

Ali Fathollah-Nejad¹

THE ‘MIDDLE EAST’: FROM PAST AND PRESENT ATTRIBUTIONS TO A FUTURE REGIONAL IDENTITY?

The south-western part of the Asian continent, an area spanning from the Levant to the Hindu Kush and from the Caucasus to the Arabian Peninsula, is widely – in political, public and even academic discourses alike – referred to as the ‘Near and/or Middle East’. Such theoretic denomination of that geographical space has been subjected to exogenous attributions based upon cultural, political and strategic considerations by colonial and imperial powers. Due to the interest-driven and hence arbitrary nature, its boundaries have constantly been altered in the colonial/imperial mind map. However superficial those outside markers are, they tend to shape the reality of that region – and thus to create a political geography. Through imperial incursions and on-going military presence the prescribed politico-strategic framework has imposed itself onto the region.

Beyond those representations, shared cultural values and historical experiences might provide a basis for an endogenously designed future, potentially able to overcome the partitions the region suffers from on multiple levels. Thus, besides tracing the changing ‘political geographies’, the paper proposes a realistic utopia. It aims to de-colonize the ‘Middle East’ through a critical history of the region and embraces a regionalization process. Thus it pro-actively engages with the challenges posed by the imperially designed past and present.

INTRODUCTION

Quis custodiet ipsos custodies?

— Latin expression for ‘Who will guard the guardians?’

This paper attempts to explore the nature of what can be called the imperial appropriations of an area commonly known as the ‘Middle East’ and their far-reaching consequences, but also delineate projects of emancipation from that ‘take-over’. The theoretical framework is informed by ‘critical geopolitics’ and its conceptual outline for the study of geopolitics as culture (see Ó Tuathail 2004). In contradistinction to classical geopolitics which claims an

¹ Ali Fathollah-Nejad is a political scientist and a PhD candidate in international relations at the Universities of London (School of Oriental and African Studies, SOAS) and Münster (Germany). He has been a Visiting Lecturer in Globalization and Development of the Middle East at the University of Westminster in the spring term 2010. This is a revised version of a paper presented at the first SOAS Research Students’ Society (RSS) conference ‘Regional Studies and Critical Perspectives on Regions’ (5–6 June 2009), School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, 5 June 2009. An overview of his publications is available at <http://fathollah-nejad.com/>.



'objective recording' of 'material realities', the critical variant conceives geopolitics as '*an intersubjective cultural practice*' (Ó Tuathail 2004: 75, emphasis in original). Building upon the Foucauldian premise of the mutually reinforcing relationship between power and knowledge, Gearóid Ó Tuathail and John Agnew (1992: 192) after the end of the Cold War argued that geopolitics

'... should be critically re-conceptualized as a discursive practice by which intellectuals of statecraft 'spatialize' international politics in such a way as to represent a 'world' characterized by particular types of places, peoples and dramas. In our understanding, the study of geopolitics is the study of the spatialization of international politics by core powers and hegemonic states.'

For the latter, the 'Middle East' – or the 'Orient' – has been a playground of almost unparalleled prominence. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said (2003 [1978]: 3) highlighted the interaction of power and knowledge with regard to the discursive construction of what is today called the 'Middle East':

'My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. Moreover, so authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I believe no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism. In brief, because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action.'

This emphasis on the processes through which colonialism (and, later, new shapes of colonialism and imperialism) produced an object known as the Orient and exercise control over the knowledge of it has often been regarded as the main legacy of *Orientalism*. Here, I will argue that the geographic productions and representations of the 'Middle East' are an indispensable prerequisite for the interventionist policies pursued by out-of-area powers such as the United States and some European states in that part of the world, i.e. (South-) West Asia.

