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If one were asked to draw a circle around the 'Middle East' on a twenty-first century map, how far would it extend? Perhaps southwest to Sudan's capital Khartoum and northeast to the Iranian city of Mashhad, skirting the edge of the Black Sea? What if the request was to draw a circle around the 'Near East'—would it reach as far west as present-day Bulgaria? And if the question referred to a circle around the 'Levant,' on what side might the city of Mosul fall? Seventy years ago, would any of these circles look quite the same?

Critical geographers and regional experts alike have often designated the diverse terminology and array of maps used to describe this region as historical inventions.¹ But as Osamah Khalil demonstrates in this fascinating article, the boundaries of what is known as the 'Middle East' have also shifted in line with the changing priorities of two of the region's hegemonic powers since the early twentieth century, Great Britain and the United States. Khalil, an historian of U.S. foreign policy and the modern Middle East at Syracuse University, argues that the evolving foreign policy interests and overarching 'imperial attitudes' of the great powers justified the divergent geographical constructs of the Middle East, reflecting "the movement of hegemony and empire from London to Washington" (302).

¹ On shifting geographic definitions, see Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 66-67. For treatment of the term by a regional expert, see Rashid Khalidi "The 'Middle East' as a Framework of Analysis: Re-mapping a Region in the Era of Globalization," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 18, no. 2 (1998), 1-8.

By tracing the etymology of the term ‘Middle East’ and its alignment with foreign policy doctrines and policies over the past century, Khalil links the expanding and contracting boundaries of the region with British and American military, political, and economic interests. This comprehensive study of various ideological and material definitions of the region—justified in turn by scholars, journalists and government officials—is based on wide-ranging archival sources in Britain and the U.S., as well as Arabic material examining local usage of the term. It offers a compelling explanation of how the Middle East emerged as an arena of external contestation rather than a region defined by limited geographical considerations or the preferences of its inhabitants.

Khalil foregrounds his argument in relation to Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, which posited the ‘Orient’ as an invention of the ‘Occident’ through a complex power relationship.² The echoes for the Middle East are clear, in that the region was “constructed and reified as a site for the exercise of British and American power and hegemony” (303). The author suggests four key factors that influenced successive definitions of the region: power politics, oil, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and religion (304).

For Great Britain, the strategic demands of resolving the ‘Eastern Question’ in its favor took first precedence. European rivalry over the territories of the Ottoman Empire precipitated the British invasion and occupation of Egypt in 1882, with control over the Suez Canal securing a path to India. The influential American Naval strategist Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan outlined the strategic value of the Persian Gulf for European access to the East after a visit to the port city of Aden on the Arabian Peninsula. He was among the first to invoke the ‘Middle East’ as a popular phrase, arguing that Britain could maintain primacy over its rivals through naval bases and alliances with local rulers in the Gulf (306). Press accounts drew on the term ‘Middle East’ as well, situating it alongside the larger contest over the ‘Near East’ and ‘Far East’ at the turn of the twentieth century. Khalil describes how one British foreign correspondent, Valentine Chirol, adopted Mahan’s term as a means of asserting Britain’s strategic ascendancy in Asia, incorporating western and northern land and sea approaches to India as part of an expanded Middle East (306-307).

Against the backdrop of great power politics, the religious revival spearheaded by European and American missionaries increased pilgrimages and expeditions to the region, solidifying Anglo-American interest in the Holy Land. The signing of the sixty year D’Arcy Oil Concession in 1901 and the British navy’s subsequent decision to move from coal to oil indelibly marked the region as a prized strategic arena in its own right, well beyond its role as a transit point to other parts of the British Empire. Khalil examines contemporaneous World War I accounts that cycled between various definitions of the eastern territories as ‘Near,’ ‘Middle,’ and ‘Far,’ and draws on records from the Public

² Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1994).

Records Office to explore the crucial diplomatic reorganization that culminated in the 1921 Cairo Conference (311). This gathering of High Commissioners and Residents established a unified British policy in the Middle East under the direction of the new Colonial Secretary, Winston Churchill. Churchill's Middle East Department, which had wrested regional control away from Lord Curzon and the India Office, implemented policies that intensified British dominance across the region, resulting in Emir Faisal bin Hussein's installation as King of Iraq and the establishment of Transjordan under Emir Abdullah bin Hussein.

