Haftar’s alliance. Another former executive of Libya li-kull al-Ahrar, Huda al-Serrari, launched the TV channel 218 in Amman, which was staunchly pro-Haftar. In Amman, too, Aref al-Nayed established his Libya TV channel, whose pro-Haftar line became increasingly pronounced over the years. The funding of such channels remained murky, though Nayed’s and Serrari’s good connections in Abu Dhabi fuelled persistent rumours of UAE funding. The influential website al-Marsad, which specialized in aggressive attacks on the government in Tripoli, kept its ownership hidden, though it also appeared to be run by Nayed out of Amman.

Meanwhile, Libya li-kull al-Ahrar relocated from Doha to Istanbul in 2017, as part of Qatar’s broader effort to create distance between itself and Muslim Brotherhood circles. In Istanbul, the Muslim Brother Suleiman Dogha now ran the channel. Two other Islamist-leaning TV channels escaped Tripoli for Istanbul: Tanasuh TV, run by a son of Libya’s controversial mufti al-Sadeq al-Ghariyani; and al-Naba TV, linked to circles surrounding former LIFG leaders, which later transformed into Febrayer TV.

From the safe distance of exile, these media outlets projected their highly partisan agenda back into Libya – in many cases the agenda of people who had lost much of what they had in Libya, and were intent on getting it back by fuelling the country’s conflicts.

**African Connections**

If Libyan exiles in Middle Eastern capitals relied on capital to exert influence back home, African fighters in Libya entered into the labour side of the equation. After the fall of the regime, several hundred Tuareg fighters famously left Libya to northern Mali, where their arrival provided the spark for a rebellion that had already been brewing. But many of them returned to Libya after the beginning of the French intervention in Mali, in January 2013.11 By 2014, African fighters were flocking to Libya, rather than escaping it.

The first foreign fighters to reach Libya in sizeable numbers were jihadists from the Maghreb countries who were hosted in Libyan coastal cities by well-implanted jihadist networks. Initially, most of these foreign fighters came to Libya to undergo training and then travel on to Syria. As Libyan and foreign jihadists brought back the Islamic
State (IS) brand from Syria, some local jihadist groups declared allegiance to the IS. In Darna, Benghazi, Sirte and Sabratha, local IS affiliates began recruitment drives.

By early 2016, the Islamic State's expansion in Libya reached its zenith, with foreign fighters in its ranks numbering in the low thousands, and Tunisians representing, by far, the largest contingent. Nationals of other North African states and Sudan also featured in sizeable numbers. But recruits from the Gambia, Senegal, Ghana, Mali, Niger, Chad and Eritrea also numbered at least several dozen each. Many of these fighters were undoubtedly killed in the various military campaigns against Libyan IS strongholds, the most significant of which was the Misratan-led offensive on Sirte (May-December 2016). It is impossible to say how many may have escaped, and whether the ties forged between fighters of different national origins will spawn new jihadist networks across Africa. Time will tell.

More significant, in terms of its scale and implications, is the recruitment of Chadian and Sudanese armed groups by Libyan parties. Former Chadian rebels, left empty-handed after the rapprochement between Sudan and Chad in 2010, had already begun moving to Libya before the revolution. In Darfur, the situation also became increasingly difficult for the rebel groups from 2011 onwards. Sudanese and Chadian fighters therefore had their own reasons for moving to Libya, beyond the fact that Libyan factions sought to hire them. On a small scale, Tubu armed groups were among the first to do so, in their conflicts with armed groups from the Awlad Suleiman and Zwayya communities in Sabha and Kufra, from 2012 onwards.

With the escalation into civil war in 2014, multiple factions began recruiting Chadian and Sudanese fighters. Tubu militia leaders, who themselves joined Haftar's operation in Benghazi, facilitated the recruitment of Chadian and Darfur rebel groups. Armed groups from Zintan, trying to fend off the Libya Dawn coalition, recruited Chadian fighters from the Goran (or Daza) ethnic group. In the Oil Crescent, the militia leader Ibrahim al-Jadhran also recruited Chadians, aided by Tubu militia leader Hassan Musa. In Ubari, Tubu armed groups recruited Chadians and Darfuris in their fight against Tuareg militias.

As these conflicts wound down during 2015, the roles of Chadian and Sudanese groups shifted from fighting as mercenaries to securing remote outposts. But their numbers continued to grow, and their presence in Libya transformed these groups. In late 2014, militia leaders and power-brokers in the Libya Dawn coalition began prying some of the Chadian mercenaries away from their adversaries. Misrata’s Third Force – an umbrella organisation including several of the city’s armed groups – assembled these Chadians at a remote location in central Libya, Jabal al-Sawda. Misratans then contacted Chadian rebel leader Mahamat Nouri in his French exile, who sent his lieutenant, Mahamat Mahdi, to take charge of the Third Force's Chadian fighters.

But once in Jabal al-Sawda, Mahdi established himself as the leader, clashed with Nouri’s loyalists, and founded a new rebel group, the Front pour l’Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad (FACT). Later, Haftar gave vehicles and a base in Sabha to a FACT commander, Mahamat Hassan Boulmaye, who split from FACT to form the Conseil de Commandement Militaire pour le Salut de la République (CCMSR).

These are just two examples for how conditions in Libya transformed Darfurian and Chadian rebel groups. Their historical leaders in Qatar, France and elsewhere often saw their influence wane as lieutenants on the ground dealt with the constraints of Libya’s fragmented landscape, and seized the opportunities Libyan actors presented to them. Chadian and Darfurian factions frequently switched sides – in some cases several times – as Libyan factions fought over central and southern Libya during 2016-2018. But most eventually aligned themselves with Haftar. In the case of Chadian groups, this meant that they had to shelve all plans for action against the government of Idriss Deby, whom Haftar saw as an ally.

By the time Haftar launched his Tripoli offensive in April 2019, Darfurian fighters in Libya numbered around 2,000
and Chadians well over 1,000.\textsuperscript{15} Seeking to free up forces for the Tripoli war and strengthen the defence of strategic locations in the Oil Crescent and Jufra region, Haftar then continued to recruit in Sudan and Chad. Over the summer and autumn of 2019, hundreds of young men from Chadian and Darfurian Arab communities joined Haftar’s forces in central Libya. But contrary to widespread reports, there was no evidence of a massive transfer of Sudanese fighters from the Rapid Support Forces to Libya.\textsuperscript{16}

The role of foreign support has only grown as the Tripoli war has dragged on, adding even more significant contingents of foreign fighters to the fray. Russian mercenaries employed by Wagner and other private military firms began fighting in Tripoli in September 2019, tilting the balance in Haftar’s favour.\textsuperscript{17} Three months later, Turkey began sending several thousand Syrian militiamen to Tripoli to prevent any further advances by Haftar.\textsuperscript{18} In response, Russia began recruiting Syrians from areas under Bashar al-Assad’s control through Wagner, and deploying them to Libya in support of Haftar.\textsuperscript{19} Contrary to Chadian and Sudanese fighters, these contingents came to Libya not through the networks of Libyan war entrepreneurs, but sent by foreign states.

**Libyan Brokers**

Well-connected Libyan brokers are the links between the networks of Libyan exiles exerting influence on events back home and those of African fighters seeking refuge or fortune in Libya. A typical profile is that of military or intelligence officers from the Qadhafi regime’s core tribal constituencies, such as the Qadhadhfa and Maqarha. Such people might have contacts to Sudanese and Chadian groups going back to the Qadhafi era. They might even have family ties in Chad, especially if their families had spent decades in Chadian exile. In most cases, they work for Haftar, responding to his demand for foreign fighters.

War entrepreneurs from the Tubu ethnic group are in another category. As representatives of a crossborder community, they tend to scoff at their Libyan adversaries’ claims that they are able to distinguish between Libyan Tubu, and those from Chad or Niger. They often have family ties in other Chadian communities, such as the Goran or Zaghawa. They can host Chadian and Sudanese fighters in areas under their control, and make profits by acting as intermediaries between these fighters and their employers in northern Libya.

At times, the nodes of Libyan networks connect all the dots. In autumn 2014, two Tubu military leaders, Barka Wardogou and Hassan Musa Keley, spent time in the UAE with the then Libyan ambassador, Aref al-Nayed. Both already had fighters with Haftar in Benghazi, and Keley was emerging as a key broker for the recruitment of Chadian and Sudanese groups. Through Nayed, they organized UAE weapons shipments to Tubu forces in southern Libya. (Wardogou died in the UAE the following year). Keley later switched sides, and in late 2016, he joined an offensive led by the Benghazi Defence Brigades (BDB) to seize control of the Oil Crescent from Haftar. The planning for the offensive had involved significant amounts of money to buy off Chadian and Sudanese groups whom Haftar had deployed in the region. Whether the money really did come from Qatar, as several people involved claimed, is unclear. But at the very least, the offensive had the backing of Ali Sallabi in Doha, whose brother Ismail was the BDB’s leader. Keley and the BDB would become a prime target of Nayed’s Amman-based media outlets.\textsuperscript{20}

**Conclusion**

Several patterns emerge from this analysis of transnational networks forged through Libya’s conflicts. The capital-intensive nodes of these networks are primarily located in Middle Eastern capitals, where they enjoy political protection, financial largesse, or access to military hardware. In Libya, we find the brokers: people who have accumulated contacts and expertise in bridging these networks over the past nine years of conflict or even longer. Their connections reach into sub-Saharan Africa, bringing foreign labour into Libya’s conflicts. In these networks, we can see the new multipolar order spawning a regional conflict formation.
Since the outbreak of the latest war in April 2019, a new pattern has emerged: it is no longer well-connected Libyan actors but foreign states that bring in contingents of foreign fighters. This goes for the Wagner Group in Russia, for the Syrian fighters Turkey and Russia have deployed to Libya, as well as for Sudanese recruits a UAE-based company hired under false pretences, for deployment in Libya's Oil Crescent. Such operations may be less likely to create lasting transnational ties, particularly not ones that will be permanently linked to Libya. But what applies to the many crossborder networks that have formed through Libya's conflicts also applies to them: once such relationships have grown, they may open up new possibilities in other locations, in future conflicts.

Endnotes

1 An earlier and longer version of this article was published as “Le conflit libyen, creuset des réseaux régionaux” in Hérodote 172 (1/2019): 23-42.
7 Peter Cole and Umar Khan, “The Fall of Tripoli (Part 1),” in Cole and McQuinn, Libyan Revolution, 55-79.
13 Tubiana and Gramizzi, Tuba Trouble, 139-149.
14 Author interviews, Libyan war entrepreneurs involved in the transactions and Chadian rebel leaders, various locations, 2016-2019. See also Tubiana and Gramizzi, Tuba Trouble, 146.
20 Author interviews, Keley, Wardogou, and multiple individuals involved in planning the BDB oil crescent offensive and in transactions with Chadian and Sudanese groups, various locations, 2014-2018.
Determinants of Middle East states involvement in the Horn of Africa

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Recent political events in the Horn of Africa (HOA) such as the restoration of relationships between Ethiopia and Eritrea and the complex transition process in Sudan have shed light on the engagement of the Middle East (ME) states in Eastern Africa. Countries such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Egypt and Israel have been involved in the HOA since the 1970s. Others, such as Turkey, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar have been engaged approximately for two decades. This involvement has been intensifying in recent years, drawing increasing interest from international scholars and local populations. For instance, last spring, the Sudanese people protested against the Gulf states’ meddling in Sudan’s complicated political transition.

This paper seeks to explain some of the factors driving the engagement of ME countries in the politics of the HOA. Through a multi-level analysis based on the neoclassical realist approach, the paper highlights how these determinants may also explain the changing policies of ME states in the last fifteen years from a trade-humanitarian-diplomatic approach to a security-political one.

Transactional relations

Given the long history of contacts between the two shores of the Red Sea, it would not be accurate to talk about the ME states (re)discovery of the HOA. However, undoubtedly, the scope and nature of these interactions have mutated since the beginning of the new millennium, becoming more structured and intensive. Such change was triggered by a variety of factors, which can be traced both to ME and global transformations.

Global drivers played a decisive role in the first phase, between 2003 and 2011, in pushing the ME players to move towards the Horn. The 2008 global financial crisis drove the ME countries to redirect their investment and economic interests towards regions less affected by the economic collapse, such as Africa. Turkey saw Africa as an alternative market for its products by enhancing trade relations. The Gulf states (UAE, KSA, Qatar) saw in Africa’s fast-growing economies a good long-term investment. Deepening economic and trade links with African countries have enabled Gulf countries to further diversify their SWF portfolio and to reduce reliance on oil revenues.

Moreover, Gulf states viewed Africa, with 60 percent of the world’s total uncultivated arable lands, as a strategic opportunity to build up their food security. Indeed, in 2009, as a result of soaring food prices, many Gulf states launched investment plans to achieve food self-sufficiency. The large-scale land acquisitions in Africa, known as ‘land grabbing,’ is a highly controversial phenomenon that has triggered several episodes of tension between locals and foreign investors. African migrant workers have been another economic issue that has fed controversies between the countries on both sides of the Red Sea. These are not the biggest unskilled migrant community in the Gulf, but remittance flows are a critical source of income for their home countries. That dependency relationship has increased the asymmetric nature of the parties’ relations. Indeed, the remittances, as well as the high number of illegal migrants, constitute an important leverage of power for the Gulf states over African ones.

Beyond the economic rationale, the gradual disengagement by the United States from the wider region (ME-HOA) has further convinced ME policy-makers to launch more adventurous foreign policies, thereby increasing their engagement in the HOA. They viewed the reduction of US commitment as a threat in terms of security procurement but also an opportunity to increase their international status. Indeed, since then, ME states have tried to increase their international relevance by acting in niche fields - humanitarian, mediation, peacekeeping, maritime logistics.
Cross-Regional Engagements

that can provide a payoff in terms of public visibility at a low political cost. Iran’s ability to assume a dominant role in post-Saddam Iraq and to strengthen the ties established in the previous decade with some of the HOA countries (Eritrea, Sudan) prompted KSA to extend its rivalry with Teheran beyond traditional regional boundaries.

