Surveying the Revolutionary Arc

GUY LARON
International Relations Department, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel; e-mail: guylaron@mscc.huji.ac.il
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In the last decade, influenced by current economic trends, Cold War historians have made an effort to de-center the story of the Cold War. They have shifted their gaze from the center of the conflict—the face-offs in Europe between the Soviet Union and the United States—and cast an observing eye on the Third World. Unlike many Middle East historians who seek to understand the Middle East in terms of its unique cultures, languages, and religions, Cold War historians treat that area as part of a revolutionary arc that stretched from the jungles of Latin America to the jungles of Vietnam. Rather than emphasizing the region's singularity, they focus on the themes that united guerilla fighters in the West Bank and the Makong Delta as well as leaders from Havana to Damascus: anticolonial and anti-imperial struggles, the yearning for self-definition, and the fight against what Third World revolutionaries perceived as economic exploitation. The sudden interest in what was considered, until recently, the periphery of the Cold War has undoubtedly been fueled by the zeitgeist of a new century in which the so-called peripheral regions are set to become more dominant economically. Southeast and Southwest Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East have a surplus of young skilled workers who are increasingly in demand by the global economy as the growth of world population slows and more prosperous countries in West Europe and North America are graying fast.[1] The Third World consists today of the very regions where most of the economic growth in coming decades will take place. Dependency theory has gone topsy-turvy: leading economists now look with hope at countries such as China, India, Turkey, and Egypt and expect them to become the new engines of global growth.[2] It is not surprising, then, that historians are now taking a stronger interest in the tangled history of the Cold War in the Third World and discovering the agency that these countries always had.[3]

Arne Westad's *The Global Cold War* (2005) was a pathbreaking study that highlighted patterns of resistance to superpower intervention in developing countries. Focusing on the Middle East, Westad notes how the rise of fundamentalist Islam in Afghanistan and Iran in the 1970s posed a challenge to the authority of both the Soviet Union and the United States.[4] Studies by Matthew Connelly and Salim Yaqub underline the surprising autonomy of Middle Eastern countries such as Algeria and Egypt and show that superpower policies were not a one-way street. Arab countries were successful in foiling superpower designs and forcing decision makers in Washington and Paris to rethink their policies. In the late 1950s, al-Nasir's regime in Egypt, for instance, was able to thwart an elaborate scheme hatched by the Eisenhower administration to create an Arab bloc that would stem the tide of Egypt's growing influence in the Arab world. Al-Nasir's skillful diplomacy convinced the U.S. government to jettison the Eisenhower Doctrine altogether. Algerian rebels proved just as resourceful when confronted with the full brunt of French rage. What they could not achieve on the battlefield they were able to get by orchestrating a sophisticated international campaign, eventually gaining the

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independence of Algeria not through armed struggle but rather thanks to a diplomatic revolution. In other words, the leaders of the FLN learned to use for their own ends the tools invented and practiced by European diplomats. Moreover, the Eisenhower administration decided to side with the rebels and not with France, fearing that the reputation of the United States in the Third World would be tarnished by too close an association with a colonial power. It is telling that the American fears of Afro-Asian resentment were greater than the apprehension of NATO's disintegration.[5]

What is notable in all of these studies is the inventive use of American, British, French, East German, Soviet, and even Yugoslav sources to illuminate the behavior of Middle Eastern leaders and movements. With Arab diplomatic archives covering the post World War II era virtually closed, it is small wonder that scholars resort to "side-door" techniques to uncover secrets still locked in Damascus and Cairo through the use of documents in Paris, Washington, and London. Nonetheless, perhaps no other archives have proven as valuable as those in East European countries. Unlike Russian archives that are still stingy with materials, archives in the former satellite states have undergone a full liberalization. They are especially valuable for those interested in the histories of Arab regimes in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, because for a good part of the Cold War officials in those countries felt politically and ideologically closer to the Communist Bloc than the Western Bloc and were therefore more willing to divulge sensitive information to East European diplomats. The latter had also much more access to high officials and local societies than their Western counterparts.[6]

