

# Inquiring into Others' Conceptions of the International and Security

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As part of a project focusing on the ethical implications of European Union (EU) border-security practices in the Mediterranean region, I conducted research from 2008 to 2011 into the EU's (then increasingly controversial) externalization practices *vis-à-vis* its southern Mediterranean neighbors.<sup>1</sup> Less than two months after the final report was submitted, these same countries experienced the tidal wave that came to be known as the "Arab uprisings." This article describes my encounter with the limitations of disciplinary social sciences when doing empirical work on the southern Mediterranean. It then suggests that had we given more attention to what people in the Arab world (elites and others) thought about security, the uprisings would have come as less of a surprise. One way to address these limitations, I submit, is inquiring into others' conception of the international and security. By "others," I mean those who happen to not be located on or near the top of the hierarchies in world politics and who enjoy unequal influence in shaping various dynamics, including the study of world politics. Restated in Valbjørn's threefold categorization, I call for more cross-fertilization between Middle East studies and disciplinary social sciences, including international relations (IR).

In early 2008, I began my research by conducting a literature review. The findings and conclusions of that review were summarized in a short paper entitled "EU Security Policies towards the Mediterranean: The Ethical Dimension—What Do We Know and What Else Should We Know?" (Bilgin 2009). My conclusion was that, as students of security, we knew almost nothing about the perspectives of the Mediterranean littoral states on what they thought about EU border-security practices in their part of the world—practices that their own governments were increasingly adopting. There were two dimensions to the limits of our knowledge on this subject. First, the literature focused on how the EU approached border security—what its interests were and what steps were being taken. Second, to the extent that the practices adopted by the southern Mediterranean neighbors were documented, their perspective on agreeing to such cooperation and whether they were pursuing interests different from those of the EU were not being considered. At best, these differences were reduced to "national-interest" calculations, without considering the ways in which they were shaped by different conceptions of the international and security.

These two limitations of the security literature correspond to two aspects of the parochial limitations of the study of

world politics. On the one hand, parochialism is "an almost inevitable and universal characteristic" of the study of world politics insofar as "there are 'national' IR disciplines and that these quite naturally tend to be concerned with their own national interests" (Hellmann 2011). Viewed as such, scholars in those parts of the world that are adversely affected by environmental degradation may prioritize the study of green politics, whereas scholars who are citizens of great powers may focus on their country's hegemonic ambitions and those of other aspiring hegemonies. On the other hand, what renders parochialism a challenge for the study of world politics is not that scholars in different parts of the world may have particular areas of interest and/or concentration but rather when our theorizing about the world mistakes those theories driven from "particular" observations for the "universal." Understood in this latter sense, parochialism pervades the study of world politics and constitutes a limitation for our understanding of the Arab world and beyond (Alder and Biersteker 1984).

After having identified the parochial limitations of the existing literature on EU border practices *vis-à-vis* the southern Mediterranean neighbors, I moved to the next stage of our project: remedying these limitations. Determined to not overlook the perspectives of the southern Mediterranean neighbors, my research associates and I organized a series of interviews with individuals representing various non-state actors. Our findings pointed to a rift between regional regimes and peoples on security cooperation with the EU. That regional regimes were increasingly viewed by their own people as doing the "dirty work" of the EU by agreeing to become a part of externalization practices was an issue that rarely arose in the literature. We wrote the following in our report:

While cooperation with the EU has allowed [regimes] access to new technologized instruments and resulted in the weakening of EU criticism of acts of repression in the short term, it also has further alienated civil society from the regimes, thus enhancing their insecurity in the long term. This alienation was evident from our interviews (Bilgin, Soler i Lecha, and Bilgic 2011).

The point is that considering the perspectives of the southern Mediterranean neighbors—that is, perspectives of those beyond the policy-making elite—revealed symptoms of unforeseen developments in the southern Mediterranean. The Arab uprisings began less than two months after our final report was submitted.