Why the Horn? The ME states began to view the HOA as a laboratory in which they can experiment with their ability as international stakeholders. Besides the geographical proximity and the many historical-cultural affinities (language, religion) the HOA has a few features that make it permeable to extra-regional influence. These include the endemic fragility typified by the high number of conflicts - interstates and intrastate - and the presence of some weak and failed states, the considerable disparity in wealth compared to ME countries, and the increasing centrality of the Red Sea in global geopolitics.

The scramble for influence

Since the 2011 uprisings, ME states have opened dozens of new embassies across Africa and have made assertive diplomatic interventions in the HOA political issues. Iran, consumed by crises such as Syria and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, (ISIL) and the nuclear negotiations for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), partly reduced the strategic importance of Africa in its security agenda. The four Sunni powers increased their involvement in the Horn’s security, economic and political issues. The impetus for Turkey, KSA, Qatar and the UAE to get involved in the HOA may have differed, but their recent interactions there have roots in the long-lasting effects of the 2011 uprisings. These resulted in turmoil across the region that paved the way to the reshuffle of regional power distributions and regime types. Even though some Gulf policymakers, mainly Saudis, had always considered the African countries bordering the Red Sea as natural strategic partners, the HOA became even more relevant in ME states’ strategies in the post-2011 scenario.

In addition to the competing ideological and regime poles of Iran and KSA, the rise of political Islamic movements galvanized Turkey’s and Qatar’s regional ambitions. Both states abandoned their former pragmatic stances and jumped on the uprisings’ bandwagon to carve new regional roles for themselves. Consequently, cross-sectarian convergences led to a dynamic realignment of strategic interests. Qatar has used its vast oil wealth in the service of various and often controversial political agendas across the region, at times dovetailing with Ankara’s support of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt. The UAE, on the other hand, came closer to KSA post-2011 in an attempt not only to maintain but grow the power and influence of the region’s conservative monarchies. In the months after the uprisings, the conditions changed and many of the political forces that Turkey and Qatar had supported, officially and unofficially, lost relevance and power and, as a result, also their influence. Although there had been an initial alignment of the Turkish-Qatari axis with the positions of the Saudi-led bloc in some crisis scenarios, mutual distrust grew. The UAE, for which political Islam constitutes an existential bloc in some crisis scenarios, mutual distrust grew. The UAE, for which political Islam constitutes an existential threat, began to perceive Turkey’s pro-active policy as a primary threat to its stability and regime survival. This jockeying for influence has spilled beyond the boundaries of the ME into the HOA, first by bolstering diplomatic-economic relations and then by securitizing the Red Sea. Following the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the KSA-UAE have prioritized, in addition to the Iranian threat, the ideological threat of moderate political Islam and have confronted Turkish and Qatari influence from Egypt to Somalia. The KSA and the UAE have sought to use financial leverage and their relative power at the regional level to pressure HOA states, such as Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia, to align with their regional policies of severing relations with Iran and opposing the spread of MB-affiliated movements.

Establishing a hierarchy of power

While global determinants had favored the rising engagement in the Horn, regional power balances have pushed the ME states to strengthen relations with their African counterparts on a political and security level. From 2015 to date, two fundamental events have driven...
the ME powers in their search for influence in the HOA, generating a continuous realignment of local state and non-state actors: the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen (2015) and the GCC crisis (2017). These two events changed the scope, the nature and the targets of the intervention of the KSA and UAE, prompting them to counteract different threats.

The turmoil in Yemen convinced Saudi leaders that Iran was using the Horn for logistical support to supply arms to the Houthi rebels. As a result, the KSA elevated the HOA to the top of its agenda as a key area for maintaining regional power balances and national security. This meant rallying GCC states in support of the Saudi interventionist policy in the region, persuading Eritrea, Sudan, and Somalia through investments, loans, and central bank transfers to sign up to the pro-Saudi camp and keep Iranian ships out of the Red Sea. The KSA-UAE’s growing involvement, in addition to being aimed at countering the Iranian presence, especially in Sudan, began to be aimed at checking Turkish policy, increasingly perceived as a threat to their interests in the region.

If the launch of Saudi-led operations in Yemen in 2015 had favored the emergence of a common front among HOA countries, the 2017 GCC crisis split that front and led to the rise of new alignments. The process had already begun in 2014 when the KSA, Bahrain and the UAE withdrew their ambassadors from Doha. The tension within the GCC increased, and in 2017 the so-called Arab Quartet decided to impose a trade and diplomatic embargo on Qatar for supporting Islamist organizations and maintaining relations with Iran. The GCC split brought Turkey and Qatar closer together. The increased cooperation between the two countries first became evident with the establishment of a Qatar-Turkey Combined Joint Force Command military base in Doha in December 2017. In response, the two Gulf monarchies began to pressure the HOA countries aligned with them to break off relations with Qatar, as they had done in 2015. However, except for Eritrea, the other countries decided not to take sides as they had long-established good diplomatic and economic relations with Doha and Ankara. Since then there has been a speedy process of militarization of the area through the opening of ME’s military bases and outposts.

The regional developments of the following two years - Jeddah agreement and al-Bashir overthrow - have shown the leading role played by the two Gulf monarchies in HOA political and security dynamics. The KSA’s and the UAE’s attempts to expand their role in the wider ME, has, on the one hand, pushed the Gulf powers to double down on their alignments in the Horn – with a burgeoning collaboration that goes beyond narrow security interests – inviting countries to choose their side of the divide. On the other hand, this interventionist and polarizing policy has induced other regional actors such as Turkey and Qatar to expand their presence in the region to counter the influence of their rivals.

Although the KSA and the UAE share a desire to limit the rise of Iran in the Horn, their main motivation seems to be the establishment of a precise hierarchy of power within the Sunni world. There are now two kinds of intra-GCC rivalries among the three main protagonists (KSA, UAE, and Qatar): on the one hand, a Gulf competition based on soft power projection, and another involving the recent efforts of Arab monarchies to compete in geo-economic diversification. The KSA is investing heavily in infrastructure and civil engineering mega-projects in the hope that its strategy in the Red Sea will be useful to its economic diversification and able to secure the allies’ loyalty through partnerships and beneficial agreements. Likewise, the UAE relies on diplomacy based on trade and infrastructures (also known as the ‘geopolitics of ports’) and on the adoption of an interventionist maritime policy. The UAE is driven by the need to protect its economic and commercial interests in the Afro-Asian area and support geo-economic and strategic alternatives to circumvent Saudi influence in the wider ME. There were signs of disagreement and strain between the KSA and the UAE over the post-crisis political agenda. The UAE’s seems to have moved towards narrower national interests, proposing itself as the best partner for the stabilization of the region, even if this means cutting losses and moving forward without Riyadh. Finally, Qatar, in cooperation...
with Turkey, is operating in the area between the Red Sea and the western Indian Ocean in such a way as to break through the diplomatic isolation imposed by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi and, at the same time, pursue its own geopolitical and economic interests.

**Conclusion**

The involvement of ME players in the HOA has become the reflection of the regional geopolitical competition and a representation of the geostrategic maritime rivalry among the several medium powers engaged in the Red Sea. While the ME states’ competition may increase the geostrategic importance of the region, it also risks to fuel conflicts or exacerbate new tensions among HOA stakeholders. The spillover effects of ME’s rivalries jeopardize HOA’s efforts to stabilize the region. As witnessed in recent events in Sudan, the ME states’ interventionist policies in the region, through their investments, political interference and growing military presence, lack a clear vision for the Horn and often create antagonist relationships and protests that increasingly denote the divergent goals of these outside powers.

**Endnotes**

3. See the contribution of Nisrin al Amin.
Network-Building and Human Capital investments at the intersection of China-Africa and China Middle East Relations

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In July 2019, a collation of twenty-two countries signed a letter calling on China to “respect human rights and fundamental freedoms... [and] refrain from the arbitrary detention and restrictions on freedom of movement of Uighurs, and other Muslim and minority communities in Xinjiang.”¹ Eighteen EU states signed the letter, along with Japan, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Notably missing from the EU group co-signatory of the letter are Greece and Italy, both involved in China’s Belt and Road Initiative and its Maritime segment (MSRI). Later that month, another coalition of thirty-seven states sent a letter to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) and the High Commissioner for Human Rights in support of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) policies in Xinjiang. The signatories of the letter endorsing the Chinese government grew to fifty ambassadors, mostly from the Global South and predominantly from Muslim countries in Africa and the Middle East, and for the most part, Belt and Road Initiative participants. Given that EU members such as Italy and Greece did not partake in signing the letter condemning China’s policies in Xinjiang and that predominantly-Muslim countries in Africa and the Middle East found it appropriate to endorse China in a letter to the UN offices, it seems necessary to probe the impact of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its Maritime segment on shifting and reshaping geopolitical borders in the world. This paper will focus on the main trends and characteristics of China’s cooperation with Africa and the Middle East via BRI and MSRI.

Despite the energy sector being vital to China’s going out strategy and for the realization of BRI projects, there are other important dimensions to China’s cooperation with Africa and the Middle East. Whether it is with states which already enjoy strong ties to China or states with weaker links, one of Beijing’s most valuable investments is not necessarily in crude oil supplies or infrastructure projects but is in human capital investments and network-building with elites, public servants, military officials, journalists, and so on. Beijing believes that investing in strong connections is vital for the long-term success of its investments in these regions. With such a diverse portfolio of investments, Africa and the Middle East represent important partnerships for China in terms of energy sources, political and national interests, soft power operations, and as regions where Beijing can take a rule-setting/norm-making role globally.

Economic Interests

In 2017, China surpassed the US as the world’s top importer of crude oil, importing US$ 238.7 billion worth of crude oil in 2019 (making it 22.6% of the overall global crude oil imports in the year).² Over half of China’s total crude oil imports come from members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).³

Ongoing infrastructure construction and BRI projects contribute to China’s accelerating rate of crude oil imports. This has been accompanied by spiking growth in the numbers of contracts and deals between Chinese companies and Gulf States. For instance, it is estimated that there are now “over 4,200 Chinese companies operating in the UAE—up from a mere 18 in 2005—and approximately 300,000 Chinese citizens living in Dubai alone.”⁴

Blanchard (2020, 163) finds interesting divergences between Africa and the Middle East in terms of the impact of joining the Silk route on trade levels with China over the past five years. China’s total trade volume with Africa was USD $157.09 billion in 2018, making an increase from USD $109.83 billion in 2013. During the same period of time, trade volumes with the Middle East went down from USD $263.81 billion to USD $252.28 billion.⁵ Blanchard also calculated the difference in trade volumes between China and Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI)
participating and non-participating countries. In Africa, the difference is stark, with MSRI countries registering a significant increase in trade volume with China going from USD $85.95 billion in 2013 to USD $131.02 in 2018. For non-MSRI trade volumes with China declined from USD $77.95 billion in 2013 to USD $71.37 billion in 2018. Participating in the Silk Route stands to increase trade volumes with China regardless of geographical region.

Political Interests

Beijing aims to develop close relations with the predominantly Muslim states of the Middle East for several reasons. Evidence of intensified cooperation between Arab League states and China can be seen in the July 2018 eight-page long Declaration of Action on China-Arab States Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative. The declaration offers a broad overview of all the areas of cooperation expected to widen through the BRI projects. These include “Cyber Silk Road projects,” “airborne Silk Road” a “space-based Belt and Road information corridor.” China’s interest in the region’s stability stems from two principal concerns: a domestic preoccupation with its Muslim populations in Xinjiang, and a regional focus on maintaining stability in the region for the sake of the BRI.

China’s north-western autonomous region of Xinjiang is home to 12 million Muslim Chinese (predominantly ethnic Uyghurs, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz). In 2014 the Chinese government started the ‘Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism’ in the territory of Xinjiang. Reports by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and human rights organizations indicate that as much as 10% of Xinjiang’s total population has been subjected to ‘re-education’ in various detention centers. A Human Rights Watch report from September 2018 details the treatment of Chinese Muslims both inside the mass detention centers and beyond (there is widespread state use of high-tech and biometric surveillance across Xinjiang). As part of this campaign, China has cooperated with Syrian authorities and intelligence agencies to monitor and gather information about Chinese Muslims potentially joining militant ranks in the Turkistan Islamic Party in Syria, as well as Jabhat Fateh al Sham (formerly known as the Nusra Front), ISIL and other groups. These fears reportedly led Chinese authorities to hold monthly high-level meetings with Syrian intelligence.

Since the launch of the BRI in 2013, maintaining stability in volatile regions directly concerned with BRI investments has become a core concern for Xi. These factors all reinforce the need for maintaining strong relations with Arab state leaders. They are linked to China’s overlapping national and regional security interests, which have the effect of putting the Muslim populations in western China at the heart of its security policy.

China’s interactions with African countries do not reveal similar national security priorities. Whereas China’s soft power suffers owing to the issue of Uyghur treatment, its African engagement gives it the chance to highlight its active contribution to global peace and security.

In comparison to the Middle East, China’s security footprint in Africa is becoming increasingly more visible. Issues pertaining to security and counterterrorism in the Middle East have a political urgency for China and present many challenges for the future of BRI projects, but in Africa the area of peace and security is more a range of opportunities. China has established a strong and increasingly visible military engagement on the African continent. This includes peacekeepers and police units deployed in several countries, military equipment pledged to help the AU’s Standby Force, joint drills and high-level military officer exchanges. China’s first overseas military base was inaugurated in Djibouti in 2017. One of the base’s main advantages is its strategic location, which ensures the security of China’s maritime lines of communication and shipping routes across the Suez Canal and the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb – a key link between the Middle East and Africa. The base is also strategic in facilitating China’s capacity for rapid response deployments in regional security crises (especially in light of the 2011 evacuations from Libya) and for peacekeeping troop deployments as part of UN operations. Yet, China’s security approach in Africa goes beyond the military and
intelligence sharing realm and is overall viewed from a development-for-security perspective. This development-security nexus approach, where Chinese investments and infrastructure projects contribute to stability by creating economic growth, job opportunities, and improving living conditions, is more relevant to China-Africa cooperation than China-Middle East.

