# Rethinking the "Middle East" as an object of study in Political Science

by
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## Abstract

It is generally considered that the expression 'Middle East' was coined in 1902 by Alfred Thayer Mahan, in an attempt to delineate a region from the Mediterranean to India. Since then, 'Middle East' has become an expression to designate everything related with 'Islam' and/or 'Muslims', and in recent years a linguistic and political development occurred when, during the Bush Administration, the term 'Greater Middle East' was used to designate the region from Morocco to Afghanistan and, in some cases, to South-East Asia. The aim of this paper is to question the validity and usefulness of these expressions, and to show how they continue to designate, including in the academic world, an object of study which only exists in abstract terms, ignoring the diversity of those regions and the way its inhabitants view themselves and their identities. Using Edward Said's concept of *Orientalism*, the main focus will be on the academic world and it will try to assess how the knowledge that is still produced in some scholarly environments continues to misinform the way those regions are seen.

## Keywords

Middle East, Mediterranean, Greater Middle East, Orientalism, Epistemology

## Introduction

As the 21st century dawned on the Arab World, the region grappled with a profound clash between inherited deep rooted traditional ideologies and the distinct calls globalization was putting forward both economically and culturally. Recent uprisings were a clear evidence of this collision as well as a reflection of the latent inconsistencies of the international system. Starting in Tunisia in December 2010 and waving out to Egypt, Syria, Algeria, Libya, and other places, the revolutions, known as the 'Arab Spring', have ushered in profound changes in political processes in the Arab world and in our understanding of them. Not only did they give the lie to a widespread assumption amongst policy analysts and, to a lesser extent, amongst academic commentators, that these processes differed fundamentally from what has occurred elsewhere, they also demonstrated that popular ambitions in the Arab world differed little from those elsewhere as well.

Taking into account the various transformations occurred in the past decades in economic conditions, social imbalances, cultural and mental outlook, political change was something predictable, but to see it coming would have

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been to see something at odds with the way in which the 'Middle East' and 'Islam' were thought of. It would also have meant acknowledging that methods and theories seeking grand universal explanations ('the Muslim character does not permit change'; 'in Islam, tyranny is preferred to no power'; 'the Middle Easterners are incapable of managing their own affairs without Western assistance'; 'Muslim women are silenced and oppressed') were in danger of failing to match real situations ('change is happening'; 'people do not want tyrants'; 'they are organising change themselves'; 'women are actively participating in what is happening').

In view of the endless analysis of politics in the Middle East and North Africa in recent years, commentators turned out to be generally ill-prepared to respond to these momentous events. It became evident that the demonstrations themselves were merely the prologues to complex and lengthy processes of transition that may take years to be completed, and assumptions about the role of political Islam - a phenomenon not explicitly prominent in the actual challenges to regimes but certain to play a major role in the political transformations that have followed them, as good electoral results by different parties embracing various shades of Islamist ideology show - have had to be revised. Another widely held myth that was debunked was that the denial of legitimate resistance and revolt by normative Islam left people without any but sectarian means to justify revolt. Comparison with pre-modern Europe would be useful. Did main-line European Christianity provide any more justification for revolt than did Islam? Although leading Muslim thinkers spoke and wrote against revolt, considering it worse than an evil ruler, there were ways around this in the Islamic tradition. It was almost unknown to speak of one's own movement as a revolt, and the words we translate as 'revolt' were pejorative, as in Europe.

In an interview given in 1976 to **Diacritics**, Edward Said (1935-2003), referring to Middle East studies said that most Middle East experts were social scientists whose expertise was based on a handful of clichés about Arab society, Islam and the like, handed down like tatters, from the 19th century Orientalists, and that a whole new vocabulary of terms was bandied about: modernization, elites, development, stability were talked about as possessing some sort of universal validity, but that in fact they formed a rhetorical smokescreen hiding ignorance on the subject. For him, the new Orientalist jargon, i.e., of the 20th century, was hermetic discourse, which could not prepare one for what was happening in Lebanon for example, or in the Israeli-occupied Arab territories, or in the everyday lives of the Middle Eastern peoples.[1]

Two years later, Said would develop these and other themes in his seminal book **Orientalism**, and, to illustrate the 'state of the art' regarding Middle Eastern and/or Islamic Studies in the United States, he would quote what Morroe Berger, President of the Middle East Studies Association at the time, wrote in 1967 in the **MESA Bulletin**.

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[1] SAID, Edward W. 2005. **Power, Politics and Culture: interviews with Edward W. Said**. London: Bloomsbury, p. 34.

For Berger, the modern Middle East and North Africa was not a centre of great cultural achievement, whatever that meant, nor were they likely to become one in the near future. Therefore, the study of the region and their languages did not constitute its own reward as far as modern culture was concerned, neither was the region a centre of great political power, nor did it have the potential to become one. For him, the Middle East (less so North Africa) had been receding in immediate political importance to the United States, even in 'headline' or 'nuisance' value, relative to Africa, Latin America and the Far East. Finally, the contemporary Middle East seemed to be lacking the desirable traits attracting scholarly attention. That did not diminish the validity and intellectual value of studying the area nor did it affect the quality of the work scholars did on it. However, it did put limits, of which 'we should be aware, on the field's capacity for growth in the numbers who study and teach.'[2]

Well, events in that region for the past fifty years have shown that the modern Middle East and North Africa never stopped being a focus of attention for political, economic and social reasons. And, of course, the Middle East and North Africa are now, more than ever, as current events show, of extreme immediate political importance not only to the United States but also to Europe.

