

## Critical Area Studies

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Its cold war legacy and the ascent of academic trends like global studies and global history notwithstanding, the concept of area studies has witnessed a remarkable renaissance in Germany in recent years, as regionally focused institutes and centers have been formed in various universities and research institutes all over the country.<sup>1</sup> Significant resources have been channeled into relevant research units through funding schemes like the DFG's (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft/German Re-

search Foundation) *Exzellenzinitiative* and the Federal Ministry for Education and Research's area studies program. The DFG is the most important funding institution for academic research in Germany. It is financed by the federal state and the *Länder* (regional states).<sup>2</sup> The growth of area studies in Germany is mirrored in the formation of special interest groups within academia working to further institutionalize this approach, such as CrossArea e.V. From a macro-perspective on the political economy of funding in academia, this trend might be interpreted as a reflection of Germany's re-entry to the stage of world

politics and the global interests of an export-oriented economy that necessitates the development of soft skills like expert knowledge in various world regions. Still, this trend has opened new opportunities for scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and regional orientations to pursue their research interests and develop state-of-the-art approaches towards knowledge production in the context of area studies. At the same time, this policy arguably reproduces and intensifies inequalities between academic systems in the Global North and those in regions that are being studied in area studies programs (Boatcă). This issue of META aims at taking stock of these developments and contributes to this ongoing endeavor from a perspective of Middle East studies. We thereby intend to contribute to the broader discussion regarding how and to what extent the institutionalization of knowledge production shapes its content. How do educational, economic and political policies on a global, regional, and local level shape the institutional body of knowledge production in this specific field of inquiry? What are the challenges for a critical area studies approach in the face of ongoing processes of globalization, and specifically with regard to Middle East studies, the impact of the Arab uprisings of 2011 and subsequent developments?

### Challenges

The process of globalization has effected an increasing focus on transregional comparative questions and a reassessment of our understanding of world regions, which has moved away from container concepts of regions as seemingly congruent and separate entities and their concomitant epistemological othering in scholarship, towards emphasizing comparative aspects and global entanglements in terms of migration, knowledge flows and economic ties. In a globalized world that is often seen as consisting of fluid and interconnected spaces, geographical and epistemological borders, which may define an area, would seem to be blurred. Yet at the same time, and in a notable departure from this globalizing trend, rigid border regimes are being (re-)installed between specific countries and whole regions in multiple parts of the world, thereby calling into question the assumption of an increasingly integrated world system. This contradictory dynamic is particularly visible in recent years with regard to the MENA region and Europe.

In fact, this is the latest incarnation of an old debate in a contemporary context. The longstanding debate on Edward Said's *Orientalism* and subsequent developments like the rise of postcolonial studies have reverberated vividly in Middle East

studies circles all over the world, challenging perceptions of Middle Eastern exceptionalism and established legacies of Oriental studies. In response to this challenge, scholars have been re-assessing their methodologies and assumptions, and it has become an established best practice to conduct collaborative research with partners working in or emanating from the MENA region.

Scholarship on the MENA region has gradually moved outside its former narrow academic niche further into the mainstream of academic knowledge production both in terms of funding and in terms of public interest after 9/11 and again after the Arab uprisings of 2011. A wealth of scholarship on the MENA region has sought to analyze the different forms of transformations triggered by the 'Arab Spring' on the institutional, political, legal, economic, social, religious and cultural levels. Initially, these works seemed to be infused by optimistic expectations of a gradual transition to democracy. However, since 2012 at the latest, in view of the Syrian civil war and the restoration of the old order in Egypt, developments on the ground have been viewed in increasingly pessimistic terms sometimes reminiscent of the paradigm of Arab exceptionalism. Several reasons have been noted for the demise of the Arab Spring. Some pointed

to failed nation building processes in countries created in a top-down manner by colonial powers and post-colonial state-building elites, and the divisive effects of decades of oppressive rule.<sup>3</sup> After the removal of *anciens régimes*, in this line of thought, long repressed tensions, primordial loyalties and unresolved conflicts inevitably re-surfaced in these societies. Others have highlighted in part externally induced processes of state erosion and state failure following prolonged wars, economic crises and stalled transitions to more inclusive forms of governance as crucial factors underlying the politicization of ethnic and sectarian identities in the MENA region. Transregional comparative and global perspectives are crucial in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the specificities of current developments in the MENA region.