Forum Diplomacy

Forum diplomacy, the convening of regional groupings for formal cooperation, is a defining characteristic to China's approach to Global South states. Ever since the first meeting of FOCAC (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation) in 2000, Beijing has expanded its forum diplomacy to other regions. FOCAC has now had seven triennial meetings alternating between being hosted in Beijing and an African capital city. In 2004, shortly after FOCAC's launching, China and Arab states decided to formalize their cooperation under the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF). CASCF had originally included the Arab League's 22 members but since 2011, Syria has been suspended from the Arab League. To date, there have been eight CASCF meetings taking place every two years. The next one will be hosted in Jordan in 2020. In 2015, forum diplomacy expanded beyond Africa and the Middle East when China-CLAC was established as a cooperation platform between China and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States.

FOCAC is both the pioneer in China's forum diplomacy and the forum which is elevated to a heads-of-states level more frequently. CASCF, on the other hand, is typically a ministerial-level meeting and does not get as much global media coverage as FOCAC does. China's Forum diplomacy more broadly sparked a trend of rising and traditional powers either establishing or reviving Forum-like cooperation platforms with Africa, Japan, India, South Korea, the U.S. and the UK all held some form of forum-diplomacy with Africa in the last decade. This indicates how successful Beijing's forum diplomacy has been.

First, Forum meetings give Beijing an opportunity to control the narrative and create a space where non-Western ideals and ideas on development, human rights, peace, governance, etc. are produced and exchanged. Building the space to show solid friendship relations between Chinese and African or Arab government leaders is important to China. By the time FOCAC or CASCF meetings take place, all agenda points have been ironed out and agreed upon in advance. The forum itself is not the space for negotiations. It is a space to celebrate the successful negotiations process, to show through photo-ops of handshakes and red carpet that China has strong friendly ties to the Global South, and to showcase China's economic development success story. Delegations are taken on tours to visit not only Chinese megacities but also companies and enterprises that contributed to their development.

Second, Forum diplomacy is a multilateral platform that allows Beijing to make grandiose announcements (for instance a financial package of $60 billion USD during FOCAC 2018 and $20 billion during CASCF 2018) without having to be transparent about what each country stands to gain from these initiatives. The opacity around the exact terms of the deals is useful to China's domestic and foreign policy objectives. Domestically, the CCP has always been cautious about the reverberations of grievances from Chinese citizens taking to social media platforms their criticism that Beijing is spending foreign aid money on outside nations when many rural areas within China could use the boost. By the same token, competition within African states for China's funding would not be in the interest of China if there was transparency around which countries stand to benefit the most or if the competition escalates. Indeed, lumpsum announcements, like during FOCAC, smooth out the fact that some coastal countries (especially in East Africa) are the destination of most of Chinese FDI, especially since the Belt and Road Initiative.

Third, forum diplomacy is advantageous from an optics perspective because it displays Beijing's skills at consensus-building. Having delegations from all across the African continent for FOCAC or from the Arab States for CASCF spend a few days concerting, brainstorming, and debating
economic and security issues of high priority to them gives Beijing the opportunity to be a key player in these important conversations. The Forum diplomacy legitimizes Beijing’s central role in negotiations about investments, (re)construction projects, and even security matters in the Global South. Over time, forum diplomacy adds confidence and assertiveness to China’s foreign policy making and reinforces China’s leadership role.

Relationality and network-building

Very few states manage their foreign policy conduct with pragmatism as the CCP does. Through careful investments in relationship building and people-centered diplomacy, the CCP had navigated some very delicate diplomatic situations. For example, Beijing managed to maintain strong relations with the Sudan while at the same time winning reconstruction projects in South Sudan. Beijing pledged $15 million USD in humanitarian aid to Palestine and is a very close partner to Algeria and Pakistan all while benefitting from strong cooperation (especially in technology and armament) with Israel. China also has very strong ties to the UAE through very high-stake financial cooperation while not shying away from undercutting DP World (Dubai Ports) in Djibouti. Beijing also managed to entertain serious allegations from UN agencies about its treatment and detention of Chinese Muslims and destruction of Islamic cultural heritage all while enjoying close relationships with predominantly Muslim governments in the Middle East or Africa. What gives China this much flexibility and leeway in its foreign policy conduct?

A combination of the CCP’s image management skills, its economic statecraft in the Global South, and its ability to control information about its investments and policy behavior all contribute to China’s practical foreign policy approach. But perhaps the most central mechanism is its human capital investments and networking-based foreign policy conduct. I argue that “guanxi” (which loosely translates as “connections”) is a central feature in China’s foreign policy conduct. Maintaining, strengthening, and multiplying guanxi with elites, diplomats, businesspeople, academics, journalists, and so on is China’s most valuable investment in the Global South. To illustrate, in 2016, CASCF pledged to invite 100 experts from think tanks and scholars for exchange visits with Chinese institutions. It also pledged sponsoring 1000 trainings for young Arab leaders and inviting 1500 leaders of political parties to visit China. In addition, CASCF promised to allocate 10,000 scholarships and 10,000 training opportunities for Arab states and organize visits for 10,000 Chinese and Arab artists. Similarly, the seventh FOCAC meeting pledged 50,000 training opportunities and 2,000 exchange scholarships for African students, and several hundred training opportunities for journalists. Such kind of human capital investment is what enables China to activate its economic statecraft, its cultural influence and affluent assistance to translate into actual domination as a global actor in the Global South.

China’s people-centered foreign policy and human-capital investments are central to its approach in Africa and the Middle East. A notable difference in China’s human capital investments and people-centered diplomacy in the Middle East when compared to Africa lies in China’s cultural diplomacy and soft power measures being more widely present in Africa than in the Middle East. So far, there are only six Confucius Institutes in the Gulf and Middle East: one in Bahrain, one in Lebanon, two in the United Arab Emirates and two Jordan. In contrast, Kenya alone is home to four Confucius Institutes and two Confucius Classrooms, while South Africa has five of each. This again shows that cultural diplomacy ties between China and African states are deeper and more elaborate. Similarly, we find that Mandarin Chinese is taught in far more schools (high schools or college levels) in Africa than it is in the Middle East. Chinese media have a much stronger presence in the African continent (for instance, CGTN international headquarters are located in Nairobi and regularly diffuse Africa-centered content). It seems plausible that there would be a much higher rate of positive perceptions of China by local populations in African countries than in the Middle East because there is much more cultural exposure to Chinese language, cultural practices, and history in African countries.
Conclusion

China's relations with both Africa and the Middle East are shaped by its strategic investments in people-to-people relations, party-to-party ties, network-building among government officials, and routinized forum diplomacy. The impact of BRI and MSRI projects on the politics and state of relations between signatory states and China is important for understanding a host of things about China and the international order. Joining BRI/MSRI projects will increasingly shape the course of global politics by opening the possibility of ordering Chinese foreign policy priorities according to where states and cities fall on the maritime and land segments of the BRI and the extent to which different components of the BRI overlap. We can expect to see, moving forward, China's foreign policy priorities categorized not only along the lines of geographical divides (Middle East or Africa) but along the lines of whether a given state is part of the BRI, or Maritime Silk Road, or the Ice Silk Road (arctic).

Endnotes

3 Ibid
7 For reference, the latest FOCAC declaration does not expand on the BRI projects in as much detail as CASCF.
The Scalar Politics of Turkey’s Pivot to Africa

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Turkey’s recent interest in sub-Saharan Africa has been the subject of alarmist media reports resonating with the frenzy about “China’s rise in Africa,” long noted by scholars. Besides the shared concerns over resource extraction, investment, foreign aid, land grabs, and military bases, Turkey has triggered specific concerns about neo-Ottomanism and pan-Islamism. Satuated with an aura of secrecy, and centered on President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, these accounts have portrayed Turkey as a curious actor in the “new scramble for Africa.” What is missing in these discussions is the politics of scale that undergird Turkey’s pivot to Africa. In order to understand the construction and contestation of Turkish presence in sub-Saharan Africa, we need to pay attention to the scalar practices of the state, business and civil society. This paper focuses on three scale-making projects: the construction of a “legitimate” Turkish presence on the continent, the making of a multiracial Muslim world, and the conjuring of Turkish-African “partnership.” In thinking the different scales of the nation, umma (community of believers), and global capitalism together, this discussion aims to provide a framework for analyzing how value is created and extracted at their conjunction.

Rescaling national representation

Since its adoption of a vague Africa strategy in the mid-2000s, Turkey became part of the biggest embassy building boom unfolding on the African continent, by rapidly increasing the number of its embassies from 12 to 42. Offices representing other public institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) complemented the embassies in conjuring the Turkish state on the continent. The importance of raising the Turkish flag in these highly securitized spaces has been only partly about the declaration of Turkey’s emergence as a new global actor in Africa. Equally important, at least since the dissolution of the political alliance between the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Gülen network, with strong roots on the continent, since 2013, has been monopolizing the privileges of officiality and reclaiming the right to speak on behalf of the Turkish nation and state.

Formed around the Muslim cleric, Fethullah Gülen, who is now blacklisted by the Turkish government for plotting the 2016 coup attempt, the Gülen network expanded its schools to the African continent in the late 1990s as a precursor to Turkey’s pivot to Africa. Initially celebrated as the representatives of Turkey in places where official missions had not yet reached, these schools became targets of Turkey’s global war on terror, especially after the attempted coup. The first wave of new embassies in Africa established in the late 2000s prioritized the countries hosting a “Turkish school” in a spirit of political alliance. However, after the rift between the party and the Gülen network, the embassies acquired a new mission of replacing the schools as the true representatives of Turkey. As a response to the anti-terror campaign waged by the Turkish government, the schools on the continent dropped the references to Turkey from their names and got rid of the Turkish flags in the schoolyards. While the schools lost their aura of officiality and representational power, state bodies and pro-government non-state bodies worked diligently to take over the schools’ claims to represent Turkey.

The Turkish state is not alone in carving up a legitimate space for the Turkish presence and marking the surface of the continent with its symbols in competition and contestation with the Gülen network. The pro-government civil society organizations actively participate in the rescaling of national representation by channeling state funds and pious donations to the construction of Islamic schools, mosques, water wells, solar energy systems, etc.
non-state actors, active in the humanitarian and education field in Africa, take an important role in the construction of Turkey as a benevolent Muslim donor through the circulation of national symbols. Often analyzed within the framework of “soft power” or “public diplomacy,” the humanitarian, developmental and pedagogical projects of faith-based NGOs and Sufi communities are, however, carried out in the name of the nation as much as that of the umma.

The making of a Muslim world as a scalar and racial project

The second scale-making project that is integral to Turkey’s recent orientation towards Africa south of the Sahara consists of the making of a Muslim world in its own image, through state as well as non-state efforts. Since 2006, Turkey organized three African summits of Muslim religious leaders which helped introduce the African participants to the Turkish model of state-religion relations and Islamic education. Two institutions that are central to this model are the Presidency of Religious Affairs that govern religious life with state funds and the imam-hatip schools that combine a religious curriculum with secular subjects. Originally designed to ensure the secularization of education and public life by the early Republican regime, today these institutions are promoted as the pillars of the “Turkish model” of Islam to be emulated by Muslim Africa.

At the heart of the making and disciplining of the umma lies the Islamic schools established in sub-Saharan countries by Naqshbandi communities from Turkey. In these mostly boarding schools, Turkish educators or African educators trained in Turkey, teach the religious curriculum imported from Turkey and, as some of my interlocutors stated, help spread “Turkish Islam.” What is common to the summits organized by the state and the pedagogical content of the Islamic schools, beyond disseminating a self-proclaimed Turkish model, is the racial ideology which refers back to the Islamic principle of racial egalitarianism while reproducing the nineteenth century racial taxonomy. Conjuring of the scale of the umma is, then, at the same time conjuring of race. In other words, imagining a multiracial Muslim world is conditioned on the racialization of Muslims as white and black. The scalar and racial politics of umma-making, furthermore, lay the ideological groundwork for the conjuring of the Turkish-African “partnership.”

The conjuring of “global partnership”

The third scalar project implicated in Turkey’s pivot to Africa is that of global capitalism and relies on the conjuring of “partnership” through business delegations and forums. Modeled after China’s forum diplomacy (discussed by Benabdallah in this collection), Turkey has been organizing Turkey-Africa summits since 2008, the same year as the African Union’s declaration of Turkey a strategic partner. One of the decisions taken at the first summit was to establish the Turkey-Africa Desk within Turkey’s Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEIK) which gradually took charge of the economic dimension of Turkey’s pivot to Africa. In 2016, DEIK’s Africa Desk organized the Turkey-Africa Economy and Business Forum in Istanbul with state funds that covered the international participants’ travel and accommodation. This forum became an international platform to demonstrate the resilience of the Turkish economy in the face of the recent coup attempt and to invite the African leaders to support Turkey’s anti-terror campaign, by either transferring the Gülen network’s schools to the Turkish state or shutting them down. After the opening ceremony, which the chairman of DEIK resembled to a wedding, the participants could attend the panels on the investment opportunities in individual sub-Saharan countries, visit the exhibition on the popular resistance against the coup attempt, or interact with Turkish companies in the business-to-business meetings (B2B). In the vast venue arranged into different business sectors for the B2B, over a thousand participants could meet their potential “partners” and communicate with the assistance of international students from African countries studying in Turkish universities who served as translators.

