

‘International Relations’ in/about Arab Middle East Epistemic Erasure Praxis

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Abstract

One of the strategic ambiguities in studying International Relations (IR) of Middle East and North Africa is still the theoretical ‘vacuum’ and parochialism problematizing its academic engagement in knowledge production worldwide. The abysmal disparities in academic activities and scholarship outputs reveal the global North domines, studies and narrates on behalf the world. This hegemony has occulted and marginalized the diversity of perspectives in world politics legitimizing a ‘scientific’ representation with an unconventional authority. In this vein, the IR knowledge in/about Arab world dismisses the conditions under which knowledge has been generated as the researchers’ praxis is not clearly positioned within the Arab world they study.

Keywords: IR; MENA; knowledge production; epistemic erasure; positionality.

Introduction:

The object of this study is to explore the problems addressed by the ‘Arab Middle East’ AME¹ scholars and specialists in International Relations (IR) paradigms arena, and how the reading of this region (Arab Middle East and North Africa) is patterned by hegemonic mainstreams situating the Euro-American conceptions as Western dominant approaches

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¹ We aim to denote the Middle East and North Africa (MENA the Western centered labeling) in our research jointly with Arab Middle East to delineate the ethno-linguistic pattern of knowledge articulation in the region of MENA vis-à-vis the hegemonic (solely) English language in the IR discipline.

of IR. This dominance has occulted and marginalized the diversity of world affairs perspectives legitimizing the 'scientific' representation based on otherness in knowledge production favoring the Western reading of world affairs. Parallely, the study attempts to (possible) acquiring *agency* in ontological and epistemological terms of politics and knowledge production. The starting points of this problematic are illustrated in theses interrogations any scholar and specialist must make:

What are IR theoretical sources and foundations while studying MENA?

What are the forms and expressions in which the Orientalism does persist nowadays?

Is it possible to think the International Relations of the Middle East beyond the dominant paradigmatic mainstreams?

Why does MENA region is still passive and norm-taker in politics?

How does coloniality and its power matrix work in knowledge and political praxis?

The now problematic of conventional International Relations is its narrow focus on the great powers and security based on the ascendance of neo-liberal paradigm shaping the doing politics on international and national spheres, dissimulating and overlooking the peripheralization of global effects caused by parochialistic conceptions.

The thematic integration of non-Western paradigms into IR as an academic task, is still wretched at global scale, and the apace globalization is urging us to involve in a geo-culturally diverse frames while reading and interpreting world affairs. The intellectual agency of knowledge set and diffused on the Arab Middle East studies or IR is derivative of the (usually Western and Western based scholars) orthodox canon of thought, with an unconventional authority. In this regard, it is important to appreciate the behind-links between ideology and theory (use) in the field, plus, to assess

the neo-colonial geopolitics of knowledge production and structure global hegemonic effects¹, marginalizing ‘the rest’ as the (weak) invisible-majority controlled by the (powerful) West. Though we are about to ask who owns the authority to represent whom².

A-late positive trend is emerging from many scholars around the world launching an intellectual enterprise to highlight relevant contributions of some important academic scholarships related to MENA in IR, however the paradigmatic IR perspectives are still untackled epistemologically and theoretically speaking³. This highlights the seldom usage to incorporate a reading of some IR paradigmatic discussions on MENA, while the bulk seems to focus on describing historical contemporary developments and issues that underscore comparative politics of the region “but nor the *International Relations* of studying it”⁴.

Immensely important to world politics, the Middle East as a strategic region is somehow neglected or ignored by Western scholars as a source for theory development⁵. If it is not for its “exception” as a region, it

¹Immanuel Wallerstein and Fernand Braudel (2009), “History and the Social Sciences: The longue Durée, *Review* (Fernand Braudel Center), vol. 32, no. 2, (2009), pp. 171-203; Steve Smith, “The discipline of international Relations: Still an American social science?” *British Journal of International Relations*, vol. 2, no. 3, (2000), pp. 374-402.

²Hamid Dabashi, *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror*, (London: Transaction Publishers, 2009), p. 3.