Still, a multitude of developments are registered in various spheres, which show the ambivalent and often contradictory dynamics of cultural, societal and political change taking place in MENA countries beyond the undeniable impact of communalism, the restoration of authoritarian rule or civil war. We need to move beyond a binary understanding of the developments in the MENA region as either rupture or continuity by conceptualizing them as re-configurations of power and society,

which take place in a gradual and fragmented, yet profound manner. Instead of focusing on spectacular events, relevant cases in periods both prior to and after uprisings or regime change need to be scrutinized in order to discover a multitude of developments and patterns of social interaction, which show the ambivalent and often contradictory dynamics of change in everyday life as well in strategies of political decision makers. Such an approach highlights fluidity and provides a comparative, diachronic and interdisciplinary analysis of the interplay between continuity and change in the MENA region (and beyond), thereby developing new perspectives on the causes and effects of the Arab uprisings within a broader context of the modern and contemporary history of the MENA region.

#### **Towards Critical Area Studies**

Against this background it remains to be seen what a Middle East studies perspective may contribute to broader debates on area studies. Without claiming to present a comprehensive answer to this question, we would argue that the waning of the emancipatory impulse which pulsed through the early days of the 'Arab Spring' should not be discussed in isolation. Increased levels of interaction between the MENA region and Europe mean that we

are dealing today with a socially constructed ensemble of interdependent social, cultural and economic spaces across and beyond physically or politically defined areas. Some developments within both Europe and the MENA region seem to follow a comparable trajectory, namely the rise of identitarian movements whose reactionary politics seem like a distorted mirror image of the ideas of liberation that fuel popular struggles in both regions. All of these developments suggest that political-economy perspectives and critical theory help to adequately conceptualize these interrelated developments as part of a 'critical area studies' approach.

It seems safe to assert that the destructive mode of the regional reconfiguration currently underway is at least to some degree an effect of neo-liberal reforms introduced to varying degrees in most MENA countries over the last few decades. Starting in the mid-1980s, many MENA states gave up their previous state-centered development policies in favor of large scale privatizations, cutting of subsidies, incentives for direct investments from abroad, etc. This meant the abolishment of the old social contract by the ruling elites and MENA's increasing integration into the world market. This process led to the demise of local economies, the erosion of state infrastructure, the emergence of cro-

ny capitalism and the erosion of salaried middle classes, all of which increased socioeconomic cleavages within MENA societies. Far from fostering democratization, as was often presumed by Western proponents of market-oriented reforms in countries of the Global South, they "helped rebuild coalitions of support during the reconfiguration of authoritarian rule in certain states of the Middle East and North Africa" (King 459). Unsurprisingly, popular discontent in view of the effects of such 'authoritarian upgrading' was crucial in fuelling the Arab uprisings (Pierret and Selvik).

Beyond the comparative approach, which tends to leave the notion of areas as more or less separate units intact, 'post area studies' or 'critical area studies' aim at "rethinking area studies epistemologically to avoid thinking in container entities such as 'nation states' or, for that matter, 'regions' and to focus instead on the mobility patterns and communicative processes of human interaction" (Derichs). One crucial characteristic of the contemporary world relevant for any critical understanding of area studies is that "there is no longer a tight coherence between physical and cultural space"(ibid.). As a consequence, scholars started to "move human action and interaction and its role in communicatively constructing space

into the center of attention" (Mielke and Hornidge 18). The relational dynamics between IS style jihadism and European Muslims clearly constitute such a case of entangled history between MENA countries and Europe. We are facing a multiplicity of partly interconnected and fluid cultural spaces existing alongside one another and sometimes in conflict with one another in various local environments across regions.

Yet all this does not take place in an empty space or in an ideal setting of equality between all players involved. It is always embedded in and shaped by material and institutional structures, hierarchies, power relations. First, the sheer material destruction and the decreasing accessibility of the field might be a specific feature of the MENA region that is not as pronounced in other parts of the world. This situation impacts on levels of transregional human interaction and communication as well as on mobility patterns. In order to grasp such figurations, our analysis should incorporate a center-periphery perspective which is conscious of power relations existing between various players. The fact that rigid border regimes are currently being (re-) installed between specific countries and whole regions in multiple parts of the world calls into question the assumption of an increasingly integrated world system

(Allen). Thus, there is ample need to investigate how the current transformations in MENA countries are part of a contradictory process of blurring and transcending boundaries, while at the same time reasserting them violently. Moreover, vast differences exist between different kinds of mobility within and beyond the MENA region. In this sense, Arjun Appadurai distinguishes circulation of forms and forms of circulation in order to explain junctures and differences in global cultural flows. He argues that "different [cultural] forms circulate through different trajectories, generate diverse interpretations, and yield different and uneven geographies" (2). These different kinds of mobilities as well as the nexus of increasing mobility and the simultaneously intensifying immobility point to uneven and contradictory patterns of social, cultural and political change unleashed by the current globalization process (the Arab uprisings are one particular expression of this process), which need to be taken into account more systematically if we want to arrive at something that might be adequately termed 'critical area studies'.

