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New Middle East, New Insecurities and the Limits of Liberation Geography

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Introduction

The recent uprisings in the Middle East have highlighted – once again and in dramatic fashion – the confluence of understandings of security, representations of danger and practices of legitimation that shape our variegated geopolitical landscape. The political landscape of the Middle East is changing, and with it many of the rote certainties about how things are done or ought to be done *in* and *with* the region. Local regimes of power can no longer justify to national constituencies and international audiences the necessity of autocratic rule, states of emergency and suspension of rights. 'The West' confronts the hypocrisies and moral discounts of its own foreign policy choices, including how its definition of regional security supported the kinds of regimes, policies and human rights violations that Western states traditionally define themselves against.

New forms of intervention and engagement have generated new ways of looking at and talking about politics in the region. The 'global street' has enlarged the possibility of action beyond the 'ritualized routines' of the political (Sassen, 2011). Blogging and social networking have bypassed official and centrally organized forms of mass communication and representation, and have shown the limitations of state propaganda and public diplomacy. They have supported the emergence of new actors with enhanced authority and revolutionary capital, competing with established actors traditionally representing authority and stability. Protest movements and the incessant activist visualization of violence and dissent have solidified civil resistance, which escaped traditional crisis management and brought about unexpected transformations on the ground.

A lot has changed and a lot is still changing in this 'sensitive' geopolitical region. The legitimacy of old regimes, presented as models of regional stability and progress, has evaporated into thin air after the uprisings. The regimes of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak have not only crumbled, but been criminalized. Yet the legitimacy of newly established regimes is far from guaranteed, as continued protests, violence, assassinations, resignations and recriminations in Tunisia and Egypt illustrate.

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As we write, a coup d'etat is unfolding in Egypt. It has overthrown a democratically elected president, yet whether to call the developments a coup or something else has become a contested issue between local sympathizers of rival sides and perplexed foreign governments that seek to balance interests and ethics while figuring out their options. For some, the revolution in Egypt was already something of a silent coup, given that it was the army's withdrawal of support for the Mubarak regime that precipitated the latter's fall and guaranteed the democratic transition. For others, the turn of events could not have been more ironic, as key democracy figures surrounded General Abdul Fatah al-Sisi in support of the overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi and the military takeover of government. However one sides in this debate, it is clear that Egypt's experiment with democracy is becoming more complex and more threatening as different versions of democratization are being floated by rival stakeholders.

The bloody civil war in Syria, periodically moving into Lebanon, has continued for over two years, and various international actors are still considering what might be the best way of resolving it; the legality or wisdom of arming the insurgents; the degree to which they constitute a single credible political subject; how to factor in chemical weapons, Hezbollah and Israel; how best to engage armed and potentially vulnerable minorities linked to the regime; and indeed whether responsibility to protect civilians should be activated in this case and whether intervention is necessary or feasible.

In Libya, where the responsibility to protect civilians was the celebrated cause for intervention via UN Security Council Resolution 1973, the situation is still volatile following the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi's regime. Intervention in support of the Benghazi rebels has left an ambivalent, if not bitter, legacy of democratization in the region, and it appears that the massive flow of weapons in and out of the country has contributed significantly to changing the Malian conflict from a low-intensity to a high-intensity one, with fears that it is already spreading into the wider Sahel region. Abdelaziz Bouteflika's regime in Algeria has also faced protests, though not on the same scale as in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, and future developments within Algeria's Berber community and Islamist movement will certainly be influenced by wider developments in the Sahel region. In Morocco, the initial protests against the regime swiftly brought about constitutional reforms that reduced the powers of King Mohammed, yet the protests continue over mainly economic and social issues.

On the other side of the region, the Jasmine and Pearl uprisings in Yemen and Bahrain, respectively, allowed the Gulf Cooperation Council to intervene – not uncontroversially, mediating in the former case and sending troops to secure the regime in the latter. Though these uprisings brought about a transfer of power in Yemen and public commitment to human rights changes in Bahrain, the situation is unstable and protests continue. There have been less violent and less reported protests in Oman, Jordan and Kuwait, often intermingling economic and political demands, and in these countries the promises of regime reform seem to have contained the situation for the time being, though criticism for the lack of progress abounds. The Saudi regime has delivered, yet again, only cosmetic changes with regard to human rights. For the time being, it has managed to stifle the protest voices of women, the Shia minority in the east of the country and other dissidents, but for how long only time will tell. The Palestinians' 'ambiguous spring' has been more difficult to decipher, given the diarchy of regimes in Gaza and the West Bank, their limited ability to govern, and the fact that there are ongoing daily protests and resistance against the Israeli occupation.