I THE PAST (IS THE PRESENT) – HOW COLONIALISM PRODUCED ITS 'ORIENT'

In terms of etymology, vocabulary such as 'Near' or 'Middle East' originates in mid-19th century British naval nomenclature. The term 'Near East' implied early refuelling in Cyprus, 'Middle East' referred to the Yemeni port of Aden and 'Far East' signified the Indian Ocean

and beyond. The term ‘Middle East’ was to be employed more widely in the context of British–Russian imperial rivalry over Central Asia in what was called the ‘Great Game’ (19th until the early 20th centuries). In an article published at the outset of the 20th century, U.S. naval strategist Alfred Mahan, when stressing the strategic centrality of the Persian Gulf along with that of the Suez Canal for British interests, invented the term ‘Middle East’ to designate the area surrounding the Persian Gulf.² Deemed as the crucial area in the attempt to avoid Russian penetration into British-controlled India, the political geography of the ‘Middle East’ was extended according to that strategic goal. As such, the term became generally used in Western imperial discourse and very quickly lost its initially adorned quotation marks. As terms such as ‘Near’ and ‘Middle East’ continue to be used, British imperial perspectives continue to shape contemporary discourse.

In the first two decades of the 20th century the now-familiar lines of the ‘Middle East’ were drawn by a small number of political and financial figures in London. They had only minimal if any knowledge of the region, projected onto it their own ideas and thus created many of its current political features (Adelson 1995). This period of direct European colonial rule was subsequently replaced by pro-consul regimes governing officially independent states. The ‘modern Middle East’ had its beginnings after World War I with the partition of the Ottoman Empire into separate entities. Other defining events in this geo-graphical transformation included the establishment of Israel as a European colonial settler-state in 1948, the departure of European powers, notably Britain and France, and their quasi-replacement by the United States. Institutions were built accordingly: To name only a few, in the late 1930s, the British established the Middle East Command in Cairo, and in 1946 the Middle East Institute was founded in Washington, D.C.

The North American and Western European usage of the term ‘Middle East’ ultimately found its way even into languages of the area itself: While the Arabic equivalent reads الأوسط الشرقي (ash-sharq al-awsat), in Persian the same geographic definition as the term ‘Middle East’ is referred to as خاورمیانه (khāvar miyāneh). The absurdity for any West Asian – Arab, Iranian, or other – to adopt the former ‘colonizer’s perspective’ and call the region (s)he inhabits the ‘Middle East’ could hardly be starker. Waves of nationalism have not succeeded

² ‘The Middle East, if I may adopt a term which I have not seen, will some day need its Malta, as well as its Gibraltar; it does not follow that either will be in the Persian Gulf. Naval force has the quality of mobility which carries with it the privilege of temporary absences; but it needs to find on every scene of operation established bases of refit, of supply, and in case of disaster, of security. The British Navy should have the facility to concentrate in force if occasion arise, about Aden, India, and the Persian Gulf.’ (Alfred Thayer Mahan [1902], ‘The Persian Gulf and International Relations’, *National Review* [London], September. Cited in Adelson 1995: 22–23.)

to effectively challenge the colonisation of minds evidenced by the local use of exocentric imperial terminology. Instead it remains a lasting example of the region's colonial past.³

Terminological uncertainties remain in present-day politics and policy. In European countries the U.S.-centred term '*Middle East*' has gained prominence replacing *Euro*-centric notions of the '*Near East*', e.g. in French, from *Proche Orient* to *Moyen Orient*, and in German from *Naher Osten* or *Vorderer Orient* to *Mittlerer Osten*. But as both terms still co-exist and are often employed in combination, a subliminal assignment has been made. '*Near East*' commonly pertains to the area and the conflicts in Palestine/Israel and the Levant. The '*Middle East*' usually refers to the area between the '*Near East*' and the Indian subcontinent, thus farer away from a European point of reference. While transatlantic countries tend to favour the '*broad*er Middle East', the World Bank employs '*Middle East and North Africa*' (MENA) in which Afghanistan and Pakistan are included. The United Nations use '*West Asia*' (except for documents relating to the Arab–Israeli conflict where '*Middle East*' is employed) and China prefers the geographically neutral notion of '*Southwest Asia*' (see Fig. 1).

