

Introduction: world politics, the Middle East and the complexities of area studies

'History', said Stephen, 'is a nightmare from which I am trying to escape.' James Joyce, Ulysses

The end of the twentieth century and the onset of the twenty-first have not been kind to students of International Relations, let alone to those of the Middle East. For decades prior to the 1990s it was the claim of political scientists, and of their separate but cognate colleagues in International Relations, that they could, within some broad framework of modernisation – capitalist, socialist or other 'third' way – and of a changing world system, i.e. what has now, since the early 1990s, been termed 'globalisation', analyse and to some degree anticipate the development of societies.

History had, however, not lost the knack of surprising and in the last decades of the twentieth century was to demonstrate that its cunning, famously noted by Hegel, was far from dead. The Tunisian sociologist Professor Freij Stambouli once explained to me, as he was driving with characteristic ebullience around his home town of Monastir, then the residence of the former President Habib Bouguiba, that three events in recent times had discredited the claims to knowledge of social science with regard to the Middle East and more generally: the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, in a society hitherto noted for being the most tolerant and prosperous in the region; the Iranian revolution and the fall of the Shah in 1978-9, a political rather than armed revolt which toppled a regime that had immense political and economic power, an army of 400,000 men, the latest western military equipment, and the unanimous backing of Washington, London, Paris, Moscow and Beijing alike; and in 1989–91 the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Soviet communism and its east European empire, an event that few, except some lucky eccentrics, had ever anticipated, and which brought to an end the last of the four great conflicts – European colonial rivalry (1798–1914), World Wars I (1914–18) and II (1939–45) and then the Cold War (1946–91) – that had marked world politics, and the Middle East, in the previous two



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centuries. In words with similar import, the Israeli academic and former general Yehoshafat Harkabi had observed that with the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 we had seen the end of two ideologies: in the east Marxism-Leninism and in the west Political Science.¹

This critique of social science in general, and of area studies and its associated expertise in particular, may have delighted the sceptic, and those whose view of social science was confined to the arid stratospheres of a narrowly conceived methodology, but it was itself seriously flawed. In particular, it set an immediate trap: faced with the charge of having been blind to the future, the western specialist, or the commentator from the region itself, might have been tempted to reply that, after all, they did *not* get things so wrong. Indeed, for many in the field of Middle Eastern studies, for whom explanations were made in terms of 'Islam' – this seen as a continuous and all-pervasive social and political entity, or in terms of the new guiding principle of the age, 'Culture' – there was no need to be modest. Surely, their general assumptions and predictions had held.

From this perspective, and whatever else may have changed in central Europe, or the whirling markets of East Asia, the Middle East region remained broadly as it was. Its state-state relations were, as ever, in turmoil. Religious discourse prevailed. It was up to the outside world to understand this region through such a cultural perspective. The bearded representatives of these religions, 'bearers' of an apparently invariant ideological instance, remained in full voice. Every self-serving selection of phrase of Tanakh, sunna and Holy Book was ready on the tongue, to be backed by the odd knife, bullet and whip if need be. And, of course, so the argument went, as any person with a mite of historical perspective, and who was not seduced by the idiocies of modern political theory, domestic or international, could see, the region remained in the grip of basic transgenerational processes, 'Rules of the Game' no less, or their equivalents.² These submerged but ascertainable verities, equal in longevity, as is implied in the word 'Rules', to, say, chess or polo, were invisible to mere social scientists, or those with a misguided sense of social or historical change, but they could be divined by a subtler mind, freed of modernist hubris.

One supposed route to such special knowledge of the Middle East lay through language. That reasonable competence in the language of a

¹ As retailed by my late LSE colleague, Philip Windsor.

² For a classic, methodologically quite unabashed, statement of this approach see L. Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game*, London: I. B. Tauris, 1984. Brown argues both for the *distinctiveness* of Middle Eastern politics, and for their *transhistorical continuity*, from the eastern question of the nineteenth century through to the present day. On both these, central, points his arguments are diametrically opposite to those underlying this study: let the reader decide which provides the more persuasive theoretical and explanatory approach!