The explosion in research and study of the region, and its languages, in the past decades has been remarkable. The number of scholars, not only 'Western' but also 'native', dealing with it, studying it and teaching about it has grown greatly. A 'Muslim' scholar is now no longer considered just a 'native informant', to use Said's expression, but someone who is, first and foremost, doing research from a vantage point, because of his or her background and personal experience, and first-hand acquaintance with the language, customs and other cultural and mental traits. What would nowadays be odd was if someone did not speak, or know, one, or more, of the 'local languages', be it Arabic (with its many dialects), Turkish, Persian, Urdu or any other, due to the fact that those who are studying the 'Middle East' and/or the 'Islamic' world are either native speakers of those languages or because the researchers felt the need to learn them.

Fields like Linguistics, Literature, History, Politics, Economics, Anthropology, Sociology, Geography, and Religion (of course), but also Society, Gender Studies, Media, Sexuality, and many others, are now mainstream. However, and as Said drew our attention to it, one aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Middle East and/or Islamic world is viewed. Television, cinema, and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardized moulds, and that 'standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the 19th century academic and imaginative demonology of "the mysterious Orient"'.[3]

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[2] BERGER, Morroe. 1967. "Middle Eastern and North African Studies: developments and needs", *MESA Bulletin*, 1, no. 2 (November), p. 16 cited in SAID, Edward W. 1979. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, p. 288.

[3] SAID, *Orientalism*, p. 27.

In George Orwell's **1984** there is a dialogue between two characters, O'Brien and Winston. The former, replying to Winston, says that 'reality is not external' and only exists in the human mind, and nowhere else, and that nothing exists except through human consciousness.[4]

The historian Margaret Macmillan quotes an episode occurred in 2002 when a senior adviser of the White House said to the journalist Ron Suskind that 'we're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors...and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.'[5]

Some scholars still consider the existence of the Middle East and/or Islamic world as a coherent, single object of reality that can be grasped, and continue to analyse it through their framework and try to fit external reality into it.

> The object of such knowledge is inherently vulnerable to scrutiny; this object is a "fact" which, if it develops, changes, or otherwise transforms itself in the way that civilizations frequently do, nevertheless is fundamentally, even ontologically stable. To have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for "us" [the West] to deny autonomy to "it" [the Middle East and/or the Islamic world] since we know it and it exists, in a sense, *as* we know it.[6]

So, it comes as no surprise that some intellectuals, scholars, experts, pundits, journalists and opinion-makers talk about Islam and the Islamic world - with more than 1.5 billion people, dozens of different societies and languages, and spread all over the world – as if it were a mere object about which one could make grand generalisations on its history of fourteen-plus centuries, and commenting on the compatibility between Islam and Democracy, Islam and Human Rights, and Islam and Progress, producing not *science* or *knowledge* but ignorance, or *agnatology*, as Martin Rose says, using Robert Proctor's expression.[7] They are in fact *Orientalists*, neither interested in nor capable of discussing individuals but artificial entities.[8]

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[4] ORWELL, George. 1949. **Nineteen Eighty-Four**. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, pp. 252-268.

[5] MACMILLAN, Margaret. 2010. **The uses and abuses of history**. London: Profile Books, pp. 144-145.

[6] SAID, **Orientalism**, p. 32.

[7] ROSE, Martin. 2009. **A shared past for a shared future: European Muslims and History-making**. Richmond, Surrey: British Council/The Association of Muslim Social Scientists, p. 22.

It would be interesting to know if, in the first half of the 20th century, Western intellectuals and scholars, living in Europe, would have considered the Old World, the West or Christianity compatible with Democracy, Human Rights, and Progress - two World Wars, Fascism, Nazism and other authoritarian regimes, and, of course, the Holocaust, would lead one to conclude that the West could not be deemed compatible with 'Western' values.

Although knowledgeable scholars are increasingly appearing on mass media to give their opinions on what is happening in places like Lebanon, Palestine, Tunisia, Libya, Syria or Egypt, there are, however, some aspects related with the scholarly work done on those regions that still have traces of nineteenth and twentieth centuries' Orientalism, particularly the concepts of Middle East, Mediterranean and/or Islamic Studies themselves. As Said said,

> because we have become accustomed to think of a contemporary expert on some branch of the Orient, or some aspect of its life, as a specialist in "area studies", we have lost a vivid sense of how until around World War II, the Orientalist was considered to be a generalist (with a great deal of specific knowledge, of course) who had highly developed skills for making summational statements. By summational statements I mean that in formulating a relatively uncomplicated idea, say, about Arabic grammar or Indian religion, the Orientalist would be understood (and would understand himself) as also making a statement about the Orient as a whole, thereby summing it up. Thus every discrete study of one bit of Oriental material would also confirm in a summary way the profound Orientality of the material. And since it was commonly believed that the whole Orient hung together in some profoundly organic way, it made perfectly good hermeneutical sense for the Orientalist scholar to regard the material evidence he dealt with as ultimately leading to a better understanding of such things as the Oriental character, mind, ethos, or world-spirit.[9]

This paper tries to show how 'Middle East' and 'Mediterranean Studies' are, in fact, European and/or Western constructs, and continue to be manifestations of Orientalism.

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[8] SAID, *Orientalism*, pp. 154-155.

[9] SAID, *Orientalism*, p. 255.

**Middle Eastern Studies as *Orientalism* and the Mediterranean as a *fact***

'The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.'[10]

*Orientalism* was the generic term that Edward Said employed to describe the Western view on the Orient (the Middle East and/or Islamic world), and was also the discipline by which that region and/or concept was, and is, approached systematically, as a topic of learning, discovery, and practice.[11]

Although the expressions 'Middle East' and 'Islamic World' are used almost indistinguishably, they will be analysed separately, since one concept, the 'Middle East', or Mediterranean, conveys a geographic location, and the other, 'Islam' has religious connotations, but also civilisational and cultural meanings.