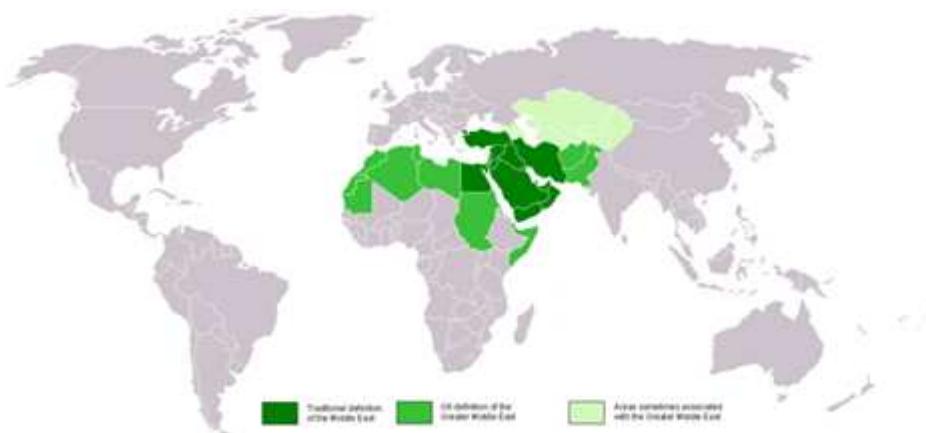


Figure 1 The 'Middle Easts'
(published as 'The Standard and Greater Middle East,' posted at
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:GreaterMiddleEast.gif>)

Perhaps, in a more ironic sense, the only inherently meaningful reading of '*Middle East*' captures its centrality in world affairs, from a civilizational intersection to the global hydrocarbons hub and its central geostrategic location between the European, African and Asian continents.

³ This phenomenon deserves further examination.

II THE PRESENT (IS THE PAST) – HOW IMPERIALISM PRODUCES THE ‘MIDDLE EAST’: ‘THE LAND OF OIL AND EVIL’

‘The problem is that the good lord didn’t see fit
to put oil and gas reserves where there are democratic governments.’

—Dick Cheney, then CEO of Halliburton,
at a 1996 energy conference in New Orleans (cited in Pemberton 2004: 31)

Said (2003 [1978]: 50) identified one of the key characteristics of Orientalism, i.e. the representation of the ‘Orient’, as ‘the confusing amalgam between imperial vagueness and precise detail.’

The ‘dark land of despotism’ ...

Such a blend of vagueness and detail can be witnessed in a speech delivered at the first neo-conservative conference held in Germany in 2008 during which a nuclear weapons preventive strike against Iran was promoted.⁴ One prominent speaker was Thomas von der Osten-Sacken, the founder and director of a German ‘relief and human rights’ NGO mainly active in Northern Iraq. He is considered a leading figure of the so-called ‘*Anti-Deutsche*’ (‘Anti-Germans’). This ideological strand among the German Left considers unconditional support for Israeli policies a consequential lesson of Germany’s hegemonic strive in World War II and its Holocaust crimes.

Von der Osten-Sacken stressed from the outset that in his opinion what he called ‘Islamo-Nazism’ was very similar to Germany’s National-Socialism. ‘Anti-fascism’, he argued, was required to ‘bash these Islam-Nazis, put them in jail, and kill them.’⁵ ‘Anti-fascists,’ he insisted, had to ‘wage war.’ This fight was to be conducted by non-militarily means but should nevertheless be taken seriously. As in the 1930s and ‘40s a universal vision to fight ‘despotism’ was required. Von der Osten-Sacken presented an agenda for ‘democratization’ of the Middle East. This included secularization, ‘rule of law’, a ‘restructuring of the economy,’ ‘federalization’ instead of nationalization (a context in which, he argued, Kurdish efforts for independence ought to be considered), combating ‘gender apartheid,’ and finally fighting both Iran and Syria.

⁴ For detailed discussion of the conference, see Fathollah-Nejad 2008b. The article was first published in German (Fathollah-Nejad 2008a). All translations from German are mine.