Business delegations accompanying President Erdoğan on his diplomatic visits to sub-Saharan countries are no
less important than the forums for imagining, enacting and celebrating the “partnership” between Turkey and Africa. During these visits, that cover up to three African countries within 3-5 days, a second plane carries a Turkish business delegation ranging between 150-300 businesspeople. Until 2014, the business delegations attached to diplomatic visits to Africa were dominated by the Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists (TUSKON), the umbrella organization of the business associations of the Gülen network spread across the country. The membership of TUSKON was primarily composed of small and medium size enterprises located in Anatolian cities which were in need of new export markets for their products in the face of a saturated domestic market and shrinking markets of the regional hinterland. Through “trade bridges” organized not only in the financial heartland of the country, Istanbul, but also in the economic peripheries such as Gaziantep, TUSKON matched the Turkish manufacturers with African merchants. When the institutions of the Gülen network began to be ostracized from Turkey’s pivot to Africa, DEIK replaced TUSKON in organizing the business delegations accompanying President Erdoğan.

DEIK was restructured by a new decree in 2014 from an autonomous institution into a unit of the Ministry of Economy, lending the government more control over it. As new business councils were established within DEIK to cater to each sub-Saharan country, the new cadres began to be filled with the members of the pro-government Independent Industrialists and Businessmen Association (MUSIAD). This shift from TUSKON to DEIK in managing the economic flows between Turkey and Africa and the encroachment of MUSIAD on DEIK were reflected in the changing profile of the business communities and the nature of the businesses promoted. MUSIAD’s membership includes the new business elite that have disproportionately prospered through their clientelistic relations to the AKP and within the “construction based growth” of the Turkish economy it engineered. While the emphasis on commercial relations has not been lost completely with the elimination of TUSKON, it is overshadowed by the agenda of construction companies. More and more CEOs representing the construction industry are flying in the second plane as part of the President’s diplomatic visits to Africa, especially since the loss of construction markets in North Africa in 2011. The “trading state” has thus become the “bidding” state for construction projects in Africa in the last years.

Reconfiguration of the scales of construction

In parallel with the construction of a “legitimate” Turkish presence on the continent and a multiracial umma at global scale, finally, a less figurative kind of construction is taking place by the hand of Turkish investors, exporters and contractors in Africa’s construction sectors. This spectrum includes Turkish immigrant clusters manufacturing brick, shop owners who sell construction materials imported from Turkey, entrepreneurs who invest the capital they accumulated through trade and manufacturing into constructing houses, cement and concrete factories established by Turkey’s larger companies that dominate local economies, and finally the building and infrastructure projects contracted to Turkish construction companies. African states are the main client of Turkish contractors on the continent. In 2017, a Turkish construction company, Yapı Merkezi was awarded two infrastructure projects worth $3.1 billion in Tanzania which, according to analyst Hasan Öztürk, was the fruit of President Erdogan’s visit to the country same year. While the railway projects in Tanzania showed Turkish contractors that a sub-Saharan country can surpass the share of traditional markets like Russia and Saudi Arabia with a single mega project, Summa’s construction projects that expanded from the north to the south of the Sahara in 2011 proved that sub-Saharan countries are ripe with opportunities for luxury and prestige projects such as presidential palaces, hotels, shopping malls, stadiums, congress centers, etc.

President Obiang of Equatorial Guinea, who attended an international meeting at the Tripoli Congress Center in Libya in November 2010, contacted Summa, who took part in its construction, for the construction of a similar congress center in Sipopo where the 17th African Union
Summit was to be held within seven months. After the congress center was successfully completed in such a short time, President Obiang asked the company to build the Oyala Government Palace as well as a shopping mall in Sipopo. Later, Summa signed a contract with Senegal’s President Sall who had seen the Sipopo Congress Center and needed a similar building for hosting the 15th Francophonie Summit in Dakar. In Senegal, the company has also built an international airport, a hotel/resort, an expo center, and the Dakar Arena while similar projects were undertaken in Rwanda, Niger, and the Republic of Congo.

Concluding remarks

The projects contracted to Summa hint at another scale-making project, that of global governance and circulation of capital. At stake with the construction of these concrete spaces is the position of African states and cities within the scalar project of global governance and capitalism. We cannot understand the interscalar entanglements between the projects of Turkish contractors and African states as their clients, which is called a “partnership,” without taking into consideration other ideological projects of scale-making, such as the claims over official representation of the nation and tutelage of the umma. Turkey’s pivot to Africa is a multi-scalar project that encompasses and interweaves the scales of the nation, the Muslim world, and global capitalism. Different scale-making projects, however, do not always lend vitality and energy to one another. As this analysis has shown, the contours of this multi-scalar project are drawn by the post-coup competitions and contestations with the Gülen network’s own scale-making project on the African continent.

Endnotes


8 Founded in 1992, TIKA initially responded Turkey’s changing role in the post-Cold war order by managing its official development assistance to the newly independent countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus as well as the Balkan countries. Over the last decade, TIKA has been restructured in alignment with Turkey’s pivot to Africa. Today, a quarter of TIKA’s budget is devoted to foreign aid in Africa.

9 In Africa south of the Sahara, TIKA has offices in Chad, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Guinea, South Africa, South Sudan, Cameroon, Kenya, Comoros, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda while the offices of the Presidency of Religious Affairs are located in Cameroon and Tanzania.


Cross-Regional Engagements


13 This becomes clear in the discourses and practices of business associations that rely on religious values and organizing such as TUSKON and MÜSİAD, which cannot be addressed within the limited space of this paper.


19 Here I limit my discussion of the Turkish contractors to the case of Summa which has been a successful one. However, there are several other examples where a contract is signed with an African state during a business forum which circulate in the Turkish media, especially after the President’s diplomatic visits, that do not come to fruition, usually due to lack of financial sources.

20 Libya has historically been the first destination for the Turkish contractors with the construction of the Tripoli port in 1972 and dominated more than half of the international market for the Turkish contractors until the end of 1980s. Following the protests in 2011, construction projects in Libya came to a halt with Turkish contractors withdrawing from the country. Therefore, Summa’s jump from Tripoli to Sipopo coinciding with the year 2011 is symbolic of the Turkish contractors’ expansion into new markets in the south of the Sahara with the loss of markets in the north.
National Identity in the Afro-Arab Periphery: Ethnicity, Indigeneity and (anti)Racism in Morocco

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In the last decade, Morocco and Algeria have attempted a “pivot” to Africa. The “infitah to Africa,” as it’s called in the local press, is driven by multiple factors. The collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya and subsequent conflict in Mali created a security dilemma in the Sahel. The European Union’s decline and reduced access to European markets has prompted both states to look southward for market opportunities. China’s expansion into Africa and the desire to be the Asian hegemon’s junior partner on the continent have also played a role in their turn to Africa. Less often discussed is how the pivot to Africa and the official embrace of pan-African discourse in Morocco and Algeria has created an opening for long-standing social movements that claim a non-Arab identity. I focus in this short essay on the rise of “indigenous” (Amazigh) and “Afro” (black) identity movements that contest Arabist ideology and, in particular, challenge the Arab nationalist character of the North African states.

I focus primarily on Morocco, which is undergoing a process of de-liberalization and increased repression, with a brief comparative look at Algeria and Sudan, which are attempting political transitions. I look at the attempts by Amazigh movements in Morocco and Algeria to expand conceptions of national identity and to alter language and educational policy. I also examine the rise of anti-racist campaigns that are trying to introduce a discourse on slavery, and new norms to define racism, while also pressing for a change in migration policy for “sub-Saharan” migrants.

The Amazigh Spring

The upheavals of 2011 had a discernible impact on Amazigh politics across the Maghreb, starting in Tunisia where the “Arab Spring” first began. In July 2011, the Tunisian Association for Amazigh Culture was established. It has since morphed into the Akal (Land) party, the only Amazigh political party in North Africa, calling for an amendment to the Tunisian constitution which, in the preamble, underscores Tunisia’s “Arab Muslim” identity and the repeal of a civil status law that bans non-Arabic names for newborns. In 2012, Tuareg rebels in Mali proclaimed the Berber state of Azawad (2012-2013) – the first Berber state since the equally short-lived and unrecognized Rif Republic (1923-26) of northeast Morocco. In July 2011, an Amazigh movement appeared in eastern Libya launching a radio station, makeshift schools, and is currently calling for constitutional recognition.

The advances made by Amazigh movements in Morocco and Algeria since 2011 have been especially impressive. In Algeria, protests led the Algerian government to recognize Tamazight as an official language in 2016. The blue, yellow and green pan-Amazigh flag has become in some ways the flag of the Algerian hirak, prompting the regime in July 2019 to ban the tri-couleur. Forty-one people were subsequently arrested for hoisting the flag; in November 2019, 21 protestors were sentenced to six months in prison, for “undermining national unity.”

In mid-June 2011, as Morocco’s streets heaved with protestors, King Mohammad VI gave a televised speech where he presented a revised constitution to the public. The “new constitution” outlined expanded rights for civic associations to introduce legislation to parliament, increased representation for opposition parties in government commissions, and made available more public funds for electoral campaigns. As critics noted, the king’s myriad powers remained uncurbed. A key aspect of the new constitution was the section on national identity, which constituted a radical departure from the 1962 constitution. Although that constitution adopted after independence did not describe Morocco as an Arab state, it did declare the official status of Arabic in the first line of the preamble. The preamble underscored Morocco’s position in the “great Arab Maghreb” and the kingdom’s commitment to “African unity.”
The preamble of Morocco's 2011 constitution does not mention language at all. Article 5 specifies that “Arabic remains the official language of the state,” but adds that that Tamazight also “constitutes an official language of the state, as the common heritage of all Moroccans without exception.” The new constitution also established that Morocco’s “national identity, one and indivisible” is based on the “convergence” of Arab-Islamic, Amazigh and Saharan “components,” that is “nourished and enriched by its African, Andalusian, Hebrew and Mediterranean influences.” Observers have disagreed on what is more remarkable – that the new Moroccan constitution now speaks of Amazigh identity, or that it was only in 2011, following an amendment, that Morocco became constitutionally an Arab state.

There are now Amazigh NGOs and civic associations such as “La Femme Amazigh” and “Africa Morocco” – which advocate respectively for Amazigh women and black Amazighs. There are Tamazight television channels. Algeria has declared Yennayer, the Amazigh New Year, a national holiday. Tifinagh script is visible in government buildings and highways in Morocco. Saad Eddin Othmani the Moroccan prime minister – member of the Islamist PJD party – addressed parliament in Tamazight in 2013, and in 2017, in Tunis, reminded Arab diplomats that they should speak of “the great Maghreb” (“al-maghreb al-kabir”) instead of “the Arab Maghreb.” In Morocco, history textbooks which had long taught that Moroccans – of both Amazigh and Arab origin – had migrated to Morocco from Yemen (reflecting the ruling Alaoui dynasty’s myth of origin) have been reformed. The Amazigh are now described as the “original” people of North Africa. Recent textbooks no longer highlight the “contact moment” when Phoenicians arrived, and skim over the Arab invasions. Textbooks also evade the question of origins – “where did our ancestors come from?”

Constraints:

The question of Amazigh numbers remains deeply contentious. How many Amazigh and Arabs are there – and, even more problematic, how should legal systems define an Arab or Amazigh? When, in 2014, the Moroccan High Commissioner for Planning announced the results of the national census, stating that 27% of the population was Tamazigh-speaking, Amazigh NGOs roundly rejected the results saying the questionnaire misjudged a person as Amazigh or not, depending on whether they could read Tifinagh or whether Tamazight was their “maternal language.” This approach was viewed as cynical and designed to depress the numbers, since the Tamzigh Tifinagh script was only introduced into primary schools in the mid-2000s, and “maternal” is unclear in a country that for decades had banned Tamazight from public schools. Mainstream Moroccan Amazigh activists claim the figure is closer to 35-40 percent in Morocco, and want to define Amazigh along more cultural and ethnic grounds. More hardline activists advocate DNA testing as a way to settle the question, to showing that the “pulverizing majority” of Maghrebians are of Amazigh descent, and to demonstrate that the Hilalian invasions -- so central to the pan-Arab narrative – had minimal genetic/demographic impact. The frontpage of Le Monde Amazigh (Amaadal Amazagh) in August 2019 proclaimed: “Genetic anthropology says: “We are all Amazigh!”

Amazigh movements in Morocco and Algeria also face varying degrees of repression. In Morocco, the hirak movement in the northeast Rif region began in October 2016 and peaked in June 2017, when a crackdown led to checkpoints, curfews, military deployments in Al Hoceima and Nador and the arrests of hundreds of youths, including the movement’s leaders who were given twenty years in prison. The other Amazigh protest movement is southern-based and revolves around veteran politician Ahmed Dghirni – a recovering pan-Arabist, who is president of the Amazigh Moroccan Democratic Party (founded in 2005) and banned in 2008 for being an “ethnic” party – though not dissolved.

While the northern hirak movement explicitly harkens back to the Rif Republic launched by Abdelkrim Al Khatabi, and leaders often reference historic Berber figures like Jugurtha and Massanina, the movement does not present itself as an Amazigh movement, speaking more generally of corruption, economic justice and democracy. The hirak’s discourse is infused with religious...
references and calls for returning to Islamic values. Unlike the southern Amazigh movement, the Rif hirak do not claim secularism, and are Arab-friendly, proclaiming their solidarity with the Palestinians – even comparing the Rif to Gaza – and reminding followers that Abdelkrim found refuge in Egypt in the 1930s and that it was Nasser who supported the Moroccan Liberation Army.

The activists of the Amazigh Moroccan Democratic Party seem to have a different audience in mind – secularists, hardline Berber nationalists, the United Nations and the West. This camp calls for normalizing relations with Israel, opposes BDS and speaks of the “Arab occupation” of North Africa. Activists in this camp steer clear of Arab politics claiming that a) Arabs have rarely expressed support for the Amazigh cause and b) involvement in Arab political causes would Arabize them in the eyes of the West. But they stand in solidarity with Kurds, Tuaregs and Darfuris – and are keenly following the debates in Sudan about normalization, withdrawal from the Arab League and the revival of Nubian culture. This movement is explicit in its rejection of Arabism and political Islam, but has not been repressed like the Rif hirak, perhaps because of the latter’s wider appeal. These movements work off each other strategically, have succeeded in mainstreaming the Amazigh cause, and are pressing civil society and state officials to define Arab and Amazigh. What is Arabness (‘uruba) – is it a linguistic identity, lineage, phenotype, membership in the Arab League? What is an “Arab state”? If Arabness is political solidarity, they argue – then speaking Arabic, as John Garang once said, should not make one Arab, any more than speaking French would make a North African a Frenchman.

