

STILL DRIPPING WITH IDENTITY POLITICS? BEYOND CLASSIC IDENTITY POLITICS:

THREE WAYS OF DISCUSSING IDENTITY POLITICS IN THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF THE NEW MIDDLE EAST

By Morten Valbjørn, Aarhus University

Identity politics traditionally has figured prominently in the study of the international relations of the Middle East, a region famously described as “dripping with identity politics.”¹ At the same time, it is obvious that the Arab uprisings not only impacted the Middle East, but also scholarship on the region, as reflected in post-2011 debates on whether it is necessary to reject, revise, or revisit past theoretical approaches to and understandings of Middle East politics.² Against this background, it is natural to ask whether the classic discussion about identity politics in (the study of) Middle East international relations is still important, and if so, to what extent has the emergence of some kind of “new Middle East” also paved the way for a “new” kind of identity politics and corresponding need to revise our approaches to the topic. In recent years, these questions have been addressed in a number of ways, spanning the role of identity politics “on the ground” in the Middle East as well as among scholars within academia.³

“*To what extent has the emergence of some kind of “new Middle East” also paved the way for a “new” kind of identity politics and corresponding need to revise our approaches*

1. (RE)EXAMINING THE COMPOSITION OF SUB/SUPRA/TERRITORIAL STATE IDENTITIES

To examine whether the importance of various kinds of identities has changed, scholars have revisited the classic debate about the composition of different

kinds of identities in the Middle East.⁴ One common argument about regional identity has long been that the most distinctive feature of the Middle East state system was “the relative incongruity between state and identity,”⁵ particularly, the relative importance of an Arab versus territorial state identities. Following the Arab uprisings, a new version of this classic debate has evolved.

Initially, the presence of only *Egyptian* flags at Tahrir Square in early 2011 prompted some to question whether state and national identity in the Middle East at last had prevailed, or if the resonance of the Arab uprisings across the “Arab sound chamber” instead showed how Arab politics still carried a distinct Arab dimension.⁶ While this discussion to some extent resembled the classic debate about (the myth of) the end of Arabism, which has been going on since 1967, the conversation soon shifted. Eventually, scholars recognized that a weakening of the Arab dimension of Arab politics did not necessarily have to mean a strengthening of territorial state identities. In line with Lynch’s statement that “a number of deeper trends have come together in recent years to give frightening new power to *identity politics writ large*,”⁷ various kinds of sub- and supra-state identities other than the Arab instead began to receive increasing attention.

Some scholars drew attention to sub-state identities based on tribe or ethnicity, discussing whether this would lead to a remapping of the Middle East.⁸ Others suggested that the defining feature of identity politics in a “new Middle East” would be what Abdo coined the “new sectarianism,” and others have described as a process of “sectarianization.”⁹ While Shia/Sunni sectarianism had been debated in the decade before the Arab uprisings, the terms of the debate had changed. Previous skeptics now acknowledged that sectarianism had become “a real factor in politics,”¹⁰ and instead of discussing whether sectarianism was a “myth or reality,”¹¹ the debate on sectarian politics now largely revolved around questions about why sectarianism had (re)emerged and how it has impacted various dynamics of regional politics.¹² While sectarianism still holds a prominent position on the agenda, recently it has been supplemented with an emerging interest in whether the Middle East—like other parts of the world—is witnessing the rise of some kind of “new nationalism.”¹³ This may mark a new stage in the post-2011 debate on the composition of identities in the Middle East.

Compared with the pre-2011 debates on identity politics in Middle East international relations, this first perspective highlights dimensions of both continuity and change. While non-territorial state identities are still studied, supra-state identities other than Arab receive more attention. This is illustrated in the labelling of current regional rivalries not only as a “new Arab cold war,” an “Arab cold war redux,” or the “third Arab cold war,” but also as a sectarian/Shia–Sunni/Iranian–Saudi/Islamic/Middle Eastern regional cold war.¹⁴

2. GRASPING IDENTITY POLITICS TOGETHER WITH OLD PARTNERS AND NEW FRIENDS

If identity politics is still relevant in the new Middle East but with a different configuration of (supra and sub-state) identities, what are the implications for Middle East international relations? Are our existing

analytical and theoretical approaches still useful or do they need to be revised? Since the Arab uprisings, these questions have been examined in debates that involve old partners as well as new allies.

