Alternative futures for the Middle East

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Abstract

This paper investigates alternative futures of security in the Middle East in an attempt to discover a path that could take the region from an insecure past to a more secure future. Looking at five scenarios about the future of world politics, namely, globalisation, fragmentation, clash of civilisations, democratic peace and the formation of a security community, the paper argues that although each scenario has its strengths (as well as weaknesses), it is the scenario that foresees the establishment of a security community that incorporates a more explicit consideration for shaping a more secure future for the Middle East. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

In the academic study of world politics, thinking about the future has almost always been a source of contention. Contending visions of the pessimists (realists who think that the future will be no better—if not worse—than the past) and the optimists (idealists who think that a brighter future could be invented through the strengthening of international institutions) have dominated the debates about the future of world politics for most of the twentieth century. In recent years, especially since the end of the Cold War, the pacifying effects of the process of globalisation and the declining use and usefulness of the military instrument in managing inter-state relations have been pointed to by some to stress the need for moving beyond such pessimistic approaches to the future of world politics [1]. The realist response to such arguments has been to point to parts of the world other than Western Europe—such as the Middle East—and maintain that the declining usefulness of the military instrument in some places does not mean that this would be repeated everywhere.

However, although the Middle East remained chronically insecure for most of the twentieth century, the question that should be asked is whether recent history justifies

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one author's observation that the Middle East is a region that 'best fits the realist view of international politics' [2] and is therefore destined to relive the past. This is a question that should be asked because when such stereotypical representations of the Middle East are coupled with a cyclical view of history that is part and parcel of the realist approach, the future of the region looks bleak. The significance of such pessimistic presentations of the future of the Middle East is that they are used to justify heavily militarised security policies that do not enable this vicious circle to be broken. Furthermore, such pessimistic conjectures and prognoses have the potential to become self-fulfilling, thereby making it difficult if not impossible to invent a new tomorrow for the Middle East.

Critical approaches to international relations seek to bypass these unhelpful dichotomies of pessimism/optimism and realism/idealism by pointing to the constitutive role theories play. From a critical perspective, 'theories do not simply explain or predict', as Steve Smith has maintained. 'They tell us what possibilities exist for human action and intervention; they define not merely our explanatory possibilities but also our ethical and political horizons' [3]. This is not to say that theories 'create' the world in a philosophical sense of the term, but that theories help to organise knowledge, which, in turn, informs, enables, privileges and legitimises certain practices whilst inhibiting or marginalising others. In other words, critical approaches to international relations view the future of world politics as open, for they believe, in Ken Booth's words, that "social inventions like international relations cannot be uninvented overnight, but they can be reinvented, over time" [4].

The proponents of critical approaches have so far adopted a twofold strategy to put their ideas into practice. One part of their strategy has been that of disturbing and problematising prevailing discourses, presenting alternative readings, revealing the choices that were made and the alternatives that were obscured. The second part of their strategy has been that of trying to put the constitutive potential of theories into 'good use' by presenting pictures of 'desired futures' and opening up space for political action to take place. This is because, in order to be able to make a meaningful change, one has to have some idea as to not only what s/he wants to avoid, but also what s/he wants to achieve in the future. In other words, from a critical perspective, if the aim is to help to invent a more secure future for the Middle East—a region that remained chronically insecure for most of the twentieth century—the task at hand is both to produce new ideas about alternative futures and to present critiques of existing scenarios. Towards this end, this essay will discuss five future scenarios chosen on the basis of their centrality to post-Cold War debates on the futures of world politics and will investigate their potential practical implications within the Middle Eastern context.

1. The Middle East in a globalising world

In the 1990s, it has become commonplace to present the future of world politics as one of increasing globalisation, with the term itself becoming a 'buzzword'—often invoked but rarely defined [5]. In brief, globalisation is a process of increase

in the extensity and intensity of relations between peoples, social groups, organisations and institutions that has been leading towards a global interpenetration of economic as well as political and military sectors. Although it is often economic factors, in particular the global integration of production and finance, that are viewed as the driving forces behind globalisation, the impact of the revolution in communications and information technologies (particularly the expansion of the World Wide Web) in increasing peoples' awareness of each other whilst diminishing the significance of the physical distance separating them ('time–space compression') is also recognised as a crucial factor in accelerating this process [6].