A final point on the “ethnic” question in the Maghreb: Morocco’s return to the African Union in 2016 and attempts to join ECOWAS, have given the Amazigh cause a boost, as the kingdom’s Amazigh heritage has become a diplomatic asset in the Sahel. Much has been made of Morocco’s religious statecraft in West Africa – the establishment of the Rabat-based Institute for the Training of Imams from West Africa, and the more recent Mohammed VI Foundation for West African Ulema to ensure “the protection of the Muslim faith and spiritual unity of the African people against all violent trends.” But alongside Sufism, Amazigh culture is now a source of soft power. The key figure at the center of the Sufi and Amazigh diplomacy is Ahmed Taoufiq, the Minister of Endowments and Islamic Affairs. Toufiq is one of Morocco’s most distinguished historians and Africanists – he was head of the Institute of African Studies in Rabat from 1989 to 1995, before doing a stint at Harvard – and is managing negotiations with Touareg groups in Mali and Niger. Thus, when regime officials speak of African unity and “investing in Africa,” opposition activists will tweet “And the Rif is not Africa”?

“Racial Vocabularies”

Another effect of the Arab Spring and the pivot to Africa is the emerging discourse on slavery and racism in the Maghreb. Local activism combined with increased migration from “sub-Saharan” Africa have sparked a conversation about racism. In October 2018, Tunisia passed a law calling for the “Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination,” and defending the rights of the purported 10 percent of Tunisians who identify as black. In Morocco, magazine covers recall the history of slavery and ask “Are We Racist?” In response to EU pressure and a desire for better relations with ECOWAS states, Morocco is trying to liberalize migration law, launching regularization campaigns in 2014 and 2017, whereby undocumented migrants gained residency cards. Algeria, in July 2017, began a similar regularization effort.

The discourse on racism in Maghreb tends to oscillate between loud denialism (e.g., claims that slavery in North Africa was “absorptive,” and that Islam is colorblind) and wild exaggeration (claims that historically there were no abolitionist voices in North Africa, or that current authoritarian rule is a legacy of slavery). As in Latin America where political liberalization in the 1980s gave rise to “indigenous” and “Afro-Latin” movements, the opening of 2011 gave rise to similar movements in the Maghreb. Since the early 1970s, Amazigh intellectuals from Algeria have compared their predicament to that of AmerIndians in Latin America and used the term “indigenous” to distinguish the Amazigh from the Arab “settler.” In 1993, when the
The United Nations declared the International Year of the World’s Indigenous People, Amazigh activists across North Africa began deploying the discourse of indigeneity and invoking the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. The term “indigenous” (asli) is hotly contested by Amazigh activists with many observing that casting “Arabs” as “settlers” or “migrants” is dangerous, yet the term is used across the political spectrum, especially as land-grabbing by the Moroccan regime and Gulf states has escalated in the Berber hinterland. “Indigeneity” is both a discourse and a norm. Arab nationalists in turn reject the concepts of “race” and “indigeneity” as colonial constructs, as exemplified by the Algerian historian Ramzi Roughi’s recent book Inventing the Berbers: History and Ideology in the Maghrib (Penn 2019).

Anti-racism activists and scholars at CODESRIA, Makerere and various Maghrebi institutions are engaging with European and American academic writing on critical race theory, racism and slavery, and debating whether works that deploy the language of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and essentially map the Atlantic onto the Sahara, can be of use locally. Recent social science literature has also relied on New World categories. Buehler and Hang’s recent surveys of “divergent opposition” to sub-Saharan African and Arab migrants in Morocco concludes that hostility from less educated Moroccans towards sub-Saharan migrants has more to do with pocketbook issues than racial prejudice. The survey has been praised for asking respondents whether they support “pan-Arab” or “pan-African” ideologies – thus taking into account recent developments – but the survey claims most Moroccans are “mixed” and follow “Arab cultural traditions” (disregarding Berber customs and traditions) and defines “Black Moroccans” as people of “sub-Saharan origin.” This is a common assumption – that darker-hued North Africans (Nubians, haratin) are a “diaspora,” and necessarily descendants of slaves and identify as such. In early 2020, partly in response to this wave of writing, the black Moroccan artist M’Barek Bouchchichi stated: “The issue that we encounter is that any black in Morocco is told to have come from sub-Saharan Africa. And this is where they are wrong. I am from here. I am here.”

The term “diaspora” is as contested as “indigenous” and “ethnic.” The media increasingly speaks of ethnicities in Morocco (al-ethniyat), yet activists avoid the term; as Adhghrini observed, “ethnic” is what state officials labeled the AMDP before banning it. There are television shows and radio programs trying to sensitize people to racism, but the public conversation remains limited to personal/attitudinal racism and not structural racism. There is little discussion of police violence, media representation, or black political representation. Moroccan activists note that out of 515 members of parliament (395 in the House of Representatives, and 120 House of Counselors), only 7 are black (5 in the former, and 2 in the latter.) And yet efforts to introduce a Tunisian-inspired anti-racism bill were roundly rejected in parliament. Anti-racist organizations – like GADEM, National Council for Human Rights, Tadamun – are massively disadvantaged, faced with a discourse of Islamic color-blindness, and French color-blindness, which sees “race” as an insidious construct and an American imposition. There are regular workshops training activists on how to talk about racism without organizing people into “races”: How to refer to black Moroccans – Afro-Arab? Afro-Berber? What is “Afro”? Another controversy has revolved around how to refer to sub-Saharan migrants? The preferred term among NGO activists seems to be “sub-Saharan,” as “African” would imply North Africa is not part of the continent. Also, how to teach the history of slavery in Morocco without incurring the ruling dynasty’s wrath - and should slavery be taught in a North African/Middle Eastern context, or reflecting the recent pivot, in a broader pan-African context? “Trans-Saharan” or “trans-African” slaveries?

Until the last decade, public discussions about the Maghrebian states’ place in Africa and African politics tended to be about Sufi networks, investment opportunities, inter-state alliances and how the African Union (then OAU) could be used to advance the national interest. Today the conversation about “notre continent” has taken a distinct identitarian turn and is affecting domestic politics, as Amazigh movements and anti-racist campaigns in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco take advantage of the “pivot to Africa” to connect with other Amazigh communities, to talk about racism and slavery, and to contest the tenets of Arab nationalism.
Endnotes


3 Aly Mouryf, “National identity through historical knowledge in schools” (“al-hawiya al-watania min khilal al-marifa al-tarikhiya al-madrasia” Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture (IRCAM, Rabat 2014)

4 The Amazigh-speaking in northern Africa population is estimated to be about 20 million, scattered between Morocco (where an estimated 35 percent is Amazigh-speaking), Algeria (20 percent), Libya (10 percent) and smaller communities in Tunisia and the Siwa oasis in western Egypt. There are also an estimated 1 million Tuareg Amazighs in Mali and Niger.


6 Abdallah Bouchtart, Amazighité and the Party (al-amazighiya wa al-hizb) (Rabat 2019)


8 Francis M. Deng, War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan (Brookings Institution Press 2011) p.450

9 Dahir # 1-15-75 Ramadan 1436 (June 24 2015)


12 “We realize the term is negative, and indigene was used by French colonialists,” says Rachid Raha, editor of Le Monde Amazigh and chair of the World Amazigh Congress, “but in the early 1990s, the United Nations was the only door we had.”


14 M'harek Bouchchichi, “The Invisibility of Black Moroccans” The Metric (January 22 2020)

15 Interview with author, Rabat (February 5 2020)
“Liberty must be suppressed until the end of the war in Algeria-- until the nation becomes homogeneous”

In 2018, three black Tunisians appealed to the Ministry of Justice to change family names which they deemed injurious. Their last names of (freed slave of el-Dali), (عويمي) and (الأبيذ) did not only conjure the traumatic memory of slavery; they also connoted a genealogical gap in a country where individuals remain vulnerable to the premodern form of discrimination of lineage. Last names like shushan, atig (freed) and others, do not only evoke black Tunisians’ untraceable blood line but equally their perpetual foreignness, pushing them to the margin of what constitutes a Tunisian identity today. The fluidity of such last names, particularly shushan and ‘ucif, and their ability to transmute into slurs evinces their stigmatizing effect and explains the quests of many black Tunisians to change them.

The fundamentalist assimilative project of the Tunisian state has relegated theories of lineage and ancestral racial purity/impurity to the margins, but they continue to proliferate in what remains from a fading kin-based social structure in the country. Such disparaging names remain one of the many deficiencies of the state sponsored de-minoritization policies that were adopted by the father of the modern Tunisian nation Habib Bourguiba (1957-1987) and prolonged under his successor Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011). Their color-blind policies intended to ingest heterogeneous entities and homogenize the nation, have inadvertently emphasized black Tunisian’s difference and underestimated the impact of racialized servitude on their identity formation. The rigidity of color-blind national policies that professed to enshrine full citizenship and suppress the memory of slavery neither washed away the stigma of slavery nor rendered black Tunisians equal to the majority.

Racialization; a byproduct of homogenization

Inspired by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk’s “Turkishness”, Bourguiba endeavored through state policies to create a model based upon the supremacy of “Tunisianness” (تونيسية) in order to attenuate the distinctive socio-cultural differences of the then-fledgling Tunisian nation. For him, the persistence of agnatic alliances and kin-based society was antagonistic not only to black Tunisians’ integration into a Tunisian collectivity defined in part by theories of racial purity, but equally to the overall state formation. Bourguiba deemed what was called a “republic of cousins” not only archaic and obsolete but threatening to the modernist national project of Tunisianité that sought to homogenize the different social segments and instill the common sense of belonging to a Tunisian nation beyond religious or patrilineage affiliations.

To dismantle kin-based groupings and their political force, Bourguiba embarked upon a series of strict bureaucratic rules that he consolidated with patriarchalism, embodied in his own image of the father of the nation (الزام). Aggressive reforms and state policies such as building bureaucracy, centralizing government and introducing the progressive family law were meant to cultivate the nuclear family model and detach individuals from their extended kin-groups. Patronymic names were introduced in 1959, building upon a policy begun during the colonial period to conscript Tunisians in the French military. The project was relaunched upon independence not only to create administrative records and to carry out a census but also instill a Tunisian character and an identity beyond a kin-based tribal one. By the late 1950s, local committees were created and assigned the task of giving Tunisians patronymic last names and eliminating surnames that reflected one’s kinship line. The process was also coupled with the refining of family names’ campaign that lasted until the 1970s, targeting last names that brought ridicule.
to their holders, had a non Maghrebi/Tunisian character that suggested foreignness or evoked hierarchies of the past like that of “Bey”. The Husaynid family that governed Ottoman Tunisia (1705-1957) for instance was not allowed to hold El-Bey for a last name; they were forced to hold Al-Husayni, Bin Hussein or El-Adel instead.

Yet, within the process of refining and changing family names, the stigma associated with Black slavery was actually reinforced and emphasized. While certain last names like Shushan (freed slave) were changed into Shair, Hamrouni and Zitouni for instance, such newly acquired names did not help black Tunisians to reinvent themselves. Instead, the new family names had reproduced the patron client relationships that bound slave and master’s descendants. Although no longer explicitly evoking the memory of slavery or the imperial Ottoman past that the state sought to erase, such new names did not delink black Tunisians from their previous masters, for those names were not deeply rooted in the kin-based structure. As such, black Tunisians’ kinlessness was implied if not further perpetuated by adopting last names of their ancestors’ masters.

The stigma of the genealogical gap that characterizes black ancestry did not get remedied with the adoption of their masters’ last names. Such patronymic names were at times changed into ones which instantaneously resurrected the history of black slavery in the country. Names recalling epithets that denoted the groups’ ancestral social status, even considered as slurs today, became their badges of enslavement, well documented on the most authoritative official documents of birth certificates and national identity cards. When special committees did not assign black families the last names of their benefactors and patrons, they gave them injurious names such as Shushan and âtig (freed) that outrightly indicated their past servitude and indexed their genealogical gap. A third group of names included surnames of previous slave-masters; i.e., a black family in Tunisia can hold “freed slave” of a given “Arab-Berber family” for a surname today. In these examples, el-Doghri as well as Bin Yedder, are popular last names of two affluent, historically slave-holding families in the southeast island of Djerba. This, clashed with the intended purpose of the refinement of family names. While the change of family names was perhaps meant to restore dignity and confer a modern outlook to Tunisians, black Tunisians were left with last names that stained them as perpetual slave descendants and reproduced the memory of a social structure that antedated the formation of the state.

This comes in contrast with the case of descendants of white slaves, or rather Mamluks of eastern Europe, northern Mediterranean and Circassian descent who did not bear the brunt of the legacy of their enslavement like black Tunisians. Black Tunisians, with their black phenotype, historically entrenched naming practice, and physical proximity as extended fictive kin members to their previous masters’ offspring, were further racialized as slave descendants in ways white former slaves were not. Black slave descendants were ingested into a culture that prized them for their whiteness, while black Tunisians transitioned from a social category of slaves to that of slave-descendants. It might be the historical incorporation of white female slaves in the Harem and the establishment of blood ties with the Ottoman elite that had shielded and helped them outgrow lineage-based discrimination. As per the male white slaves, incorporated into the Kul military system of slavery, it is perhaps due to their previous unmatched power that did not fully dissipate under colonialism and the later rise of the nation state.