In the decade before the Arab uprisings, the traditional gap between IR theory and Middle East scholarship had already begun to narrow.¹⁵ In recent years, the IR/Middle East nexus has been further revitalized through various conferences, workshops, and publications on how IR theory can contribute to a better understanding of the international dimension of the Arab uprisings and how insights from the Middle East can enrich broader debates in IR.¹⁶

For instance, some have combined neo-classical realism with Middle East studies’ strong attention to supra-state identities and domestic-international linkages to show how sectarianism is used in geopolitical rivalries among regional powers and through proxies in various domestic theaters.¹⁷ Others have drawn on historical sociology to develop a new identity/ideology framework that refines and nuances our understanding of the ideational drivers of the foreign policies of regional powers.¹⁸ Still others have introduced the Copenhagen School’s theory about securitization to examine the process by which sectarian identities become security issues and sources of conflict.¹⁹

The traditional prominence of analytical eclecticism in Middle East scholarship continues to inform analyses today. Hinnebusch, for instance, has introduced a “multivariate synthetic approach” that draws on neoclassic realism, constructivism, English School theory, IPE and historical sociology to account for international relations in a new Middle East marked by “transnational identity wars and competitive interference.”²⁰ Meanwhile, Lynch combines a constructivist emphasis on ideas, a realist focus on states, and theory on proxy war, networks, civil war, and insurgency to make sense of “the new Arab wars.”²¹

In addition to this revitalization of the IR/Middle East studies nexus, new issues have emerged that leverage other kinds of partnership. One critique posited that the recent sectarianism debate has explained sectarianism away by reducing the phenomenon to factors exterior to sectarian identity politics itself.²² In response, a growing number of Middle East scholars are now exploring whether and how insights from religious and ethnicity studies as well as from the broader IR debate on the role of religion in international relations can be useful analytical tools to study sectarianism in way that avoids the pitfalls of both essentialism and instrumentalism. This relates to another debate partly inspired by Brubaker's distinction between "diacritical" and "normative ordering" dimensions of (religious) identities.²³ Rather than focusing on the classic issue about territorial-versus supra-state identities, there is a growing interest in examining whether different kinds of supra-state identities affect regional politics differently.²⁴ For instance, does it matter that external actors are emphasizing different *kinds* of (supra/sub-state) identities when trying to mobilize local proxies in Syria or Libya respectively? Likewise, does it make a difference if the current regional rivalry is understood in terms of an Arab, sectarian, Islamic, or Middle Eastern regional cold war?

3. HOW SCHOLARLY IDENTITIES "IN HERE" SHAPE HOW WE UNDERSTAND IDENTITY POLITICS "OUT THERE"

While the two previous perspectives focus on the composition of identities in the region and their implications for analyzing regional politics, it is possible to identify a third and more novel and self-reflexive way of discussing identity politics. While Middle East scholars "have always acknowledged the importance of identities for an understanding of the region,"⁷ surprisingly little attention has been directed at whether and how our own political, cultural, and professional identities "in here" might shape scholarship and influence how identities "out there" are approached, theorized, and discussed.

Previously, this issue was mainly confined to the area studies controversy with its distinction between those trained in the disciplines versus area studies.¹⁵ Conversely, questions about geo-cultural epistemologies and the role of the cultural-institutional contexts for knowledge production have received less attention.

These questions however have figured prominently in that part of the broader field of IR theory engaged in the so-called Global/Post-Western IR debate.²⁵ Following Cox's famous remark about how "theory is always for someone and for some purpose...(there) is no such thing as theory in itself divorced from a standpoint in time and space" combined with Hoffmann's statement about how IR to a large extent has been an "American Social Science" and Wæver's suggestion that "IR might be quite different in different places"²⁶, this has not only given rise to an inward-looking critique of (mainstream) IR for being blind to its own limited or bounded perspective. It has also led to more outward-looking explorations into whether international relations are imagined and studied in substantially different ways in other parts of the world and how the "non-West" to a larger extent can become a "producer of knowledge" rather than being only an "object of knowledge."²⁷

According the TRIP (Teaching, Research, and International Policy) Project survey on theory and practice of IR around the world, the Middle East figures as one of the most studied regions "beyond the West." Nevertheless, Middle East scholars (from the region and elsewhere) have been largely absent in the Global/Post-Western IR debate, where focus has been occupied by discussions concerning Chinese, Indian, Latin American or continental European IR. Questions about how Middle East international relations have been studied within the region itself or whether, for instance, American and European Middle East scholars differ in how they approach the region have only rarely been addressed. Partly as an outcome of an Arab uprisings triggered soul-searching among

Middle East scholars, however, there are signs of an emerging interest in examining this dimension of identity politics in (the study of) Middle East international relations. In addition to studies on the geopolitics of knowledge and postcolonial agency, this trend includes scholars studying the “politics of insecurity” viewed from Beirut or how security in the Arab world and Turkey is “differently different.”²⁸ This new mode of analysis has recently been reflected in the manifesto for a “Beirut School of critical security studies.”²⁹ And various workshops have brought together leading figures from Global/Post-Western IR with Middle East scholars, to compare how IR is studied and taught in American, European, and different Middle Eastern contexts, producing self-reflective autobiographies of how private experiences, institutional contexts, geo-cultural locations, disciplinary training, and the encounter of specific influential persons/books have influenced scholars’ intellectual journey.³⁰