⁵ ‘... aufs Maul zu hauen, [sie] einzuknasten und umzubringen.’ (cited in Fathollah-Nejad 2008a)

These programmatic points were strongly reminiscent of the 2004 U.S. initiative for a 'Greater Middle East' (for further discussion see below). They were supplemented by his very particular interpretation of the on-going war in Iraq. The country as well as others in the region, he claimed, had been 'rotten from the core.' As such one only had to 'unscrew the cork,' i.e. remove the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, and inevitably war broke out. Von der Osten-Sacken provided the 'precise detail', in the aforementioned Saidian sense, in his 'vision' of the future of a 'free Middle East': One day, he imagined, he may be able to take an inter-city train from Tel Aviv via Amman and Baghdad to Tehran without any passport check, then go to a Tehrani disco, drink whiskey and later sunbath on the Persian Gulf coast (Fathollah-Nejad 2008a; 2008b).

Comparable ideological representations of the 'Middle East' as the homestead of the 'ultimate evil' and an 'oriental 'Third Reich'⁶ can be found in the writings of David Horowitz,⁷ French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy and German writer Henryk M. Broder. Similar views were expressed by the Dutch writer Leon de Winter. In an interview with Broder (2005) he argued:

'Sometimes there is only the choice between disaster and catastrophe, and then one must remember that the first and foremost task of the state is to guarantee the life and security of its citizens. ... We deal with a new totalitarianism. No, this one is not new, but is only different. After the left-wing fascism of the Soviets, after the right-wing fascism of the Nazis, Islamism is the fascism of the 21st century.' (my translation)

Here, shared strong 'Islamophobic' tendencies blur the political divide between 'Left' and 'Right.' As a result, self-appointed leftists ally themselves with neo-conservatives in the fight for the 'liberation' of the 'Middle East' from 'despotic' conditions.

... awaiting to be 'freed' and 'democratized': Washington's 'Greater Middle East' restructuring offensive

'... The United States has adopted a new policy,
a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East.'
—George W. Bush, U.S. president, 6 November 2003.

'We are always threatening the Middle East with Democracy
But there is another kind of freedom they would like,

⁶ For a discussion of the concept of 'Islam-Fascism', see e.g. Hossein-Zadeh 2006.

⁷ Horowitz is the founder of the 'Islam-Fascism Awareness Week' lecture tour taking place at over hundred U.S. university and college campuses in October 2007.

and that is freedom from us.'

—Robert Fisk, 24 November 2005 (cited in Podur 2005).

In the aftermath of the U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan ('Operation Enduring Freedom' beginning in October 2001) and of Iraq ('Operation Iraqi Freedom' starting in March 2003), Washington announced its vision of a democratized 'broader Middle East' region. In November 2003 U.S. president George W. Bush presented a new 'Forward Strategy of Freedom' (Bush 2003). In April 2004 the project was presented to the G8 under the title 'Greater Middle East Initiative' (GMEI). It proclaimed 'democracy promotion' in the 'Middle East' as the prime goal of Washington's foreign policy agenda. A messianic religious fervour shined through the speech but concrete policy formulations were lacking (Amari 2005: 8–11). The project officially entailed three main corner-stones: the promotion of democracy and 'good governance', the establishment of a 'knowledge society', and the extension of economic potentials through 'liberalization' (*Al-Hayat* 2004).

After the interventionist nature of Washington's vision for a 'new Middle East' became known, a debate emerged about the geographical limitations of the plan: While some considered nearly the whole Muslim world (from 'Marrakesh to Bangladesh'), others limited its scope to the Hindu Kush. Conventionally understood the GMEI referred to a vast, ethnically and religiously diverse region spanning two continents. Everybody, however, agreed that all the oil-rich Southwest-Asian countries and the gas-rich Caspian Sea region formed an integral part of the region in question. Some European countries' reservations about the GMEI's too offensive tone favoured a more 'diplomatic' version entitled 'Partnership for Progress and a Common Future with the Region of the Broader Middle East and North Africa' which was finally adopted by the G8 in June 2004.

