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IDEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND THEORETICAL
PARTIALITY IN MIDDLE EAST STUDIES:
THE BASES FOR TEACHINGS OF HISTORY IN AREA STUDIES

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Abstract: This study deals basically with a critique of ideological and policy-oriented approaches in area studies, and problems of political interventions and ideological inclinations in the Middle Eastern studies. Politics and ideology not only makes the area more complex to understand, since they aim to meet the needs of the governments, but also prevents the academic studies to develop independently. The study aims at putting forth a historical analysis required both to take the issues of the Middle East studies within their unique socio-economic settings, and to regard them from the historical point of view. Central for the paper is to propose bases for the development of area studies depending on the interactions of regional histories and politics with each other. The study argues that Middle East studies in particular and area studies in general would produce reasonable knowledge and add up to the literature within a working relationship with world history, and in a comparative and multi-dimensional manner.

Key Words: Middle East Studies, power, politics, ideology, comparative studies, local, regional relations

Introduction

The study of the Middle East has generally been considered, following the Second World War, as a part of the extension of the rivalry among the Great Powers for world hegemony. The studies were done not for the understanding of Middle East societies and their relations with an analytical examination, but for the formation of policies of the states that wanted to establish their influences in the region. In such studies, the Middle East was not taken as a unit of analysis in itself in the study of international relations, but was by and large taken either as an arena for struggle or independent and insignificant actors, the roles of which were negligible in the working of the world system. Middle East studies have also been profoundly affected in the last couple of decades by several approaches depending on the course of the study of the field itself, and on various walks of the students of the area. The reason for this was not the increase of the importance of the region, the Middle East was already so important an area historically for religious, cultural and economic/commercial reasons; however, it gradually became one of the variables of change particularly after the end of the Cold War. While the political issues were previously regarded as matters evaluated around the Arab-Israeli conflict, and wars, civil wars, crises, occupations, population movements, state policies in the whole Arab world were always considered in terms of their affects on the Great Power politics, the approaches and attitudes of the students of the Middle East started to change from seeing the region as a dependent unit on world politics to studying its national, regional and international issues as determined by internal developments.¹

There were of course profound work by the students of economic development and/or social change in individual Middle Eastern countries, but these were mainly works on such internal factors as class, bureaucracy, interest groups, and the state determining the development stages as if there were ever such a uni-linear path to development and modernization. The attempts to analyze the “modernization” in Middle Eastern history with the terminology of the development of the West preempted the works on the historical-social material foundations of Middle Eastern societies, the analysis of which, I believe, might have been much more teaching than the attempts to put social and historical distinctiveness of the area into narrow compartments. And last but not least, the contemporary theoretical approaches, alternative paradigms, “ontological” discussions and prescriptive schemes covered much of Middle East studies in general, and some of the works on Islam in particular. Politics, society and economics of the Middle East were analyzed by the conceptual frames of behaviouralism, structuralism,

constructivism, post-modernity, globalization, democratization and the like, but did not make any help to understand the complexities of the area, and even made the history, religion and culture of the Middle East more unintelligible by the concepts of the theories produced from without.

This study attempts to discuss the non-explanatory nature of ideological, policy-oriented approaches and theoretical presuppositions bound to stay in the air for Middle East studies.² The study will first try to put forward the weakness of political and ideological approaches in Middle East Studies, and their implications for the politicization of the field, which contributes to the degradation of Middle East studies in academic circles, and diminishing of the value of area studies in general. Then the study will attempt to propose a frame for the development of cooperation and collaboration within and between area studies and traditional disciplines, making a due stress on history and historical research.

Ideological Tendencies and Political Considerations in Middle East Studies

The Middle East Studies elsewhere in the world, but especially in the US, remained under the influence of value-intensive ideological approaches since the WW II. The dominant paradigm of political science in Middle East institutes and centers to analyze the Third World in the 1950s and 1960s was the modernization theory, which, under the political climate of the Cold War, was used to attract Middle Eastern economies and societies to take side with the West. The modernization theory emerged from an idea of the existence (and requirement) of universal progress in human societies, but there are historically inherently acquired differences among various regions of the world. The inherent differences might be in the sphere of politics, economics, culture and civilization, religion, and individual and social mentality, and it is “the white man’s burden” to civilize and modernize the societies essentially different from the West. It is clear from this perspective that the modernization theory has its origins in the Orientalist thought, which was thought to bring economic development with industrialization, modern patterns of behavior with urbanization, democratization with political participation, secularization with modernity and integration of these “less developed” societies into the world culture.³ Since culture was believed to be global, and modernity was universal in the modernization theory; history and social sciences, especially political science, anthropology and sociology must have studied cultures to compare, measure and generalize the level of differences between modern and traditional societies.