Finally, there have been important developments in countries located in the geographical and cultural borders of the Middle East. In Iran, the recent election to the presidency of the reformist

Hassan Rowhani has been viewed as the culmination of the Green Movement protests or 'Iranian awakening' that followed the disputed elections of 2009. Whether Rowhani will prove to be the new Gorbachev in both domestic and international politics, as some believe, waits to be seen. In Turkey, the recent Gezi Park/Taksim Square protests have surprised many observers who did not expect such protests to occur in a country that has experienced both impressive demilitarization of state structures and exceptional economic progress in the midst of a global economic crisis. They have led some to suggest that a 'Turkish Spring' or 'Kurdish Spring' might be on its way or, differently analysed, that democratization also entails resistances to the colonization of local habitats and the micromanagements of life – which Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government appeared totally insensitive towards; or, indeed, that turmoil in Turkey and in the region as a whole should be read and analysed from within the context of global protests and occupy movements that vocalize dissatisfaction and indignation with established political structures and decisionmaking processes.

From liberation theology to liberation geography

What follows from the above is a series of difficult political questions about what has happened and what ought to be done. A wide range of conceptual shifts, geopolitical reorientations, and cultural and social upheavals all combine to generate serious predicaments for the region. Understanding, confronting and resolving them is not easy and is qualified and complicated by group sympathies and political commitments. To intervene or not to intervene? And if the former, how to do so? What kind of security to furnish in this or that situation? Would it always be or could it ever be less selective and more holistic – that is, not just securing this 'something' or that 'someone'? How to deal with the fact that the securities of some are bound to become the insecurities of others? What is the human impact of insecurity discourses and security actions in the region? The newly voiced experiences of the political in the Middle East trigger new understandings of security and insecurity, governance and abandonment, neighbourhood and solidarity, colonialism and postcolonialism, liberalism and order, and reveal a new calculus of risk and uncertainty. They also entail new negotiations of values once imposed as sacrosanct or universal, or only valid in particular 'non-Middle Eastern' contexts. All these complicate the conditions under which security is imaged, articulated and attained.

The representation of Islam/Islamism as a security issue and its attitudinal reorientations in local and global contexts are especially important in this regard. To be sure, the securitization of Islam has a long history that spans the centuries, and in the Western imagination and public discourse it legitimated a series of interventions in the region from the crusades onwards. After World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, however, and following the soft and hard colonialism that European powers installed in the post-Ottoman political space, political Islam was supposed to have been tamed, primarily through the creation of sovereign territorial units and the patronage of regimes that were sympathetic to Western influence and interests. Yet Islamic ideology, being both 'matrix and worldview' for all human activity (Nasr, 2003: 26), meant that the separation between political and religious activity was difficult to sustain, and this picture of tamed Islam was eventually shattered by the Iranian Revolution in 1979, which was as unexpected for policymakers at that time as were the Arab Spring uprisings more recently.

The emancipatory discourse and symbolism that emanated out of the Iranian Revolution was novel and seductive. Before its hijacking by the clerical elite that installed a 'totalitarian democracy' in Iran, its intellectual founders articulated a most fascinating version of political Islam as a

liberation theology. Through the inspirational social philosophy of figures like Ali Shariati (1993), who distinguished between the 'religion of legitimation' and the 'religion of revolution', Islam – just like Christian liberation theology in Latin America – was radically reinterpreted via Marxist, anticolonial and existentialist perspectives. These appealed not only to religious groups, but also to secularist ones dissatisfied with the political corruption and Western neocolonial infiltration of the Pahlavi dynasty (Dabashi, 2006).

During the second Cold War (1979–1985), the Iranian Revolution effectively presented an Islamo-Marxist alternative of 'permanent revolution', or Shiite anti-establishment 'discontent', ready for export to all countries with majority Muslim populations. It was, therefore, inevitably perceived by the West and its regional allies as a major source of regional and potentially global insecurity. Yet the crude misappropriation of this ideology by the clerical regime in Iran and its radical offshoots in Lebanon and elsewhere did more to make it unpopular and threatening for the secular and Sunni Muslim masses, while the rhetoric of personal and communal liberation was progressively put to dark and authoritarian uses. So, when Iranian leaders and 'revolutionary guards' speak these days of the 'Islamic awakening' in the Middle East rather than of the 'Arab Spring', they seem to do so as already awakened and enlightened pioneers whose political theology has been justified by the recent events rather than, more appropriately, as a regime that has betrayed the promise of Islamic liberation theology. At the same time, other rearticulations of Islamic discourse and politics elsewhere in the Islamic world offered ground for new legitimations and delegitimations of Islamic politics in the region (Mirbagheri, 2012; Sheikh, 2004).

