

Regional security in the Middle East— what is that we seek?

Pinar Bilgin

Key words

Regional security, Middle East, critical security studies, critical geopolitics

Summary

While we cannot all agree on our visions for 'regional security', it is important, for the purposes of furthering dialogue, to clarify our points of disagreement. In my previous work, I adopted a critical security framework for studying regional security by opening up both 'region' and 'security' to inquire into the mutually constitutive relationship between the two. These perspectives were the 'Middle East, 'Arab regional system', 'Mediterranean', and 'Muslim Middle East'. In what follows, I revisit this framework in light of the developments of the past decade and consider two new perspectives: Turkey's 'Ottoman geopolitical space' and '*al Midan*'.

About the author:

Pinar Bilgin is currently a guest professor at the Center of Contemporary Middle East Studies at the University of Southern Denmark and visiting researcher at CRIC, University of Copenhagen. She is an Associate Professor of International Relations at Bilkent University.

Debate Analysis

The 'Middle East' is defined in multiple ways. The classic text quoted by almost every one writing on the subject is an article by the historian Roderic Davison (1960) entitled 'Where is the Middle East?' The political scientist Nikki Keddie (1973) asked an even more controversial question: 'Is there a Middle East?' There has been, in other words, some controversy regarding the definition of the 'Middle East' as a region and/or its delineation. Is Iran included? How about Turkey? Is not MENA a better designation?...

There is no room for Middle East exceptionalism in this regard. Many regions have multiple definitions. Critical Geopolitics, a subfield of Political Geography, addresses these questions about the relationship between politics and space (Lewis and Wigen, 1997). What is important for the students of regional security in the Middle East is that for a long time the relationship between space and politics was not considered by students of regional security.

On 'Europe', for instance, there are two critical works by Ken Booth & Nicholas J. Wheeler (1992), and by Ole Wæver (1987). Both studies looked at contending definitions of 'Europe' that shaped different actors' approaches to security in Europe. At the time these studies came out, the Cold War structures were unraveling. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had spoken about a Common European home. NATO's future and US commitment to security in Europe was uncertain. Clashes between different definitions of Europe and different approaches to European security was a topic for everyday discussion—though not always expressed in conceptual terms as in Booth & Wheeler and Wæver. These two studies, offered from within a critical security studies framework, pointed to a different way of studying regional security.

In my previous work, I drew upon these two studies to build a critical security framework for studying regional security, i.e. by opening up both 'region' and 'security' to inquire into the mutually constitutive relationship between the two (Bilgin, 2004a, Bilgin, 2004b). When applied to the Middle East, a critical security studies approach to regional security points to the relationship between politics and space in a way that went unexplored for a long time. Such a framework allows inquiring into different insecurities and referents as prioritized by different perspectives on regional security.

Writing in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I analyzed four regional conceptions as identified by Saad Eddin Ibrahim (1996), namely: the Middle East, the Arab Middle East, the Mediterranean Middle East, and the Muslim Middle East. I teased out the perspectives on regional security that have shaped (and been shaped by) these regional conceptions (Bilgin, 2000). All four perspectives assumed threats to stem from outside the 'region'. However, depending on their definition of the 'region', what constituted the threatening 'outside' was understood differently. The 'Middle East' perspective defined the region in terms of 'Western' security interests and assumed threats to emanate from those seeking to destabilize or influence this part of the world, true to its origins in Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan's definition. Admiral Mahan was a US naval officer and the author of multiple works on sea power. He suggested des-

ignating this part of the world as the 'Middle East', underscoring its significance for Britain's security interests in the 'East' (Mahan, 1902). The Arabist perspective emerged in reaction to the 'Middle East', challenging the representation of this part of the world as a less-than-homogenous. The proponents of the Arabist perspective considered 'non-Arabs' as the source of insecurities in this part of the world, and defined the region as 'the Arab regional system' (Dessouki, 1993). The Mediterranean perspective is relatively new and mostly the brainchild of EU policy-makers who defined the region in accordance with insecurities they experienced, thereby focusing on stability in North Africa (i.e. excluding the Arabian peninsula) in delineating a 'Euro-Mediterranean' region. Among the four, the Muslim perspective is the one that is most difficult to capture in spatial terms, as it defines threats in terms of 'un-Islamic influences' (Bilgin, 2004a, Bilgin, 2004b).