As opposed to those who remain sceptical regarding the impact made by the global integration of production and finance in the peripheries of the world [7], those who firmly believe in its virtues maintain that increasing globalisation fosters economic efficiency and helps to provide a remedy to the very problems it perpetuates. In this new world united in its search for new markets and higher profits, the argument goes, markets would demand and help to produce common ways of thinking or even a new global culture, and peoples' identities as producers and consumers will overshadow most, if not all, other interests and identities. In such a world, myriad actors are expected to solve their conflicts by non-military means, not only because they would achieve common ways of thinking but also because a breakdown in business relations would simply be regarded as too costly. Hence the expectation of global security as a result of further globalisation (see, for example, [8]).

The Middle East has so far had an uneven balance sheet in keeping up with an increasingly globalising world. On the one hand, it is closely linked to world markets via oil sales, financial flows and arms purchases. The Gulf being the hub of world oil production means it is fully integrated into the world economy. On the other hand, the level of integration of the Middle East in general is still below the expectations of the proponents of increasing globalisation. This being the case, despite the increase in the density of financial and trade connections between the Middle East and world markets, especially since the 1970s boom in oil prices, suggests that the region has had very little to offer with the exception of oil. In a globalised future where oil may not be as significant a commodity as it currently is, the future of the Middle East in general and the Gulf in particular may be rather bleak. Alternatively, in a future where the significance of oil as a commodity does not decrease, the Middle East may lose its attraction as a source of oil and natural gas since regional reserves are likely to diminish in about 45 to 70 years time [9].

The relatively low level of integration between world markets and Middle Eastern economies has partly been due to the fact that the latter were geared towards import-substitution in the post-colonial era. Although some (such as Tunisia and Turkey) have switched to export-promotion in the last two decades, many others have either hesitated or failed to make this shift.[1] Syrian and Saudi policy makers, for instance, have chosen to seek self-sufficiency in basic foodstuffs production for reasons of economic security—that is, fear of having to rely on external supplies at times of

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[1] The Lebanon in the 1950s and 1960s was an exception to this statement.

crises. For others, such as Egypt, the transition from import-substitution to export-promotion has been hampered by the lack of infrastructure and financial resources. Furthermore, some regional actors' negative disposition towards the globalising forces has also played a role in delaying this shift. Indeed, many regional people, with the memories of colonialism still fresh in their minds, feel threatened by the very enmeshing and interpenetration that is involved in the process of globalisation. The growth of 'Islamic banking' is exemplary of some regional actors' misgivings regarding the process of globalisation which some view as a 'colonisation of the future'—to borrow Ziauddin Sardar's phrase [10].

Although the proponents of increasing globalisation are not wholly unaware of regional actors' misgivings, their response would be to say that Middle Eastern regimes would sooner or later have to give in. This is necessarily because, they would argue, 'the only thing worse than being a part of the evolving economic hierarchy is being excluded from it' [11]. If this statement is taken to its logical conclusion, it could be argued that if Middle Eastern actors were to go against the wishes and expectations of the forces of globalisation, they would find themselves marginalised in an increasingly globalising world. Accordingly, in a hypothetical future where oil prices fall drastically or oil loses its contemporary significance as a commodity, the Middle East (with the possible exception of Israel, Tunisia, and Turkey) would find itself on the margins of the world economy with the marginalisation of Gulf economies resulting in a loss of crucial financial support for the rest of the Arab states.

If oil prices were to remain stable, the Gulf would be likely to remain a part of the globalised world economy. Southern Mediterranean states should also be expected to integrate with the global markets largely due to the European Union's interest in and continued resource input into their economies.[2] In this hypothetical future world, only Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran should be expected to become marginalised—unless, that is, they agree to adopt the recommended stabilisation and structural adjustment packages and open up their markets. In such a future world, one should not expect much improvement in regional security. For, given the intimate links between Arab societies, it would be very difficult to conceive of security being established in some Arab states whilst the rest is still on the margins.