The GMEI can be regarded as a culmination of many foreign-policy proposals made by neo-conservative policy circles before and after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Key figures of the neo-conservative 'Project for a New American Century' (PNAC) were associated with the initiative, a fact that generated much criticism. Despite the GMEI's misleading label as 'democratization offensive' it constituted another U.S. government 'Greater Middle East' project, this time in undisguised hegemonic terms: First, it called for the removal of so-called 'rogue states', i.e. governments rejecting U.S. tutelage, the establishment of U.S.-oriented élites and general elections. Second, it suggested the establishment of military bases across the region under the umbrella of the much friendlier labelled 'Partnership for Peace (PfP)' programme. Thirdly, it advocated financial and military cooperation with 'friendly states' (see Perthes 2004; Massarat 2005, Girdner 2005, Candland 2007, Fathollah-Nejad 2007: 19–20).

'A better Middle East': Imperial redrawings of the map

Following major geopolitical transformations, in particular in the wake of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the collapse of the bi-polar global order a decade later, the map of the region was subjected to considerations of transformation in an effort to suit the U.S. superpower's imperial project. For instance, in the late 1970s prominent U.S. establishment figures like Bernard Lewis and Zbigniew Brzezinski brought up similar 're-mapping' ideas of an area they designated as the 'Arc of Crisis' (see Lewis 1992, Blecher 2003, Marshall 2008). That notion should become the *sine qua non* for many contemporary discussions on that part of the world.

In a widely-circulated 2006 article in the *Armed Services Journal*, retired U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Peters revived the approach. There he arbitrarily redrew the boundaries of the 'Middle East' according to his understanding of 'ethnic affinities and religious communalism' in the region (see Fig 2): '[T]he point of this exercise is not to draw maps as we would like them', Peters asserted, 'but as local populations would prefer them.' But instead his proposed new geography of the region bears evidence to a great deal of arrogance coupled with ignorance vis-à-vis the region. This is perfectly illustrated in the proposition that a 'Free Kurdistan, stretching from Diyarbakir through Tabriz, would be the most pro-Western state between Bulgaria and Japan' (Peters 2006). The integration of the largest Iranian-Azeri city, Tabriz, into such a 'free Kurdistan' appears more than amateurish. There is no real vicinity between those two ethnic groups other than that both have been



Figure 2 'Redrawing the Middle East Map
(Authored by Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Peters; published in *Armed Forces Journal*, June 2006, www.armedforcesjournal.com)

classified as 'Iranian people'. Further, as to the alleged 'pro-Westernness' of such an entity, Iranian history demonstrates Tabriz's centrality in revolutionary uprisings against rulers many of whom were considered to serve foreign powers. Nevertheless, 'without such major boundary revisions,' Lieutenant Colonel Peters (2006) asserted, 'we shall never see a more peaceful Middle East.' 'Thinking the unthinkable' for Iran, he predicted the following:

'Iran, a state with madcap boundaries, would lose a great deal of territory to Unified Azerbaijan, Free Kurdistan, the Arab Shia State and Free Baluchistan, but would gain the provinces around Herat in today's Afghanistan – a region with a historical and linguistic affinity for Persia. Iran would, in effect, become an ethnic Persian state again, with the most difficult question being whether or not it should keep the port of Bandar Abbas or surrender it to the Arab Shia State.' (emphases added)

Fulfilling its godfather's imperial designs, this 'Arab Shia State ringing much of the Persian Gulf' should further counterbalance 'Persian Iran'. By such rearrangement, the Persian Gulf's tremendous oil reserves would completely fall into the hands of an imagined new pro-U.S. vassal state – the ethnic character of which the Pentagon chose to call 'Arab'.