If Islam provides a matrix of legitimation for a variety of more or less threatening regimes, as well as for political activism and revolution against them, the 'matrix of war' and intervention under conditions of global liberal governance (Dillon and Reid, 2001; Jabri, 2006) provides the other major source of insecurity in the region. Consequently, the geopolitical particularities of the region should be taken on board, and crucial in this regard is the very notion of the 'Middle East', newly recast and revalorized. Of course, different terms beyond the 'Middle East' are used by different authors and officials, and some can be more appropriate in certain contexts than others: such as MENA (the Middle East and North Africa), the Arab world, the Arab-Islamic world or, subregionally, the Gulf, the Levant, the Maghreb, the Sahel, and so on. But we think that none illustrates better than the 'Middle East' the strategic valorization and security concern that this area has had initially for 'Western' and now globalized understandings of world order.

The concept of the Middle East was imagined during the apogee of colonialism. Naval strategist Alfred Mahan (1902: 237), who claimed to have coined the term in 1902, saw it as a British political puzzle and imperial predicament:

> The Middle East, if I may adopt a term which I have not seen, will some day need its Malta, as well as its Gibraltar. . . . The British Navy should have the facility to concentrate in force, if occasion arises, about Aden, India and the Gulf.

The Middle East thus appeared from the very beginning as a space of colonial facilitation, a base for controlling a largely undefined region 'in the middle of' the so-called Far East (i.e. China and neighbouring regions) and the so-called Near East (i.e. the weakened Ottoman Empire and neighbouring regions). What that *middle* might be could be shrunk or expanded for different strategists at different periods, meaning that the region could include in its enlarged cartography also countries such as Greece, Somalia, Ethiopia and Pakistan. In short, the Middle East has been both a eurocentric invention and a contested term, as has already been pointed out (see e.g. Bilgin, 2004; Davison, 1960; Koppes, 1976), and from this *outside* perspective a peculiarly

Western security concern. To choose to talk today about security *in* and *of* the Middle East – and not to substitute it with a more 'appropriate' geographical term – is for us a recognition of the legacy of security imaginings and investments that defined the Old and haunt the New Middle East – security imaginings and investments that are on the one hand *foreign* to the region, yet on the other hand invariably *resisted*, *domesticated* and *hybridized* by power regimes and people in the region.

From this perspective, one can only be sympathetic to Hamid Dabashi's (2012) thesis that the Arab Spring revised the moral map of the 'Middle East' and significantly troubled the boundaries of East/West and North/South. Dabashi seems to move away from the notion of liberation theology and suggests that we now live in an epoch of 'liberation geography'. Still, how far this celebratory call can take us remains a key question.

Dabashi (2012: 6) has suggested that

> the events unfolding from Morocco to Syria, and from Iran to Yemen, are effectively altering the very geography of how we think and fathom the world. This is no longer the middle of anybody's East, or the north of any colonial divide in Africa.

He makes his case for a liberation geography that is no longer based on the *ethnic* divisions of the world, but rather on the '*ethos* of a collective awareness of the fragility of the globe' (Dabashi, 2012: 56). For Dabashi, the Arab Spring is the conduit for these alternative political identities which enhance new cartographic imaginings of self and other, reformulations of the familiar and the domestic, and of cross-national spaces that help us to extend feelings of sympathy and solidarity.

But to what extent is this move towards an ethical recognition of global fragility truly experienced? Can we really say that this region or any subregion is no longer the middle of anybody's East? Whose East? Whose strategic and postcolonial legacy is Dabashi brushing over with his liberation geography? Is liberation geography just emancipatory or could it also be strategic? Could it not proclaim *ethos* yet serve *ethnos*?

A short historical detour may help. Note that before Mahan's strategic conceptualization of the broad and undefined area he referred to as the Middle East, the smaller area of the Levant was opened up and became a base for the Europeans through the notion of extraterritoriality that was accepted by the Ottoman Empire through treaties of capitulation. As in the East Asia Treaty ports, in many coastal cities of the Ottoman Empire, *imperial* liberation geography allowed Europeans to take liberties, to live jurisdictionally in the Ottoman Empire as though they were living in the territory of their own countries. In other words, Europeans ensured their own strategic rights and interests through exclusive consular courts and territorial zones that enacted a different geographic locality. There was an interesting ethical debate about whether there was a need for separate jurisdictions for people of different religions who settled in the Ottoman Empire, but there were also specific national agendas and interests that can be missed if one simply concentrates on the former.