Social sciences and scholars working with the modernity and developmentalist paradigms, therefore, regarded “the other societies” as the mirror image of their own, while claiming in their respective

territorial domains and professionalizing in their “area” of research. However, as Timothy Mitchell put it, in the age of nationalism, the collapse of empires and de-colonization, social knowledge increasingly came under the influence of nationalization, and social sciences started to consider the other states and societies as parts of a global system, which was established already homogeneous nation-states: “As professional, political, and academic knowledge came to see the world as a series of nation-states, it also came to imagine it to consist of a series of discrete national economies, societies, cultures, and histories.”⁴ Since the nation-state became the unit of analysis of politics and economics, social science disciplines also studied nationalities, ethnicities, culture, and communities through national lenses. The scholarship in area studies considered their unit of analysis as the nation-state, and this was especially true for the Middle East, the societies of which were coping with the nation-building and state-making experiences particularly after the decolonization process after the 1960s. Yet, the analysis of the “nation-states” in the Middle East helped draw the boundaries of academic studies and field works with presumably distinct nationalities and nation-states, settling specific geography not only for the Middle East nations”, but also for area studies.

But, it was soon understood by the academia that specific regions, areas of research, the fields in which the work is done are not as homogeneous units as social science disciplines hitherto imagined. The state and nation in the Middle East were understood to have already been constructed from without in the first half of the twentieth century, not from within through national social processes and structures as developed in Western societies. They came into existence not as a result of increase in the authoritative power of the political institutions and the differentiation of institutions and functions, but as a result of the forces, basically of colonial powers, external to the dynamics of Middle Eastern societies. The state and nation in the Middle East were directly influenced and even founded by the colonial powers and became increasingly dependent on outside forces. The state was not based solely on internal forces, and classes, and the conflict and accommodation among social forces, thus the bureaucracy did not feel any need to answer societal demands. Classes also were not the products of internal socio-economic developments, but the make of outside powers for their own requirements. The central power was not as effective as those of the Western states, it was patriarchal, but was also segmented, not representing the whole society, but in alliance with the local forces and interests depending on the manipulation of one segment of society against another. The political authority covered all territory as was perfectly exemplified by nation-wide taxation; however, the authoritative power of the state was limited only with the urban areas, remaining an outside force even to the closest rural regions of the country. What was done by

the state in Middle Eastern societies in the 1950s was to transform state institutions in order to make them fit the personal requirements of the day, and more than that to make it suit to the needs of the power constellations formed after the independence.

The patterns of the formation of the nation-state in the Middle East happened to emerge, therefore, under different conditions and in different time periods than the West. Consequently, the social science disciplines which were arranged to analyze Western modes and models were bound to be, in large part, unfit to properly analyze Middle Eastern developments. They remained largely in failure not only in the analysis of the Middle East societies and institutions other than answering the needs of the Cold War requirements, but also in demarcating the borders of the area research and the boundaries of a well-established scholarship in the area studies. Middle East politics has such a nature that, as James A. Bill rightly points out, “Middle Eastern political processes defy observation, discourage generalization, and resist explanation”⁵.

The good will of the paradigm of modernity and its offshoots continued to make the day until the appearance of globalization and the democratization approach especially after the thunderous collapse of the authoritarian rules in Eastern and Central Europe. The promising titles of “transition to democracy, power of civil society and multiculturalism in Eastern Europe” decorated the shiny covers of academic publications; however democratization somehow bypassed the Middle East at the turn of the century and neglected internal changes in the Arab world.⁶ Few attempts were made to analyze the possibilities and obstacles of democratization in the Arab Middle East, which emphasized the role of the state and elites in political transformation and regime changes.⁷ Though, with the revolutionary changes in this world in the last decades, came the studies of Middle East democratization with a strong emphasis on the role of civil society, especially the role of Islam and Islamic movements.⁸ Nevertheless, the works of Middle East scholars did not focus much on social change and the process of democratization in Middle Eastern countries, but on political relations, and this was just the result of negligence, if not of ideological preference. The neglect is partly due to the nature of civil society and its ambiguous meanings, and the difficulty to study it in the Middle East, since the term civil society sometimes covers all civic formations that the citizens can enjoy under the protective nature of the state, sometimes all private institutions which remained outside the political sphere, and sometimes all the institutions that the ruling class use to control society to further its ideological hegemony. The reluctance of the use of the term in the Middle East might be, as Bellin suggests, that the term represents “a bulwark of freedom and anti-totalitarianism to the survivors of communism’s fall in Eastern Europe while signifying the spearhead of Western imperialism to those suspicious of efforts to ‘export democracy’ to the developing world”.⁹ However, as Bellin recognizes, the absence of civil society in the Middle East

is not just because of conceptual ambiguity, but the inhospitable nature of the political system towards a civic culture as well. The state in the Middle East is utterly hegemonic over society, which is divided across familial, tribal, religious, and cultural cleavages. Although some students of the Middle East consider religious groups, sects and orders as the premature formations of civil society, the genuine civic organizations organized freely by responsible citizen groups around common issues for civic purposes did not find enough room to develop in the Middle East with some exceptions in Turkey, Israel, Tunisia and Egypt.