In the 1990s, it was this threat of marginalisation in an increasingly globalising world that helped to persuade regional governments such as Egypt, Jordan and Morocco to remove the obstacles to free trade. So far this has involved the implementation of stabilisation and structural adjustment programs by regional governments in line with the 'Washington consensus' [12:18]. Some Gulf economies have also taken steps towards privatisation and reducing governmental subsidies. Still, the fact that many Middle Eastern actors seem to have given in to the forces of globalisation should not be taken to suggest that the outcome is likely to lead to regional security as the proponents of increasing globalisation hope. On the contrary, the recent trend towards economic liberalisation in the Middle East could also be viewed as a sign

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[2] Libya and Algeria are also oil and natural gas producers.

of helplessness and fear of being marginalised, and not necessarily commitment to achieving security by way of doing business. The problem with presenting increased globalisation as the only option is that it constitutes a 'primary form of alienation' [13] and could lead to further fragmentation and instability—the very developments the proponents of increasing globalisation would want to avoid. In other words, the excesses caused by the uncontrolled character of globalisation not only constitute a major obstacle on the road to further integration but also feed into the tendency towards fragmentation.

2. The Middle East as a breeding ground for fragmentation

Notwithstanding one author's claim that 'the wretched of the earth want to go to Disneyworld, not to the barricades' [14], Robert D. Kaplan maintains that the very uniformity that is imposed by the global communication and information networks and the entertainment industry has, at the same time, given rise to a proliferation of particularisms that manifest themselves as cultural and racial clashes, increasing erosion of states and state-borders, and refugee flows. Although Kaplan is not alone in his conception of globalisation and fragmentation as two mutually reinforcing processes, his approach is singular in its celebration of globalisation in the developed world and warning about the 'coming anarchy' in the developing world [15].

Kaplan's scenario is based on the assumption that environmental dynamics would, in the future, further reinforce the process of fragmentation. As a result, the lines dividing the realm of globalisation (represented by the travellers of his metaphorical stretch limo) and the realm of fragmentation (made up of the majority of the world's peoples who travel on foot and are therefore more amenable to the effects of environmental degradation) would further deepen, leading towards a future world characterised by spreading diseases, population upsurges, unprovoked crime, scarcity of resources, increasing erosion of states and inter-state borders, and the augmentation of private armies, security firms and transnational criminal organisations (such as drug cartels) [15:46].

At the first glance, the Middle East does not seem to be a likely candidate for fragmentation in the way depicted in Kaplan's scenario. After all, many Middle Eastern countries have rich oil and natural gas resources, are better off economically than some relatively deprived parts of the world and could therefore be expected to remain largely immune to the effects of such fragmentary forces. On the other hand, it could be argued that environmental factors could push the Middle East into the realm of fragmentation with, for example, the scarcity of water in quantitative terms coupled with a deterioration in its quality (due to excessive use) fuelling already existing divisions between parties that share the same river basins.[3] Although the impact that changes in the global climate would make cannot be predicted, it is

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[3] Iraq, Syria and Turkey share the Tigris–Euphrates basin, Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority share the Jordan basin, and Egypt and Sudan share the Nile basin.

estimated that the Middle East would emerge as one of the problem areas in the not-so-distant future.

Furthermore, fragmentation could also be caused by a crisis in the economies of the oil-rich countries of the region that currently desalinate and/or import water at very high costs. A fall in the oil prices could push Saudi Arabia, for instance, further into the club of water-scarce countries. In other words, not even the resource-rich countries of the Middle East would remain immune to the kinds of dynamics empha-sised in Kaplan's scenario if the existing scarcity were to be compounded by environ-mental factors (such as the 'greenhouse effect') and demographic trends (unchecked population growth coupled with rapid urbanisation). The future may indeed bring 'water wars' if no preventive action were to be taken [16]. Or, alternatively, the world may witness a Middle East where some are living in cities and suburbs leading comfortable lives, whereas the shanty-town dwellers or rural populations that sustain themselves by agriculture are 'doomed by a lack of water to drink, soil to till, and space to survive in'—a future more in line with Kaplan's stretch limo analogy [15:59]. And, as Kaplan reminds us, such environments would be likely to become a breeding ground for particularisms and fragmentation.

However, although the emerging particularisms and the challenge they pose to the state system may seem like the 'coming anarchy' to some, the same processes could be viewed as novel forms of resistance that could constitute a solution to the very problems perpetuated by the economic straitjacket forced onto regional economies in line with the 'Washington consensus'. Robert Cox is one who thinks that globalis-ation's perpetuation of inequalities worldwide could set social forces (such as social coalitions, labour movements, democratisation struggles) that might in the future lay down the groundwork for an alternative ('postglobalisation') world order. Although Cox is not unaware of the potential for fragmentation and violent conflict dormant in the struggles led by the social forces, he maintains that the disintegration of some units could result in the formation of new alliances thereby bringing about a new order [17].