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country or region that is studied is essential is an obvious, if now too often ignored, basis for any social science research, or broader human or current policy engagement. Language is also certainly one of the central ways in which history and culture are reflected, in contemporary life and ideas, and is, at the same time, a major form of human interaction. In it are inscribed past and present.

However, the philosophy of language that pervades much of the study of the Middle East asserts something more. Here language becomes not just the necessary but the sufficient condition for comprehending politics and society. This curious but pervasive idea is evident, for example, in the word 'Arabist', a term which implied that someone who knew Arabic could, by that very means, 'know' or intuit the social and political character of the country (the same was true of the terms, albeit less used, 'Persianist', 'Turkist', even 'Hebrewist' and no doubt finer gradations all the way to Himyaritic, Canaanite and Nabatean). Now, if 'Arabist' just means someone who has studied Arabic and is somewhat familiar with the history or contemporary politics of the Arab world it is a reasonable term. However, the word, much used of anyone with a serious interest in the Middle East who knows, for example, the difference between Iran and the Arabs, or Sunni and Shi'a, is, in epistemological and socio-linguistic terms, ridiculous, as are the debate and set of counter-arguments marshalled against it. The claim that knowledge of the Arabic language is equivalent to knowledge of a society rests, as a moment of attention to the general rules of the philosophy of science will show, on three absurd premises: first, that knowledge of a language as such gives knowledge of the country, and adequate understanding of its politics, or even, as residents of the Middle East as much as outsiders claim, some insight into the 'mind' of the Arab/Iraqi/Lebanese/Kurd or whoever; secondly, that indeed there is such a thing as a single 'Arab' language when it comes to spoken culture and vocabulary or grammar, something assumed by nationalists, and by many teachers of the language, but a linguistic sleight of hand achieved by calling all the, in reality, different languages spoken in the Arab world by the same name, 'Arabic'; and thirdly, that there

³ Yasir Suleiman, ed., Language and Society in the Middle East and North Africa: Studies in Variation and Identity, London: Curzon, 1999; Yasir Suleiman, The Politics of Arabic, London: Curzon, 2003; Fred Halliday, 'Words and States: the Politics of Language in the Middle East', chapter 4, 100 Myths about the Middle East (London: Saqi, 2005). Similar claims as to the oneness of two idioms, nationalist in aspiration and sentiment, but invalid by any independent linguistic or philological standards, are made with regard to the unity of the, at least, three distinct Kurdish languages, and that of ancient Hebrew, ivrit tanakhit, and the modern, reformulated (not revived) and contemporary language of Israel. By contrast, nationalists in other contexts confect differences of language when only differences of dialect, if that, operate - most notably Persian/Dari (Afghanistan)/Tajik, and Serbian/Croatian/Bosniac.



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is in some sense an Arab 'essence' to be known, that one can, in any significant way, and beyond some obvious shared historical reference points way back in time, for example, the death of the Prophet in AD 632, or the fall of the Ummayad empire in 750, find a history that is common to the *Arabs* as a whole, rather than to distinct regions, and, in contemporary terms, to the very different distinct Arab states (twenty-two in the Arab League in 2000).

Language is, therefore, certainly part of the study of any society; it helps to constitute power, identity and hierarchy as well as encode history. Yet language is only a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for understanding a country. To grasp its relation to the rest of social reality you need to have a historical and international context, and have studied some of the history, politics and sociology of a country. Indeed, you need to do this to understand the vocabulary and the resonances of history, and of power, in the language itself (the meanings of words such as, for example, 'state', 'nation', 'heritage', 'tradition', 'community', modular modern code words, but with somewhat different registers in every country).

The key to this problem of how to analyse the Middle East, or, indeed, anywhere else, is not, therefore, to swap insights, predictions and claims of deep-structural characteristics, or to argue that 'Islam' is an overarching explanatory category, or to overstate the explanatory powers of language. It is rather to question the very premises on which the argument about the 'failure' of Middle Eastern social science rests, namely, first, that is the job of social science to predict, and secondly, that the region, or any other part of the world, can be comprehended through taking an entity called 'culture', or some version of religious belief, or some linguistic 'essence', as a general explanatory factor, an independent variable.