³ Some illustrative examples include: Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East* (1984); Tariq Ismael, *International Relations of the Contemporary Middle East* (1986); Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations* (2005); Raymond Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East* (2015); Louise Fawcett *International Relations of the Middle East* (2016).

⁴Brent Sasley “Studying Middle Eastern International Relations Through IR Theory”, *OrtadoğuEtutleri*, vol. 2, no. 2, (2011), p. 12.

⁵Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan) "Why There is no Non-Western International Relations Theory? An Introduction", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*,(2007),pp. 1-26; Acharya and Buzan, "Why There is no Non-Western Theory in International Relations Theory? Ten Years On", revisited forum, *International Relations of The Asia-Pacific*,vol. 0, (2017), pp. 1-30.

could be unsuitable to fulfill a role into IR approaches. However, the region is ‘struck by a much deeper, cultural, ecological, and above all, (geo-)political crisis marked by the implosion of the western forms and norms of sovereignty¹. Another factor of complex dynamics is the ‘hard’ engagement and militaro-security involvement (and presence) of the great and regional powers in the Middle East turmoil foment conflictual regime polarizations in detriment of the democratization and development policies. This type of polarization as critical juncture has, arguably, adverse effects on internal politics and its state-building autonomy². The region is defectively situated in global and regional rankings in socio-political, economic, human and knowledge production domains, whereas a noticeable improvement is observed in Asia and Latin America as emerging and rising of the rest³.

The structure of this study is constituted of a main point exploring what shapes the grammar of IR in/on MENA by dissecting the modes of thinking of the official epistemological paradigms. Following by one of the politics of knowledge based on erasure as leading strategies relied on colonial logic and orientalism. Finally, this paper intends to shed light on the continuing socio-political *malaises* of the post-Arab uprising states and the epistemic oppression which is still challenging the traditional academia. Subsequently, the postcolonialism in MENA region involved a sustainable effort to emancipation and intellectual decolonization under adverse and weak political, economic and military conditions.

The Grammar of IR on MENA

¹ Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

² Nedjar Mekia, “Arab in International Relations: Reasons for the Shortfall in Arab Contributions to International Relations Theories”, Arab Policies Journal, Issue 61, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Qatar, 2023, pp. 54-77. (The article was originally written in Arabic.)

³ Acharya and Buzan, *The Making of Global International Relations: Origins and Evolution of IR at its Centenary*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

My explicit intention is to have my research extends beyond my grasp in order to unfold the emancipation engineering hamstrings the Arab societies are still addressing theoretically and praxeologically. The IR narration on MENA deals more with cleavage panorama of archaic societies and rulers. The peace grammar was not the initiator factor of shaping IR¹. Nor it was envisioned by the great powers while the colonial enterprise was on the edge to dominate whole the world. Rather, there were serious concerns about the magnitude of declining great power like Great Britain after WWI which facilitates the US power rising in post-WWII².

From a methodological standpoint, the critical and postcolonial approaches, as well as postmodern and poststructuralist critique of modernity in Europe (and the West), come up from the hegemonic locus of enunciation. They constitute, partly, a useful tool to critic internally the Eurocentrism in knowledge system. However, the decolonial approach, we argue, is the external and utter disclosure of epistemic erasure and injustice questions³. Decolonizing politics in MENA must be concomitant to decolonizing knowledge on MENA. Hence, a broader critic role is suited to unpack Eurocentrism in IR and break down its ‘mental’ limitations and boundaries as privileged epistemic sites set before the geographical ones⁴.

¹Pinar Bilgin, “Opening Up International Relations, or: how I learned to stop worrying and love non-Western IR” in Steven Roach (ed.), *Handbook of Critical International Relations*, (UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020); Vineet Thakur *et al*, *The Imperial Discipline: Race and the Founding of International Relations*, (London: Pluto Press, 2020); MeeraSabaratnam, “Is IR Theory White? Racialised Subject-Positioning in Three Canonical Texts”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 49, no. 1,(2020), pp. 3-31.

²Bilgin, “Opening”, p. 2.