Starting with the concept of 'Middle East', and using Said's words, this region is not only adjacent to Europe but it is also the place where Europe had its greatest, richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the East, or in this case the Middle East, has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of that Orient was merely imaginative, because it was an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture, and Orientalism expressed and represented it 'culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles.'[12]

Middle Eastern studies have a long history, while Mediterranean studies is a relatively newly defined area of study. The former is a development of different European's colonial and great power heritage, and may be said to broadly encompass the territories that lie from Morocco in the West to Iran in the East, from Turkey in the North to Sudan in the South. It includes the Arab world, plus the non-Arab neighbouring states of Israel, Turkey and Iran. Central Asia was appended for much of the nineteenth century, lost to regional studies during its membership of the Soviet Union, and has lately become once more affiliated although not a central component of the region for academic purposes. Until 1995, and the creation of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the southern European and the southern Mediterranean states were not co-joined in any specific academic community other than a single academic centre at the University of Reading, in the United Kingdom (established in 1988), and since then a number of new bodies and publications promoting Mediterranean studies

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[10] SAID, **Orientalism**, p. 1.

[11] SAID, **Orientalism**, p. 73.

[12] SAID, **Orientalism**, pp. 1-2.

has evolved. Mediterranean in this context refers to the territory encompassed by the littoral states of the sea, as well as the waters themselves.[13]

The very concept of 'Middle East' is debatable, not to say elusive or illusory. If one accepts that the Earth is round and the Universe infinite, notions of West and East, North and South do not make any sense, because one can only establish arbitrary, non-absolute points of reference. But, be it as it may, and accepting that Europe and North America are what is called the West, and everything else is the East, and that between the West and the Far East, i.e., China and Japan, is the Middle East, a region from the Mediterranean to India, one has to wonder where to put Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, or Australia, which certainly would not consider itself part of the East.

The fact is that the notion of 'Middle East' is so powerful and widespread that even in a country such as Japan, the 'land of the rising Sun', the easternmost country of all, 'Middle Eastern Studies' is an accepted academic designation even though the region stretching from Morocco to India is well to the West. There is a Japan Association for Middle East Studies (JAMES)[14], and other 'oriental' examples include the Middle East Studies Institute at the Shanghai International Studies University in China.[15] This Institute is subdivided into the Iranian Studies Centre, and the Editorial Department for Arab World Studies, but, nevertheless, it also has Research Programs for 'Middle East Politics', for 'Middle East Economy' and for 'Middle East Culture', and publishes the ***Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia) (JMEISA)*** with the aim of publishing 'scholarly research and analysis, as well as book reviews, on the Islamic world, including North Africa, the Middle East, and various regions and countries in Asia containing Muslim communities', focusing particularly on introducing the Asian scholarship and perspective to the Western audience.[16]

In fact, from Chinese and Japanese perspectives, the 'Middle East' should be called the 'Middle West', but the designative term used is the one used in Europe and the United States, which shows that the most readily accepted designation for the 'Middle East' and/or 'Islam' is an academic one, labels that still serve in a number of academic institutions. Anyone teaching, writing about or researching the Middle East, be it an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, philologist, or from any other discipline, either in its specific or its general aspects, is a 'Middle East' expert. Books, papers, articles are written

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[13] For further details, see MURPHY, Emma C. and PACE, Michelle. 2009. "The status of Middle Eastern and Mediterranean studies in the UK", in GILLESPIE, Richard and MARTÍN, Iván (eds.). 2009. ***Researching the Mediterranean***. Barcelona: British Council/Fundació CIDOB/IEMed/WOCMESBarcelona2010, p. 43.

[14] http://wwwsoc.nii.ac.jp/james/index-e.html (last accessed 30th April 2012).

[15] http://www.sh-mideast.cn/e01.htm (last accessed 30th April 2012).

[16] http://www.sh-mideast.cn/albsjyj.html (last accessed 30th April 2012).

and congresses held with 'the Middle East' as their main focus. Someone can be talking about gender relations in Morocco and another one on economic inequalities in Iran, and both would be considered experts on the 'Middle East'.

> The point is that even if it does not survive as it once did, Orientalism lives on academically through its doctrines and theses about the Orient [the Middle East] and the Oriental [or Middle Easterner or Muslim].[17]

We now turn our attention to the expression 'Islamic Studies'. If a social scientist, considered as an expert in 'Islamic Studies', says to a Muslim, who does not have to be necessarily very pious, that he or she has an expertise on that field, probably the reaction would be of surprise by that Muslim, who would ask, without any hint of cynicism or irony, if they were doing research at Al-Azhar, Medina, Peshawar, or Qom in the case of a Shi'ite. Other questions would follow such as, if he or she knew by heart, or what it was like to be studying, the *Qur'an*, the *Hadith*, the *Sunna*, the *Sira* of the Prophet Muhammad, which authors were being studied, which *Madhab*, which *Tariqah* and so on. Even for an 'Western' audience, not necessarily uneducated, 'Islamic Studies' conveys some kind of religious research, or studies in a field related to religion. However, for that social scientist to be an expert in 'Islamic Studies' is to study 'Islam' as an object of social science and to know 'Islam' as a fact. For him or her

> there are still such things as *an* Islamic society, *an* Arab mind, *an* Oriental psyche. Even the ones whose specialty is the modern Islamic world anachronistically use texts like the *Qur'an* to read into every facet of contemporary Egyptian or Algerian society. Islam, or a seventh-century ideal of it constituted by the Orientalist, is assumed to possess the unity that eludes the more recent and important influences of colonialism, imperialism, and even ordinary politics.[18]

Using history, social anthropology, political science, economy and geopolitics as disciplinary backgrounds, different authors such as Gilles Kepel, Malise Ruthven[19], and Bernard Lewis[20], among others, confuse and misuse concepts in their attempts to fit reality into their own preconceptions.