In the German context, the generic term Middle East studies has long been used to designate research on political social and economic aspects of the contemporary MENA region, as contrasted to the legacy

of Oriental studies dating back to nineteenth century philology and religious studies. This polarity is institutionally anchored in Germany in two existing professional roof organizations, the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft/German Oriental Society (DMG), founded in 1845, and the Deutsche Arbeitsgemeinschaft Vorderer Orient/German Middle East Studies Association (DAVO), founded in 1993. The formation of regional studies centers uniting all of these various disciplinary traditions under one roof, such as Marburg University's Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies (CNMS), as well as conceptual debates in the humanities regarding the need for inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration of scholars, have challenged the self-perceptions and modes of cooperation among scholars working on the MENA region in one form or another. While the need for interdisciplinary and comparative approaches has reached a degree of consensus among scholars in this field, translating this consensus into our daily practice as researchers is still a challenging endeavor, as disciplinary structures and legacies remain influential (Freitag).

Knowledge production on the contemporary MENA region remains a contested discursive field in which a variety of players jockey for influence. Apart from West-

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ern academic institutions, local universities as well as local and international non-governmental Organisations produce relevant knowledge as well, but their status is often deemed inferior. Differences between these various players can also be detected in regards to the character of knowledge deemed 'scientific', and existing power structures are sometimes subtly reproduced when inclusion and exclusion in a specific scientific community or field of research is dependent on the use of a certain highly specialized jargon or specific expressions that symbolize adherence to a relevant school of thought. Such inequalities and differences cannot be easily bridged, and collaborative research with partners in the region therefore remains a challenge in practice.

Obviously, the ongoing massive transformations within the MENA region known as the 'Arab Spring' have a material as well as a non-material impact on the institutions of knowledge production in Europe and Northern America (e.g. a higher interest of third party funding vs. withdrawal of third party donors, special issues of journals and lecture series, new MA programs, etc.). But, first and foremost, these upheavals have substantial effects on the universities and research centers within Arab and other neighboring countries where similar developments are taking shape. In this is-

sue, we therefore encourage an open debate on the institutional landscape of knowledge production within the MENA region itself, particularly against the backdrop of the Arab uprisings. The current trends towards the restructuring of universities in the MENA region are of particular interest in this context. We are also interested to learn more about the impact of the ongoing transformations in the MENA region on working relations between scholars and academic institutions located there and those in the Global North, including the effects thereof on the production of relevant knowledge on the MENA region in both parts of the world.

One factor that is strongly impacting the work of scholars from both backgrounds is the decreasing accessibility of more and more countries in the MENA region due to civil wars, state failure and/or the return of *anciens régimes* under a new guise and heightened levels of repression. We have yet to find satisfactory solutions to this problem in order to ensure the diffusion of knowledge, particularly on countries such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and the Gaza Strip. Different academic cultures and a lack of connectedness to the international scene on the part of universities in the MENA region are a further factor that negatively impacts the exchange of knowledge and transregional academic

collaboration, while visa restrictions make it increasingly difficult for scholars working in those countries to set foot on the golden shores of 'Merkel's paradise' (EU).<sup>4</sup> This issue of META is as much an expression of such structural factors and constraints as it is an attempt to challenge them by assembling a distinguished group of authors who engage in critical and informed debates of the issues at hand.

**Outline of this Issue**

This issue addresses both the historical evolution of area studies and related disciplines (in this case: Islamic studies, Oriental philology, Middle East studies, etc.) as well as contemporary developments on a conceptual as well as an empirical level. Some contributions critically engage with historical lineages, concepts and methods used in area studies programs (and related disciplines) and discuss the changing relations between area studies and systematic disciplines over the years.

Several articles deal with contemporary conceptualizations of area studies developed in the German context in recent years. While **Anna-Katharina Hornidge** and **Katja Mielke** (Thesis 1) are proposing an approach they label 'crossroads studies' by emphasizing mobility and the move from regions as spatial containers to fluid and socially constructed spaces, **André**

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**Bank** (Thesis 2) underlines the necessity of comparisons in the sense of comparative area studies.