³ See Rasmus Alenius Boseru, *et al*, *New Conflicts Dynamics: Between Regional Autonomy and Intervention in the Middle East and North Africa*, (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2017); Arlene Tickner and KarenSmith, *International Relations from the Global South: Worlds of Difference*, (London: Routledge, 2020); HimadeepMuppidi, *The Colonial Signs of International Relations*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

⁴ Stephen Chan, *Plural International Relations in a Divided World*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017); Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “The Topology of Being and the Geopolitics of

As a crucial area in which the problem of history and reading of IR is at issue is, inter alia, the degree of permeability between domestic and regional (international) spaces easing external polarization -as external support for survival- have intensified rivalry and fragmentation.

Epistemic erasure as praxis in IR

The established standard of knowledge construction and dissemination in IR marked by the noticeable absence of non-Western (non-white) scholars (TRIP survey 2017)¹, offers *illusionary* academic rigor of an unconventional authority. Many scholars and thinkers questioned the colonial correlation to the origins of IR and knowledge production in the North about the Rest and the South. This conception stipulates that if the Rest and the South societies are ontologically inferior, they are epistemically deficient².

Knowledge: Modernity, Empire, Coloniality”, *City*, vol. 8, no. 1, (2004), pp. 29-56. DOI: 10.1080/1360481042000199787.

¹ Answers of TRIP surveys 2014-2017 to questions of US based scholars:

- Scholars: 67,23% male, 85,21 % white, 61% in 2014 positivist in epistemological terms in clear decline to 52,88% in 2017.
- IR is an American dominated discipline: over 51%.
- Western dominated discipline: 58, 93%.
- Proposition to counter American dominance in IR: 35,07%, counter Western dominance 55,93%.
- The frequency to cite literature written in languages other than English when writing in English-language publication is about ‘rarely’ 32,56%, ‘never’ 20,08%, ‘occasionally’ 28,68%. The 60,52% of IR scholars have never collaborated with their siblings from social sciences.

A notable decline of positivist approaches seen by reducing realist paradigm (18,12% comparing to 24,41% for constructivism) show that the IR move toward post-positivist. For more details see the TRIP survey on the ‘dominance of North American and Western Europe’ on theories, methods, curricula and texts and training centers: <https://trip.wm.edu/about-us>.

² Dabashi, *Can Non-Europeans Think?* (London: Zed Books, 2014), p. 40.

The politics of representation is so strategically managed that we hardly envisage who gets the authority to represent whom?¹, who speaks for whom?², who and what gets included and excluded?³, what is central? What is marginal in studying IR? What belongs intellectually elsewhere? Why (under which criteria)?⁴. A priori, mere interrogations indicate the magnitude of uncertainty within the knowledge as a human activity⁵, but certainly is a powerful tool for those who produce, diffuse and dictate global research agendas⁶, linked to nations preferences and world affairs⁷.

The power of knowledge production on the MENA resides in its willingness to “intervene as well as become the object of the exercise of power”⁸. Its materialization delineates a kind of ‘politics of knowledge’⁹ based on structures, parameters and rules for scholars to write and produce knowledge with a certain grammar of style and modes undemocratically

¹ Ibidem.

² Audrey Alejandro, *Western Dominance in International Relations? The Internationalisation of IR in Brazil and India*, (London: Routledge, 2017).

³ Gurminder Bhambraet al, *Decolonising the University*, (UK: Pluto Press, 2018).

⁴ Donald Puchala, *Theory and History in International Relations*, (New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁵ The Book of Immanuel Wallerstein is illustrative in this regard as he puts emphasis on the subjective human activity in producing knowledge. The labor division and the fact/value crisis regarding the social sciences and humanities academic quarrels reflect the logical weakness of scientism of epistemic communities, see Wallerstein, *The Uncertainties of Knowledge*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004).

⁶ Fran Collyer et al, *Knowledge and Global Power: Making New Sciences in the South*, (Australia: Monash, 2019); Christian Bueger, “From Epistemology to Practice: A Sociology of Science for International Relations,” *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol. 15, no. 1, (2019), pp. 97-109.

⁷ MekiaNedjar, “Education and the Arab Middle East in IR: Knowledge and the Endless (Hi)story of Coloniality” in João Paraskeva (Ed)., *Itinerant Curriculum Theory: A Declaration of Epistemological Liberation*, (US: Bloomsbury, 2024).

