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Thoughts from the Provinces

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"Place matters," geographers are fond of saying. And it seems this sentiment is more and more embraced by scholars in other disciplines. The current outpour of writing in Middle East studies that draws on geographic themes goes a long way toward showing how "spatial form can alter the future course of the very histories which have produced it."[1] At the same time, geography in Middle East studies is at risk of being provincialized over the long term, instead of taken seriously as a source for new approaches to studying the region. For the so-called spatial turn to endure, it must be transformed from a vague thematic concern to a more self-conscious analytical perspective, one that reveals the many competing visions and practices that constitute space. More reflection on the purposes, limits, and politics of thinking geographically in research on the Middle East is required.

There is good reason to be optimistic about a rapprochement between geography and Middle East studies. The number of graduate students studying the region in geography departments is slowly rising, while their work increasingly embraces language training as well as ethnographic fieldwork and an embodied feminist perspective. Indeed, as the other contributors to this roundtable describe, geographers are more generally navigating their discipline's distinctive legacies of colonialism, environmental determinism, regional studies (chorology), and the quantitative revolution, which shaped its current state. Likewise, Middle East studies—and area studies writ large—is hardly the Cold War caricature that geographers sometimes envision. As in many disciplines today, scholars in Middle East studies reflect increasingly on the institutional and financial infrastructures of their own field and have critiqued core concepts, with a particular focus on region constructs. And although Middle East studies skews heavily toward the discipline of history (with significant contributions from political science and anthropology), analytical perspectives range far and wide.

The spatial turn in Middle East studies thus leaves room for engagement across disciplinary lines, but it is often pursued on the terms of those at the center of the field. The focus on the *fin de siècle* period, as well as the adoption of the global or transnational as a scalar anchor (e.g., the oceanic turn, on which *IJMES* recently published a roundtable[2]), reflects currents in history more than a renewed interest in debates and insights from geography. To consider how we might bring these more consciously to bear on contemporary issues in the region, I will reflect on my ongoing field research on the Syrian opposition in exile. For the last two years, I have been conducting interviews with opposition actors in Gaziantep, Turkey and Amman, Jordan, part of a broader effort to conceive political encounter in Syria "beyond ruling coalitions" and formal institutions;[3] specifically, my dissertation project introduces a geographic dimension by foregrounding exile and displacement as central to the dynamics of this encounter, exploring the spaces of interaction and practices of mobility that sustain opposition to the Asad regime.

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To shed a more geographic light on Middle East studies means that "space" must be troubled as a straightforward, prepolitical dimension of social life. Rather than viewing distance and distributions as a passive context in need of cartographic representation, geographers today study the processes shaping the production of space as constitutive of social life, for which they draw on a variety of heuristics. In this view, space is produced relationally through processes of encounter and contestation over the terms of shared fate in a spatial division of labor. Thinking of all places as crossroads for such encounters thus shifts discussion from manifestly "spatial stuff" (borders, migration routes, the built environment) to a more spatial view of social process and political order (practices of territoriality, mobilities, urbanization, and the politics of place). It destabilizes conceptual categories such as ethnicity, religion, and the nation-state, but also opens up a language for exploring how these categories are worked into situated narratives of shared fate.

Today, for instance, Syria's conflict of six years is dominated by a master cleavage pitting a sectarian regime against a civil opposition.[4] But the category of "sect" is entangled in and formed through particular relations of encounter. Early in the Syrian uprising, Homs became a symbolic capital of sorts for the revolutionary movement after it witnessed some of the largest demonstrations and later the fiercest clashes between rebels and regime security forces. Much of this took place in neighborhoods of the old city, where economic prospects had declined since the 1980s to the relative benefit of recent ʿAlawite migrants from the countryside, who settled in newer neighborhoods of the city. This characterization of the Asad regime as "ʿAlawite" has not prevented thousands of Sunnis from north and central Syria from seeking shelter and economic opportunity in coastal Tartous, a regime stronghold and bastion of the ʿAlawite community in Syria. Conceiving of "sectarianism" as a category with national political coherence thus simplifies how particular spatial relationships constitute the meaning and practices through which sectarian identity becomes salient.