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[17] SAID, *Orientalism*, pp. 1-2.

[18] SAID, *Orientalism*, p. 301.

[19] RUTHVEN, Malise. 2002. "Radical Islam's failure", *Prospect* 76 (July), pp. 30-35.

[20] LEWIS, Bernard. 2001. *What went wrong? Western impact and Middle Eastern response*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

For example, in a review to Gilles Kepel's book **Jihad: the trail of Political Islam**[21] and to Bernard Lewis's **What went wrong?**, Malise Ruthven wrote that

> Shi'ism, like Christianity, is built on political failure. The founding figures of both – Jesus and Ali ibn Abi Talib with his son Hussein – are martyrs whose failure to achieve a worldly revolution allowed an apocalyptic idea to be subsumed into an act of ritual sacrifice.[22]

Using events occurred in the 1st and 7th centuries, Malise Ruthven tries to explain what is going on now, in the 21st century, in Iran, with the same old hackneyed ideas, like the separation of politics and religion in Christianity, and how this religion is more similar to Shi'ism.

Should one consider as 'political failure' the Catholic Church's almost two thousand years of history, or the conversion of Constantine the Great and the establishment of Christianity as the State religion in the Roman Empire? In addition, how do we explain the fact that even nowadays there are European countries with a State religion?

In the case of Shi'ism, Shah Isma'il, of the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722), established it as a state religion in Iran, something which is still maintained and reinforced for the last thirty years – is this an example of 'political failure'?

Further on, Ruthven says that

> [i]n contrast to Islam, Christianity externalised its mythologies by giving them visual form, fostering the process whereby the image came to be separated from its content. The brilliant, abstract, geometric patternings of Islamic art may have opened a window into the mind of God, but they did not encourage visual scepticism: every Baghdad store has its picture of "Brother Saddam," who is indeed watching, like Big Brother, because in a culture conditioned by centuries of aniconism, the portrait still conveys an element of the person.[23]

In one paragraph Ruthven explains the source of the cult of personality in Saddam Hussein's regime by identifying it with 'Islamic Art'[24], and, intentionally or not, he seems to forget that there is no such thing as one *Islam* or one

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[21] KEPEL, Gilles. 2002. **Jihad: the trail of Political Islam**. London: I.B. Tauris.

[22] RUTHVEN, "Radical Islam's failure", p.34.

[23] RUTHVEN, "Radical Islam's failure", p.35.

[24] Another expression which has been questioned by, among others, Souren Melikian.

*Christianity*, and simply ignores centuries of Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal art, with their portraits and exquisite miniatures, not to mention the fact that the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein, with its cult of personality imitating European regimes from the 1930s, was led by the Ba'ath Party, a staunch proponent of *laïcité* and founded by Michel Aflaq, a Christian.

According to Ruthven's line of thinking, Christianity, in contrast to Islam, externalised its mythologies, encouraging visual scepticism and making it impossible to have pictures of 'Big Brothers' watching you. One wonders how to explain Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, and Franco, who used the cult of the image in Christian and European political environments in a very effective way, in some cases in countries with strong iconic tradition such as Spain, Italy and Russia.

In less than six pages, Ruthven tried to convey a full picture of what is 'Radical Islam', the source of al-Qa'ida, the connections between Islamist activity in Malaysia and Pakistan and events in Sudan, how 'the wider Islamic world lost any influence it might have over Bosnia's future'[25], the rise of Hamas, and, of course, Sufism, Mysticism and Art.

One of Said's worries, regarding Orientalism, was the danger and temptation of employing its formidable structure of cultural domination by formerly colonised peoples upon themselves or upon others.[26]

Even 'native' scholars, whether practising Muslims or not (e.g. Fareed Zakaria[27], Bassam Tibi[28] or Abdelwahab Meddeb[29]) talk about 'Islam' as if it had a geographical existence like, say, the former Soviet Union, or if it had a political and theological structural unity like the Roman Catholic Church in the Vatican, perpetuating old myths.

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[25] RUTHVEN, "Radical Islam's failure", p.32.

[26] SAID, *Orientalism*, p. 25.

[27] ZAKARIA, Fareed. 2009. "Learning to live with Radical Islam", **Newsweek** (March 09), pp. 12-19.

[28] http://wwwuser.gwdg.de/~uspw/iib/books_eng.html (last accessed 30th April 2012).

[29] After writing **The malady of Islam** (New York: Basic Books, 2003), where all the pessimistic clichés about Islam's decadence and the dangers of Islamism were superficially analysed, Abdelwahab Meddeb seems to have been taken aback by recent events in the Arab world, particularly in his native country Tunisia, which led him to write **Printemps de Tunis: la metamorphose de l'Histoire** [**Tunisia's Springtime: History's metamorphosis**] (Paris: Albin Michel, 2011), now talking optimistically about other commonplaces like Universal values, non-violence, Democracy, the bankruptcy of 'the clash of civilizations' and the 'end of History' theories, and *laïcité*. The fact is none of his books helps us to understand the what, how, and why of such complex events.

For example, Anshuman A. Mondal, in an article published in 2003,[30] wrote that '[u]nderlying the difficulty that most Islamic states have in accommodating political liberalism is Islam itself. Islam's 19th century reformers could not reconcile their faith with western modernity.'

Not once did Mondal mention the impact of colonialism and the brutality with which in some cases colonial powers denied the 'natives' the 'sweet fruits' of Democracy and Liberalism, and how that attitude fuelled the feeling of rejection of everything coming from the West. Needless to say, also absent from that article is the fact that in the first half of the 20th century many Europeans also rejected Liberal-Democracy, paving the way for the subsequent atrocities in the Old World and in other continents – was the reason for that something intrinsic in Christianity or in the West?