The state and civil society organizations are, in most instances, not separable from each other in the Middle East. The boundaries of civil society is drawn by the state, their framework of operation is decided in accordance with the objectives of the political sphere, and the rules and regulations for the civic sphere are done by the state. The Middle Eastern state supports some civil society organizations, the aims of which are in accordance with those of the projects of the state such as modernization, while it foils the operation of some civic organization, whose objectives, the political authorities believe, are not in congruence with those of the state. As Wickham stresses via Sami Zubaida that civil society in the Middle East remains within the governmental sphere, which provides the civil society organizations with legally mandated rights, protection, and autonomy.¹⁰ This was so at least until the recent Arab youth movements in the liberation squares in Tunis, Cairo, Bahrain and elsewhere, where the civil initiative demonstrated against the authoritarian rules of the Arab states, and started a process of change in their political systems. With all of the independent arenas of political and social expressions closed within the authoritarian political systems in the Middle East, the people look for and find the ways of communicating with the likewise community members in a language that they know best: religion and its political institutions. However, as the civil initiative could not get organized outside the state, religio-political organizations, well-established in the lack of any other kind of opposition, usurped what was done by the civil society groups in these countries.¹¹

A brief glance displays the not only weakness of civic culture in the Middle East, but also the limited number of works on the development of civil society. Much scholarly work the basic aim of which was to conceptualize civic culture in the 1970s did not even come to convincing definitions of civility. But one point in their analysis of the Middle Eastern political culture was clear: the Middle East, as an undifferentiated unit, failed to develop a civic political culture due basically to the existence of distrust towards the government instead of trust, the coercive nature of the state against individual liberty and freedom, the hierarchical order of the political system instead of equality, and the particularistic character of society and the lack of national loyalty.¹² Although the definition of civic culture almost completely changed throughout years following the publications of the developmentalist paradigm of the 1970s, one thing remained unchanged in

the Middle East: the development of a political (civic) culture requires the availability of secularization, which is the greatest desideratum of the most of the nations of the Middle East. Also studying civil societies, grassroots activities, and the movements from below may have policy-objectives and policy-implications. Not all, but some non-governmental organizations became the political tools of great power politics, which employed them to undermine the regime legitimacy and authoritative power of the state in the Middle East.

There is an ongoing debate among the Middle East scholars and within the Islamic activist circles regarding the nature of political Islamic groups and organizations. There is abundance of publication on political Islam; however, one should be very careful for the attempts at theorizing Islam and studying Islamic history and philosophy as a religion in general, and Islamic movements as political activities in particular. From the start of the Islamic revivalism roughly in the 1970's, many paradigms have been produced to understand the nature of Islamic fundamentalism and social structures that gave way to Islamic opposition to social and political order. The theoretical formulations are based basically on identity questions as a result of rapid urbanization, unemployment, poverty, and so on, the eroding legitimacy of Middle Eastern regimes due mainly to economic crisis and under-representation and non-participation of the people at the political level, and the nature of the religion, Islam in providing theoretical bases for politics. There are also approaches to analyze the social and popular characteristics of Islamic movements to the extent that religious orders, various Islamic leadership patterns, socio-religious organizations were conceptualized within the civil society and democratization paradigms. However, in the approaches that look for civil society in Islamic movements, one thing goes unnoticed, which is the fact that the concept of "civil society" itself implies voluntary and non-profit activities outside the borders of not only the political, but also religious establishment. Therefore, the search of civic engagement in political-religious organizations is constantly pumping a dry well.

There also works that conceptualize and theorize Middle Eastern societies, politics and religion, and the attempts at generalizations and homogenization of Islam, however, these studies are bound to remain ahistorical, they do not take into account the change and the dynamics of change in Middle Eastern societies throughout their "Islamic" history. Also how feasible and accurate is to study the Middle East only through Islamic history is also debatable. But, in the Middle East humanities, Islam is one of the most politicized and hot research topics by its own nature.

Area studies in general, and Middle East Studies in particular are highly politicized not only because of the nature of the fields, but also of the outside intervention. The politicization of the Middle East studies first create obstacles in front of the formation of a legitimate field of area study, and second lead the political, economic, cultural and any kind of

researches done in the field to be policy-oriented. The intervention of politics into the academic work has a variety of aspects, positive and negative. One main problem of the day is the intervention of the US in the internal affairs of Middle Eastern states, and its determinative power over the academia of the field. However, so much intervention brings a great deal of reaction directed towards American lives and interests in the region. A chain of events starting from the 1953 CIA intervention in Iran and the 1979 hostage crisis, to the 1991 and 2003 operations in Iraq created both a reaction to American power in the region and works the basic aim of which was to justify the US activities in the Middle East.¹³ While the regional reaction posed itself as the attacks against the US and its interests in an age of globalization of terrorism, the most significant of which was 9/11, the new periodicals, new institutions and new scholarly work on Islam, Middle East and terrorism started to occupy the agenda. Part of this literature was scholarly work on the American war on terrorism, but some were the work that ideologically justified this war. The mixture of politics and academics might have produced good academic works, i.e. on the politics of tactics, and on the history and causes of terrorism, but it ended up with the degradation of the academic nature of area studies. The embedment of some anthropologists into the US troops in Afghanistan for “cultural” aims is still fresh in academic minds.