Towards the end of the article, resting his neo-colonialist pen, the author himself unmistakably disclosed the true purpose of such an enterprise: '[O]ur men and women in uniform will continue to fight for security from terrorism, for the prospect of democracy and for access to oil supplies in a region that is destined to fight itself' (Peters 2006). Thus, the proposed 'balkanization' of the region was directly linked to U.S. security and energy policy goals – an integral part of the agenda of the 'American Empire'. To be sure, dividing the 'Middle East' into several parts would serve two political ends: (1) According to the maxim of *divide et impera*, exerting power over smaller political entities is easier than towards greater ones. (2) Due to the arbitrary geographical delimitation of the entities disputes seem pre-programmed, which would eventually be best exploited by more powerful, especially militarily more potent, actors like the USA.

In sum, the GMEI's and Peters' 'new Middle East' have to be primarily considered as a hegemonic – indeed, overtly imperialist – project rather than a policy vision with the intention of real democratization (see e.g. Schmid 2005).

Imperial interventions and the politics of empire

Numerous other forms and shapes of imperial designs have been projected onto the region. Among such 'representations' we can identify:

- The Israeli ‘vision of the New Middle East.’ It was coined in the early 1990s by then-Labour party leader Shimon Peres in the wake of U.S. president George H. W. Bush’s proclamation of the ‘New World Order’ constituting a ‘myth of peace’ (see e.g. Yadgar 2006).
- The notion of Israel being the ‘only democracy in the Middle East’ positioned by the U.S. and its European allies, for instance, in defiance of Hamas’s democratic victory in the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections.
- Two of three members of the ‘axis of evil’ – proclaimed by U.S. president George W. Bush in early 2002 – happen to be placed in the region: Iraq and Iran.
- The region is construed around the dichotomy of radical/Shia versus moderate/Sunni denoting anti- versus pro-American postures (see Fig. 3).
- The U.S. administration under Barack Obama has defined Afghanistan and Pakistan to be the ‘new front in the global war on terror’, referring to them as ‘AfPak’ in ‘Washingtonese’.
- The U.S.-driven ‘Arabization’ of the Persian Gulf. Due to space limitations here, only the ‘Persian Gulf dispute’ shall be hinted at.



Figure 3 The 'Shia Crescent'
 (Authored by Dr. M. R. Izady, 2008; posted by the Gulf/2000 Project at Columbia University, New York, at <http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml>)

In the wake of 1960s pan-Arab nationalism the naming of the body of water separating Iran from the Arabian Peninsula, historically known as the ‘Persian Gulf’, became contested among some Arab states, especially the harbouring sheikhdoms. The rivalry has informed a

variety of denominations such as 'Arabian Gulf', 'Arabo-Persian Gulf' or simply 'The Gulf'. After the 1979 Iranian Revolution that replaced the pro-U.S. Tehran regime with an anti-U.S. one, the U.S. and its European allies stimulated those Arab nationalistic sentiments by increasingly furthering the 'Arabized' designations of the gulf. In more recent times, such 'Western' support for the Arab nationalist denomination should be read in the context of efforts to drive a wedge between Arab ruling élites and their Iranian neighbours in the U.S. attempt to form an 'anti-Iran front'.

The United Nations (UN) has repeatedly endorsed the use of the name 'Persian Gulf' stressing the historical origin of that notion (United Nations Secretariat 1994; 1999; United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names 2006; see also Mehr 1997: 12–64, Daryaei 2003). Among those who have not followed the UN-endorsed name are a number of U.S. and British organizations like ARAMCO, British Airways, HarperCollins Publisher, Hyatt Hotel, *National Geographic*, and Google Earth as well as the news outlets Reuters News, the BBC and *The Economist* (Persian Gulf Taskforce 2003). Thus the matter of denoting the body of water has trespassed the realm of rivalling Arab-Persian identity politics and has entered the sphere of outside 're-mappings'.

III Towards a 'Realistic Utopia': Reclaiming the Middle East

However superficial those outside markers might appear, they inform regional and extra-territorial conceptualizations of the region and thus shape its reality. In this sense, they create a *political geography*. Not only has the notion of the 'Near/Middle East' entered Arabic and Persian languages. Through imperial interventions and presence the prescribed politico-strategic framework has been imposed on the region. Hence I argue that the colonial and imperial productions of the 'Middle East', its perpetuation through U.S/EU 'security' discourses, its politico-military 'maintenance' have finally 'subjectified' the Middle East as an insurmountable part of the transatlantic world's imperial *Weltanschauung*.