Importantly, these relationships are not coterminous with state territory. Whatever its Weberian pretentions, state power is unevenly realized across space, and is perhaps better understood as a situated state effect, a performance of reach that articulates with, rather than encompasses, social relations.[5] Indeed, the "billiard ball" model of isomorphic state territories belies both the historically varying sovereignty regimes adopted by states, and the plethora of actors constructing counter-geographies whose political effects are very real. Recent work on the transnational politics of Syria and Lebanon describes networks of political mobilization that have transected state boundaries and spanned great distances.[6] Some of these networks constituted spaces for the circulation of radical political thought in ways that challenged state-building processes in the late Ottoman Levant. A few decades later, similar networks developed in the diaspora—this time dedicated to strengthening an autonomous state-building process in post-1919 Syria. Whether the goal is to challenge or augment a state project, then, it is important to seek out the political relationships that stretch beyond the neat confines of state territory.

Likewise, Syria's amorphous opposition in exile stretches the spaces of Syrian politics beyond territorial Syria. The arrival of hundreds of thousands of Syrians, as well as hundreds of international actors, to Gaziantep and Amman[7] has positioned these peripheral cities as central to the Syrian opposition's spatial division of labor. The "Anatolian tiger" of Gaziantep has become a hub for civil society organizations, logistics

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firms, institutions of local governance, aid workers, and diplomats, with the city's tiny Oğuzeli Airport now offering occasional flights to Beirut, Erbil, and Amman. Apart from reshaping local politics in Gaziantep, the resources and practices centered on the city—trainings, field visits, aid convoys, and so on—help constitute a set of "liberated territories" inside Syria. State territory thus shapes, but does not contain, the politics of the Syrian opposition.

Thinking geographically also means not limiting one's view to particular scales (the global) or modalities of social experience (the transnational). Scalar imaginaries of this sort, with their implicit hierarchy of relations, cloud more empirical approaches to teasing out how the global and local are interwoven in specific sites, the new possibilities they enable, and the forms of contestation they provoke.

Indeed, though the Syrian opposition comprises many intersecting transnational networks, these are important to, but not definitive of, its nature. As many Syrian activists point out, the opposition is highly localized. It cannot be everywhere, and thus must take place in specific locales. Its cross-border practices are mediated by the distinct constellation of local institutions, state policies, social forces, and historical narratives of the sites from which they act. As early as 2012, the Turkish provincial city of Antakya hosted a major hub for opposition actors, including activists, civil society organizations, and an early military operations center for coordinating among militia brigades and foreign sources of funding.[8] The Turkish government facilitated administrative procedures, and the location provided easy access to both Idleb and Aleppo provinces by way of the official Bab al-Hawa border crossing. With time, however, tensions arose between the opposition actors who had settled in the city and local Turks of Arab extraction, whom many claim support the Asad regime out of sectarian solidarity. Many organizations voluntarily relocated to Gaziantep, where safety as well as medical and logistical services were more available. To reach Syria, and thus realize their transnational linkages, these organizations accordingly engaged in a form of politics predicated not on challenging or transcending state sovereignty, but on overcoming place-specific challenges. Fixating on the label of the transnational is to both confuse ends (political change in Syria) with means (transnational governance) and to erase key variations that characterize the counter-geography of the Syrian opposition.

