The Middle Eastern Cold War: Unique Dynamics in a Questionable Regional Framework

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One of the more prominent themes to emerge from this roundtable is the desire to integrate the history of the modern Middle East with broader trends in international history, particularly with regard to the recent emphasis on "decentralizing" and "globalizing" the Cold War narrative.[1] My own research interests are consistent with this approach, as one of the central concerns of my current project is to show how Algeria's revolutionary nationalists defied the regional categories imposed on them from the outside by pursuing overlapping diplomatic initiatives under the rubrics of Maghribi unity, African unity, Arab unity, Afro-Asianism, and Third Worldism. After independence in 1962, the Algerian foreign ministry's main geographical divisions differed significantly from those used by the U.S. State Department—and most history departments' hiring committees—by dividing the world into "the West," "the Socialist Countries," "the Arab World," "Africa," and "Latin America/Asia." These categories were the product of both practical considerations and ideological/identity politics on the part of Algeria's new leaders, and to my mind suggest that the "Middle East" may itself be a particularly arbitrary and misleading geographical framework, even in comparison to other parts of the developing world where European imperialism exerted a heavy cartographical influence.

After all, there was no real Middle Eastern equivalent of Pan-Africanism, given that the closest equivalents, Arab nationalism and Pan-Islamism, did not map all that well onto any of the usual definitions of the region. Islam extended deeply into Africa and Asia, while important states like Iran, Turkey, and Israel identified with neither Arabism nor Arabic. As a consequence, after independence, Algeria was not unusual in putting more of its energies into non-Middle Eastern endeavors. Libya and Egypt, for example, also put great stock in their African identities and trans-Saharan connections. Israel looked westward, while Turkey and Morocco formally floated the idea of joining the European Economic Community/European Union. In practice, during the Cold War the foreign policies of Middle Eastern governments and transnational movements were most often defined in terms like the Mediterranean, Africa, the Maghrib, Europe, the Third World, Persia, Shi'ism, the West, or the Free World. Naturally, any regional category falls apart under scrutiny, but it is still striking how domineering the Middle Eastern frame of American and Soviet geopolitical thinking was with respect to the cognitive maps of the region's inhabitants. Matthew Connelly has argued that an overreliance on the "Cold War lens" can obstruct an accurate view of the decolonizing world, and Cemil Aydin's recent work on Pan-Islamist and Pan-Asian alternatives to the established order in the early 20th century serves to remind that, through their pervasive rivalry, the superpowers imposed a particular way of viewing the world with little local consultation.[2]

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Nevertheless, there is some truth to the hubristic claim in 2002 by a White House aide (reputedly Karl Rove) that the United States was powerful enough to "make its own reality," and the superpower contest in the Middle East did feature some unique dynamics that help shed light on the nature of the Cold War international system as a whole.[3] Above all, from Moscow and Washington's perspective, the distinction and imbalance between ideological and strategic imperatives was unlike that seen practically anywhere else. Thus, while American policymakers often quickly lost patience with unaccommodating radical nationalists elsewhere in the Third World, such as Fidel Castro or Patrice Lumumba, they believed that they could "do business" with like-minded Arab leaders like Jamal ʿAbd al-Nasir and Algeria's Houari Boumedienne.[4] Similarly, the Soviet leadership maintained substantial economic and military ties with regimes that repressed their communists, often brutally, such as Iraq and Egypt. Al-Nasir at least pioneered Arab socialism, and Nikita Khrushchev seems to have held out hope that Algeria under Ahmed Ben Bella (1962–65) would follow the Cuban example of bringing the communists into government. But by 1971 Boumedienne was declaring that "the world moves much too fast for theories . . . [and] this is no longer 1971," while Anwar Sadat's *infitāḥ* liberalization drive signaled Egypt's embrace of the free market.[5]