Mondal assumes that the only way forward for 'Islam' is to adopt what he thinks is the 'West', forcing one to conclude that if India or China became hegemonic powers in the future, people would be asking themselves why 'Islam' is not like 'India' or 'China'.

Another argument used is a cliché from 19th century Orientalism and Sociology, *i.e.*, the absence of Reformation in Islam:

> Western critics often claim that the failure of Islam to modernise is due to the fact it has had no Reformation. The Reformation, it is said, loosened the intellectual shackles of medieval Christendom and led to the development of capitalism and the emergence of the rational individual as the basic constituent of society. The development of Protestantism is also seen as instrumental in the secularisation of European society. Together, these developments crystallised into political institutions that were constitutional and democratic.[31]

Max Weber and Benjamin Kidd's theories on Protestantism, Capitalism, and forms of Government, developing Karl Marx's theory of modes of production and Montesquieu's stereotypes on Eastern despotism, were elaborated in the late 19th, early 20th century, a period of economical, social, political, military, institutional, scientific and cultural strength of some European countries, especially the 'Protestant' ones, like Great Britain and Germany, or the French Third Republic, which was under Positivism momentum and applying *laïcité*.[32] With their theories, Weber and Kidd (who was openly racist),

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[30] MONDAL, Anshuman A. 2003. "Liberal Islam?", **Prospect** 82 (January), pp. 28-33.

[31] MONDAL, "Liberal Islam?", p.28.

[32] The subject will not be developed here, but 'secularism' is different from '*laïcité*', and to say that a State is a secular one is redundant. Every State, even

were justifying the landscape of their own times with something they thought had happened with the Reformation, and projecting on the past their historical situation, and also explaining the backwardness of Roman Catholic countries.[33]

The Reformation did not mean the loosening of the intellectual shackles of medieval Christendom. That movement was aimed at the abuses of the Catholic Church in Rome, and it produced a period of great political and religious violence which only ended in 1648, with the Peace of Westphalia, putting an end to the Thirty Years' War, and even after that religious hostilities continued with the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Until the early 19th century, the Inquisition was still operating in the Roman Catholic world, and in many Reformed countries it was unthinkable to be a subject of the Crown or a Prince without adhering to the religion of the ruler (*cujus regio, ejus religio*).

The Reformation was not the main cause of capitalism, an economic system which already existed in medieval Italy (where the Holy See is located), and very important for it were the contributions of Arab trade and financial instruments.[34] And, importantly, it should not be forgotten that the Roman Catholic Church, very influential in many countries until the 19th century and one of the most important religious and political Western institutions, never reformed herself. Finally, if the development of Protestantism was instrumental in the secularisation of European society, how to explain the fact that many Protestant countries still have State religions?

Without advancing any data, or explaining his reasoning, Mondal then says that most Muslims in the West, even young second generation ones, tend to reject secularism and individualism and their faith is often expressed in even more collective forms than in the Islamic world itself.[35] Summing up all these subjects in five pages, and echoing Malise Ruthven's opinions, Mondal explains Islam's history, theology, law, the *Shari'a*, Islamic thought, Islamic fundamentalism, since the 7th century until the 10th, and then from the 19th century until the contemporary world, leaving a gap of almost nine centuries in

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those who claim some sort of divine origin, deals primarily with human and 'this-worldly' affairs.

[33] Timur Kuran, using this same line of reasoning, argues that what slowed the economic development of the Middle East was not colonialism or geography, but Islamic legal institutions from the 10th century onwards. By the 19th century, modern economic institutions began to be transplanted to the Middle East, but its economy has not caught up. Once again, never mind the fact that that 'transplantation' was done using imperial violence and colonial brutality, and, not surprisingly, Kuran does not explain what happened between the 11th and 18th centuries. KURAN, Timur. 2010. **The long divergence: how Islamic law held back the Middle East**. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

[34] For further details, see GRAEBER, David. 2011. **Debt: The First 5000 Years**. New York: Melville House, especially pp. 251-306.

[35] MONDAL, "Liberal Islam?", p.32.

between, as if 'Islam' had ceased to exist, and commenting on current events in places like Iran, Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia, South Asia or the Muslims in the West, using as a framework for analysis something that happened between the 7th and 10th centuries.

> Strictly speaking, Orientalism is a field of learned study. [...] Yet any account of Orientalism would have to consider not only the professional Orientalist and his work but also the very notion of a field of study based on a geographical, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic unit called the Orient. Fields, of course, are made. They acquire coherence and integrity in time because scholars devote themselves in different ways to what seems to be a commonly agreed-upon subject matter. Yet it goes without saying that a field of study is rarely as simply defined as even its most committed partisans – usually scholars, professors, experts, and the like – claim it is. Besides, a field can change so entirely, in even the most traditional disciplines like philology, history, or theology, as to make an all-purpose definition of subject matter almost impossible.[36]

**The Greater Middle East, from Morocco to Afghanistan**
There is a growing corpus of literature in contemporary social sciences that treats the contiguous landmass stretching from the Maghreb through southern Eurasia to China as a cogent unit of analysis.

Since 'Islamic Studies' deal with Muslim-majority countries and since Muslims are not restricted to the 'Middle East', which is, according to Orientalist clichés, the natural environment of Muslims, a new expression, the 'Greater Middle East', was coined to designate the region from Morocco to Afghanistan and, in some cases, to South-East Asia.

In 2007, a book on the 'Greater Middle East' (GME) was published,[37] with the aim of presenting a comparative study of history, state–society relations, globalization, Islamism, nationalism, democracy, regionalism, revolution, war, energy, conflict, etc., of that region, defined as a sum total of the Middle East and North Africa, Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Central Asian republics and the Caucasus.