The Meta article of this issue, written by **Claudia Derichs**, focuses on epistemological questions in area studies. She stresses the fact that area studies are not fixed in geographical terms but are politically constructed entities. Here, the move from space to scale is claimed.

**Anika Oettler** leads the discussion of comparative area studies within the context of transitional justice research and advances the argument for the reconsideration of intersecting relations.

Following these contributions on different approaches to conceptualize area studies, the next articles deal with the institutionalization and transformation of certain research areas throughout different historical periods.

**Larissa Schmid** writes about the School of Oriental Languages in Berlin and explores two opposite approaches to deal with Oriental languages between the two world wars. **Denis V. Volkov** follows the traces of Iranian studies in Late Imperial Russia, Soviet and post-Soviet periods and relates this with Foucault's power and knowledge relation. **Steffen Wippel** focuses on the research of economic issues of the Arab world and the Middle East within German

academia and refers to structural and methodological challenges.

The article of **Karim Malak** and **Sara Salem** takes the Arab uprisings as a starting point. The authors argue that the shaping of the events by academia, think-tanks, donor institutions, etc., serve the reorientalization of the Middle East and are informed by (neo) liberal concepts.

As the Arab uprisings and other events have also had a decisive impact on universities and research centers within the Arab world, the next three contributions deal with perspectives and developments in the Arab research landscape on very different levels. **Heba M. Sharobeem**, as a researcher and lecturer in an Egyptian university, reports and reflects on her personal experiences in her taught courses and activities during the revolution and thereafter. **Jonathan Kriener** leads us to the Lebanese higher education landscape and shed lights on two different important institutions of knowledge production in Beirut. In doing so, he addresses questions of interconnectedness and deficiencies within the social sciences in the Arab world.

In the Interview section, **Sari Hanafi**, a prominent social scientist from the American University of Beirut, answers questions related to the impact of the Arab uprisings on Arab higher education and the restruc-

turing of universities in the MENA region. The positionality of the American University of Beirut as an elitist "Western" university within the Arab region is also scrutinized.

The last five contributions are not related to the topic of area studies but widen the geographical horizon of this issue. With this issue META introduces its review section with the primary and overarching objective to make research on and from the MENA region widely visible. In this issue one review by **Fadma Ait Mous** of a French-language book by the reputable Moroccan author and anthropologist, Hassan Rachik, on one century of anthropology in Morocco is published. The second review is written by **Erdem Evren** and discusses an edited volume on the Gezi-park protests and the protest movement in Turkey.

In the section Close Up, the author **Jens Heibach** provides a political biography of Muhammad 'Abd al-Malik al-Mutawakkil, a pioneer of the human rights movements in South Arabia, an outstanding personality and important intellectual in Yemen.

The articles in the section Off-Topic discuss social movements in the broadest sense: **Wietse van den Berge's** focus is on Kurdish activism in Syria and **Dimitris Soudias** analyzes the spatial component of Egypt's 2011 uprisings.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A signpost for this development was a report by the Wissenschaftsrat (Council of Science and Humanities, an advisory body to the German Federal Government and the regional governments), "Empfehlungen zu den Regionalstudien (area studies) in den Hochschulen und außeruniversitären Forschungseinrichtungen", published June 2006. See also, Birgit Schäßler.

<sup>2</sup> For the Ministry's funding scheme, see <<http://www.bmbf.de/foerderungen/13101.php>>.

<sup>3</sup> This approach seems reminiscent of a school of thought in European historiography that saw a twisted transition to modernity, belated nation building and authoritarian cultural legacies as reasons for a German *Sonderweg* that was to explain the rise of Hitler. The approach has since been widely criticized and more or less discarded (see Kershaw).

<sup>4</sup> Thus, despite the symbolic importance often attributed by Western donors to issues of gender equality in countries of the South, such considerations seem to have little impact in practice, as was experienced by several Iraqi scholars invited to Marburg for a conference on 'Gender in Iraqi Studies' in May 2015, who never managed to attain a visa to enter Germany for this purpose (<[www.uni-marburg.de/cnms/forschung/re-konfigurationen/aktuelles/news/gender\\_in\\_iraqu\\_studies](http://www.uni-marburg.de/cnms/forschung/re-konfigurationen/aktuelles/news/gender_in_iraqu_studies)>.).

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