The negative effects of political manipulation give harm to scientific works in area studies, especially in the Middle East, which is already so politically defined a region. The one and the most important question is how the Middle East Studies would be defined, and where they would take place, in the politics and/or academics? Years passed since the establishment of Middle East Institute in 1946 and many others¹⁴ and scholars coped in blood, sweat and tears with providing its academic status within the American social sciences. That there is still a controversy in the field on the issue whether area studies should be supported by the governments is academically meaningless at best. The idea of learning about other societies and having their knowledge comparable to those collected from the West would be used and politically supported to affect the development of Middle Eastern societies in accordance with the US interests is not plausible.¹⁵ Financial support is necessary for any kind of institute, but instead of political control, politics-free funding is needed for the cultural, historical, political specifics of Middle Eastern societies. The support for new field researches and learning languages is also for the benefit of both the development of social sciences in general, and the development of new institutions in area studies. Governmental influences can only be diminished in this way, and area studies would find a way to develop academic and scientific work.

The Arab-Israeli conflict used to pose a question of politicization in Middle East Studies until a decade ago. The research in politics, security and conflict in this field had subjective views; the Arab, American and

Israeli scholars, and others according to their inclination had biases over the issues. The 1967, 1973 and the interminable peace processes were, for a long time, the basic issues of Middle East studies. The subjectivity of the scholar, sometimes as participant of the matter, was the problem of the politics of the Middle East. Middle East scholars, and institutes and journals look for issues other than the Arab-Israeli issue to make research and publish, and books deliberately excluded the subject from their contents pages¹⁶. The students of the Middle East also harshly criticized Israeli dominance in the funding institutions, academia, think tank organizations, periodicals and publications, and in the politics of the American government. A collaborate work published in *Academic Questions* clearly demonstrated the Israeli dominance in the classes which emphasized Arab-Israeli conflict, teaching the issue much more than any subjects of the area. Also the scholars' search of keywords in the Academic Abstracts showed a clear supremacy of Israel with 1,440 entries comparing with 322 on Palestine, 533 on Turkey and a mere 282 on Iran.¹⁷

The association of Israeli scholars with national organizations is another aspect of the politicization of Middle East studies. Eyal discusses the association, co-relationship and cooperation between Israeli Middle East experts in academia and media with the Israeli military intelligence.¹⁸ The Israeli experts work for the government projects, are heavily involved in political decision making, even serve the intelligence service during their military reserve service, and publish extensively in national(ist) periodicals, as the Arab-origin scholars' had close connection with the Arab governments and their publications.

Theoretical Inconsistency with Historical Realities

The scholars who deal with theories of social sciences and those of area studies do generally not agree on the content, research methods and techniques, findings and benefit of area studies. In Middle East studies also, the political scientists, sociologists and economists interested in a specific geographical area are accused of doing nothing but trying to understand remote areas from their glass chateaus, as James A. Bill says, from their ivory towers.¹⁹ The area specialists are also blamed for dealing with so many details in their work, including specific languages, cultures and religious rituals as once the old Orientalist scholars do. Because of the nature of their work, as Martin Kramer argues, they failed to foresee the so-called coming threat of Islamism, terrorism and international crimes, though they and their institutions, research centers and educational bodies are paid by the governments.²⁰ The experts in Middle East studies were particularly criticized even before 9/11 attacks of not seeing the threat of Islamic militancy, and of considering political Islam as the exaggeration of US policy-making with an aim of creating an irrational fear of terrorism.²¹ In general, the social scientists dealing with the

adoption of the hypotheses of structuralism, behaviouralism, game theory, functionalism and the like to the facts of the Middle East argued that the area studies focus too much on the culture, history and languages of other societies and their studies lack the foundations to produce generalized conclusions and extensive (universal) knowledge.²²