Part of the problem with relying on the agency of social forces within the Middle Eastern context is that when faced with economic hardship, they may show little resistance against the globalising forces' efforts to buy them off in an attempt to strengthen their grip over the populace (as was the case with the EU plan to channel resources into Southern Mediterranean NGOs to harvest support for increasing regionalism among Mediterranean-rim countries of the Middle East and the EU). In sum, given the fact that they have to operate under the double burden of restraint exercised by both their own governments as well as the pull and push of external actors (such as the United States or the EU), social forces in the Middle East face a difficult task if they were to fulfil Cox's expectations from them.

Although it is always possible to be sceptical about the relevance of Cox's scenario within the Middle Eastern context given the restraints imposed upon the activities of non-state actors by regional governments, there are also instances of non-state actors undertaking crucial roles in working towards alternative futures. In the case of the Israel–Palestine issue, for instance, women's movements helped to make the *Intifada* on the part of some Palestinian women, while some of their Israeli counter-

parts helped to enhance its impact by way of questioning the moral boundaries of the Israeli state [18]. This is not to suggest that all social forces would be fit to be considered as agents for change. Nor is it to suggest that an uncritical adoption of their agendas would not be problematic. Rather the argument is that Cox's scenario introduces an element of human agency to reverse the trends set by the forces of globalisation—a factor that is missing from Kaplan's scenario of a 'coming anarchy'.

3. Clash of civilisations

As the universalism of the West fostered by the globalising forces brings it into conflict with non-Western states, argues Samuel Huntington, the latter would increasingly choose to form coalitions to stand against the West thereby challenging the Western civilisation. Hence Huntington's scenario of the future of world politics as a 'clash of civilisations'. Huntington maintains that this clash would not remain at the macro (inter-state) level only; at the micro-level groups belonging to different civilisations vying for power would also clash with each other. Accordingly, submits Huntington, the future of world politics would be characterised by cooperation within and conflict between civilisations [19]. Needless to say, Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' scenario denies the very possibility of the formation of an alliance among social forces as anticipated by Cox, unless, that is, it is formed by actors that all belong to the same civilisation.

Notwithstanding the criticisms, the significance of Huntington's scenario for the Middle Eastern context stems not necessarily from its consistency (or lack of it) but from the fact that it is by building upon the declarations of Islamist actors, examples of terrorism and inter-denominational conflicts from within the Middle East that Huntington substantiates his argument on the need for a new world order based on civilisations. It is also worth noting that Huntington borrowed the phrase 'clash of civilisations' from Bernard Lewis, a noted student of the Middle East [20]. One potential implication of Huntington's scenario is that it could 'unwittingly play into the hands of the fundamentalists' [21]. The propagation of Huntington-type arguments have so far opened up political space for some Islamist actors who have been trying to convince their supporters that they should seek to strengthen their own side and prepare for the coming clash by rallying around their own civilisation [22]—a call Huntington would recognise as one of his own. The failure of the mass media in the West in general and in the United States in particular to distinguish between Islam as a religion and Islamism as an ideology and political movement only adds to the sense of siege prevalent among some Muslims, and substantiates the claims of some Islamist actors that Muslims have been chosen as the enemy to replace the communist threat and that they will be victimised no matter what they do.

Furthermore, Huntington's scenario could not only play into the hands of Islamist actors in propagating their own perspective on regional security, but it could also be utilised to license interventions and militarised security practices by extra-regional actors from other civilisations whilst marginalising alternative non-militarised practices designed to create a regional security architecture. If people do indeed 'rally to

those with similar ancestry, religion, language, values, and institutions, and distance themselves from those with different ones', as Huntington thinks they would [19:126], then the best that US policy-makers, for instance, could do would be to seek to maximise friction among the Muslims, on the one hand, and Muslims and peoples of non-Muslim civilisations, on the other, whilst holding the West together. Within the Middle Eastern context this may amount to upholding the policy of dual containment in an effort to prevent the emergence of any regional hegemon, keeping Muslim/Arab states divided whilst making sure the regional balance of power tilts towards Israel. Otherwise, a closely coupled community of Muslim/Arab Middle East, if it were to emerge, could challenge US dominance in the region (this may or may not constitute a threat to Israel's security depending on the conceptions and practices of security adopted by actors on both sides).