The arguments used for that definition, GME, were three: 1) today's Greater Middle East countries were part of the three great Islamic empires of Mughal India, Safavid Persia and the Ottomans; 2) as a result of pressures from colonial modernity, they experienced 'sequential industrialization', which

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[36] SAID, *Orientalism,* pp. 1-2.

[37] AMINEH, M. Parvizi (ed.). 2007. *The Greater Middle East in global politics: social science perspectives on the changing geography of the world politics*. Leiden: Brill.

perennially distorted state–society relations; and, finally, 3) this part of the world constitutes a power vacuum, where big powers compete with each other for fossil fuels and other resources.[38]

Recently **An Atlas of Middle Eastern Affairs** was published.[39] On section D, 'States of the Middle East', there is a list of countries which, according to the authors, form part of that region, with its western and eastern geographical extremities, Morocco and Afghanistan respectively. These two countries have different languages, different religious traditions, different political histories, different economic conditions, and, nonetheless, both are considered Middle Eastern.

One may ask that if Morocco is considered to be part of the Middle East, why should Italy, which is geographically more Eastern than Morocco, to be considered Western?[40] Or what were the criteria for not including Pakistan as a country of the Middle East, in contrast to the book published in 2007?

What could be done, of course, is to study those different regions in a comparative manner, but it would not occur to anyone to study today's Cuba and the Philippines as a unit because both were part of the Spanish empire until 1898, or to lump Namibia and Tanganyika together because they were German colonies until the early 20th century. It would be even stranger to group these four territories and compare their present realities just because Spain and Germany, former colonial powers, were, and are, Christian, or to study these two countries as being one just because in the 16th century they were under the rule of Charles V of Habsburg.

After the Great Mutiny, or Sepoy Revolt, of 1857-58 in India, and although the great majority of the insurgents were Hindus, the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, was put on trial by the British and charged with being behind an international Muslim conspiracy stretching from Istanbul, Mecca and Iran to the walls of the Red Fort in Delhi.[41]

In the late 19th century, Gertrude Bell argued that it was due to the success of the British government in Egypt, as well in the Persian Gulf and on the Indian north-west frontier that the East could hang together, and that if the

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[38] For a review on this book see NOURZHANOV, Kirill. 2009. "The Greater Middle East in global politics: social science perspectives on the changing geography of the world politics", **Central Asian Survey**, 28, 1, pp. 79-80.

[39] ANDERSON, Ewan W. and ANDERSON, Liam D. 2010. **An Atlas of Middle Eastern Affairs**. London/New York: Routledge.

[40] Curiously enough, the way Moroccans designate their country, *al-Maghrib*, means, in Arabic, the West.

[41] DALRYMPLE, William. 2007. **The last mughal: the fall of a dynasty, Delhi 1857**. London: Bloomsbury.

British mission had been turned back from the gates of Kabul, 'the English tourist would be frowned upon in the streets of Damascus.'[42]

The 'Greater Middle East' is considered as a concept with actual, real existence as if there was some kind of political unity from one geographical extremity to the other, or as if by knowing, say, Tajik history one could understand events in Algeria, or by being an 'expert' on Iranian history one could grasp the situation in Egypt.

During the events leading to Mubarak's resignation in 2011, it was common to ask if there was a risk of Egypt becoming like Iran, a 'theocracy' with mullahs controlling the government and the State (it will not be discussed here if Iran really is a 'theocracy' or if the mullahs, as a single body, really control the State and the government).

Once again, never mind the fact that the two countries have different languages (one speaks an Egyptian dialect of Arabic, and the other speaks Persian), different traditions (one is Sunni and the other is Shi'a), different political histories (one was part of the Ottoman Empire and under British control, the other remained more or less independent), and, finally, the *'ulama* were never as strong in Egypt as the mullahs are in Iran.

It is difficult to understand that line of reasoning, unless, of course, we consider as determinant the fact that Egypt and Persia were under the same rulers more than twenty five hundred years ago, long before the appearance of Islam, or just because they are part of the 'Greater Middle East'.

Even Niall Ferguson, who is not an 'expert' on the Middle East, had something to say about what was going on in Egypt, repeating the same old sound bites: the menace that the Muslim Brotherhood represented (never mind that the organization works closely with Christians), the threat of 'the restoration of the caliphate' (using Ferguson's intellectual process, one has to conclude that the European Union's project is Nazi-inspired because Hitler's ultimate aim was to unite, under German hegemony, Europe), and, of course, the 'strict application of Sharia' (never mind that this is an abstract concept, varying through time and geography).[43]

Those fears towards the events in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere, were fuelled by the fact that they were genuine popular revolutions, something which Arabs and Muslims are not supposedly capable of, and justified because there are organizations called 'the Muslim Brotherhood' and others, inspired by Islam as a source of identity. Such fear-mongering has proved to be misplaced. Since the collapse of dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, Islamist

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[42] BELL, Gertrude. 1958. *From her personal papers, 1889-1914*. London: Ernest Benn, p. 204 cited in SAID, *Orientalism*, p. 229.

[43] FERGUSON, Niall. 2011. "Wanted: a grand strategy for America", *Newsweek* (February 14). Available at http://www.newsweek.com/2011/02/13/wanted-a-grand-strategy-for-america.html (last accessed 30th April 2012).

parties have shown themselves to be conciliatory toward sceptics, at home and abroad, winning votes by building political alliances with groups with different agendas and by embracing causes like fighting corruption and reforming the economy. The diversity of Islamist movements and parties means that there is no single way to communicate with Islamists, a fact that has only recently dawned on policy-makers in the U.S.A. and the E.U.[44], which are currently facing several crises, not only economical or financial, and also lacking the legitimacy to talk on an equal footing with the different political actors which have taken the stage in different countries affected by the 'Arab Spring', leaving an empty space to be filled by countries such as China, Brazil or Turkey.