However, to what extent were these developments unanticipated? They need not have been, if only the insights of scholars specializing in the study of Arab politics were integrated into security theorizing about rendering our concepts less parochial. The story of the so-called area-studies controversy is almost always told by focusing on the limitations of area studies (see Valbjørn in this issue). In the immediate aftermath of the Arab uprisings, it was the students of Middle

“low-intensity conflicts,” and “guerrilla wars” focused on and thus were able to capture only the threat perceptions and interest calculations of the “First World” (Korany 1986). Stated differently, the “Third World”—even when it was the focal point of security scholarship—was not treated as the referent object (i.e., what/who needs protection). Whereas one part of the problem can be located in parochialism of the first type (i.e., that security scholarship has looked at from

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East studies who were chastised for missing the developments. Nevertheless, disciplinary social sciences also bear responsibility insofar as they have become oblivious to their parochial limitations, especially the second aspect—that is, mistaking one’s own particular experiences for the universal, thereby adopting particular notions of “national security” in designing research.

To clarify, the original task of area studies would have required students to render the disciplines less parochial by “testing” those frameworks with universalist pretensions against the empirical findings of area-studies scholars. Perhaps “testing,” as such, could have allowed for further development of the theories at hand, thereby contributing to the project of achieving “universal” knowledge. However, the overbearing authority of the disciplines made it difficult for area-studies scholars to access—much less challenge—the disciplines (Bilgin 2004). Indeed, in recent years, efforts came to focus on studying the “areas” as part of an ostensibly “universal” story told in and about North America and Western Europe (Mitchell 2002).

It is in this sense that one part of the responsibility falls on the social sciences disciplines (e.g., IR) that, by definition, are expected to be curious about “others” who also constitute the international. Yet, students of world politics have not always been interested in the world beyond the great powers. “Denmark does not matter,” quipped Kenneth Waltz, highlighting the marginality of smaller states to system theorizing. This is not because those who are in the peripheries of world politics also are relegated to the peripheries of their thinking. Instead, it is because the scholarly study of world politics has orientated its students to think of states as units, the internal composition and dynamics of which are of relatively little consequence for world politics.

The choices made by the students of disciplinary social sciences in favor of conducting state- and great-power-centric analyses have implications for the study of world politics. In recent decades, scholarly treatises—even as they focused on other parts of the world—failed to be fully relevant to the concerns of people, states, and societies living in those other parts of the world. This is because analyses of “sagebrush wars,”

the perspective of Washington or Brussels, as discussed by Hazbun in this issue), another part of the problem is located in parochialism of the second type (i.e., the limitations of our ostensibly “universal” concepts and theories). The point is that the limitations we encounter in the study of world politics cannot be remedied only by shifting our perspective from the north to the south; we also need to inquire into others’ conceptions of the international and security.

The study of security may not be any better or worse than other disciplinary social sciences relative to parochialism. Toward the end of the Cold War, students of security studies were criticized by students of Soviet studies, who reminded them that the Soviet Union did not “play” the deterrence game in the way that deterrence theorists assumed. Indeed, deterrence theorizing developed almost independently of inquiring about the perspectives of those whom we were seeking to deter (Booth 1979; McGwire 1985). In the aftermath of the Cold War, Lebow and Stein (1995) wrote *We All Lost the Cold War* based on evidence they gathered by studying Cold War practices of deterrence by multiple nuclear powers. Abraham (1998) and Biswas (2014) highlighted how India transitioned from a postcolonial state in possession of a so-called peaceful bomb (from the late 1940s until the late 1990s) to a rising great power practicing “nuclear diplomacy” like other “normal” great powers (since 1998). These critical inquiries about deterrence thinking and practices highlighted the limitations of security studies focusing on others’ approaches to security in general and deterrence in particular.

It was not a student of world politics but rather an anthropologist, Hugh Gusterson, (1999), who unmistakably identified the parochialism of the study of security. In a survey of articles published from 1986 to 1989 in the subfield’s leading journal, *International Security*, Gusterson noted that those “readers who relied on the journal *International Security* alone for their understanding of world politics would have been taken more or less completely by surprise by the end of the Cold War in the fall of 1989” (Gusterson 1999). The point Gusterson made was not about (failures in) prediction in the study of security. Rather, he argued that “authors in the journal constructed a discursive world within which the indefinite continuation of the Cold War

was plausibly presumed and what we would in retrospect narrate as signs of the impending end of the Cold War were rendered dubious or invisible” (Gusterson 1999). Stated differently, Gusterson’s analysis highlighted how Anglo-American security concerns and a particular approach to them had become embedded in the epistemology of security studies as reflected in the articles published in *International Security*. What led to parochialism in the study of security, argued Gusterson, was not only the search for prediction through utilizing a particular way of thinking about world politics but also the subfield’s failures to recognize its particularity.