A NEW CHAPTER IN AN OLD BOOK

In the context of the 9/11 debate, Halliday once remarked that that “there are two predictable, and nearly always mistaken, responses to any great international upheaval: one is to say that everything has changed; the other is to say that nothing has changed.”³¹ Against this background, he called for

simultaneous attention to both continuities and changes. This advice is similarly relevant in the debate on the role of identity politics in the study of Middle East international relations after the Arab uprisings. While the Middle East may still be “dripping with identity politics,” classic themes have reemerged with a twist, and novel issues have been introduced. The exact composition of different kinds of identities in the region and its implications for regional politics continues to be an important but contested topic, but other supra-state identities than the Arab now receive more attention. The IR/Middle East studies nexus still offers important analytical tools, but at the same time, it is possible to detect a growing interest in how the specific nature of different supra/sub-state identities, and religion in particular, can be taken more seriously in non-essentialist ways. Finally, it is possible to detect a new trend in the debate on identity politics, which redirects focus from identities “out there” to those “in here.” This is reflected in a novel interest in whether scholars’ own identities, shaped not only by their disciplinary training but also their cultural-institutional setting, impact how they study identity politics in the Middle East. In view of these dimensions of both continuity and change, the current post-Arab uprisings debate appears most of all as a new chapter in a long and old book on the role of identity politics in (the study of) Middle East international relations.

¹ S. Telhami and M. Barnett, 'Introduction: Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East', in S. Telhami and M. Barnett (eds.) *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 1-25.

² J. Schwedler, 'Comparative Politics and the Arab Uprisings', *Middle East Law and Governance*, 7 (2015), pp. 141-152; M. Valbjørn, 'Reflections on Self-Reflections - On framing the analytical implications of the Arab uprisings for the study of Arab politics', *Democratization*, 22 (2015), pp. 218-238; Lynch, M., et al. (2017). "Symposium: The Arab Uprisings and International Relations Theory". *PS: Political Science and Politics*, vol. 50, no. 3.

³ For a longer and more elaborated exploration of identity politics in the study of Middle East international relations before and after the Arab uprisings, see M. Valbjørn, 'Studying identity politics in Middle East international relations before and after the Arab uprisings', in R. Hinnebusch and J. Gani

(eds.) *Routledge Handbook on the Middle East State* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

⁴ M. Valbjørn, 'Introduction: The Role of Ideas and Identities in Middle East International Relations', in M. Valbjørn and F. Lawson (eds.) *International Relations of the Middle East (Vol. 3)* (London: Sage, 2015), pp. vii-xxiii.

⁵ R. Hinnebusch, 'The Politics of Identity in the Middle East International Relations', in L. Fawcett (ed.) *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2005), pp. 151-171.

⁶ C. Phillips, 'The Arabism Debate and the Arab Uprisings', *Mediterranean Politics*, 19 (2014), pp. 141-144.

⁷ M. Lynch, 'The Entrepreneurs of Cynical Sectarianism', *POMEPS Studies* (2013), pp. 3-6. Italics added.

⁸ R. Wright, 'Imagining a Remapped Middle East', *New York Times*, September 28 2013

⁹ G. Abdo, *The New Sectarianism : the Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), N. A. Hashemi and D. Postel (eds.), *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2017).

¹⁰ F. G. Gause, 'Sectarianism and the Politics of the New Middle East', in *Brookings Upfront Blog* (2013).

¹¹ M. Maoz, 'The "Shi'i Crescent": Myth and Reality', in *Brookings Inst. - Saban Center Analysis Paper* (2007).

¹² R. Hinnebusch, 'The Sectarian Revolution in the Middle East', *R/evolutions: Global Trends & Regional Issues*, 4 (2016), pp. 120-152; M. Valbjørn and R. Hinnebusch, 'Exploring the Nexus between Sectarianism and Regime Formation in a New Middle East: Theoretical Points of Departure', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 19 (2019).

¹³ G. Rose, 'New Nationalism: What's Inside', *Foreign Affairs*, (2019); M. Rouhi, 'Revolution at 40: IRGC turns to new nationalism to win over Iranian millennials', *al-Monitor*, (2019); S. Diwan, 'Saudi Nationalism Raises Hopes of Greater Shia Inclusion', in *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington* (May 3, 2018) Available at: <http://www.agsiw.org/saudi-nationalism-raises-hopes-greater-inclusion-shias/>; E. Ardemagni, 'Gulf Monarchies' Militarized Nationalism', in *Sada - Analysis on Arab Reform* (February 28, 2019) Available at: <https://camegieendowment.org/sada/78472/>;

J.S. Mitchell and J. Allagui, 'The Gulf Information War: Car Decals, Civic Rituals, and Changing Conceptions of Nationalism', *International Journal of Communication*, 13 (2019), pp. 1368-1388.