Although it may be argued that this has for long been the practice of the United States and does not necessarily require a license by Huntington, it nevertheless is true that Huntington's scenario could be used to explain, for instance, the futility of the search for a region-wide peace agreement or help to legitimise reliance on the use of the military instrument in the Middle East (as was the case with the Gulf War and subsequent bombings of Iraq) whilst other (non-military) practices are becoming the norm in some other parts of the world.

4. Establishment of democratic peace in the Middle East

The so-called democratic peace theory has been prominent in international relations since the 1970s [23,24]. After the end of the Cold War it has become more and more commonplace among US policy makers to refer to the democratic peace phenomenon—that very few democracies in the last hundred years or so have waged war on one another—to justify US policy of supporting the spread of democracy.

The implication of the democratic peace scenario within the Middle Eastern context is the basic assertion that in a future Middle East where democracy takes root, this would have a pacifying effect. One could identify two problems with this conjecture. The first and widely acknowledged problem is that it would be rather difficult to envision the establishment of democratic peace in the Middle East, because the region has so far proven to be rather 'resistant to democratisation' [25]. However, it could also be argued that although it is true that the region (with the exception of Israel and Turkey) has so far remained relatively immune to calls for further democratisation, to assert that the Middle East could be an exception to the democratic peace phenomenon is to let one's thinking be trapped in the present state of affairs, not realising the potential for change that exists. Indeed, during the 1990s there has been some movement towards democratisation in the Middle East with some Arab policy makers moving to respond to their populations' demands for the adoption of liberalisation and democratisation measures. In the last decade or so, multi-party competition for elected legislative assemblies have been either introduced or expanded in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestine Authority and Tunisia.

Although it is possible to argue that a beginning has been made, there are significant problems with these developments. For one thing, executive posts in some of these countries remain uncontested or at times unelected. Moreover, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Saudi Arabia still do not have universal suffrage. Libya does have universal suffrage but elections are never held. In Kuwait suffrage is limited to males aged 21+ who resided in Kuwait before 1921, their sons, and sons of naturalised citizens. Lastly, the few elections that have been allowed to take place with limited suffrage are often engineered in line with the wishes of the ruling elite. Indeed, it has been suggested that elected assemblies are there not to enable genuine political participation but to enhance domestic and international legitimacy. Still, even engineered elections are elections and they constitute a deviation from past practices by handing a certain degree of control to the public over the executive's actions and lending them an opportunity to get their voices heard.

The second problem with this scenario is that it is difficult to know whether giving Arab peoples, for instance, more say in policy making would have led to more or less clashes with Israel. It could be argued that, if Arab non-state actors had more say in their countries' policy making, they could have pushed for more support for the Palestinian cause, not less. Likewise, they could have demanded and achieved some degree of integration between Arab countries and/or more uniform responses to Israel's actions. In this sense, if the future was to bring increasing political liberalisation and democratisation in the Middle East, this could lead to strained relations with both Israel and the United States, and not necessarily regional peace and security. Indeed, it is this very unpredictability of democratic systems that has so far led the United States to shy away from supporting full democratisation whilst backing 'friendly tyrants' [26] and 'promoting polyarchy' [27] to help to maintain the status quo and make the region secure for transition to free-market economies.

5. A Middle Eastern security community

The security community approach developed by Karl Deutsch and his colleagues during the 1950s is a prime example of attempts within international relations to bypass the unhelpful dichotomies of idealism/realism or optimism/pessimism and directly address the problem of regional security. Deutsch and his colleagues were interested in finding ways of creating an inclusive political community characterised by the cessation of inter-state violence and the creation of dependable expectations of peaceful change by way of strengthening relationships among a group of states [28].

The creation of more inclusive political communities has been considered desirable but not attainable for a long time. As Andrew Linklater has noted, this has had to do with the perceived need to organise within states for economic and military purposes. Although the Westphalian state system and its cornerstone, the sovereign state, have served these purposes for a long time, the reasons for persisting with the system of sovereign states as an organising principle of world politics have been gradually eroding [29]. Furthermore, in recent years it has increasingly become evident that the rising density of economic, social and military relations among myriad actors

has at the same time increased their vulnerability. This, in turn, led them to seek a degree of stability by pooling their resources at the regional level. The realisation of these trends, maintains Linklater, constitutes an immanent potential for the transformation of political community.