One can argue that such attempts at eradicating the political force of local patrimonialism were Janus -faced, particularly when pertaining to the predicament of black Tunisians. With the exception of black groups, lineage hierarchies have been mostly overcome by the majority today. On the one hand, such family names’ policies might have counteracted the client patronage relations in which many slave descendants were trapped from the time of manumission (1890) to independence (1956). The focus of the state policies on the nuclear family and the evisceration of clan ties might have helped black Tunisians to relatively distance themselves and move away from such relations of subordination as they too, were considered Tunisian citizens and were encouraged to focus on the
nuclear family as a kin-base and to overcome their own tribal affiliations that were strongly tied to their masters’ tribes. The state’s aggressive reform had helped reduce the political power of clans that were not only dangerous to the formation of the state but for their preservation of some form of pre-modern theories of racial purity of Arab-Berber descent that would have worsened the state of black Tunisians. Although clans’ subscription to premodern forms of lineage discrimination have not lost their efficacy in historicizing black Tunisians origins as slave descendants, their power remains limited.

On the other hand, the weakening of such kin-based solidarity and the political power of clans might have also perpetuated client patron relations in the country. I posit that the new patriarchalism, embodied in the transformative bureaucracy, might have depressed tribal claims to political power but inadvertently strengthened their attachment to codes of honor and the symbolic markers of a bygone period of prestige of slave ownership. For a desperate need to assert their now-limited superiority, Tunisians of so-called elevated Arab descent clung to that which bore witness to their past glory. They sought to reinforce the honor codes in order to preserve relations of subordination that no longer provided any economic benefit, but instead abstracted images that authenticated a past of honorable lineage and the wealth of slave ownership. Clinging to the past symbols of nobility, embodied in the patronage relations, crystallized ideas of superiority.

On the other end of the spectrum, slave-descendants and their offspring are also encouraged or manipulated to continue to perform certain traditional roles that reinforced the stigma, like performing or cooking at rites of passage, for instance, and for which they are symbolically rewarded. Such complicity from slave-descendants is perhaps exacerbated by their economic deprivation and disempowerment. In its attempts to deny that which antedated it, the Tunisian nation-state never recognized the economic disadvantage that slave descendants continue to suffer, as the recognition, runs the risk of singling out the group, which in a country that seeks to homogenize, can run against the essence of its national ideology. This is not only a critique of the introduction of patronymic names and refining family names’ campaigns but also of the general state policies that targeted kin-based alliances in the country. The focus on such powerful tribes had diverted the attention from social groups that were historically subordinated to them like black Tunisians. Overall, in a country where the question of minorities is rendered impertinent and where race or ethnic-based data is banned, the singularity of black experience remains difficult to grapple with.

Black Tunisians have now sought to change last names that they considered humiliating and evocative of a stigmatizing history of servitude. While some had succeeded in changing their names, others were impeded by the rigidity of the state bureaucracy, more particularly the family name law. With the dissolution of last names committees by the 1970s, citizens’ request to change family names are usually either rejected or remain unsettled by the Ministry of Justice. It can be concluded hence that the rise of the nation state, although it trumped some of these issues of lineage and race, failed to completely wash away that which signaled these groups’ foreignness. Although it weakened some social structures that preceded its formation, it failed to remove the weight of history on black Tunisians’ identity formation. The event that ended in 1890 continues to inform how modern black Tunisians are perceived despite the state’s aggressive homogenization project.

Overall, one might judge the state-sponsored assimilative project successful in reducing difference and weakening kin-based alliances that might have further antagonized black Tunisians’ integration. Yet, such process did not account for the weight of history particularly that of slavery onto a visible minority group like black Tunisians. It did not only fail to erase the memory of slavery from the collective memory but even further racialized and differentiated them as perennial slave descendants. As it sought to produce uniform postcolonial subjects, black Tunisians remained vulnerable to the relics of slavery that continue to manifest not only in the vernacular culture but on official documents that supposedly testify
to their Tunisian citizenship. The legacy of slavery today is entangled in both its erasure from the official national memory and historiography as well as in the never fading semantics that conjure it in black Tunisians’ last names. The persistence of such anachronistic epithets, as both slurs and family names, do not only index the weight of a suppressed history of slavery but also its racialization and the materiality of blackness that is both fundamentally migratory and thoroughly equated with slavery in a continent where blackness is supposedly indigenous.

Endnotes

2 As a group, shwashin (plural of shushan), had historically preceded black west Africans (predominantly Kanuri and Hausa) in Tunisia. They are said to be enslaved around 1738 under the aegis of Youssef Dey (1610-1637) the Turkish ruler who built the slave market of Suq el-Birka, for the exclusive sale of black slaves. See, Montana, Ismael. “The Borie Colonies of Tunis” in Slavery, Islam and Diaspora, ed. Behnaz Mirzai, et al. (Africa World Press, 2009),155-168.
5 Although historians trace its origin to the Berber Hafsid Dynasty (1229-1574), Tunisianité, an ideology of unity and homogeneity, became an official decolonial state ideology since the 1920s. See Bessis, Sophie. Histoire de La Tunisie : De Carthage à nos Jours. Tallandier, 2019.
10 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
17 The literal meaning of Mamluk is “owned”. Mamluks were never outrightly designated as slaves. Even local Tunisian terms for them were not racialized and divergently differed from those reserved for black slaves and slave descendants.
18 It is important to rectify that the slavery system under the Ottoman hegemony over the Tunisian province, was very multiethnic and it included white enslaved subjects both from the northern Mediterranean shores and Circassia.
19 Through the story of the Mamluk Hussein Bin Abdallah and the wrangles about his inheritance, Historian M’hamed Oualdi’s Slave Between Empires evidences the sociopolitical as well as economic power of white enslaved that was not characteristic to black slaves. See, Oualdi, M’hamed. A Slave between Empires: a Transimperial History of North Africa. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.
21 Theories of lineage in Tunisia did not have the similar socio-political weight like in modern day Mauritania or Sudan for instance. At least in a country with the most progressive citizenship laws in North Africa and the Arab world, such myths of Arab origin came to contradict the nation state's modernist endeavors.
1 See Connor Gaffey, “al-Qaida Leaders Considered Truce With Mauritania: Bin Laden Documents Reveal”, Newsweek, 03/02/2016. See also: Marco Hosenball, “Al Qaida leaders made plans for peace deal with Mauritania:documents”, Reuters, 03/02/2016.
Rethinking the weak state paradigm in light of the war on terror: Evidence from the Islamic Republic of Mauritania

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Mauritania, straddling West Africa and the Maghrib, could easily be classified as the Sahel region’s weakest security link. With its history of repeated coup d’ états, lingering ethnic tensions, and poor governance, this sparsely populated desert nation exemplified state weakness. Yet, when AQIM (Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb) waged a terror campaign there over a six years period (2005-2010), the self-styled Islamic Republic managed (2011-2013) ultimately to suppress jihadi activism even amidst the extreme volatility of the Sahel-Maghreb region and the post-Arab revolts of 2011. Interestingly, Mauritania thwarted the jihadi threat while the country was emerging from a cycle of leadership instability: a military junta had just toppled two elected presidents, respectively in 2005 and 2008 (Foster, 2011). While over the following years, more stable and democratic states (Mali) nearly collapsed under jihadi pressure, Mauritania became a showcase for effective countering violent extremism (CVE) policies (Simpson, 2018).

External observers puzzled for quite some time over this “Mauritanian paradox”. One tantalizing theory emerged from an unlikely place: Osama Bin Laden personal archives. According to documents seized by U.S. Navy Seals when they raided Bin Laden’s Pakistani hideout in 2011, Al Qaeda leaders seemed to have discussed a plan in 2010 to arrange a truce with the government of Mauritania. This theory was vehemently denied by local authorities, and few foreign commentators lent it credibility. More significantly, this narrative provides an insufficient explanation as to why a weak country such as Mauritania has been nevertheless able to take advantage of a number of strategic opportunities in order to effectively use a combination of internal stabilization efforts, security policies, and political engagement and de-radicalization programs. Although the sustainability of such a success story is open to question, this case could potentially complicate our approach of the resilience of African and Arab states to security threats.

An Islamic Republic against Islamists

Mauritania is officially an Islamic Republic. Yet, with the exception of President Ould Haidalla (1980-1984), a notoriously pious army colonel who proclaimed Sharia as the main source of law, all the country’s leaders opposed non-state political Islam (Ould Ahmed Salem, 2013: 103-126). This was especially the case under the regime of President Maaouya Ould Taya (1984-2005). In a 1990s regional context marked by concerns across the region over the Algerian civil war, the Taya regime openly harassed Islamist currents, institutions and networks. Taya’s enthusiasm for the war on terror and his aggressive anti-Islamist policy ultimately backfired, attracting jihadism to the country and contributing to the regime’s downfall.

The first regime crackdown on non-state religious networks took place in 1994. Many clubs, associations, and Islamic foundations previously authorized as part of the “democratization process” were abruptly closed down and their activities banned. Leaders of the tiny Muslim Brotherhood network were forced to make self-incriminating confessions on National TV only to be released shortly thereafter. A similar scenario repeated itself in 1998. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the USA, the government enthusiastically joined the global war on terror. In 2003, the Mauritanian Islamist movement organized itself more effectively, orchestrating...
a variety of demonstrations denouncing the government’s alliance with the West, especially its diplomatic ties with Israel. When a bloody military coup was foiled on June 8, 2003, Taya immediately blamed “Islamism”. During the following presidential campaign, the Islamist current backed Taya’s challenger, former president Haidalla. Taya won a third six-year term in November 7, 2003, but the campaign had turned unusually bitter (Ould Ahmed Salem, 2012).

Local national events were hardly disconnected from other regional security concerns and developments. In 2002, the GSPC (Salafist Group for Predication and Combat) abducted over thirty German tourists in Southern Alegria and transported them to their new safe haven in Northern Mali. By then, Western nations had already started discussing an anti-terrorist strategy in the African Sahel. In 2003, Mauritania joined the US-led Pan-Sahel Initiative and, later, the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism partnership. Perhaps not coincidentally, the government decided to step-up its repression of Islamic organizations, especially between 2003 and 2005. At that point, Mauritanian intelligence services had been monitoring a few young Mauritanian recruits in the GSPC. Taking advantage of the growing internal discontent with the government and the rise of Islamism, the GSPC launched an aggressive terror campaign on Mauritania.

The Islamic Republic under jihadist attacks

On June 3, 2005, a GSPC commando attacked Lemghaity, a military outpost, killing 15 soldiers. This was but the first of a wave of jihadist operations against Mauritania. With this attack however, GSPC somewhat precipitated the fall of the Taya regime (ICG, 2005). On August 3, 2005, colonels M. Ould Abdel Aziz and Ely Ould Mohamed Vall overthrew Ould Taya. The new “Military Committee for Justice and Democracy,” they created promised to reestablish democracy and civilian rule. Following a 19-month transition, a new president, former cabinet minister Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, was elected. The jihadist attacks did not stop, however; it was quite the contrary. On December 24, 2007, three French tourists were killed outside Aleg, a southern town. Quickly arrested in Guinea, four AQIM operatives confessed to the crime in January 2008. On December 27, 2007, another remote northern military outpost called Al-Ghallawiya suffered a violent attack, resulting in three deaths. In February 2008, a series of coordinated attacks targeted the Israel embassy and a night-club in Nouakchott (the capital city). A few weeks later, the authorities dismantled an AQIM cell following a bloody clash with a group of Mauritanian jihadists hiding in plain sight in Tevragh Zeina, an affluent Nouakchott neighborhood (Ould Ahmed Salem, 2011).

In the meantime, an unrelated political crisis quickly unfolded. Following a rather tense standoff between the new president on one hand and the army and the parliament on the other hand, General Abdel Aziz ultimately overthrew President Abdallahi on 6 August 2008. While the opposition parties resisted pacifically the new putsch during several months, Abdel Aziz was finally able to strike an accord with the main political players who opposed his coup. The accord allowed him to run for and ultimately win the new presidential election held on 18 July 2009 (Foster, 2011). The new President pledged to “spare no effort in attacking terrorism and its causes”, gaining in the process much-needed international legitimacy and support. The following events immediately put him to the test.

In September 2008, AQIM claimed responsibility for the massacre of twelve Mauritanian soldiers in Tourine, a northern Mauritanian hamlet. On the morning of June 23, 2009, John Legget, an American evangelist, was gunned down in broad daylight in downtown Nouakchott. On August 9, 2009, the first Mauritanian suicide bomber, Ahmed Vih al-Barka, blew himself up near the French embassy in Nouakchott. In 2009, three tourists from Spain were abducted on a busy national road. In August 25, 2010, another suicide bomber, Idriss Mohamed Lemine, attacked a military garrison located in Bassiknou, in the eastern part of the country. In February 2011, Mauritanian authorities intercepted another explosive-laden car just hours before it reached its target: the presidential palace. However, this foiled attack was the last one AQIM was able to plan on Mauritanian soil ever since. (Boukhars, 2016)
Islamist Movements

Defeating jihadism

During the wave of terrorist attacks, the government had reacted forcefully in two ways. First, it systematically investigated the attacks, arresting their perpetrators and trying them. Second, it started a preventive war, bombing terrorist hideouts in Northern Mali, for example. A securitization strategy started to emerge, including key measures such as: security sector reform and increase in military spending; a much tougher anti-terrorism law; better controls along the 2,200-kilometre border with Mali; closer collaboration with western allies; and a new biometric identification/civil registration system.

This effort constituted a shift in the government’s resolve to secure the country and fight al-Qaida. Mauritania started quickly to showcase its newly acquired military capacities with countless arrests of smugglers and raids to free western hostages or negotiate their liberation without paying any ransoms. For example, Mauritanian intelligence officers were able within days to identify, track down in Northern Mali, and abduct a certain Omar al-Sahrawi, the leader of the crew who had abducted three Spaniards back in November 2009. The suspect was then transported to Nouakchott. The authorities later exchanged him for the liberation of the hostages he had himself abducted. This operation made a great impression on the country’s strategic western partners and neighbors.

In this particular case, it seemed that Mauritania had revived its decades old intelligence networks among Arab and Tuareg communities in Northern Mali to obtain first-rate intelligence on AQIM. AQIM later identified some of these embedded informants. The gruesome videos of their executions were later circulated on the jihadi websites (Ould Ahmed Salem 2013:143-184).