Massimiliano Trentin, by working closely with East German sources and looking into the process of modernization in the Arab world, has explained an advantage the East Germans had over the West Germans when it came to strengthening relations with Egypt, Syria, and Iraq during the 1960s and 1970s. While in the early 1960s West Germany was still a major trade partner of these countries, it could offer little in the way of advice to authoritarian regimes pursuing state-led development. East German advisors proved far more useful in providing counsel on how to devise five-year plans, organize an effective secret police, operate an efficient domestic propaganda machine, and establish a one-party system.[7] Czech and German scholars, again turning the agency structure on its head, have shown how desperate East German and Czechoslovak officials were to use Muammar el Qaddafi's radicalism and oil riches to save their failing finances. Following the 1970s oil shock, East German politicians convinced themselves that Qaddafi would use the mountain of cash that he had amassed in his bank account to fund a billion-dollar East German export offensive in Africa and the Middle East (Qaddafi was willing to play along with that scheme for a short time). Likewise, Czechoslovak officials, always eager to support their cash-starved country by selling arms, hoped that orders from Libya would cover for the loss of the Egyptian market as Anwar Sadat increasingly drifted toward American weapon suppliers from the mid-1970s.[8]

It also goes the other way around. Middle East historians have much to contribute to the field of Cold War studies as they are better equipped methodologically and linguistically to describe the motives and worldviews of Middle Eastern leaders, social groups, and states whose agency has only recently attracted the attention of Cold War historians.[9] Nevertheless, influenced by the growing economic importance of Third World countries, Cold War historians have de-centered the story of the second half of the 20th century by taking a closer look at the periphery of the Cold War, the Middle East included. Viewing

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that region as part of a revolutionary arc that encompassed other developing nations and national liberation movements, they have also worked creatively with non-Arabic sources. Obviously Cold War and Middle East historians have much to contribute to each other. The conversation between these two fields, which starts here thanks to the initiative of the *IJMES* editors, was long overdue and should certainly continue.

NOTES

[1]A series of papers published by Goldman-Sachs analysts during the last decade alerted scholars and policymakers to the coming shift in the economic balance of power. See especially Jim O'Neill, "The World Needs Better Economic BRICs," Goldman-Sachs Economic Research, *Global Economic Paper* no. 66 (2001); and Dominic Wilson and Roopa Purushothaman, "Dreaming with BRICs: The Path to 2050," Goldman–Sachs Economic Research, *Global Economic Papers,* no. 99 (2003).

[2]Ramin Toloui, "'Region of Reverse Command': Consequences of the Industrialized Country Debt Explosion," PIMCO, Emerging Markets Watch, April 2010; "Counting Their Blessings," 2 January 2010, *The Economist*.

[3]For samples of the new "Third Worldist" Cold War historiography, see Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Kathryn C. Statler and Andrew L. Johns, eds., *The Eisenhower Administration, the Third World, and the Globalization of the Cold War* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); and Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniela Spenser, eds., *In from the Cold: Latin America's New Encounter with the Cold War* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).

[4]Westad, *The Global Cold War,* 288–330.

[5]Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). In a manner typical of the new Cold War historiography, Samuel E. Crowl implicitly claims that Algeria was merely following the footsteps of another Third Would country, Indonesia. See his "Indonesia's Diplomatic Revolution: Lining Up for Non-Alignment, 1945–1955," in *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945–1962*, ed. Christopher E. Goscha and Christian F. Ostermann (Washington, D.C., and Stanford, Calif.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2009).

[6]The virtual archive section of the Cold War International History Project website (http://www.cwihp.org) has many valuable documents (translated into English) that were culled from these East European archives, some of which are highly relevant to Middle East historians.

[7]Massimiliano Trentin, "'Tough Negotiations': The Two Germanys in Syria and Iraq, 1963–1974," *Cold War History* 8 (2008): 353–80; idem, "Modernization as State Building: The Two Germanies in Syria, 1963–1972," *Diplomatic History* 33 (2009): 487–505.

[8]Hans-Joachim Döring, "Es geht um unsere Existanz," *Die Politik Der DDR gegenüber der Dritten Welt am Beispiel von Musambik und Äthiopien* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 1999), 57–86; Pter Zídek and Karel Sieber, *Československo a Blízký Východ v letech 1948–1989* (Prague: Ústav mezinárodních vzthů, 2009), 199–217.

[9]See Nathan J. Citino's contribution to this roundtable.

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