The thus-produced 'Middle East' has had negative effects on the region's inhabitants in terms of socio-economic development, accountable governance and political stability. Several ways to 'reclaim' the 'Middle East' can be distinguished. Indigenous intellectuals have attempted to 'humanize' the region as many dehumanizing masks have been imposed upon the Middle Eastern face. An instrumental part of that is to compile a critical history of the region, trespassing national boundaries upon which exclusionary nationalist myths can best flourish (see Adib-Moghaddam 2007; Dabashi 2007: ch. 1). Some scholars have dropped the term 'Middle East' for being an imperially foisted designation. Instead they opted

for more neutral terms such as the West or Southwest Asia, thus following the example of their Asian colleagues in India or in China.

Conflicts and perspectives for a stable peace and security structure

On the political level, I like to highlight one project, which despite all odds in the world of imperial *Realpolitik* deserves to be boosted. Beyond those above mentioned representations, the common centuries-long civilizational history provides the basis for an endogenously designed future, potentially able to overcome the partitions the region suffers from. A *realistic utopia* lies in a serious, multi-layered regionalization process.⁸

Analogous to the allegedly adamant law of cultural otherness, it is widely argued in the Western world that the region as such lacks any prospects to reverse the ill-fated tide of conflict and war. But the thesis of a vicious cycle cannot be held against positive developments which bear a real potential for expansion. For instance, in the years after 1997, Iran under the Mohammad Khatami administration engaged in multilateral agreements with states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which had a stabilizing effect on Persian Gulf politics (see Adib-Moghaddam 2006: 85ff). Also in the 1990s, even Saudi-Arabia and Iran – perceived to be the main opponents in the Shia–Sunni divide – embarked upon a *rapprochement* process. Hence one can agree with Adib-Moghaddam (2006: 133) that a ‘communitarian’ idea ‘does not have to remain a remote utopia’. Deriving from his discussion on the ‘cultural genealogy of international politics in the Persian Gulf’, Adib-Moghaddam (2006: 128) emphasize the need to ‘institutionalise a viable security architecture’ since ‘although there was a relatively stable order, there was no stable peace’. The so far prevalent impacts of ‘transnational loyalties and exclusionary identity politics’ ought to be replaced by ‘an inclusive, pluralistic ‘West Asian community’ leading to a commonly accepted ‘security community’ (Adib-Moghaddam 128–29), he argues. Having said that, he adds that ‘[f]rom a regional perspective, the role of the United States was equally destabilising’ (Adib-Moghaddam 2006: 129).

Anoushiravan Ehteshami (2007) extends both the geographical and analytical framework in arguing that ‘old games’ of global geopolitical competition are dominant in shaping contemporary Middle Eastern affairs. Counter to globalization’s corollary of increasing interdependence, quite the opposite can be observed in that region with poor state formation, low inter-regional trade, little foreign and inter-regional investment, and the reassertion of traditional identities. As a response to Adib-Moghaddam’s (2006: 131) call for ‘*change of the anarchic culture of rivalry towards amicable relations*’, the project of a

⁸ For a discussion of a variety of real(istic) utopias, see Gottschlich *et al.* (eds.) 2008.

Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Middle and Near East (CSCMNE) seems to be best equipped.

The conflict structures in the region are indeed complex and interwoven – and therefore need an all-comprehensive framework to be dealt with. We can enumerate territorial disputes, conflicts over the use of trans-border sources of water and energy, cross-border ethno-religious conflicts, the Israel–Palestine and Israel–Lebanon conflicts (Massarrat 2006: 275–79). Of crucial importance is the issue of regional (in-)security that can be traced back to the nuclear weapons monopoly of Israel since the 1960s and to the U.S-led military interventions until the present day (see also *P/J*2010).