First of all, prediction: assessing the future is a necessary part of life – psychologically, to make sense of one's everyday existence, plans and, as was dramatically highlighted world-wide after 11 September 2001, one's vital, everyday, sense of security. Some view of the future is also a necessary part of any organised social life – be it having a family, pursuing an education, running a business, a political party or an intelligence system. It provides, even if through a set of supremely unfalsifiable but enduring human thought systems, such as ancient vatic prophesy, the interpretation of dreams or astrology, a way that many people, including in the modern world, make sense of their lives.

However, even in natural science prediction is not as precise as is assumed: the most quantitatively confident predictive branch of social science is that of demography, a factor of immense importance for the coming decades in the Middle East. Yet even the demographers, if pressed



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off the record, admit that, while the mortality rates can be anticipated over three-quarters of a century, with birth rates there is only reasonable certainty over twenty-five years, in effect a generation. For its part, meteorology, let alone seismology, can make only vague predictions, quite insufficient, if you own a house in Turkey, Iran, Egypt or, for that matter, California, to calculate the risks of living or working there. As for evolutionary biology, we cannot know, nor indeed would we probably want to, what humans will look like in two or three million years.⁴

Far away from the natural sciences, in the necessarily uncertain world of human affairs and politics, the Middle East has given many examples of how even the most precise, or as they like to claim 'hard', social sciences are not really that capable. The most obvious area is that of oil prices. Nothing makes a fool so quickly of an economist, a minister of finance, a speculator or an economic forecaster than the unexpected reversals, or resistances, of oil prices – predictions of world price spikes being followed by crashes and depression, gloomy (or, if a consumer, cheerful) vistas of low prices for a generation being followed by sudden shortages, suddenly discovered but hitherto invisible 'bottlenecks' (this last a great cop-out of the falsified visionary).

As for quantified data in general, these are sometimes oversold. Quantification is essential for social science, and the latter has, quite rightly, aspired to measurement, and mathematical abstraction, since its inception in the nineteenth century. But there are limits to what quantification can address, even given proper data. Major comparative issues, such as

⁴ In all of this I am much influenced by the classics of the philosophy of science and of social science that I studied as a student: Rom Harré, The Philosophies of Science: an Introductory Survey, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972; Alan Ryan, The Philosophy of the Social Sciences, London: Macmillan, 1970; W. G. Runciman, Social Science and Political Theory, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965; E. H. Carr, What is History?, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962; later, A. F. Chalmers, What is This Thing Called Science?, second edition, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1982; Eric Hobsbawm, On History, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997. These inject respect for the study of method. Much has been made of epistemological 'breakthroughs', even 'revolutions', in International Relations, Middle East studies and so forth in recent decades, of all of which I am sceptical, not because I am sceptical of theory in general, or of the need to be literate in issues in the philosophy of social science, but for the opposite reason, namely that it is necessary to do this work well, to read what others who specialise in the field have already written and not to rush about reinventing the wheel. Core guidance on the appropriate relation of method and social science is found in: Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, London: University of Chicago Press, 1961; C. Wright Mills, The Sociological Imagination, London: Oxford University Press, 1959; Ernest Gellner, Postmodernism, Reason and Religion, London: Routledge, 1992. For judicious reflection on IR theory and history see Thomas W. Smith, History and International Relations, London: Routledge, 1999. In one sentence, echoing Gellner, Postmodernism: those who, quite properly, want to do philosophy of social science should go and work in a philosophy department.



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the causes of war, the rise of nationalism, the durability of states, the bases of co-operation, the consequences of terrorism, the preconditions of democracy, do not lend themselves to precise quantification. There are also, even in areas of apparent precision, large areas of guesswork and inference, all of which is compounded, in the case of an area like the Middle East, by the simple unreliability of data on even those broad public issues where it is possible elsewhere – population, foreign reserves, oil income, state expenditure, income inequality. The most apparently secure Middle Eastern statistic of all is the daily oil output of producer states – 3.2 million barrels per day or whatever. Yet there are at least four rival sources for such figures, none of which has adequate authority.