Political projects and Orientalist tendencies aside, what the consular system strongly supported were the great coastal cities of the Levant (Alexandria, Beirut, Smyrna and many others), which encapsulated a novel cosmopolitan space (Mansel, 2012): a 'middle ground' where identity, preservation and coexistence were negotiated among different groups, a third space rising over and above the despotism of the Ottoman Empire and the monoreligious dominance of central and northern Europe. Strategic actions and great-power interests notwithstanding, a new ethos and way of being may be secured irrespective of imperial intentions, delivering freedom and cultural pluralism on the ground.

As in the past, one needs therefore to remain vigilant of liberation discourses. Liberation geography – like liberation theology – can turn both a utopian and a dystopian face. The New Middle East can invariably become a site of liberation yet also a zone of subordination. One needs thus to recognize that securing ethnic claims can undermine an ethical disposition, and vice versa. However, one also needs to recognize, contra Dabashi, that when activated politically, any successful new ethos, be it local or ecumenical, will in time create new ethnoscapes and collective divisions – and not to recognize this belatedly, ex post facto, as Dabashi (2013) seems to have done following the Egyptian coup through an open call to 'Egyptian brothers and sisters' to unite in order to save their revolution:

> You did it for all of us – humans, Arabs, Iranians, Turks, Afghans … Muslims, non-Muslims, men, women, young, old, frightened, hopeful. And yet, your division, your bitter and bruising and false divisions between pro-Morsi and anti-Morsi, between religious and secular, is threatening to sully your world historic revolution.

Though Dabashi (2013) may have had the best of intentions, it is a gross idealization and insensitive to view the violence currently produced out of these rival ethnoscapes as 'the historic fate of your revolution, the pains of it the *birth pangs* of our delivery to posterity, to a better world, a world of our ancestral dreaming'.

This is not to underestimate the new 'ethos of a collective awareness' concerning global fragility that can cross national borders. From a balcony at Semiramis Intercontinental, overlooking Tahrir Square, one can have a geo-moral deja vu and think that a protest of indignation that turns violent is not unlike one at Syntagma Square in Athens. But, going down to Tahrir Square or Syntagma Square or Taksim Square, and so on, one cannot but encounter a number and sometimes a plethora of *ethnoscapes.* That is to say, one meets surprising groups and unexpected alliances that are not inspired by the same *ethos*, which are only brought together by the protest and a common feeling of injustice, and which in the not too distant future will part ways and join opposing camps.

That political fragility, those less visible geographies of the square or interethnic relations of the multitude, should also be reflected upon and taken on board. Becoming sensitive to the *interethnic* in the multitude, not necessarily in contrast to but complementing the revolutionary agency accorded it in recent critical studies (Hardt and Negri, 2005), cultivates an *ethical* appreciation of the disparate and conflicting aims of uprisings and revolutions – that is, how such aims are bound to breed insecurities and securitizations. To paraphrase Žižek (2013) on the perenniality of revolutionary failures, one should realize that failure extends beyond the problematic application of noble principles, like democracy, and is indeed tragically inherent in the principles themselves, which can never in the longer term eliminate *all* the threats, risks and frustrations that lead people to an uprising. This realization can be a big step in political and security education in the New Middle East and beyond.

Outline of the special issue

The articles that make up this special issue belong to a first generation of the analyses trying to make sense of the new political geography emerging after the Arab Spring (see e.g. the special forum of *Globalizations*, guest edited by Anna Agathangelou and Nevzat Soguk (2011)). They give support to the hypothesis that the 'Middle East', 'geopolitics', the 'Arab world' and other canonical concepts of Middle East security studies are put under pressure by changing notions and legitimizations of authority, new representations of danger, new forms of communication and communicative violence and, not least, mutating concepts of and criteria for intervention. These articles collectively circle in on the nature and function of uncertainty and point out new forms and modes

of international governance relative to the Middle East. The result is, among other things, a collective reflection on the inadequacy of the conventional analyses of power, coalitions, communities and constituencies.

Neoliberal governmentality and its recasting as an analytic tool for understanding the movements of the Arab Spring is the focus of the analysis of Halit M. Tagma, Elif Kalaycioglu and Emel Akcali. Like most of the contributers, the authors take exception to structures of power and legitimacy that place a unified global geopolitical structure, most often European but also American, at its centre. This basic misprision generates and sustains others. The article resumes the thread, launched by Hamid Dabashi, about the course of the ideology of Western liberalism, observing that the form and structure of the latter is often very different from the diverse threads of evolution of Islamic or Arabic cultures.