From De-radicalization to strategic opportunism

Even though the Aziz regime sought early on to appear as “tough on terror”, it claimed equally to be open to dialogue, engaging as early as 2010 in a de-radicalization project targeting its jihadist detainees. In engaging its de-radicalization program, the government hoped to delegitimize the radical discourse among the Muslim public.

The original proposal came from Muhammad al-Hassan Dedew and Jamil Mansour, respectively, spiritual leader and president of the main Islamist political party Tawassoul (Muslim Brotherhood) (Cavatorta, Ojeda Garcia 2017). President Aziz has been popular in moderate Islamist circles ever since he decided to sever all diplomatic ties with Israel back in 2008. After months of preparation, the dialogue between ulama and extremists finally began in January 2010. It took the form of a formal debate over the lawfulness of AQIM jihad (Wehrey, 2019). The entire group of roughly seventy detained “extremists” with ties to terrorism (most of whom were AQIM soldiers) agreed to engage the government sponsored ulama. Eventually, fifty-five detainees finally repented and renounced their pro-jihadi views. In return, the state promised to offer spiritual support, freedom, care packages and economic opportunities. The dialogue did not include those jihadis already convicted for their involvement in criminal acts. Other detainees who were serving sentences qualified in theory to the program but were not allowed to secure an early release. (Ould Ahmed Salem 2013:143-184)

Even though it campaigned against it and warned its militants not to accept its premises, the de-radicalization process somehow affected AQIM hostility towards Mauritania (Ould Ahmed Salem 2013: 143-184). In the meantime, the combination of securitization policies and de-radicalization programs put the country in a better position to seize on additional strategic opportunities afforded by the geopolitical context.

Strategic opportunities

Mauritania resisted the pressure of Islamist armed groups and later consolidated its status as a jihadism-free country. While the government policies described earlier could explain this positive outcome, Mauritania owes part of its success to its ability to take advantage of a number of structural and conjunctural opportunities.

First, unlike Mali or Niger, Mauritania has neither
a separatist movement nor a powerful jihadi group established on its territory. Second, an armed confrontation between Mauritania and jihadists ended before the Tuareg militias returning from Libya allied with AQMI insurgents to take control of Northern Mali in mid-2012. Third, by the time Mali witnessed a new military coup in March 2012 and faced an aggressive jihadist threat, Mauritania had already stepped up its military engagement and finalized its de-radicalization process.

Fourth, Mauritania benefited from the Malian crisis and the collapse of the Qaddafi regime as jihadists shifted their attention to the Libyan battleground. In addition to the effective use of these structural and conjunctural opportunities, Mauritania declined to join the French military intervention in Mali after January 2013, securing thus a much-needed neutral position. After a full blown civil war started in Mali, Mauritania hosted hundreds of thousands of Tuareg refugees, reinforcing thus its already strong channels of communication with the main leaders of the Tuareg groups. Some of those have already joined forces with AQIM against the French-led international intervention in Mali in January 2013. By that time, jihadi groups were too busy fighting other battles on other fronts (Algeria, Libya, Niger, Libya, and Burkina Faso) or fighting France and the UN in Mali. Mauritania seemed of little strategic value. As AQIM withdrew from the country, Mauritania continued its commitment to the global war on terror. It offered for example support to the French army and opened its military bases for their logistical needs. In addition, the government engaged in international coalitions and initiatives aimed at building an international alliance against jihadism in the region. President Aziz spearheaded the regional anti-terrorism initiative called “the Nouakchott process” (2013) that would later become the Sahel G-5, a security organization regrouping in addition to Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina and Chad.

Even though there is no end in sight for the cycle of violence and terror in the region, Mauritania continues to escape the regional turmoil and is increasingly praised as a stabilizing force. However, since success in addressing security concerns often trump more relevant state capacity considerations, Abdel Aziz government has been both unable and unwilling to find real solutions to the daunting economic, political and social challenges it continued to face. Under President Aziz, the Mauritanian regime utilized the “secure country label” to increase its internal political control, curb demands for democratization and plunder the national resources. Yet, surprisingly, in 2019, Abdel Aziz complied with the Mauritanian constitution and stepped down at the end of his second presidential term in mid-2019. A new president, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, has now been elected and sworn in office in August 2019 (Thurston, 2019). An ex-general, long-time army chief of staff and defense Minister, Ghazouani is unlikely to change the national security strategy he had himself partly designed and implemented. However, the threat of extremism and terror will remain as long as extremist groups are able to take advantage of the drivers of insecurity that still persist in Mauritania and the region, namely poverty, absence of democracy and development, corruption, and inequality. Yet, it is undeniable that Mauritania’s recent trajectory challenges our understanding of weak states’ resilience to “terrorism” and the interplay between transnational insurgencies, domestic policies and regional politics.

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Why Are There Few Islamist Parties South of the Sahara?

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For Islamic movements, the Sahara has often been a bridge, rather than a barrier. The Maliki school of jurisprudence, various Sufi orders, and even jihadists have all crossed the desert, sometimes finding greater purchase south of the Sahara than north of it.

Given these trans-Saharan religious connections, why are there so few Islamist parties south of the Sahara? In North Africa, Islamists are key players in politics. In Muslim-majority countries in the Sahel region and West Africa, however, there are no Islamist parties of any strength. This paper contrasts the fates of Islamism in North Africa and the Sahel. I argue that the political and religious space available to Islamism is smaller in the Sahel and nearby northern Nigeria than in North Africa, for three reasons.

First, there is the greater hegemony of clerical models of religious authority in the Sahel and Nigeria, in comparison with North Africa where clerics maintain substantial authority but where lay-led activist groups have also acquired a substantial share of the religious field. Second, there is a triple interaction between constitutionally-imposed secularism in most Sahel countries, the lack of Islamist mobilization in the Sahel in the 1970s and 1980s, and the way that liberalization in the 1990s favored French-educated technocrats in the Sahel and military-civilian networks in Nigeria. Third, there are demographic contrasts between North Africa on the one hand and the Sahel on the other hand, particularly the latter region’s relatively lower rates of middle class formation, urbanization, and formal education, as well as higher rates of religious diversity in parts of the greater Sahel. Together, these factors have shrunk the political, social, and religious space available to would-be Islamist movements.

Diverging Paths for Clerical Authority

Since the colonial period, clerical hegemony has largely continued in the Sahel and West Africa, whereas lay Muslims have taken leading roles in North African activist movements. In West Africa and the Sahel, there are effectively no equivalents to Western-educated, lay Islamist leaders such as Tunisia’s Rachid Ghannouchi or Egypt’s Muhammad Morsi. There are few equivalents even to Sudan’s Hasan al-Turabi, who came from a scholarly lineage but who was himself a French- and British-trained lawyer.

One factor is that Sufism became a pillar of colonial governance in the Sahel and Nigeria. Sufi shaykhs’ influence often carried over powerfully into the postcolony. Certainly, Sufism was and is crucially important in North African society and politics: for example, in Sudan, the Khalwatiyya Sufi order is the social base for the Democratic Unionist Party, and Sufi models of authority have influenced movements such as Morocco’s Justice and Charity Organization. During the twenty-first century, the governments of Morocco and Algeria have made efforts to promote Sufism, presenting Sufism as a counterweight to Islamism and Salafism.

Yet Sufism’s role in North Africa’s post-independence politics has sometimes been more limited than in the Sahel. North Africa even saw a degree of state-directed anti-Sufism, particularly in Qadhafi-era Libya, that had no parallel in the Sahel countries or Nigeria. Meanwhile, Islamic modernism had a greater impact in North Africa than in the Sahel, and modernist intellectuals had a substantial impact on the development of Islamist parties there.

The prominence of Sufism in the Sahel and West Africa helped to sustain models of clerical authority that were picked up even by Sufis’ competitors. Even amid a “fragmentation of sacred authority,” the model of the religious community headed by a shaykh has not been supplanted—or even seriously challenged—by the model of a bureaucratic organization headed by lay Muslim activists. For example, in northern Nigeria, Salafi preachers draw massive audiences but the popularity of the Sufi orders continues. Salafis reject esotericism and belittle
Sufis’ claims that their own shaykhss are saints, but Salafis still locate much religious authority in the shaykh’s ability to claim a place in a world of knowledge transmitted through clerics. Nigeria’s main Shi’i movement, the Islamic Movement in Nigeria, is headed by a lay activist, Ibrahim al-Zakzaky who reinvented himself on the model of a Shi’i Ayatollah.

In defining the sources of religious authority, Sufis and Salafis have more in common with each other than they do with the lay intellectuals, scientists, doctors, engineers, and others who have often led Islamist movements in North Africa. In northern Nigeria, the only properly Islamist figures are a relatively limited coterie of university-based intellectuals who wielded policy influence during the phase of shari’a implementation in northern states (especially 2000–2007), but who lack mass followings. The durability of Sufism in the Sahel has also periodically brought Salafis into political coalitions with Sufis, particularly in Mali. Sahelian movements and coalitions that superficially resemble Islamism, and whose demands parallel those of Islamists elsewhere, nevertheless occupy different religious niches than Islamist movements in North Africa and beyond.

Laïcité, Liberalization, and History

Although most of northwest Africa was colonized by France, former colonies emerged into independence with very different formal descriptions of the roles that Islam should play in politics. In North Africa, the Moroccan and Libyan monarchies foregrounded Islamic referents and claims to authority, and the one-party states in Algeria and Mauritania also invoked Islamic values.

In North Africa, Islamists experienced a period of formation, growth, and/or revival in the 1970s and 1980s. The 1980s and 1990s brought the promise of a democratic opening – but incumbents frustrated the ambitions of their challengers, especially Islamists. Since the early 1990s, and especially since the Arab Spring, the trajectories of Islamist movements across North Africa have been diverse, ranging from shorter or longer periods in government to differing experiences of repression. If there are any generalizations to be made from these experiences, one might be that North African Islamist movements’ longevity today owes much to histories woven long before the Arab Spring and even long before the abortive openings of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Networks forged during the 1970s and after proved to be substantially durable, even as young Islamists today wrestle with the challenge of devising new strategies following disappointments such as the 2013 coup in Egypt.

This history of North Africa’s Islamists has only weak parallels on the other side of the Sahara.

In the Sahel and West Africa, post-independence constitutions, as well as subsequent constitutions in the 1990s and after, enshrined the idea that states were laïc. Laïcité did not automatically foreclose prospects for Islamist mobilization. In the Sahel and Nigeria, however, underground movements that appeared under authoritarianism, such as Mali’s Ançar Dine (not to be confused with the jihadist Ansar al-Din), tended to be led by clerics and to be oriented less toward capturing state power and more toward piety. Meanwhile, top-down, state-backed councils and/or ministries, often dominated by clerics, exercised significant control over several Sahelian countries’ religious fields from the 1970s on.

When democratic openings and liberalizing forces swept parts of West Africa in the 1990s and 2000s, the beneficiaries were not Islamists. Rather, elections in Sahelian countries were won by French-educated technocrats who had typically served in the recently overthrown governments. In Nigeria, the victor of the 1999 election was a former military ruler, and retired generals and their networks have played substantial roles in the country’s politics ever since. Across the region, opposition politicians share much in terms of background, education, and outlook with those they aim to replace. Recurring party fragmentation and party switching have also blurred ideological differences between incumbents and their main challengers.

Clerics and would-be Islamists largely adjusted to these formally laïc democratic theaters. Politically-minded
clerics endorsed or opposed particular candidates, and organized protests around controversial legislation. Such clerics typically intervene in politics not as the representatives of Islamist organizations but as the spokesmen for imagined moral communities. In the Sahel, clerics have periodically questioned the suitability of *laïcité* for their Muslim-majority societies, but over roughly three decades of democratic experiments, explicitly Islamist organizing has remained minoritarian.

In Nigeria following the 1999 transition, northern states implemented “full shari’a codes” that would have been the envy of North African Islamists — but the implementers of those codes were politicians from major parties. The politicians in turn constituted government committees dominated by clerics, often specifically by Sufis. Some of the northern politicians most vocal about instituting shari’a went on to have conventional careers in the Nigerian context, switching parties when advantageous and showing no Islamist inclinations in, for example, federal cabinet positions. In short, moments of political opportunity have been profoundly different between North Africa and the Sahel, and the actors positioned to move into political openings have also been very different.

### Different Demographics

Demography is not destiny, including for the fates of Islamist movements. Yet demography is one factor in shaping the constituencies available for Islamists and would-be Islamists. Much of the literature has emphasized the middle-class base of some Islamist movements, including the parallel service sectors that the Muslim Brotherhood and others have developed. Historically, moreover, North African Islamists have tended to be strongest in cities. For example, in the 2011 Moroccan parliamentary elections, the Islamist Parti de justice et développement’s strongholds were the country’s largest cities. Another key constituency for Islamists has been university students and other educated youth.

By virtually all of these measures, sub-Saharan Africa looks much different than North Africa. Just comparing Algeria and its neighbor Mali, for example, one finds that the rate of urbanization in the former was estimated at 73% in 2018, versus 42% in the latter; per capita gross domestic product was $4,115 in Algeria, versus $900 in Mali; and tertiary enrollments were 51% in Algeria, versus 6% in Mali. Lower rates of urbanization, per capita GDP, and tertiary enrollments in the Sahel shrink the available constituencies for the kind of urban-based, middle-class, well-educated Islamist movements found in North Africa. Meanwhile, although I do not want to perpetuate stereotypes of predatory Sufi shaykhs exploiting peasants, it might be hypothesized that clerical authority remains stronger in the Sahel partly because the structure of the population is different than in North Africa.