In many cases, Western policy-makers have waited hesitantly until revolutions have reached their most volatile stages before terminating their support for authoritarian governments, most recently in Egypt and Tunisia.

As Antonio Giustozzi shows[45], when Western liberal states intervene abroad and seek to rebuild collapsed states, or to build new ones, they face a dilemma: how to combine the necessary recourse to coercion with liberal principles of how a state should be run. During the Cold War, Western governments invested in the building and consolidation of domestic liberal institutions (among others) for the purpose of building an ideological bulwark against 'socialism,' the ideology of the enemy. While this effort was a success, over the years it became so embedded in western identity that even policy makers, usually among the most cynical of human beings, had at least to pay lip service to this liberal ideology. Because the realities found in post-conflict or collapsed states are not conducive to the emergence of liberal institutions, Western policy-makers have been struggling to come up with strategies and policies that actually work on the ground. In fact, even within the ministries of defence or foreign affairs of Western democracies, not to mention development ministries and departments, there is in most cases now a critical mass of officials who have been trained (indoctrinated, perhaps) to believe that the western contemporary model of the state can be replicated *tout-court* in post-conflict states. Once operating in those unfriendly environments, some of these officials rediscover their lost cynicism, but others do not. The result is the characteristic two-tier policy pursued by Western state agencies when intervening in conflict and post-conflict environments: some agencies support institution-building, invest massively in it, advocate competitive and free elections, sponsor civil society organisations, even invent them when too few are readily available, always striving to create an environment that meets their ideological parameters. Other agencies, by contrast, sponsor state repression, or worse, rogue warlords and strongmen, unbound by rules and with a vested interest in opposing the consolidation of strong liberal institutions. Increasingly, the direct support for the agencies of state repression is politically unpalatable,

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[44] For further details see GHOSH, Bobby. 2012. "The converted", *Time* (April 09), pp. 32-38.

[45] GIUSTOZZI, Antonio. 2011. ***The Art of Coercion: The Primitive Accumulation and Management of Coercive Power***. New York: Columbia University Press.

has to be kept to a minimum, and must be accompanied by the imposition of strict rules on the behaviour of these agencies. The result is the tendency to rely on non-state armed groups (militias, warlords, strongmen and their retinues) to exercise what might be termed 'The Art of Coercion' as far as is possible, away from the (western) public eye, and with as much 'plausible deniability' as they can.

In 1974, Poland, a Roman Catholic-majority country, was under communist rule and was one of the Soviet Union strongest allies. At the same time, there was a revolution in another Roman Catholic-majority country, Portugal, which overthrew a right-leaning authoritarian regime. One of the main forces in that revolution was the Communist Party, which was very well-organised and with strong links with the Army. For a year and a half there were fears that Portugal could become a Soviet satellite. Finally, in November 1975, a military uprising put an end to the uncertainty and instability, and Portugal became a liberal democracy.

During this period no one proposed that there was a real danger of Portugal becoming a Communist state on the grounds that it was a Roman Catholic-majority country, like Poland, a line of thought which would certainly have been ridiculed. And an expert on, say, the Philippines, another Roman Catholic-majority country, would certainly think twice before giving his or her opinion on political events in Poland, or the financial bailouts of Portugal, Spain, Italy and Ireland, based solely on religion.

Many 'westerners' fear those organisations, even when admittedly they know nothing about them, just because they have *Muslim* on their names. On the other hand, the fact that some far-right parties in the Netherlands, Austria, Germany and elsewhere have *Freedom* in their names is sufficient to quell one's fears. It would never occur to anyone to brand them as 'Political Christianity', 'Western Extremists', or 'Radical' or 'Militant Christians', despite the fact that in their speeches and discourse the respective leaders in many such organisations talk constantly about the West's Christian identity and how important it is to defend Western values, whatever that may mean.

The recent success of Islamist parties in elections in Tunisia and Egypt has led many to conclude, a little hastily, that political Islam has hijacked the Arab Spring. In the current context of turbulence and uncertainty in the Middle East, it is more important than ever to understand what Islamism is, what drives it, and what its future role is likely to be.

Roger Hardy wrote one of his most recent books[46] in an attempt to explain and demystify Islamism, drawing on his experiences as a journalist who had travelled through large parts of the Muslim world. The book argues that, in its origins, Islamism represented a double revolt – against foreign dominion and against local autocracy. Like other anti-colonial movements, its driving force

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[46] HARDY, Roger. 2010. ***The Muslim Revolt: A Journey Through Political Islam***. New York: Columbia University Press.

was opposition to European rule; but unlike its secular counterparts, it rallied the faithful under the banner of a 'return to Islam.'

But even if these two elements, the external and the internal, remain its defining characteristics, we should not conclude that Islamism is monolithic and unchanging. In the light of the Arab Spring, we can now see Islamism as having passed through three crucial, and very different, phases: Its birth and early expansion from the late 1920s to the early 1950s; its revival in the 1970s, especially following the Iranian revolution; and its emergence as an actor with new-found importance in the Arab uprisings of today. From the setbacks of the first two phases, the Islamists had to learn hard lessons. Now, the current phase offers them unprecedented opportunities but also unprecedented constraints. What distinguishes Egypt in 2012 from Iran in 1979 is, first, that Iranian-style Islamism has been tried and found wanting; and, second, that the Islamists now find themselves part of a broadly-based movement of popular discontent and popular mobilisation. The Egyptian Brothers know they have a unique opportunity to share power in the post-Mubarak order – an opportunity they can't afford to squander. But they find themselves constrained by the pressure of events and by the need to conform to the national mood. They are having to make difficult accommodations with the generals who are currently running the show (and who have promised to leave power by June) and to remain in tune with the mass of the Egyptian people, who are impatient for both political change and economic improvement. Both the generals and ordinary Egyptians are ready to let the Brotherhood play a role in the transition to civilian rule – but neither wants Egypt to be transformed into an Islamic state governed by Islamic law.