In what follows, I revisit this framework of studying regional security in light of the developments of the past decade (including 9/11, the Arab Spring and the so-called 'Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham' set up in 2014) and consider two new ones: Turkey's 'Ottoman geopolitical space' and '*al Midan*'. I define the latter as a bottom-up perspective shaped by people in this part of the world and beyond, who 'reclaimed the political' (Jabri, 2013) in *Midan al Tahrir* of Egypt.

Ottoman geopolitical space

Turkey's AKP (Justice and Development Party), in power since 2002, has evolved into a dynamic actor in regional politics. The post-September 11 environment meant both a crisis and an opportunity for the founders of Justice and Development Party. During the 2000s, the slow pace of development in relations with the European Union, when coupled with a flourishing economy and consecutive election successes, encouraged the AKP policy-makers to pursue a more independent path in foreign policy. What I term the 'Ottoman geopolitical space' is the brainchild of Turkey's current Primer Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, a professor of International Relations who served as Advisor to the Prime Minister (2002-2009) and as Foreign Minister (2009-2014). The 'Ottoman geopolitical space', as envisioned by Davutoğlu includes the former Ottoman territories plus those adjoining areas where Muslim and/or Turkic people live. While it is never explicitly defined, it is invoked mostly in discussions on the Middle East and North Africa and less frequently on the Balkans and the Caucasus.

The Arab Spring was viewed by the AKP leadership and some observers in Turkey as an opportunity for Turkey to assume leadership of the 'Ottoman geopolitical space'. Indeed, the popular uprisings were read by some as having been 'inspired' by Turkey's 'model'. Such a reading of the developments in the Arab World emboldened the AKP leadership to act in a manner that was assertive toward Syria in an unexpected and unforeseen manner.

That said, Turkey's reception in the region have had ups and downs. Consider, in lieu of evidence, the results of a series of surveys conducted during 2009-13 in the Arab World by Turkey's think-tank [TESEV](#). These surveys pointed to the following five factors as rendering

Turkey a 'good model' for the region: the economy, democratic regime, secular system, Muslim identity, and strategic significance. While answers to these questions were 'encouraging' in the late 2000s, they took a less encouraging tone especially since 2012. What is also interesting is the reasons why the interviewees considered it difficult for Turkey to be a model. In 2013 'interventionism' emerged as the leading factor. Others include: 'close relations with the West', 'secular system', 'not Muslim enough', the 'suppression of Gezi events' [71% said they followed the events], 'not Arab', 'no need for a model' (see, Akgün and Gündoğar, 2013).

To summarize, Turkey's 'Ottoman geopolitical space' offers a new perspective not in terms of conceptions of security (statist conceptions of security prevail in Turkey's domestic and foreign policies) but in terms of its referent. The new perspective offered by Turkey is decidedly Turkey-centric. It seeks to revision regional security in view of Turkey's insecurities formulated in terms of economic expansionism with an admixture of culturalism.

al Midan

al Midan is a bottom-up perspective. It may not be entirely accurate to consider it a perspective; for, it is more a stance taken by peoples in this part of the world (and beyond) who are 'reclaiming the political'—to use Vivienne Jabri's (2013) phrase. In offering this perspective, I draw on Jabri's analysis of postcolonial subject and agency and her reading of the Arab uprisings as 'claim to politics'.

Writing a decade before the uprisings, it was the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi (2002) who pointed to the changing nature of young people's activism in the Arab world. Making use of the Arab satellite TV channels and the Internet, young people across the Arab world did not remain content with the information their governments provided them, but turned to the world beyond. In doing so, some learned English from 'English without Teachers' booklets, others practiced via the Internet. They discussed with others while also learning from them. This allowed the re-emergence of a humanist potential, argued Mernissi, which had theretofore remained untapped. The pertinence Mernissi's observations became apparent a decade later, in the Egyptian resistance in *Midan al Tahrir* but also across the Arab world and beyond.