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Although there have been attempts to render visible the “hierarchy in anarchy” (Donnelly 2006) and “hierarchy under anarchy” (Wendt and Friedheim 2009) in recognition of “inequalities” between states, focus thus far has been on inequalities in material power or institutionalized relationships of dependency. This is opposed to inequalities that follow relegating one’s contemporaries to the past by temporalizing difference and spatializing time (Fabian 1983; Hindess 2007; Jabri 2013). The international is shaped by multiple inequalities conditioned by twin processes of temporalizing difference and spatializing time, which shape the way we “see” the world while rendering less “visible” their institutionalized effects. A case in point is how the new or non-nuclear powers view the way that nuclear proliferation is managed by the great powers: as a “nuclear-apartheid” (see subsequent discussion). Such a “racially institutionalized global hierarchy” as viewed by the new or non-nuclear powers, however, cannot be captured through analyses that focus on inequalities in material power alone but rather calls for inquiring about who can and cannot “have” nuclear weapons and why (Biswas 2014). Yet, students of world politics have not always been socialized into

politics, which were presumed to be “universal,” that lured security analysts into presuming that a lack of curiosity about others’ approaches to world politics was not a problem when theorizing about the international and security.<sup>2</sup>

I conclude by returning to where I began: the Arab uprisings. I suggest that the uprisings need not have come across as unanticipated had we integrated insights from studies on Arab politics into security theorizing.

Writing in the early 1990s, Bahgat Korany (a member of the Montréal school; see Salloukh in this issue) identified a rift between two different conceptions of “Arab national

security”: state-centric and society-centric conceptions (Korany, Brynen, and Noble 1993). The concept of “Arab national security” is not new; it originated in the discourses of pan-Arabist policy makers during the (Arab) Cold War. However, in this early incarnation, “Arab national security” emphasized “Arab” identity and focused on the different insecurities of Arab states. Stated differently, the referent of security was the society of Arab states (Bilgin 2012). Korany’s contribution to this discussion was to distinguish between two conceptions of “Arab national security”: one taking the society of Arab states as its referent object, the other the trans-state society of Arab peoples (Korany 1994). This was a conception of security that understood the international in not only anarchical but also hierarchical terms (Bilgin 2016). It also was a broad conception of security that considered nonmilitary as well as military dimensions.

Had we inquired into this notion of “Arab national security” that transcends the “nation-state” to look at the trans-state society of Arab peoples, we could arguably have noted a notion that was long declared dead by those who are unable to see beyond their parochial limitations (whether they are

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being curious about others’ conception of the international; rather, they have been encouraged to dismiss such dynamics by superimposing ostensibly “universal” concepts and categories. For purposes of illustration, I focus on my own field of security studies. I suggest that students of security studies have not always been interested in the others’ conceptions of “security.” It was “particular” ways of thinking about world

located in Washington, Brussels, or Cairo) was alive among non-state actors, continuing to shape their articulations of insecurity and activism. We perhaps could have generated better insight about insecurities experienced by various state and non-state actors in the Arab world, as well as the military, economic, and societal dimensions of insecurity. We then could have noticed that the rift between peoples and regimes

in the southern Mediterranean was growing as part of the latter's security cooperation with the EU. Even more ambitious, perhaps we could have incorporated these insights into security theorizing toward becoming more cognizant of others' conceptions of the international and security. After all, the aim is to point to the particularity of our ostensibly "universal" concepts such as "national security," not replacing one particularism with another (Arab) particularism but rather rendering security theorizing less parochial. ■

## NOTES

1. In EU parlance, "externalization" means practicing border security before people reach the physical border, by transferring EU rules to other countries to be implemented then and there. For more about the in:ex project (i.e., converging and conflicting ethical values in the internal/external security in continuum in Europe), see [www.inexproject.eu](http://www.inexproject.eu).
2. An important and early exception in this regard is Booth (1979).

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