Notwithstanding those conflicts, there are indeed manifold regional commonalities which provide significant potentials for a wide range of fields for cooperation. These can be enumerated as follows: (1) the whole region offers much potential for *economic cooperation*, which can consist of a regional division of labour based upon comparative cost advantages, a deepening of cross-border investment and financing projects, the establishment of a regional development bank reducing dependency vis-à-vis multinational financial institutions, as well as the creation of a common economic commission furthering regional economic integration; (2) *resource and environmental protection as well as expansion of renewable sources of energy*; (3) *social projects* for fostering a common identity; (4) building a regional *culture and education* infrastructure based upon the common cultural heritage (Massarrat 2006: 279–81, emphases in original). In the same vein, Adib-Moghaddam (2006: 133) writes:

[...] there is no a priori, god given, natural reason why a region that is embedded in a 'thick' social structure, which has emerged out of several millennia common history and intensive interaction, evidenced relatively few wars, which is economically linked by a powerful cartel [the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries] and which is inhibited by shared religious bonds and cultural idioms, should be condemned to follow a specific narrative that guides it towards conflict and enmity.

Those economic, ecologic, social and cultural cooperative bonds can serve as a solid basis for establishing mutually beneficial ties in a long-term effort towards regional integration. Analogous to the European OSCE process which championed the motto of 'change through rapprochement', the core idea of a CSCMNE can be coined as follows: '*The security of others is also my own security*' is the philosophy of the concept of *Common Security*.' (Massarrat 2006: 281, my translation, emphasis in original) The CSCNME would contribute to an overall integration process of that region which is only poorly integrated (see also Massarrat 2007).

Conclusion

I have argued how the ‘Middle East’ was colonially ‘geo-graphed’, projected in the minds of its ‘designers’, ‘characterized’, and ultimately militarized. Those multi-faceted attributions have contributed to its turbulent history. They have deprived local actors of agency of their own and transformed them into apparently will-less pawns or wilful collaborators of colonial and imperial actors. The ‘dehumanization’ of the region continues in U.S. and European media coverage that affects not only public opinion in these countries but has also repercussions on the region itself. Since it has a legitimizing effect for coercive and even militarist policies. At the same time it paralyzes human compassion and solidarity with victims of war and destruction as well as opposition to these policies (see Hafez 2008, *Peace, Propaganda and the Promised Land* 2004, Dabashi 2008). Thus, these attributions have left deep scars which can only heal if a regional arrangement emerges.

The way scholarship engages with the outlined exogenous conceptualizations of and attribution to the ‘Middle East’ is of pivotal significance. It can either uncritically adopt them and thus reinforce the imposed traits of the ‘Middle Eastern’ landscape or it can contribute to more accurate and emancipated representations. It might aim to think beyond those colonially imposed ‘structures’ and thus help to decolonize the ‘Middle East’ through, e.g., a critical history of the region and the use of the geographically neutral terms proposed by UN bodies.

In the politico-security realm new geopolitical frameworks for the whole region can be designed. But plans for a neo-colonial ‘Greater Middle East’ ought to be rejected. The existential and preliminary need of this globally important region is security accompanied by equal relationships between all states involved. This could pave the way for a self-determined, peaceful, and prosperous co-existence in a cooperative framework. Regional integration would certainly benefit West Asian populations but will face opposition by those benefitting from today’s *status quo*.

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Figures

- Figure 1 The 'Middle Easts,' published as 'The Standard and Greater Middle East,' <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:GreaterMiddleEast.gif>, public domain image.
- Figure 2 Redrawing the Middle East Map (After), map designed by Ralph Peters; published in the *Armed Forces Journal* (AFJ), June 2006, posted at http://web.archive.org/web/20061117135836/www.armedforcesjournal.com/xml/2006/06/images/afj.peters_map_before.JPG, permission sought (12 March 2010), awaiting reply. The editors believe that the reproduction here is covered by 'fair dealing' for criticism and review.
- Figure 3 The 'Shia Crescent,' authored by Dr. M. R. Izady, 2008; posted by the Gulf/2000 Project at Columbia University, New York, at <http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml>, permission granted 13 March 2010.