After the outbreak of World War II, and the ascendancy of U.S. power across the globe, American foreign policy drew on evolving British definitions of the Middle East. Khalil cites coverage of the area by the Office of Strategic Service (OSS), the American wartime intelligence service, to demonstrate a range of definitions that extended from Egypt to Afghanistan. He explores the region's transition from British to American influence during the 1947 Pentagon Talks, as the U.S. government established foreign policy priorities in what was called the "Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East" (314). The Joint Chiefs of Staff later distinguished between the two, with the "Eastern Mediterranean" covering Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt, leaving Iraq, Iran, and the Arabian Peninsula to the "Middle East" (314). Over time, the term 'Middle East' took precedence, and Turkey became the region's front line against the Soviet Union as part of the emergent Truman Doctrine. Khalil cites Secretary of Defense James Forrestal's view of Turkey as a "natural barrier to an advance by Russia to the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East countries, Palestine in particular" (315). Combined with the import of cheap oil via the Suez Canal as part of the containment goals of the Marshall Plan, the region was now firmly a subset of Cold War imperatives.

The continuing redefinition of bureaucratic terminology to encompass the region within the State Department is well covered by Khalil, who traces public discourse around the varied definitions. This mirrors his approach to attitudes in Great Britain earlier in the century, highlighting the continuities that inhered in the transition from British to American hegemony. But a predominant focus on these two great powers also obscures the role of other regional hegemony, such as the Soviet Union. In Khalil's account, the Soviets largely appear as a subset of a burgeoning Cold War rivalry. From the viewpoint of Moscow, how might the region have been constructed differently?³ And while assigning hegemonic status to Britain and the United States certainly makes historical sense (and fits the purview of the article), the push and pull of other forces in the region during the twentieth century—from France to Germany and Italy—influenced strategic conceptions of the Middle East as well.

³ One relevant account in this regard is 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).

Khalil also explores the emergence of American scholarly institutions and think tanks devoted to the region, which further served to bolster use of the term 'Middle East' while also signaling its flexibility. "Indeed," as Khalil writes, "the malleability of the term and the region it represented would be an asset to U.S. strategic planners during the Cold War" (319). With the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), both Britain and the United States sought to establish a security arrangement for the region in the form of the Middle East Command (MEC). Israel's creation in 1948 complicated matters, leading to the Eisenhower Administration's pursuit of the 'Northern Tier' alliance comprised of Iran, Pakistan and Turkey. Utilizing records from the State Department's Office of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA), Khalil demonstrates how Secretary of State John Foster Dulles "redefined the borders of the 'Middle East' yet again" (321). With Western antagonism towards Egypt growing under the rule of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, the 1956 Suez Crisis formally curtailed British influence in the Middle East. As the United States and the Soviet Union forced an end to the tripartite aggression of Israel, Britain and France, the Eisenhower Doctrine underscored resurgent American aims in the region. Drawing on the NEA records, Khalil shows how Afghanistan, Morocco, Greece, and Tunisia were at one point tacked on to the 'Middle East' for strategic reasons as well.

To counter claims that the region was never assigned a name in internal sources, Khalil looks at the phraseology of Arab geographers to highlight alternative perspectives. Using material from the American University in Cairo Archives, including the Egyptian magazine *al-Hilāl*, he highlights the dissonance between external and internal usage, as well as the differences between scholarly and security-oriented discussions of the region. Arab scholars and journalists continued to contest the evolving usage of the term 'Middle East' throughout the late twentieth century, and Khalil situates the debates over terminology against the backdrop of rising American power on the ground. His discussion of modernization theory links the projection of U.S. power with ideological assumptions about Middle Eastern society, a 'Third World' locale in need of external assistance. Drawing on the work of Nils Gilman as well as Zachary Lockman, Khalil explains how modernization theory drew on essentializing definitions of Middle Easterners that traded racial hierarchies for cultural ones by the 1960s.⁴