Parts of the Sahel also have very different religious demographics than do the North African countries. Whereas much of both North Africa and the Sahel is virtually 100% Muslim, some of the Sahel countries — Burkina Faso and Chad, and also Nigeria as part of the greater Sahel — are roughly half Muslim. Having a religiously plural society is not necessarily an obstacle to forming Islamist parties: one could imagine scenarios in which Islamists might argue that their message is best poised to mobilize a democratic majority in particular contexts. Nigeria’s ruling All Progressives Congress (APC, in power since 2015) has periodically been accused by some Nigerian Christians of covertly functioning as an Islamist party, given that its primary electoral strength is in the Muslim-majority north and the heavily Muslim southwest, and given that many of its top leaders happen to be Muslims. In the case of the APC, the charge of Islamism has little merit, and Islamist voices have remained relatively marginalized at the national level in delicately balanced countries such as Nigeria and Burkina Faso. The top Muslim politicians in the more religiously diverse Sahelian and West African countries have tended to present themselves as national leaders rather than as the champions of Islam.

Another demographic issue concerns the relatively greater ethnic diversity in the Sahel and Nigeria as compared with North Africa — although as Hisham Aidi and Afifa Ltifi’s papers in this collection make clear: race, ethnicity,
and identity are deeply contested and complicated in North Africa, ostensibly part of an “Arab World.” With that said, only in two Sahelian countries – Niger and Burkina Faso – is the largest ethnic group estimated to represent more than half of the population, and even in those two countries these groups (the Hausa and Mossi, respectively) constitute the barest of majorities. Some religious communities in the Sahel and Nigeria are strongly associated with particular ethnic groups. At the same time, as noted above, Sufi orders, Salafi preaching networks, and even jihadist movements have often crossed ethnic and racial lines in their recruitment in the Sahel and Nigeria. The cross-racial outreach and recruitment of Mauritania’s Tewassoul Party, moreover, provides a model that aspiring Islamist organizers in nearby countries might follow, were it not for the other constraints they face.

Conclusion

If the space available to Islamists in the Sahel and Nigeria has been small, the status quo is not immune to challenge. In 2019, the Malian cleric Mahmoud Dicko – the most prominent Islamist-like figure in the country – founded the “Coordination des mouvements, associations et sympathisants.” Although not branded as Islamist, the organization might enable Dicko to run candidates in parliamentary elections and even run for president himself. On the other hand, the factors discussed above – clerical authority, formally secularist systems, and a relatively small middle class – remain entrenched in the Sahel and Nigeria, suggesting that this region is unlikely to replicate the strength of North Africa’s Islamists any time soon.

Endnotes

1 Roman Loimeier, Muslim Societies in Africa: A Historical Anthropology (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013), Chapter Three.
2 For the purposes of the paper, North Africa includes Sudan as well as Mauritania, a country that is arguably both North African and Sahelian. Because of northern Nigeria’s long-time integration into Sahelian dynamics, I include Nigeria as part of the greater Sahel.
10 I am thinking of figures such as Ibrahim Suleiman of the Centre for Islamic Legal Studies at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.
11 One important treatment of this period is Abdullah al-Arian, Answering the Call: Popular Islamic Activism in Sadat’s Egypt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
12 On these strategic deliberations among young activists, see Shadi Hamid, Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam Is Reshaping the World (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2016), Chapter Four.
14 See, for example, Aaron Rock-Singer, Practicing Islam in Egypt: Print Media and Islamic Revival (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
16 A useful map of the results can be found at https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/medihal-01088388/document.
17 World Bank data.
18 CIA World Factbook data as of March 2020.
Concluding Reflections on Africa and the Middle East

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If ‘Africa’ straddles the vast desert of the Sahara, the Kenyan historian Ali Mazrui once provocatively asked, why should it not also cross the narrow waterway that is the Red Sea? The cultural similarities between the two shores of the Red Sea are such, Mazrui contended, that we should also consider the Arabian Peninsula as part of Africa’s civilization. The authors in this collection are, like Mazrui, predominantly Africanists, and are asking comparably intriguing and expansive questions. Rather than seeking to assimilate one region to another, the essays ask a set of questions that allow us to pose fruitful critique of the traditions of scholarship—and policy paradigms—across both regions.

These concluding reflections are grouped into two sections. First, I will examine areas in which Middle Eastern studies can benefit from African studies, and vice versa, and some of the policy implications that might follow a more productive dialogue. Next, I turn to themes that particularly gain from trans-regional comparative study, including identity issues, political Islam and resistance and revolution.

Cross-Pollinating African and Middle Eastern Studies

This collection, while organized by the Project on Middle East Political Science, consists predominantly of Africanist scholars reaching out across the Sahara and the Red Sea. It is striking that scholars of society and comparative politics in Africa, perhaps on account of their subaltern status within the metropolitan academy, have taken the lead in posing challenges to their colleagues working on the Middle East, rather than the other way around. This, I presume, represents a first rather than a final step in an important scholarly dialogue.

Some of the prevailing paradigms for African political science which had earlier outings across the breadth of the Third World (including the Middle East) have been elaborated to their fullest extent in sub-Saharan Africa. A fine example is neo-patrimonialism, earlier applied to Iran under Mohamed Reza Shah, and is now the default framework for African states. The ethnography of contesting forms of authority in armed conflict—‘warscape’—is similarly of value well beyond its principal case studies south of the Sahara.

For Africanists, the reluctance of scholars of Iraq and (especially) Syria to draw on Africanist scholarship to help understand their wars has been puzzling and occasionally galling. Those studying conflict in Afghanistan and Yemen have been more open to Africanist insight. Is this because of identifiable differences in the nature of Middle Eastern states and conflict dynamics, or is it something else? Similarly, policymakers dealing with Middle Eastern conflicts would have greatly benefited from the hard-won wisdom of the African Union in conflict resolution, which compares favorably with the record of the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council. In the case of Libya in 2011, the African Union’s prescient warnings about the perils of forcible regime change were disregarded by Arab countries and NATO, with calamitous results. Similarly, the African-led approach for dealing with militant jihadism in the 1990s, in which military and policing were subordinate to an overall political strategy, successfully removed the threat posed by al-Qaeda, but those lessons were not learned in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.

There are also frameworks and perspectives developed within Middle Eastern studies that can usefully be imported to African studies. For example, the literature on proxy wars, developed historically around Lebanon and more recently Syria and Libya, is highly relevant to sub-Saharan Africa, where studies of conflict have been handicapped by a preoccupation with internal conflicts with the consequence of underplaying the inter-state dimensions which are far more common than received wisdom permits. Geo-political rivalry, a much-utilized
lens for the study of the Middle East, is similarly neglected with regard to Africa. The attention paid by Middle East scholars to the growing interventionism of Middle Eastern states such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates around the region can help inform Africanist scholars about their interests and growing role across Africa, as suggested here by Federico Donelli, Jean-Baptiste Gallopin, Ezgi Guner and Wolfram Lacher. Perhaps most neglected of all is the role of Israel in Africa, a gap remedied in part by Yotam Gidron’s recent book. Gulf States have been paying keen attention to the imminent energy transition (from oil and gas to renewable energy), albeit using the language of ‘diversification’ in preference to either ‘climate change adjustment’ or ‘energy transition.’ The prospects of rapid and traumatic decarbonization and collapse of oil revenues has, by contrast, scarcely begun to enter the thinking of African oil producers such as Angola, Chad, Nigeria or South Sudan.

Identity Issues across the Regions

Across Africa and the Middle East, discourses and contests around identity are fast-changing. Among the most fascinating changes are where ‘African’ and ‘Arab’ identities are in flux and contestation. The different shades of colonialism across the Sahara, up the Nile Valley and across the Red Sea foreshadow different shades of post-colonial cultural critique. Just as the ‘black Atlantic’ perspective—subaltern and postcolonial—has refashioned our understanding of the flow of social and cultural forms, we anticipate writings on the ‘black Sahara,’ and ‘black Nile’—perhaps even the ‘black Red Sea.’

Morocco, for example, has recently shifted towards affirming the African dimensions of its national identity, both internally (recognizing the Berber language) and internationally (rejoining the African Union and playing an active role in West Africa). As Hisham Aidi explores in this volume, Morocco’s shift towards emphasizing its African character has arisen in part through a subaltern challenge to the Arab nationalist character of the state by indigenous (Amazigh) and African identity movements that gained profile and momentum after the ‘Arab Spring,’ and also by an adept re-positioning of the state in response to changing geo-strategic realities. The government of King Mohamed VI has tried to use both its Sufi traditions and its part-Amazigh identity as soft power elements in building a sphere of influence in lands that were once part of the greater Moroccan empire, and even beyond. This embrace has been cautiously welcomed by its immediate beneficiaries, who are nonetheless conscious of the political motives driving the change. The re-invocation of legacies of empire also compels Moroccans to deal with histories of slavery and contemporary racism in a discomfiting manner that was probably unanticipated by the authorities when they pivoted towards Africa.

Morocco provides illuminating cases of what happens when there is an official opening up of ‘African’ discourse in a hitherto ‘Arab’ nation. Libya, as Wolfram Lacher demonstrates in this collection, shows the reverse—a violently contested political landscape in which the contenders agreed only in their rejection of the ‘African’ embrace of the former leader Muammar Gaddafi, which shaped a post-Gaddafi Libya unwelcoming to sub-Saharan Africans. Tunisia, as Afifa Ltifi shows, has a different pattern again, in which black identities have been sufficiently marginal to be unproblematic within the dominant discourse but have enduring effects on citizens with African origins. These shifts all bring into greater focus the place in Northern Africa of peoples of the Central Sahara, such as Toubou and Tuareg.

When South Sudan achieved its independence in 2011, it is notable that the country chose to retain ‘Sudan’ in its name. This was less an internalization of the label used by an oppressor and more that it was laying claim to an historical heritage. As Noah Salomon suggests in this collection, the term ‘Sudanese’ has historically migrated northwards: originally used for detribalized southern Sudanese and Nuba people in northern Sudan, it gradually took on a pan-Sudanese referent before becoming attached in the post-colonial era to the governing elite. Therefore, South Sudanese can claim to be the ‘original’ Sudanese, and sometimes do. Although the new republic decided to adopt English and indigenous languages as its national
languages—pointedly excluding Arabic—South Sudanese Arabic is in reality the lingua franca of the country, the preferred medium for the president to use when he wants to reach the largest possible national audience.

It is no accident that Sudan leads the introduction to this volume, or that the collection includes more essays about it than any other single country. Sudan is a microcosm and a meeting point of scholarly traditions from Africa and the Middle East, and the comparative political ethnography of Sudan provides exemplars of everything and its opposite. The leaders of the civil uprising of 2019 explicitly called on ‘African’ images and narratives, including most famously the figure of the Nubian queen Kandaka. Non-Arab Sudanese in the peripheries (for example Darfur, the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile) are ambivalent about this, as for them the Nubians and members of the Shaigiya and Ja’aliyyin Arab groups of northern Sudan are grouped in the same category as the elite that has dominated the Sudanese state since independence, marginalizing the others.

The paramilitary leader, General Mohamed ‘Hemedti’ Hamdan Dagolo, has ably played on this ambivalence: as a Darfurian Arab he has portrayed himself as a champion of the marginalized provinces for whom ‘African’ or ‘Arab’ identity is secondary to position in a status hierarchy based on place of origin. In doing this, Hemedti is also seeking to subvert the discourse of ‘African’ autochtones versus ‘Arab’ incomers that has dominated the narrative of the Darfur war. The narrative of indigeneity was initially used in the 1990s by discontented Darfurians in a contextual and hesitant manner, aware that the Darfurian Arabs were also victims of marginalization. The simplified dichotomy was, however, adopted and amplified by the international Save Darfur coalition as a key element in its framing of the Darfur war as genocide perpetrated by ‘Arabs’ against ‘Africans’, and then further utilized by Darfurian leaders to mobilize their constituents.

There are other connections which could be drawn. Because of Eritrea’s recent isolation from the rest of the scholarly world, its linkages up, down and across the Red Sea have not been sufficiently explored. By comparison, the history of Yemenis in Africa—associated with trade rather than empire—is well-documented, though it also calls out for broader comparative study. At far eastern littoral of the Arab region, Oman has a history of engagement in East Africa. The Zanzibari revolution of 1964 curtailed Omani links to the Swahili coast in an abrupt and bloody manner, leading to a protracted mutual estrangement. A substantial minority of Omanis can trace their ancestry to East Africa. Moreover, Oman’s history is seen in a new light in a context where its Gulf neighbors (Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE) as well as Turkey are becoming assertive players across the Red Sea, often acting in a manner that is seen at minimum self-interested and insensitive and at worst downright bullying and exploitative.

Political Islam

Political Islam is also illuminated by the trans-regional analysis. Alex Thurston, in this volume, effectively interrogates the puzzling absence of the Muslim Brothers as a social and political force in sub-Saharan Africa. Part of the answer appears to be the enduring vibrancy of diverse forms of Islam in Sudan and the Sahel, including Sufi and Salafi sects, with the implication that the Muslim Brothers had to position themselves not only with respect to a secular state, but also to other Islamisms. In this context, it also makes sense to invert the question and to ask, why did the particular political, ideological and organizational form of the Muslim Brothers emerge, first in Egypt, and then in other Middle Eastern countries? And should we not see the resonance and resilience of this particular configuration as the puzzle to be explained, rather than its absence elsewhere? Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, from another direction, shows how Mauritania’s approach to violent Islamist challenges has differed in intriguing ways from those of its “Middle Eastern” neighbors.

Resistance and Revolution

The study of civic resistance and non-violent revolution in Africa was a neglected backwater, until the ‘Arab Spring’ posed the question of whether such uprisings had taken place south of the Sahara. As Nisrin El-Amin elegantly demonstrates here, the answer to this question was that
they indeed had—famously in Sudan in 1964 and 1985 and in numerous other forms during independence struggles and democracy movements.14 This tradition has remained alive in both regions, and the 2019 uprisings in Algeria, Iraq and Sudan have shown a remarkable capacity for learning from past shortcomings and disappointments. Particularly significant has been the leading role played by women in the Sudanese revolution, which was, among other things, a powerful signal of a commitment to non-violence. And in turn, a comparative history of democratic efforts across Africa and the Middle East illuminates both the persistence of revolutionary demands and the endless creativity of democratic activists.

Endnotes

The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.