The critique of Middle East studies from the point of theory is focused on the inadequate conceptualization and the difficulty to theorize the whole region of the area, its over emphasis on history, culture and languages, and the nature of humanities which has different research techniques than social sciences. The nature of the field, literally the geography of the Middle East is one of the basic obstacles of the conceptualization and generalization in the field. In MES 101/501s, the class generally starts to define and delimit the region; scholars do various definitions of the Middle East in terms of culture, language, religion, politics and economics. This is a difficult task, since the borders of the region changes over time and according to the definitional concepts used, if not with the wish of the scholar. The borders may change from the narrow Fertile Crescent, a linguistic, cultural and religious definition, to an area that includes the Eastern Mediterranean, Central Asia, the Caucasus and even the Black Sea region from the political, economic and conceptual perspectives. The scholars working in different fields also define the region according to the requirements of their disciplines and methods; as the historians draw the regional borderlines in accordance with the borders of historical empires, be it Umayyad, Abbasid, Seljukid and Ottoman, the anthropologists define it as a culture area. There are also people who claim the definition of the Middle East is more psychological than a geographical area.²³ The ambiguity and arbitrariness in defining the boundaries make it hard for the academic work to theorize, and produce generalizations. Yet, a good delimitation of the area in terms of time, space and geography is the first step of humanities to start a good study. A good example of framing an area is a journal, published by the Cambridge University in 1992, titled *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* as a unique publication on science philosophy in the world of Islam. The journal adopted an area of science and philosophy that was drawn by the “whole traditions of inquiry in Persian, Turkish, and perhaps other Islamic languages and philosophy in Islamic civilization”²⁴. Therefore, historical, political, cultural, religious or anthropological borders may be drawn with the help of the conceptual frameworks of the discipline, and help the students and scholars alike to study in an interdisciplinary area, in similar vein with the research methods and techniques in traditional disciplines.²⁵ Such a four-cornered approach in area studies require to study the subject in an interdisciplinary manner.

Here appears another problem with the concerns of academic disciplines that tend to increase their field of research in an age of increasing differentiation in social sciences. Social science disciplines look

like having a jealousy in disciplinary works, and want to enlarge their territories and fields of research with an objective to develop the discipline, but most of the time at the expense of other fields of study. While disciplinary focus is a complication for the development of area studies, area studies programs highly benefitted from the participation of social science scholars into systematization of theoretical frames and the formation of the boundaries of area studies. The traditional disciplines and interdisciplinary programs were in very far compartments only few decades ago, now many disciplines created their areas and academic programs, regional or conceptual, and teach social history, historical sociology, economic history, political economy, gender studies, history of science and philosophy, and all kinds of histories in many other areas. The old accusation of the area studies of being particularistic, essentialist and historicist is not, now, on the agenda of social sciences.

History and the Poverty of Theory

However slow, the use of theory is increasing in disciplinary and interdisciplinary area studies. The tardiness in the development of theory in Middle East studies has various reasons. The requirements of humanities as the most important part of area studies are building barriers to the theoretical work. Learning the languages, history, culture and philosophy of the area needs time and energy to be spent during the graduate work. Humanities did not used to leave enough space for theory, though there is a substantial increase in the works with a more emphasis to theoretical insights in area studies.²⁶ The theoretical progress in general is done in political science and sociology, and the participation of the scholars from these traditional disciplines in area studies, brought more and more theoretical formulations, Marxist, neo-Weberian, neo-statist, behaviorist, structural-functionalist, historical sociology, and cultural approaches, to the area studies. Many dissertations in area studies by now are not written in descriptive manner, but with questions and sub-questions asked around a problematic. The general application of a theory to an area, the past custom of experiencing the validity of theory is highly controversial, since it does generally end up in failure in the explanation of various societies; however, discussing this issue is out of the boundaries of this paper.

A second reason for the underdevelopment of theory in the field is that the scholars who deal with the generalizations are mostly from disciplinary areas in which culture and religion are not for the most part accepted as having any explanatory power. Also these scholars want to go away from the misguided accusations of being orientalist, though it is those who take part in area studies, collect data from the field, use theoretical formulations in their works and contribute most to the development of theory in social sciences.²⁷ The third reason is the

incompetence of the scholars in theoretical work in area studies.²⁸ The field requires disseminating the focus of scholars from one country to a region, learning several languages, studying various tracks of histories, visiting so many different archives, connecting data, events, structures and institutions to each other and producing meaningful conclusions for the literature. The graduate students who find such a study too much most likely prefer to specialize in single-track disciplines to get the fastest tenure.²⁹ A fourth reason is the relationship between power and knowledge. According to Brynen, the underdevelopment of the Middle East field of research is the interrelationship between US government support for area studies and American strategic interests in the region.³⁰ Still, knowledge produces, but power manipulates. This completes the cycle, and takes us to the beginning of the discussion of this paper, to the intervention of ideology and politics into the academic work for the accumulation of knowledge. The study is oriented, the field research done, the data collected to define the problem and find ways for solution, and the explanation is made. The knowledge is not to develop analytical tools for a theoretical frame, and not to reach methodological conclusions that can build hypotheses for theoretical constructions. The politicization of the field could have only served to non-academic interests as happens in Middle East studies for the time being.