This is not to say that the ideological Cold War was not extremely consequential in the Middle East; on the contrary, it was precisely because so many of the region's self-styled revolutionaries believed that their Islamic heritage inoculated them from communism that they were able to embrace so much of the *practical* content of Marxist-Leninism without fearing for their "authenticity." As was true elsewhere in the southern hemisphere, the basic thesis behind Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Form of Capitalism* offered Middle Eastern nationalists a succinct and compelling explanation for a century of European domination, but oil and natural gas gave them an unrivalled opportunity to challenge the prevailing global economic paradigm. For this reason, the Third Worldist movement to change the nature of the world economy achieved its zenith with the hydrocarbon nationalizations and OPEC price hikes of the early 1970s, allowing countries like Algeria and Libya to dream of a global vanguard role.[6] Even more important than the economic realm, perhaps, Bolshevism also set a peerless precedent for the crucial tasks of first seizing state power and then expanding it, and few countries in the region were untouched by the communist practices of underground political organization, revolutionary warfare, or monolithic single-party governance. Later generations of religiously motivated revolutionaries could not help but use elements of Marxist-Leninist analysis and methodology in their efforts to grasp the future, even when they reviled the philosophy of communism.

Yet, if the ideological dimensions of the Middle Eastern Cold War suggest that the 20th century belonged principally to Lenin and that we live in his shadow still, the *geopolitical* aspects of the Soviet–U.S. rivalry in this part of the world paradoxically tell the story of steady, relentless American ascendency. At the very least, this story reminds us just how lopsided the contest between the two superpowers had always been, since the Soviets could not match their primary adversary in this strategically vital region even after having set ideological considerations aside and forsaken local communists. In fact, Moscow's moment in the Middle East was so fleeting that some scholars argue that the Cold War actually ended there in the 1970s with Sadat's dramatic reversal of Egypt's

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alignment and Washington's subsequent monopolization of the regional "peacemaker" role, or that the Islamic-driven Iranian Revolution heralded the end of the communist challenge on a global level.[7] By the 1980s, the superpowers colluded in a certain sense by backing Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran, before Mikhail Gorbachev effectively conceded the contest by supporting the American campaign to end the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait.[8]

Given developments since that time, with the United States electing to directly conquer Iraq and Afghanistan and expand its network of military bases and alliances throughout the wider Middle East, it is unsurprising that much recent scholarship has portrayed the United States as steadily taking over the British and French imperial role since 1945. Effectively, the Middle East has now become "Exhibit A" in the case against American imperialism, perhaps pioneering the diminution of the Cold War as a whole with regard to the international history of the 20th century.[9]

NOTES

[1]See also Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Tony Smith, "New Bottles for New Wine: A Pericentric Framework for the Study of the Cold War," *Diplomatic History* 24 (2000): 567–91; and Timothy Mitchell, "The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science," in *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*, ed. David L. Szanton (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2002).

[2]Matthew Connelly, "Taking Off the Cold War Lens: Visions of North–South Conflict during the Algerian War for Independence," *American Historical Review* 105 (2000): 739–69. Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

[3]Ron Suskind, "Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush," *New York Times Magazine*, 17 October 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/17BUSH.html (accessed 10 December 2010).

[4]Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); William B. Quandt, "Can We Do Business With Radical Nationalists? Algeria: Yes," *Foreign Policy* 7 (1972): 108–31.

[5]Boumedienne, quoted in C. L. Sulzberger, "Pragmatic Partnership," *New York Times*, 26 February 1971.

[6]Robert A. Mortimer, *The Third World Coalition in International Politics* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1984), 44–46.

[7]Salim Yaqub, "The Cold War and the Middle East," in *The Cold War in the Third World*, ed. Robert McMahon ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming); Westad, *Global Cold War*, chap. 8, 10, and conclusion. See also Fred Halliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War* (London: Verso, 1983).

[8]Galia Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East: From World War II to Gorbachev* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Yevgeny Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

[9]Rashid Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America's Perilous Path in the Middle East* (Boston: Beacon, 2004); Rashid Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East* (Boston: Beacon, 2009); Juan R. I. Cole, *Engaging the Muslim World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Jeremy Salt, *The Unmaking of the Middle East: A History of Western Disorder in Arab Lands* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2009).

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