¹⁴ F. G. Gause, 'Beyond Sectarianism...'; R. Hinnebusch, 'The Sectarian Revolution...'; C. Ryan, 'The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria', *Middle East Report*, (2012), pp. 28-31; P. Salisbury, 'Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War'', in *Chatham House - Middle East and North Africa Programme* (February 2015); R. Hanau Santini, 'A New Regional Cold War in the Middle East and North Africa: Regional Security Complex Theory Revisited', *The International Spectator*, 52 (2017), pp. 93-111; . M. Stephens, 'The Arab Cold War Redux: the Foreign Policy of the Gulf Cooperation Council States since 2011', in T. Cambanis and M. W. Hanna (eds.) *Arab politics beyond the uprisings : experiments in an era of resurgent authoritarianism* (New York: The Century Foundation Press, 2017), pp. 73-104.

¹⁵ M. Valbjørn, 'Toward a 'Mesopotamian Turn': Disciplinarity and the Study of the International Relations of the Middle East', *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 14 (2004), pp. 47-75.

¹⁶ POMEPS, 'International Relations Theory and a Changing Middle East', in *POMEPS Studies* (2015); Lynch, Marc, et al. . "Symposium..."

¹⁷ F. G. Gause, 'Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War', in *Brookings Doha Center - Analysis Paper* (2014); B. F. Salloukh, 'The Sectarianization of Geopolitics in the Middle East', in N. A. Hashemi and D. Postel (eds.) *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2017), pp. 35-52.

¹⁸ E. Stein, 'Ideological Codependency and Regional Order: Iran, Syria, and the Axis of Refusal', *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 50 (2017), pp. 676-680

¹⁹ H. Malmvig, 'Coming in from the Cold: How we may take sectarian identity politics seriously in the Middle East without playing to the tunes of regional power elites', *POMEPS Studies*, (2015); M. Darwich and T. Fakhoury, 'Casting the Other as an existential threat: The securitisation of sectarianism in the international relations of the Syria crisis', *Global Discourse*, 6 (2016); S. Mabon, 'The End of the Battle for Bahrain and the Securitization of Bahraini Shi'a', *Middle East Journal*, 73 (2019), pp. 29-50

²⁰ R. Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

²¹ M. Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016).

²² Malmvig, 'Coming in...'

²³ R. Brubaker, 'Religious Dimensions of Political Conflict and Violence', *Sociological Theory*, 33 (2015)

²⁴ C. Phillips and M. Valbjørn, 'What is in a Name?: The Role of (Different) Identities in the Multiple Proxy Wars in Syria', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 29 (2018),

²⁵ A. B. Tickner and O. Wæver (eds.), *International Relations Scholarship Around the World* (NY: Routledge, 2009), A. Acharya, 'Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds', *International Studies Quarterly*, 58 (2014), pp. 647-659.

²⁶ R. Cox, 'Social forces, states, and world orders: beyond international relations theory', in R. Cox and J. S. with Timothy (eds.) *Approaches to World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); S. Hoffmann, 'An American Social Science: International Relations', *Daedalus*, 106 (1977), pp. 41-60; O. Wæver, 'The Sociology of a Not So International Discipline: American and European Developments in International Relations', *International Organization*, 52 (1998), pp. 687-727.

²⁷ G. Hellmann and M. Valbjørn, 'Problematizing Global Challenges: Recalibrating the "Inter" in IR-Theory', *International Studies Review*, 19 (2017), pp. 279-282.

²⁸ P. Bilgin, 'Security in the Arab world and Turkey - differently different', in A. B. Tickner and D. Blaney (eds.) *Thinking International Relations Differently* (NY: Routledge, 2012), pp. 27-47.

³³ W. Hazbun, 'The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Challenge of Postcolonial Agency: International Relations, US Policy, and the Arab World', in G. Huggan (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 217-234.

²⁹ S. Abboud et al. (2018). "Towards a Beirut School of critical security studies". *Critical Studies on Security*, vol. 6, no. 3,

³⁰ W. Hazbun & M. Valbjørn (2018). "The Making of IR in the Middle East: Critical Perspectives on Scholarship and Teaching in the Region". *APSA-MENA Newsletter*, no. 5 (Fall); Valbjørn, Morten & Waleed Hazbun (2017). "Scholarly Identities and

The Making of Middle East IR". *APSA-MENA Newsletter*, no. 3 (Fall), pp. 3-6.

³¹ F. Halliday, 'A New Global Configuration', in K. Booth and T. Dunne (eds.) *Worlds in Collision - Terror and the Future of Global Order* (N.Y.: Palgrave, 2002), p. 235.