This is not because of the poverty of theory, but of the practical needs of politics. The political needs lead scholars to study the workings of regions at the expense of knowledge, which limits not only knowledge, but also the development of theory out of the accurate accumulation of knowledge. This statement means, in no way, that history and theory are alternatives to each other. In contrast they are complementary, as Marx aptly stated: “praxis produces theory”. Historical data, historical methodology and historical knowledge are required to construct, modify and deconstruct theories as theory provides necessary tools to classify, put in order the empirical data, and to produce meaningful chains of episodes from among millions of events that happened in the past. Only in this way scholars can move forward from the observation and definition to generalization and explanation.

Area specialists have a comparative advantage over the theoreticians of the field in terms of their expanded field of work, and their historical, cultural and linguistic knowledge. However, for the last few decades, theory and scientific revolutions gained pace and disciplinary and interdisciplinary studies are gradually interrelated. If this trend continues, more theoretical work done, then it is fair to state that it will be the area studies which most likely to gain from the developments in the disciplinary studies. But, on the other hand, if the theory continues to fail in the production of explanations for social change, or put it more correctly, as long as the theory could not be liberated from the influences

of power and politics; history, languages and philosophy will still have the preferred works in academic studies in the field.

Most of what Albert Hourani explicated for the status of history for about forty years ago is still valid and present in the studies of the Middle East. The Middle East academia lacks the native craftsmen to make research in local histories, most of the works done for the area is done by foreign scholars and the Middle East history is under the general guidance of Western scholarship. The Western scholars, on the other hand, do not have native scholars' work to follow for known reasons, and if there are any, the works of native scholars are rare to open new paths for young scholars, and remain only in discovering necessary documents in the dusty shelves behind the gray walls of archive buildings.³¹ However developed the study of Middle East history since then, and established the departments, centers, institutes and societies by native scholars especially in Israel and Turkey, the development of history, sociology, philosophy and politics of the Middle East has largely been slow. The works mostly focus on modern and contemporary periods, and on basic issues of political and intellectual history. Yet, though slow, there has been tremendous progress in Middle East history comparing with the scholarship of half a century ago with the work of scholars in Egypt, Israel, Turkey and elsewhere on urban, rural, social, economic, financial and cultural history of the Middle East as well. Providing the names and works of scholars, both of whom now reach few thousands, is out of the scope of this study, but it would suffice to take a glance at the subject lists of the dissertations and theses done in the centers of Middle East studies elsewhere in the region. One can expect the widening and deepening of scholarly works to the Western caliber for the next few decades.

Conclusion

This study tries to answer the question how then we can overcome the overwhelming difficulties in area studies. I propose a constant collaborative work among the disciplines (as the Annales school did in history), among the scholars of various disciplinary background, among the centers, institutions and colleges of area studies and different curricula regarding the teaching of history, languages and theoretical frameworks in area studies.

The Development of World History and Local Histories: The first approach might be to interconnect national, regional and global histories. Regional history could not, and should not be isolated from the more general history of the world. Area studies can develop and gain significance for the students and scholars with the establishment of meaningful relations between national, regional, and international histories and politics. Therefore, area studies need to develop approaches to history and social sciences, which analyzes regional and world history in *longue durée*, and

presents the students of the area various perspectives for regional problems, crises, changes and developments. A historical and systematic analysis of the region within these expanded historical processes could help build up suitable analytical tools to be employed in social, economic and political problems both at the national and regional levels.

A project of the Council of Europe completed in 2001 can provide some insights for studying regional history and its interactions with global history and politics. The basic objectives of the project of “Learning and Teaching about the History of Europe in the Twentieth Century”³² are to discuss, arrange and publicize new approaches in the history of the twentieth century, and to support the teachers and scholars in teaching highly disputed and controversial topics in regional [European] history. The project does not aim to write a regional history textbook, nor does it want to create a consensus in selecting what, when and how to teach European history. On the contrary, the project participants aim to display the impossibility of the existence of an all-time helpful theoretical framework to understand regional history and to demonstrate that any scholar of regional history is required to have a critical and multicultural reading of history to provide evidence for the influences of stereotypes and ideological orientations in social sciences.³³ To prevent the effects of ideology and politics, the study focuses on the teaching of methodology which provides conceptual tools for the students of area studies to establish meaningful connections between historical facts and data throughout many episodes of regional history.

Multi-dimensional Regional History Teaching: A second step in area studies is to focus on and increase multi-dimensional characteristics of regional studies. Area studies provide a unique opportunity to present the change, similarities and differences prevail in many societies, classes, groups and communities at the same time period and in the same geography, but at a larger, “regional” level. Cross-cultural studies would help us better understand common historical processes throughout the region, their effects on individual societies and the causes and effects of differences in each historical track. Area studies should bring social scientists, academicians and scholars with various backgrounds together in an interdisciplinary way to study on history, politics, culture, economy, gender and geography of the area of research. The history of area studies demonstrates that each social science discipline achieved great success in their respective territories. What is to be done is to interconnect independent studies in a regional framework to fill up the gap between the traditional disciplines and area studies.