Increasing regionalisation of security relations and the creation of a security community in the Middle East is desirable not only because the twin processes of globalisation and fragmentation have made it more difficult for existing forms of political community (that is, states) to fulfil their roles, but also because the creation of a Middle Eastern security community would help directly address the problem of regional security. Indeed, one point of strength of the security community approach stems from the fact that it addresses the problem of regional (in)security directly, rather than treating it as a side-effect of increasing globalisation or democratisation. Another point of strength is that the security community approach builds upon Cox's understanding of fragmentation. As noted above, central to Cox is the stress he puts on the agency of social forces in creating a future world where the boundaries of political community extend beyond that of the sovereign state. Furthermore, the security community approach provides an explicit account of the potentialities of human agency; an idea as to what individuals and social groups as well as states could do if they chose to address their predicament: regional insecurity. Finally, it provides (however imperfect) the start of a path from an insecure past to a more secure future [30].

The creation of a security community in the Middle East, therefore, constitutes a desired future. The question of whether it is possible to envision the creation of a security community in the Middle East of all places is a difficult one to answer. Given the aforementioned global changes, the argument for organising security relations at the regional level is fairly strong. The end of the Cold War and the marginalisation of many Arab actors, the 'atomisation' of the Arab world in the aftermath of the Gulf War and the accelerated pace of globalisation in other parts of the world suggest that it may no longer be possible to avoid large-scale change in the Middle East. However, whether the velocity of these changes would lead to the creation of a Middle Eastern security community is yet to be seen.

The seeming lack of enthusiasm for the US-backed Middle East Peace Process and the slow progress of the Euro-Med partnership scheme, especially when viewed against the backdrop of increasing regionalisation in other parts of the world, could be viewed as substantiating assertions that the Middle East may be an exception to trends observed in other parts of the world [31]. However, it could also be argued that the problem in the Middle East is not necessarily a lack of interest in regionalisation per se, but rather the presence of a multitude of regionalism projects propounded by different actors (state and non-state) [32]. For instance those who view themselves as belonging to the 'Middle East' work towards increasing cooperation and collaboration among Arab states, Iran, Israel and Turkey. Those who emphasise the Arab character of this part of the world aim to increase integration among Arab actors in an attempt to consolidate regionalisation in the 'Arab world'. There are also the proponents of Mediterraneanism that seek to further integrate Mediterranean littoral economies (which include the EU as well as North African and Eastern Medit-

erranean countries). Finally, there are the proponents of planting the seeds of an 'Islamic future' in the 'Muslim Middle East'. What is significant about these alternative regionalism projects is that they are propounded by non-state actors often against the wishes of their governments.

In sum, the relatively little evidence for regionalisation in the Middle East should not lead one to turn a blind eye to the efforts of myriad non-state actors that attempt to put their own regionalism projects into practice. Indeed, as Michael Hudson has observed, in recent years there emerged 'a great deal more sociocultural integration than the naive Arab nationalists of the 1940s and 1950s ever imagined'. In this sense, the problem in the Middle East is not that there is little or no cooperation, integration or interdependence but that there exists very little in terms of institutions. As Hudson reminds us, 'interdependence does not lead directly to the growth of political community' [33].

At present one could observe certain regional trends that could be identified as factors that could precipitate the creation of a security community in the Middle East. These factors include the end of the Cold War, which caused a relative decline in the strategic importance and therefore marginalisation of the region; the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the Gulf war and the Madrid Peace Process; changes in the natural environment, such as global warming, and further depletion of water resources and technological changes, such as the increase in the ranges of surface-to-surface missiles that threaten regional stability. Changes in the natural environment, for instance, could potentially bring regional actors together if they choose to interpret global warming and the increasing scarcity of water resources as a threat to their security. After all, these are what Ulrich Beck refers to as 'threats to the future' to cope with which action would need to be taken in the present [34]. Accordingly, there is some potential for cooperation on this issue should regional actors choose to think more seriously about the long-term future and adopt cooperative measures that could enhance their gains. However, although a working group addressing this issue was formed as a part of the multilateral track of the Middle East Peace Process, there currently is very little evidence of regional actors' willingness to adopt cooperative measures to cope with such threats. On the contrary, changes in the natural environment so far seem to have stiffened some actors' positions (as is the case with the conflict surrounding the use of the Tigris–Euphrates river basin shared by Iraq, Syria and Turkey).