The simple rebuttal of our critics is therefore not to claim some dubious if seemingly precise social science foresight. It is rather to question the very claim that social science should, in some vain and misplaced attempt, try to imitate natural science. Such a rebuttal can also assert, with an open agenda that should keep us all busy with the Middle East or anywhere else, that the task of social science, IR included, is something else, and richer, namely to *explain*, in as persuasive a manner as possible, what has occurred and to identify what constitute significant contemporary trends. This explanatory function, rather than grabbing at superficially sage but, on closer examination, banal platitudes about a reified 'Islam', the specificities of the 'region', and the atavistic and irremediable ways of its inhabitants, is the appropriate touchstone for social science work on the Middle East. It is this that this book, and the major social science works of regional study, seek to address.

It is not the future of the Middle East, but its past, that, with this in mind, poses the greatest challenge. It was, perhaps, little surprise in the face of the region's events of the past century, that the confidence of social science might appear somewhat shaky. Everyone can remember one or two, probably more, occasions on which the region's politics, all of it indeed, had been 'transformed' for ever by some new event, be this a disaster, war or revolution. This could be some sudden burst of embracing and oneiric posturing in front of the cameras, and of potential donors, or some breakthrough in the political and ideological systems: in recent times, 1991, the liberation (for such, for all its limitations, it was) of Kuwait from Iraq; 1993, the Oslo peace accords between the Arabs and the Israelis, and the Rabin–Arafat handshake on the White House lawn; 11 September 2001, with the attack on the World Trade Center in New York; and 2003, the start of a new 'democratic' epoch following the occupation of Iraq in the March–May war: these were,

⁵ For an incisive critique of apparent numerical precision even in OECD countries see Harry Gelber, *Sovereignty through Interdependence*, London: Kluwer, 1997, chapter 11, 'Appendix: Control by Numbers?'



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at the time of writing the book, the most obvious candidates for such watershed moments. Those with a longer memory, even one that was shaped as was mine in the 1960s, could add to this list: June 1967, the Arab-Israeli war that apparently turned the Middle East upside down; the 1973 October war and quadrupling of oil prices; 1979, the Iranian revolution, and the rise of radical Islam. The list could, however, be stretched further back. The 1908 Young Turk revolution was arguably the greatest turning point in the modern history of the Middle East. 6 It was this event which set off political and military conflict in the Balkan wars (1912-13) and led, through the events in Sarajevo in June 1914, to World War I, then on to redrawing of the map of the modern Middle East in 1918–26 – through British and French colonial demarcation, on the one hand, and, in the Peninsula, the rise of the modern Yemeni and Saudi states, the first independent Arab countries in modern times, on the other. Other transitional periods were 1945-9, with the British and French withdrawal in formal terms from the region, and the emergence of Israel, against Arab opposition; the Suez crisis of 1956; and the Iraqi and related Jordanian and Lebanese crises of 1958.⁷

The critic could have replied that indeed these events did not lead to a brave, peaceful and democratic Middle East. The events of 1908

⁶ It can be argued that, in terms of both historic impact *and* the laying down of an agenda, a set of major and still unresolved political and social questions for the whole region, the Turkish revolution of 1908-23 was the most important upheaval in modern Middle Eastern history. These questions included the relation between modern European scientific and secular ideas and religion; the role of the armed forces in politics; the construction of a modern state in a multi-ethnic society; the role of women in social and economic life; the modernisation of language; the resolution of state territory and nationalist aspiration; the modernisation of education; and, not least, the definition and flourishing of a supposedly 'national', but in glorious and ever-changing reality cosmopolitan, cuisine. All subsequent Middle Eastern revolutions have given their answers to the questions raised, but none has resolved them. If future relations between the Middle East/the Islamic world and the west are to be based on a solid foundation, then the fate of the still ongoing Turkish experience may be not just influential, but decisive. The particular international/diplomatic focus of this process, Turkey's possible accession to the European Union, is but the visible part of a much broader political, economic and cultural interaction. Significantly, the regional revolution that most resembled the Turkish in its resolute secular modernism, and its impatience to catch up with a 'western' model, was that of the People's Democratic Party in Afghanistan, 1978-92; it was this one which, of course, led to the most ferocious backlash, a reaction in both senses of the word, not to be forgotten, that the 'west' energetically supported. On this last point see Fred Halliday, Two Hours that Shook the World, London: Saqi, 2001.