⁸ SeteneyShami and and Cynthia Miller-Idriss (eds), *Middle East Studies for the New Millennium: Infrastructure of Knowledge*, (New York University Press, 2016), p. 3.

⁹ Zachary Lockman, *Field Notes: The Making of Middle East Studies in the United States*, US: Stanford University Press, 2016), p. XII.

established in Western knowledge structures¹. In the MENA case, we cannot dismiss or ignore that this same power of the authoritarian regimes obstructs producing and developing knowledge in the region, thus critical theory building. The main intellectual interest of Arab thinkers was focused on problematizing rather than theorizing². In this context, the conventional rules of research and knowledge, essentially Eurocentrist, deny agency to the non-Western and AME because they silence the causality of the general turmoil and *malaises* in the region.

Generally speaking, the main features of the syllabi patterns relating to the global South and, as were for Third world, are Area Studies. Here we should notify that the Area Studies (and Middle East Studies) had done strongly in the case of the Middle East which insistently use orientalist tools to study AME. Portraying to the genealogical links between knowledge and power is well elucidated by the reliance of colonialism on Orientalism³. However, its politicization eclipses the deeper problems in modern and modernist forms of knowledge and its performativity regarding AME. Christian Bueger asserts that the ontological position of the nature of scientific (experts) and political knowledge set in IR is not undetermined⁴, even if it's somewhat positively perceived enabling peace and cooperation. The 'dark side' of the epistemic communities, shown by Bueger, reveals how expertise narrows down available policy options, stabilizes power relations, hinders emancipation or marginalizes actors⁵. Bizarrely, Bueger did not question the praxeology backgrounds of these epistemic

¹ Didier Bigo et al, "the Art of Writing Social Sciences: Disrupting the Current Politics of Style", *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences (PARISS)* vol. 1, no. 1, (2020), pp. 11-6.

² Elizabeth Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Contemporary Perspective*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

³ Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, (US: Vintage Books, 1994 [1978]); Andrea Teti, "The ME and the Production of Knowledge", in Begüm Özden Firat, Sarah De Mul, Sonja van Wichelenet al, *Commitment and Complicity in Cultural Theory and Practice*, (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁴Bueger, "From Epistemology", p. 50.

⁵ Ibid, p. 51.

communities and their authority to generate knowledge whose dubious platform persists uncritical, or as Boaventura de Sousa Santos posits ‘the inconsequentiality of critical theory’¹.

As far for the study of IR in the region, there is little information available in terms of (as)symmetries in the dynamics and curricula syllabi². The academic interactions are dismissed except for some few local academic institutions with the lowest research funding. Note that the IR and academic items such as books and journal are not easily accessible and highly expensive for low research and education budgetary. The export industry of publishing houses in the North have capitalized and monopolized the world knowledge production for its own benefit and advantage.

Area Studies/disciplines controversy (labor) division has more implications for the kind of knowledge produced. I should come across, from Andrea Teti’s insightful notes, what ‘double ventriloquism’ in social science implies as epistemic alterity in Area Studies and disciplines combined with orientalist alterity ascribed to the non-West in social scientific knowledge activity. Technically, the alterity is silenced both during the passage from the native voice to Area Studies (when AS gathers raw data, claims its reality of a locality through interpretive hermeneutic) then again in the passage (from the truth constructed by AS) to disciplines through its universalizing methods. That means the truth of the Middle Eastern (other) is revealed by the epistemic tools of MES. Regarding the Area Studies/disciplines gap, the epistemological and methodological differences between IR and MES as between Area Studies and disciplines imply the epistemic primacy of ‘universalist’ disciplines over ‘particularistic’ Area Studies even they share social scientific project.

¹ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “A Non-Occidental West?: Learned Ignorance and Ecology of Knowledg, *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 26 (7-8), (2009a), pp. 103-125.

² For more details see the TRIP survey on the ‘dominance of North American and Western Europe’ on theories, methods, curricula and texts and training centers: <https://trip.wm.edu/about-us>.

Which, a priori, creates conditions of imperialism of the ‘disciplines’ over ‘Area Studies’ as junior partner¹. ‘The continuing divisions are intentionally articulated to create kinds of interdisciplinarity gaps which polices and disciplines these divisions and make them impossible to bridge in order to produce a hegemonic understanding of them’².