Alongside the growing importance of oil, as the pioneering work of Robert Vitalis on the Saudi oil giant ARAMCO has demonstrated for the immediate postwar period, U.S. interests in the Middle East took on a very troubling cast by the 1970s.⁵ Khalil argues that the 1967 and 1973 regional wars reshaped definitions of the region once again, fomenting the growth of the U.S.-Israel alliance and the American dependence on conservative regimes like Iran and Saudi Arabia (331). He draws on a wide range of secondary literature

⁴ See Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007) and Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁵ Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (London: Verso, 2009).

to outline the passage from President Richard Nixon's "Twin Pillars" to the birth of the US Central Command (CENTCOM) under President Jimmy Carter and the articulation of a space known as the "Greater Middle East" in the early 1990s (333). Khalil suggests that this new area, ranging from Morocco to India and including countries in central East Africa and the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, signaled a utilitarian approach that wielded geographic representation for strategic ends.

Such an approach reached its apogee after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, as scholars tried to situate events in wider historical context, relying on "contrived or overstated geographic, historical and social ties to validate their theories" (335). Khalil criticizes historians like Douglas Little on the left and Michael Oren on the right for conflating the 'Middle East' with the threat of radical political Islam on the one hand, and U.S. support for Zionism and the creation of Israel on the other (335-336).⁶

In this regard, Khalil's account raises the question of periodization, and the role of the late 1970s and 1980s in forging post-Cold War conceptions of the region. As Hamit Bozarslan has suggested in focusing on 1979, and Mahmood Mamdani in terms of the rise of political Islam, these intervening decades were crucial for the elaboration of particular foreign policy ideas about the region.⁷ Many of the American policymakers who articulated a new approach to the Middle East by the early 2000s were in fact drawing on concepts that first circulated among neoconservative critics of the Carter administration decades earlier. Coupled with the region's ideological transformations, such as the religious revival in Egypt and the Iranian Revolution, as well as local violence fomented by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the Iran-Iraq War, Middle Easterners themselves were developing radically new conceptions of external and regional powers by the end of the Cold War.

As Khalil's article underscores, the Middle East was constantly subject to the vested interests and strategic concerns of external powers. By unraveling successive assignations of the 'Middle East,' the author situates the region as a mirror to British and later American perceptions of their expanding global reach and evolving national security concerns. In its geographic malleability, expanding and contracting at the whim of ruling hegemony, the term 'Middle East' becomes a tool of control.⁸ In its eclipse of 'Near East'

⁶ See Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002) and Michael Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present* (New York: Norton, 2008).

⁷ See Hamit Bozarslan, "Revisiting the Middle East's 1979," *Economy and Society* (2012) 41:4, 558-567; and Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

⁸ Here it might be useful to think in parallel with Anders Stephanson, whose interrogation of 'the cold war' as a discrete concept and singular period forces a closer look at the American nature of the

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as the dominant parlance, the term also marks a passing of the torch from one imperial worldview to the next. Khalil concludes that this transition shared a common feature and symbolism in the context of great power rivalry: “the country that controlled the Middle East, in effect controlled the crossroads of the world” (344).

The link between twentieth century UK and U.S.-Middle East relations and the region’s contemporary condition remains a subject deserving of greater scholarly attention. Khalil’s article is among the most recent contributions to a growing body of work on the Middle East in international history, underscoring the value of empirically rich studies that bring together local sources with archives in Great Britain, the United States, and farther afield.⁹ In laying out an agenda for future research, specifically among diplomatic historians, Khalil’s article provides an important scholarly map of how the ‘Middle East’ first came to be defined as a region.¹⁰

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project. Anders Stephanson, “Cold War Degree Zero,” in Joel Isaac and Duncan Bell, eds., *Uncertain Empire: American History and the Idea of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 19-50.

⁹ See, for example, Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive: The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) and Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

¹⁰ For a comparative example, see Michel Gobat, “The Invention of Latin America: A Transnational History of Anti-Imperialism, Democracy and Race,” *The American Historical Review* (2013) 118 (5): 1345-137.