On 1958 see Roger Owen and Roger Louis, eds., 1958, London: I. B. Tauris, 2002. David M. Lesch, 1979: the Year that Shaped the Modern Middle East, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001, signals three events of that year as constitutive – the Iranian revolution of February, the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty of March and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December – to which he could have added the inter-Yemeni war of February and the decisive intra-Ba'th purge by Saddam Hussein in Iraq in July. His overall category 'annualisation' could have been strengthened by examination of the concept 'conjuncture', used in both Marxist and Annales writings.



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were followed by nationalist conflict between Turk, Arab, Armenian and Kurd, and the bloody wars of the Balkans – this was why the year was, arguably, the decisive step in the onset of the century of wars and revolutions. The new state map of 1918-26 did endure, but within it older affiliations, transnational tribal and family links on the one hand, and new radical forces such as nationalism, fundamentalist Islam and mass protest on the other, were on the march. As ever, though, the professors were not so quick to join the unemployment queue. Some proclaimed, in a fine burst of transhistorical equanimity, or perhaps complacence, that all this showed that nothing had really changed and that world politics, the Middle East and the affairs of men could only be understood in terms of some timeless maxims: the balance of power (of which there was precious little sight in the post-1991 world), the struggle for dominance, the rise and fall of empires, the clash of civilisations, the anarchy of states, even, a threadbare and fatuous generalisation if it were not so dangerous, the conflict between Islam and Christendom/the west.

The partisans of 'historic' turning points could, therefore, find almost one moment a decade into which they could project their hopes and forecasts; but, for as many such 'turning points' as the former divined, there were the protagonists of reserve, be they world-historical and pessimistic believers in the folly of human progress and modernity, or the equally ferocious and unmovable tribes of regional identity, specificity and, a great favourite, 'faultlines' (a complete and always tautological historical fancy that has become, sadly, one of the dominant global-analytic tropes of late twentieth-century international analysis, à la Samuel Huntington, Robert Kaplan and their clan). Thus, for every 'turning point' there came, inexorably it seemed, a historic reverse, or reassertion of timeless verities. This was perhaps never more so than in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution in 1979 when, as social theorists and radical Muslims alike proclaimed a new epoch of Shi'ite revolution and Islamic transnationalism, the regrouped exponent of 'Islam' as an explanatory category and of the 'Muslim mindset' came back to sweep all analytic challenges before them. These were replete with sage references to the Battle of Qadissiya, the fates of the Shi'ite founders Ali and Hussein, the allegedly never-ending wars of Ottomans and Safavis. This ahistorical outburst was all filtered through the eternal but unique etymologically determined ideations through which 'Muslims', supposedly identifiable political and social (sometimes even economic!) actors, engaged, or rather failed to engage, with the modern world.⁸ As if Muslims are not allowed to change.

Much was made after 1979, by writers who knew little of Iran, of the 'radical' nature of Shi'ism, ignoring the fact that like all sects and religions Shi'ism allowed of multiple readings and that, in Iran as in Iraq, many clergy were political quietists.



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Into all these regional battles rode the outriders or vanguards of other broader, global and/or epistemological campaigns - Islam and Christendom, arid and agrarian societies, nomads and settlers, 'Civilisations' locked in the timeless circularity of 'Challenge and Response' (another transhistorical catchall), Semites and, well, Semites again (each of whom claimed they could not hate or kill the other because they were all descendants of the same son of Noah), of course Semites and Aryans, in the Peninsula, the sons of Adnan and the sons of Qahtan. More recently, we have had a long list of set-piece debates: 'traditional' versus 'modern' society, elite versus mass politics, men with holy texts versus those on horseback, socialists versus monarchists, socialists (Nasserists) versus socialists (Ba'thists), each pitted against various forms of Marxist (particularly the subjects of my Ph.D., the South Yemenis, who at least coined the world historically unique slogans 'Workers and Peasants, Fishermen and Nomads, Unite!' and 'Arm the Women!'), munafiqin versus molhidin, shu'ubis versus taghutis, Mu'awiya and Yazid against Zoroastrian Magi, crowns versus turbans, and, far from least in the lists of recurrent conflicts, rulers and ruled, rich and poor, landlords and peasants, women and patriarchs, even, in an idiom now seemingly more dated that the hegemonic phrases of seventh-century Mecca and Medina, workers and peasants. Finally, and never to be silenced, certainly not when short of historic detail, textual precision or linguistic capacity, the most dominant, entrenched and, in my view, misconceived and diversionary regional epistemological combat of all, that of 'Orientalists' versus their critics.⁹