Comparative Studies: Comparative studies may open new perspectives for studying different regions, the histories and politics of each society in the area within various periods and among many regions. Comparative studies may contribute to overcome the theory-history dichotomy and the conflict between disciplinary and interdisciplinary studies through

examining, questioning and accommodating different approaches, hypotheses and theoretical formulations. Comparative historical analysis may also prevent prejudgments, ideological orientations and policy-oriented analysis from affecting academic work, and help increase the scientific quality in area studies through creating a ground among disciplines and scholars for common interpretations. Group studies for comparative analysis may also create divergence of opinions and conflict among approaches, and may cause the tension between social sciences, humanities and area studies; however reconciliation will only be possible as the basic result of discussion and comparisons of scientific approaches to area studies.

Institutionalization and Priority of Knowledge over Politics: Institutionalization is likely the most effective tool for the prevention of political interventions in area studies. By institutionalization I mean the foundation of research and education centers, the development of curricula and the increase in comparative studies with mutual interactions among area studies not only in the universities and academic institutions in the West but also in those of the Middle East. The Middle East studies have come a long way in establishing such an institutionalization; however, it still looks like it is not fully exempt from policy-oriented approaches and political interventions of the state. There will always be scholars in close connection with the state and politics, and the policy-oriented studies and think tanks will continue to influence decision-making processes. But, I strongly think that as the public support and the state's participation in the organization of area studies increase (not in terms of controlling and orienting them, but in helping to found institutes, archives, libraries and research centers, in providing funds and so on), the number and influence of political and ideological studies will decrease in the field.

Notes:

¹ Approaches to the Middle East within the framework of area studies have long been on the agenda of Middle East scholars. In an early study, Leonard Binder discussed the subordination of Middle East to bi-polar power politics during the Cold War (Leonard Binder, "The Middle East as a Subordinate International System", *World Politics*, 10, 3 (April 1958), 408-429), Zartman contributed to the development of area studies with his early piece in William Zartman, "Africa as a Subordinate State System in International Relations", *International Organization*, 21, 3 (Summer 1967), and William R. Thompson conceptualized subsystem in his theoretical debate, "The Regional Sub-System: A Conceptual Explication and a Propositional Inventory", *International Studies Quarterly*, 17, 1 (March 1973), 89-117. Fawaz Gerges discussed the problems of Middle East studies as the theoretical underdevelopment, reductionism and policy orientation in his "The Study of Middle East in International Relations", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 18, 2

(1991), 208-220 followed with similar critique by Martin Kramer, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle East Studies in America* (Washington DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2001).

² I discussed how Middle East history should be read with the approaches of social sciences and history, in “Tarih ve Sosyal Bilimler Yaklaşımlarıyla Bölgesel Tarih İncelemeleri: Orta Doğu Tarihi Araştırmaları” [The Research in Regional History with the Approaches of Social Sciences and History: Middle Eastern History Studies], *Global Strateji*, 3, 12 (Winter 2008), 99-107. I also argued the basic arguments of this paper, “History, Theory and Ideology in Middle East Studies”, in the 6th *Nordic Conference on Middle Eastern Studies*, in Copenhagen, in 2004.

³ I criticized the ideological character of the orientalist-modernization tradition elsewhere, stressing the continuation of these hundreds years apart theoretical formations to analyze Eastern societies: Recep Boztemur, “Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nda Devlet-Toplum İlişkileri: Araştırma Yöntemlerinde ve Kuramsal Yaklaşımlarda Tek-Yanlılık” [The State-Society Relations in the Ottoman Empire: Biases in Theoretical Approaches and Research Methods], *OTAM (Osmanlı Tarihi Araştırma Merkezi Dergisi)*, Vol. 9 (1998), 79-110, and Recep Boztemur, “Marx, Doğu Sorunu ve Oryantalizm [Marx, the Eastern Question and Orientalism]”, *Doğu Batı*, Vol 5, No. 20 (Aug. – Oct. 2002): 135-150.

⁴ Timothy Mitchell, “The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science”, *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*, University of California International and Area Studies Digital Collection, (2003): 7.

⁵ James A. Bill, “The Study of Middle East Politics, 1946-1996: A Stocktaking”, *Middle East Journal*, 50, 4 (Autumn 1996): 503.

⁶ For the democratization in the Arab world, see, Recep Boztemur, “The State, Nation and Prospects for Democracy in the Middle East”, *Journal of Oriental and African Studies*, 13 (2004), 277-291.

⁷ Heather Deegan, *The Middle East and Problems of Democracy*, (Boulder, CO.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994); Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany and Paul Noble, *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World*, (Boulder CO.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995); Paul J. Magnarella (ed), *Middle East and North Africa: Governance, Democratization, Human Rights*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999).

⁸ John Esposito, *Islam and Politics*, 3rd ed., (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1991).

⁹ Eva Bellin, “Civil Society: Effective Tool of Analysis for Middle East Politics?”, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Sep. 1994): 509.