On one hand, MES/Area Studies are accused of remaining theoretically underdeveloped. On the other, the division and autonomy between Area Studies and Disciplines do not reflect mere enquiry differences. It’s due to their legitimacy and distinctiveness of their respective epistemologies and methodologies. More clearly, the nature of their object of knowledge (which is MENA, the other) requires orientalist interpretive tools (language, history, culture...) supposedly allow them to decipher the ‘Arab mind’, which also refer to sort of an essentialist predilection in studying the ‘other’. Despite of the attempted distancing of Area Studies/MES from the orientalist hermeneutic application, the Middle East is still conceived as socio-politically exceptional region and perceived as a(n cultural) anomaly of Western defined norm³. Assessing the aforementioned, Zachary Lockman put critically this note at the end of his book ‘The historical trajectory of Middle East Studies has had its own specificities and today remains unhappily distinctive among its sister area studies fields because of the external pressures to which it continues to be subjected’¹.

Conclusion:

From the standpoint of critical realist philosophy, none epistemological position could prioritize owning (complete) knowledge. The argument is not for/against social scientific task, or merely to pay more

¹ Chan, *Plural*, p. 73; Acharya, “International Relations and Area Studies: Towards a New Synthesis”, Workshop on the Future of Interdisciplinary Area Studies in the UK, Oxford University, 6-7/12/2005, pp. 1-2.

² Teti, “The ME”, pp. 81-3.

³ Said, *Orientalism*.

attention, as Bilgin points, “to that which gets overlooked, lost or mistranslated”, but to recognize the epistemic injustice -among other injustices- undergone by non-Western societies. The state of knowledge in contemporary world system highlights such ambiguities generated and overthrown by agential properties and theorization so flourished in Europe especially in North-America as subjects and agents of knowledge². MENA as a norm-taker or passive-subject still appears as a *fascinating* object of study for the North because it materializes the intersubjective *Other perception*.

It is crucial to make distinction between change of order, which is not the case here, versus the changes within the existing regional order. The subsequent empirical analysis of the changes that have been marking the MENA region post-Arab uprisings assesses significant changes at the intersection between domestic and regional politics, including the weakening of states, increased regime insecurities and sectarian securitization (narratives). Regarding the predominantly regional dynamics emphasize the polarity shaping (new/old) patterns of shifting alliances dwelling in the same game.

A preconceived idea on MENA politics can't provide a truthful analytical tool to understand the Arab upheaval. It is unusual to recast epistemically Arab upheavals from the Arab scholars who should speak for themselves. However, the large literature scope diffused on it come from the outsiders and Western scholars³.

¹ Lockman, *Field Notes*, p. 265.

² Acharya and Buzan, *Making*.

³ We should notice that there is an intensive production of research in Arab Middle East in Arabic language, however its dissemination is barely exposed locally and hardly reach the core. In this case, the English language turns to be an impediment -among of others- to any promotion and scientific progress in the region especially in social sciences and humanities. The politics of style as the Anglosphere centrism and normative restrictions of knowledge production and diffusion manage exclusion of, and suppress agency from the periphery.

Therefore, the epistemic erasure concept, in this study, refers also to the fact that empire and race, as original focus of IR logic theorization, have intentionally been erased from the canon. This is related to the part of epistemic erasure which is strategized as dropping refereeing subjugation and exploitation aspects of colonial powers in favor of modern and developed Western conceptions.

We argue that the major transformations in the MENA post Arab uprising translate some international dynamics which are shaping path toward pot-American world and which constitute sustaining authoritarian resilience. Resultantly, the dynamic changing in the region indicate a variety of hegemon and competitive/military powers would dominate the region, leading to more weakening of states and security disempowerment. Here wars and extreme foreign meddling have eroded state capacities and enhanced the permeability of the Arab state in a territorial sovereign sense¹. The equation stipulates that unfolding tensions as proxy wars fabric in MENA constitutes enhancing warfare business in detriment of development and progress of these states.

¹ On Permeability see BasselSalloukh and Rex Brynen, *Persistent Permeability? Regionalism, Localism, and Globalization in the Middle East*, (London: Routledge, 2004).