Beyond the Arab world, the transformation of a public meeting place into a space where politics takes place was observed in Turkey's *Taksim Meydanı*, and Ukraine's *Maidan Nezalezhnosti*. Jabri's characterization of these dynamics as 'reclaiming politics' strikes a chord given Arab peoples' disenchantment with the European Union (that promised so much during the 1990s) and further alienation from their own regimes in the past decade. It also strikes a chord with the disenchantment with the so-called 'forces of democracy' that Mernissi (1992) observed in the first Gulf War, and the humanism (loosely defined) of the digital revolutionaries that she underscored a decade later.

It is difficult to tease out one conception of security from the *al Midan* stance. This is not only because it is very new, but also because it is characterized by multiplicity and fluidity.

What is pertinent for our discussion here is that *al Midan* stance constitutes a new discourse that contests the statist (national) security agendas and practices of myriad regional regimes, and claims a space for individuals' and social groups' contributions to security debates—a space that was not available before (Greenwood and Waever, 2013). Insofar as the main agents voicing peoples' concerns at *al Midan* were the urban youth and women, the degree to which they were representative of the concerns of the multitude is difficult to know.

That said, *al Midan* stance reflects the concerns of those who did not have anybody else to voice their insecurities. Their insecurities are not voiced by the proponents of the Muslim Middle East perspective (see above) who focus on providing basic needs for those who they consider as 'us', and ridding their societies of the so-called un-Islamic influences ('them'). 'Claim to politics' by individuals and social groups also does not sit easily by the other perspectives that remain statist. As such, *al Midan* stance is unique insofar as it promotes a humanist agenda (loosely defined), and voices the insecurities of individuals and social groups.

Conclusion

There is no denying the centrality of the 'Middle East' perspective in thinking about regional security in this part of the world. That said, the *al Midan* perspective carries a potential that is yet to be fully realized. This potential of *the al Midan* perspective has already rendered Turkey's 'Ottoman geopolitical space' defunct in the eyes of the regional peoples. For, if Tahrir Square was about dignity, such dignity would be defended against all kinds of interventionism, regardless of the appeal of the 'Turkish model'. Of the two remaining contenders, the Middle East perspective has the backing of the United States as the superpower and Saudi Arabia as the regional linchpin, whereas *al Midan* appeals to (young) peoples' hearts and minds.

References

- Akgün, M. & Gündoğar, S. S. 2013. Ortadoğu'da Türkiye Algısı 2013. *TESEV Dış Politika Programı, TESEV Yayınları*.
- Bilgin, P. 2000. Inventing Middle East? The Making of Regions through Security Discourses. In: Vikor, K. (ed.) *The Middle East in Globalizing World*. Oslo: Nordic Society for Middle Eastern Studies.
- Bilgin, P. 2004a. *Regional Security in the Middle East: A Critical Perspective*, London, Routledge.
- Bilgin, P. 2004b. Whose Middle East? Geopolitical Inventions and Practices of Security. *International Relations*, 18, 17-33.
- Booth, K. & Wheeler, N. J. 1992. Contending Philosophies About Security in Europe. In: McInnes, C. (ed.) *Security and strategy in the new Europe*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Davison, R. H. 1960. *Where is the Middle East?*, Council on Foreign Relations.
- Dessouki, A. E. H. 1993. Dilemmas of Security and Development in the Arab World. In: Korany, B., Noble, P. & Brynen, R. (eds.) *The Many Faces of National Security in the Arab World*. New York: Palgrave
- Ibrahim, S. E. 1996. Future Visions of the Arab Middle East. *Security Dialogue*, 27, 425-436.
- Jabri, V. 2013. *The Postcolonial Subject: Claiming politics/governing others in late modernity*, London, Routledge.

- Keddie, N. R. 1973. Is There a Middle East? *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 4, 255-271.
- Lewis, M. W. & Wigen, K. 1997. *The myth of continents: a critique of metageography*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Mahan, A. T. 1902. The Persian Gulf and International Relations. *National Review*, XL.
- Mernissi, F. 1992. *Islam and democracy : fear of the modern world*, Reading, Mass., Addison-Wesley Pub. Co.
- Mernissi, F. 2002. *Islam and democracy: fear of the modern world*, New York, Basic Books.
- Waever, O. 1987. Conflicts of vision: Visions of conflict. *European polyphony: Perspective beyond East-West confrontation*. London: Macmillan.