¹⁰ Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, “Beyond Democratization: Political Change in the Arab World”, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Sep. 1994): 508.

¹¹ Recep Boztemur, “Mısır’da Halk Hareketleri, Müslüman Kardeşler ve Demokrasinin Geleceği” [Popular Movements, Muslim Brotherhood and the Future of Democracy in Egypt], *Adam Akademi*, 2 (Dec. 2011).

¹² Gabriel Ben-Dor, “Political Culture Approach to Middle East Politics”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 8 (1977): 48, c.f. Gabriel A. Almond and Sydney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, 1963).

¹³ Joel Beinin, “Middle East Studies after September 11”, *MESA Bulletin*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2003): 5-6.

¹⁴ Zachary Lockman, “Behind the Battles over Middle East Studies”, *MERIP* (Jan. 2004).

¹⁵ Kemal H. Karpat, “Gelişmekte olan Ülkeler, Özellikle Ortadoğu Çalışmalarında Sosyal Bilimler ve Tarihin Kullanılması” [Usage of Social Science and History in the Study of Developing Nations with a special emphasis on the Middle East], *Ortadoğu’da Osmanlı Mirası ve Ulusçuluk* (trans. by Recep Boztemur), (Ankara: İmge Kitabevi, 2001), 25.

¹⁶ The MESA Board in the MESA Meeting after the 1967 War prevented a graduate student who was affiliated with a foreign diplomatic service to present a paper discussing the Arab-Israeli Conflict because of the high sensitivity of the subject. There was no formal discussion on the topic also in the 1973 Meeting of MESA. Mitchell, p. 10.

¹⁷ Norvell B. De Atkine and Daniel Pipes, “Middle Eastern Studies: What Went Wrong”, *Academic Questions*, Vol. 9, Issue 1 (Winter 1995-96): 60-75. There was also a debate on the prejudice, bias and right-wing character of this study, but this is out of the scope of this paper.

¹⁸ Gil Eyal, “Dangerous Liaisons between Military Intelligence and Middle Eastern Studies in Israel”, *Theory and Society*, Vol. 31 (2002): 653-693.

¹⁹ Bill, 506.

²⁰ Martin Kramer, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America* (Washington DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2001). Fred Haliday and Gerd Nonneman argue that Kramer’s accusations to the field are baseless, and written out of the effects of 9/11; and does not help improve the methodology, knowledge and substance in Middle East studies in his review article, “9/11 and Middle Eastern Studies, Past and Future: Revisiting Ivory Towers on Sand”, *International Affairs*, 80, 5 (Oct. 2004): 953-962.

²¹ Daniel Pipes, “Campus Academics Got It Wrong on the Middle East”, *Human Events*, Nov. 19, Vol. 57, No. 43 (2001): 10.

²² Louis J. Cantori, “Introduction: Democracy, Islam and the Study of Middle Eastern Politics”, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Sep. 1994): 507.

²³ Gerges, 209.

²⁴ Carter V. Findley, “Remedying the Flaws in Area Studies”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 16, Vol. 39/17 (1992): B3.

²⁵ Kenneth J. Grieb, “Area Studies and Traditional Disciplines”, *The History Teacher*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Feb. 1974): 228-229.

²⁶ Ian S. Lustick, “The Quality of Theory and the Comparative Disadvantage of Area Studies”, *MESA Bulletin*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Winter 2000): 190.

²⁷ Among eleven authors of the seminal work edited by Mark Tessler on Area Studies and Social Sciences, only three authors are directly or indirectly affiliated with the area studies. The rest has their positions in traditional disciplines, but contributes to the development of Middle East studies in one way or another. Mark Tessler, (ed.), *Area Studies and Social Science: Strategies for Understanding Middle East Politics* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999). More interestingly, all of the Middle East historians, interviewed by Nancy E. Gallagher for her highly useful book, are directly affiliated with the foundation of Middle East studies as the academic field of study. Nancy E. Gallagher, *Approaches to the History of the Middle East: Interviews with Leading Middle East Historians* (Berkshire: Ithaca Press, 1994).

²⁸ Gerges, 215.

²⁹ Bill, 508.

³⁰ Gerges, 216, c.f. Rex Brynen, “The State of the Art in Middle Eastern Studies: A Research Note on Inquiry and the American Empire”, *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Fall 1986): 414.

³¹ Albert Hourani, “History”, *The Study of the Middle East: Research and Scholarship in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, ed. by Leonard Binder, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1976), 97-100.

³² Robert Stradling, *20. Yüzyıl Avrupa Tarihi Nasıl Öğretilmeli* [Teaching 20th Century European History] (trans. by Ayfer Ünal) (Istanbul: Türkiye Ekonomik ve Toplumsal Tarih Vakfı Yayınları, 2003).

³³ Mark McLaughlin, “Learning and Teaching about the History of Europe in the Twentieth History”, *Teaching History*, No. 107 (2002): 26-28.

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