Others were, however, waiting in the wings not to rethink area studies but to try, once again, to bury it. This disdain for regional expertise was an enterprise in which many had engaged over the previous decades, in Europe these tending to be historians or cultural essentialists, in the USA quantifiers, behaviourists, methodological obsessives without due concern for epistemological or historiographic content. The latter wanted to reduce social science to the teaching of a banal, but authoritarian, set of methodologies, and to ignore the very real, and lived, differences between the OECD rich and the increasingly rancorous rest of the world. These foes of area studies, purveyors of vapid taxonomies and inflated quantification, took the stalling of the analytic and area studies

On this last, see my "Orientalism" and its Critics', chapter 7 of Islam and the Myth of Confrontation, London: I. B. Tauris, 1996, based on a 1993 BRSMES Lecture at SOAS. The debate on this issue, for all its 'anti-imperialism', was on both sides dominated by an introspective US academic narcissism. Far superior to the normally cited combatants is the work of Maxime Rodinson, unabashed 'Orientalist' and 'Maxxist', Europe and the Mystique of Islam, London: University of Washington Press, 1991; original French edition 1980.



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specialists of the 1980s and 1990s as an excuse to escalate their promotion of some particular, arguably more 'scientific', theoretical approach: rational choice theory, constructivism, longitudinal surveys of things that the more sceptical doubted could ever be measured in the first place (for example, the how and when of one community of peoples trying to massacre the others), the various tribes of post-modernism. The latter, *ansar*, or loyal followers, of discourse, but negligent of the real components of power, were, despite their supposedly ironic and multivalent orientation, vying for supremacy in this field.

Such were, from the vantage point of the western academy but also much of the Middle Eastern discussion, some of the dominant intellectual trends of the last part of the twentieth century. 10 The Middle East was far from being the only region of study where this malaise of methodology and over-specialism was to hit, but there were certainly reasons, even avoiding what I term 'regional narcissism' (the belief that the whole world spends all its time plotting and worrying about the Middle East, and that everything that happens in the region is somehow dissimilar to that which takes place elsewhere, and is singularly evil or angelic as a result), to feel that the history of the late twentieth century had in some way set upon the Middle East with particular vengeance. There were three main reasons for this. The first was to do with the predominant role of the issue of security. Security, of states and in particular of rulers, and coercion, or the plausible threat thereof, lies at the core of all political and international orders. In the modern Middle East, however, as in the Latin America of the 1970s and 1980s, or East Asia during the Cold War, this predominance of security, internal and/or external, has been greater, and more visible, than in the developed world, where a 'democratic peace', idealised but nonetheless real, has prevailed.

In the decade from the late 1980s to the end of the 1990s, moreover, a number of what were termed in the idiom of the time 'regional conflicts' were brought, through some mixture of exhaustion, arm-twisting and abandonment by the participants of their maximal goals, to conclusions, even if imperfect ones¹¹: this was true of the wars of southern Africa (Mozambique, South Africa itself, Angola, Namibia), of Central America (El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala) and of East Asia (Cambodia, East Timor). In the Middle East the record of these last two decades of the

Much has, rightly, been made of the need to create a 'non-western' approach to social science in general, and IR in particular. But as the book and journal literature to date shows, this has not materialised.

¹¹ Fred Halliday, 'Peace Processes in the 1990s: a Mixed Record', in Michael Cox, Adrian Guelke and Fiona Stephen, eds., A Farewell to Arms? From 'Long War' to Long Peace in Northern Ireland, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.