A new constellation of gender and activism is identified and analysed in Elisabeth Johansson-Nogués's contribution on the participation of Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan women in the Arab Spring uprisings. However, the research reveals that women's options for participation are fragmented across the region. Any general approach to addressing the question of democratic participation is inhibited by the range of different forms democracy takes across the region and as brought forth in political, cultural, religious and linguistic variations. Hegemonic structures are neither simple nor general, but rather play out differently as a function of rights and juridical cultures, themselves subject to changes in gendered value systems.

In his contribution to the issue, Hussein Banai problematizes the very notions of democracy and democratization at the heart of 'mainstream instrumentalist arguments' about democracy and the 'solidarity' it engenders. He points out that the struggle for democracy at the heart of the Arab Spring uprisings is not identical to the search for democratic legitimacy. Indeed, the two types of reform follow different paths. Banai's analysis replaces result-oriented notions of democracy with a conception centred on solidarity, based on the notions of non-interference, inclusivity and reflexivity, whose aim it is to bridge the fragmentation of concepts of democracy across the region.

In their analysis of Turkey's discourse of security relative to the Middle East, Aylin Güney and Nazif Mandacı, discover a new and evolving 'meta-geography', a set of political codes that structure the imaginary geography of the region. Using the methods of critical geography, their study shows how an imaginary geography of the Middle East and North Africa has accompanied the development of the AKP and its use of power since 2002. The impact of the AKP on the formulation of a Turkish policy on the Broader Middle East and North Africa has essentially changed the Middle East imaginary beyond Turkey. Traditional Turkish foreign policy issues are thus interlinked with a moving imaginary of national and regional identity, self and other, itself inseparable from the larger identity debate that situates Turkey relative to the EU, and the EU in a constellation with the Middle East.

Neoliberalism and the discourse of liberal governmentality is also the guiding theme of François-Xavier Plasse-Couture's contribution to the special issue, here in the analysis of what he calls 'sovereign violence'. The new model of sovereign violence that is observable in the context of the Arab Spring is characterized by a porous relation between the inside and the outside of sovereignty. Plasse-Couture shows that violence is not a simple tool of the state, but that its intensity and form varies widely according to varying war imaginaries. This makes it possible to link together sources of and justifications for violence exerted by the sovereign, through its abandonment of populations.

In their contribution to the issue, Benjamin Muller and Samer Abboud show that the logic of exceptionalism has distinct relevance for efforts to understand the politics of the Arab Spring. By

focusing on the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), set up through UN Security Council Resolution 1757, they clarify the mode and structure of legitimacy that supports the exceptional nature of the tribunal and reflect upon the exclusions and suspensions made in the context of this extraordinary juridical operation. They show how the exceptionalism of the STL is essentially coded for a context that does not map onto the region where it is applied, opening questions not only about the legitimacy of the STL, but also about the generality of the Security Council resolution that supports it.

Maja Touzari Greenwood and Ole Wæver present and analyse recent work done in the field of securitization theory on the question of the applicability of the theory to non-Western settings. Building upon an intensive interaction between the Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo and the Centre for Advanced Security Theory in 2010, the authors develop a distinct set of conclusions about the scope and reach of the theory. They conclude that challenges remain for the adaptation of securitization theory to non-Western contexts, but that this development must be critically tested along three lines: in terms of intensities of legitimization of the securitizations; more flexibility and sensitivity relative to the question of levels, especially when the novelty of the level of actors in the Arab uprising was so significant; and a revisiting of the securitization theory's theory of politics, adaptable to the new political structures that became evident during the Egyptian revolutionary moment.

In conclusion, Odysseas Christou and Constantinos Adamides analyse the Arab Spring through a focus on the natural resources of the region, while detailing the securitization processes that link those resources to the dynamics of international security. The article links the overall movement of contestation of the Arab Spring with the discourses generated to make it meaningful, legitimate or, in some cases, illegitimate. The authors apply securitization theory in order to map out the limits of the theory and to expose the hegemonic or Euro-Atlantic underpinnings of the conventional interpretations of the uprisings. They find securitization theory typically lacking in an understanding of the uncertainty that is a key to grasping the movements of the region. This uncertainty is most directly observable in relation to the scramble for energy resources and the arguments surrounding energy security on which it is based – and that ultimately fail to explain it.

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