In sum, there clearly is some potential for further regionalisation and the formation of a security community in the Middle East. However, the same set of factors could encourage increasing cooperation and collaboration or, alternatively, lead regional states to resort to militarised practices such as balance of power politics and arms build-up. Therefore, in order for new interpretations of these factors to emerge in a way that would propel the regional actors to view each other as potential partners rather than enemies, there is a need for human agency to intervene and provide them with alternative readings of their pasts, presents, and especially futures. This is because the threats of further marginalisation of Arab countries and increasing scarcity of water exist only as 'threats to the future'. As they exist in the future, the only way to prevent such threats from becoming 'reality' is to take action in the present.

In the absence of human agents that could provide such alternative readings of the pasts and presents, and investigate alternative futures, regional actors may remain oblivious to the drastic changes such as massive population upsurges or the increasing globalisation of world economy, thereby failing to take cooperative measures that could indeed be to their mutual advantage. This, in turn, requires students of international relations to think more seriously about the medium- to long-term future.

6. Towards a more secure future?

Thinking about the future of world politics becomes more crucial once we recognise that out ideas about the future—our conjectures and prognoses—have a self-constitutive potential. What students of realist international relations consider as a more 'realistic' picture of the future becomes 'real' through practice, albeit under circumstances inherited from the past. Thinking about desired futures is significant for the very same reason; that is, to be able to turn it into a 'reality' through adopting emancipatory practices—for, having a vision of a desired future empowers people in the present.

Presenting pictures of what desired futures might look like and pointing to the security community scenario as the start of a path that could take the Middle East from an insecure past to a more secure future should not be taken to suggest that this is the most likely outcome. Indeed, an alternative scenario that falls outside the categories adopted for the purposes of this essay, that of an 'Islamic future' for the Middle East, is considered as a likely outcome by its own proponents; they would regard it being left out of an analysis such as this one as evidence of the biased character of the prevailing approaches to security in the Middle East [35].

Although this scenario could potentially constitute another alternative future for security in the Middle East, the contradictory character of the security discourses adopted by its proponents has so far caused this potential to remain unfulfilled. Notwithstanding their globalist discourse, most Islamist non-governmental actors aim to bring about change at home, even though they may occasionally undertake (violent as well as non-violent) action abroad to achieve this aim. In other words, the globalist outlook presented by the Islamist actors becomes locally oriented in practice. Furthermore, although the Islamist discourse perceives threats to security as stemming from 'un-Islamic' influences, when it comes to defining what constitutes 'un-Islamic' there is more agreement amongst its proponents as to what they are against rather than what they are for. Some would consider 'Western' influence over and intervention into the Middle East as 'un-Islamic'. Some others criticise the existing political establishments (such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that allowed US troops on the 'holy lands') as well as the forces of Arab nationalism as threats to their security. There are also those who define 'structural violence' as 'un-Islamic' and call for its erosion [36].

Interestingly, this last conception of 'structural violence' as 'un-Islamic' weakens the case for an 'Islamic future' whilst strengthening that for a Middle Eastern security community. For, when security is conceived as the erosion of 'un-Islamic' factors

understood as 'structural violence', it becomes rather problematic to envision a 'Muslim Middle East' as a 'land of peace' and the rest of the world as the 'land of war'. Structural violence does not recognise such conventional boundaries. Furthermore, this conception of security strengthens the case for a security community by presenting a conception of security very similar to that adopted by the proponents of critical approaches thereby showing how it is possible to arrive at similar future visions although starting from different foundations.

To conclude, the dynamics pointed to when discussing the alternatives indicate that there exists a potential for descent into chaos if no action is taken to prevent militarisation and fragmentation of societies and the marginalisation of peoples as well as economies in an increasingly globalising world. However, these dynamics exist as 'threats to the future' and it is only through thinking (and writing) about them that one could hope to mobilise prevention action to be taken at present. Viewed as such, the security community scenario provides not an 'idealistic' or 'optimistic' but a more 'realistic' picture of the future.

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