Perhaps most importantly, a geographical perspective need not confine its gaze to particular locales or sites. Just as every place has a history, every history is shaped by where it takes place. Just like port cities and hubs of pilgrimage, sleepy provincial towns are characterized by histories of interaction. Centers and peripheries alike are entangled in the structures of late modern capitalism, the interstate system, and environmental change—albeit on differing terms. One of the more fascinating articles testifying to this is William Cronon's "Kennecott Journey" about a deserted copper boom town in Alaska. In the essay, Cronon (a geographer as well as historian) masterfully highlights the erratic and evolving relations that constitute life in the remote mining settlement of Kennecott. Though far on the periphery, this settlement was central to the global copper industry for several decades, a legacy whose traces shape the very landscape of the town.

Likewise, the spaces of Syrian opposition politics go beyond the simple dualism of center and periphery. These spaces are multiple, overlapping, and constantly evolving. They neither correspond to state boundaries nor necessarily challenge them in the way people have come to associate with groups such as Daʿish. Wartime dynamics

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reveal enduring, but also emergent, forms of *manātiqiyya* (regionalism), inspiring a Carnegie Research conference in Beirut to explore the regime's practices of local and national control.[9] Indeed, "anomalous spaces" of geopolitics are cropping up in Idleb and Jarablus, sites where sovereignty is shared and contested among militias, transnational activists, local councils, and, in the case of Jarablus, the Turkish military.[10] Practices of mobility—and, more specifically, forced migration—tie this evolving constellation of forces into the hubs in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. At the same time, this inside/outside divide has become an important narrative device in the contest for legitimacy within opposition networks. To this end, in July 2016 the Syrian Interim Government (part of the Syrian opposition coalition, or Etilaf) shifted all of its ministries from the former headquarters in Gaziantep to the liberated territories—this after five years of popular anger at mismanagement of funds and needless bureaucracy. The list of topics goes on.

Geography offers no magic explanation for the forces that are transforming the political landscape of Syria. But foregrounding their geographic dimensions draws attention to new actors, relationships, and contexts for political activity that have emerged since 2011. Thinking in terms of encounter, mobility, and reach thus offers an idiom for moving beyond discussions of formal institutions or coalitions with static interests. It also means we can conceive of these as constantly evolving, situated relationships rather than a few exceptional moments in history. In this regard, geography enriches the analytical vocabulary and empirical direction of Middle East studies, shifting space from the periphery of the discipline to the core of its concerns.

NOTES

[1]Doreen Massey, "Politics and Space/Time," in *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 269.

[2]"Roundtable: View from the Seas: The Middle East and North Africa Unbounded," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 48 (2016): 743–66.

[3]Arang Keshavarzian, "Analyzing Authoritarianism in an Age of Uprisings," *Arab Studies Journal* 22 (2014): 342–57.

[4]Reinoud Leenders, "Master Frames of the Syrian Conflict," *From Mobilization to Counter-Revolution,* POMEPS Studies 20, 26 July 2016, accessed 4 January 2017, https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/POMEPS_Studies_20_Mobilization_Web-REV.pdf, 63–69. See also Stathis Kalyvas, "The Ontology of 'Political Violence': Action and Identity in Civil Wars," *Perspectives on Politics* 1 (2003): 475–94.

[5]Joe Painter, "Prosaic Geographies of Stateness," *Political Geography* 25 (2006): 752–74.

[6]Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860–1914* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2010); Reem Bailony, "Transnational Rebellion: The Syria Revolt of 1925–1927" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2015).

[7]Importantly, Amman has long been a regional headquarters for humanitarian organizations in the Middle East. The Syrian crisis has intensified this role.

[8]Razzan Shalab al-Sham, cofounder of the Syrian Emergency Task Force, Skype interview with the author, 28 April 2016.

[9]"Syria: From Central Power to Local Authorities," conference organized by Malik al-Abdeh, Noah Bonsey, Maria Fantappie, Peter Harling, Sam Heller, Ammar Kahf, Kheder Khaddour, and Maya Yahya, Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut, Lebanon, 2 December 2016.

[10]Fiona McConnell, "The Fallacy and the Promise of the Territorial Trap: Sovereign Articulations of Geopolitical Anomalies," *Geopolitics* 15 (2010): 762–68.

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