In short, the nature of the game has changed. The intriguing question is not whether Islam and Islamism have a role to play in the difficult birth of a more democratic Middle East, but, rather, what that role will be. Among the actors that will face the toughest challenges in the months ahead are the Islamists themselves.

**Conclusion**
'Lamentably, there has been no demonstrable effect – if there has been a challenging gesture at all – made by Islamic or Arab scholars' work disputing the dogmas of Orientalism; an isolated article here or there, while important for its time and place, cannot possibly affect the course of an imposing research consensus maintained by all sorts of agencies, institutions, and traditions. The point of this is that Islamic Orientalism has led a contemporary life quite different from that of the other Orientalist sub disciplines. [...] Only the Arabists and Islamologists still function unrevised.'[47]

It is fair to say that these fields of 'Middle East' and/or 'Islamic' studies have gone through remarkable changes in the past thirty years. There has been an impressive body of work disputing and challenging these dogmas in two

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[47] SAID, *Orientalism*, pp. 301-302.

ways: firstly, by rigorous research done in the various specific fields, showing that reality is much more complex than what the essentialist theories about 'Islam', the 'Middle East', the 'Mediterranean' and the 'Islamic' world can account for; and, secondly, by rigorous research which looked into and questioned the ontological validity of those concepts.

Gradually, Arabists and Islamologists are revising their views, body of work, and stereotypes. As examples, we have Assef Bayat[48], or Sami Zubaida, who, in his most recent work,[49] tries to understand the 'Middle East' while addressing the fundamental question in Middle East studies on the definition of the Middle East itself. To see it through the prism of Islam, he argues, in its religious aspects, as it is conventionally viewed, is completely to misunderstand it. Many characteristics that we think of as 'Islamic' are products of culture and society, not religion. To think of Islam itself as an essentially anti-modern force in the region rather than something shaped by specific historical-economic processes is, Zubaida argues, a mistake. Instead, he offers an alternative view of the region, its historic cosmopolitanism, its religious and cultural diversity, and its rapid adoption of new media cultures, revealing a rich, multi-faceted region with a complex identity.

Over the past thirty years, this field of research has been transformed in a profound way and the existing body of knowledge has been questioned, revised and enlarged dramatically, but, of course, there continues to be

> a Middle East studies establishment, a pool of interests, "old boy" or "expert" networks linking corporate business, the foundations, the oil companies, the missions, the military, the foreign service, the intelligence community together with the academic world. There are grants and other rewards, there are organizations, there are hierarchies, there are institutes, centres, faculties, departments, all devoted to legitimizing and maintaining the authority of a handful of basic, basically unchanging ideas about Islam, the Orient, and the Arabs.[50]

Using Jillian Schwedler's reflections regarding the study of 'Political Islam'[51] (another questionable concept which in recent years has been

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[48] BAYAT, Assef. 2007. ***Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist turn***. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

[49] ZUBAIDA, Sami. 2010. ***Beyond Islam: A New Understanding of the Middle East***. London: I.B. Tauris.

[50] SAID, ***Orientalism***, pp. 301-302.

[51] SCHWEDLER, Jillian. 2011. "Studying Political Islam", ***International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies***, 43, pp.135-137.

extensively used as synonym of 'Islam'[52]) and applying them now on the fields of 'Middle East' and 'Mediterranean' studies, much of the work done by researchers in specific fields, which enter under this broad categorization, has drawn little attention outside of academia despite the anxieties over Islam shared by policy-makers and the general public.

The many rigorous studies judiciously carried out by both academics and journalists, and grounded on extensive field research and use of primary sources in Arabic, Turkish, and Persian, are bundled together with bestselling books more consistent with the existing obsessions and stereotypes over the irrational, West-hating Muslim fanatic, and the oppressed veiled woman. Serious scholarship on Islam cannot ignore the stereotypes and fear-mongering which dominate mainstream debate about Islam and the Middle East, but in responding to these discourses it often allows this mainstream to dictate the analytic starting point.

We could do what Martin Kramer defends, which is going back to the roots in Oriental studies to 'restore some continuity with the great tradition' in order to explain and predict change in the Middle East[53] – we could also ask historians to drop all the developments occurred in the last century in the field of historiography and return to the written text as the only legitimate source for writing History, or we could also ask physicists to ignore Einstein's theories and go back to Newtonian Physics – or, instead, we can choose to approach reality's complexities, its ontological and epistemological challenges, without trying to mould it according to a predefined model (what Kramer's 'explain and predict' euphemism stands for).

Categorisations and generalisations are natural to humans; they are basic cognitive skills which help us give some order to the world. Although categories created by scientists are means to better understand what surrounds us, there is a problem when they become generalisations and when these begin to be considered as *reality*; when this is the case categories become a hindrance instead of helping us, a dangerous one since the subject being dealt with are humans, and their concrete lives.

Current events in North Africa, Egypt and other countries in the Arab world have shown that political reality is changing. Taking into account the various transformations occurred in the past decades in economic conditions, social imbalances, cultural and mental outlook, political change was something

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[52] For further details on this subject see MOHOMED, Carimo. 2009. "Islam and Islamisms: Religion, Politics and Identity", in LONG, Ahmad Sunawari et al. (eds.), *Issues and challenges of contemporary Islam and muslims*. Bangi: Department of Theology and Philosophy, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, pp. 107-110.

[53] KRAMER, Martin. 2001. *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America.* Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, p 123 cited in BILGIN, Pinar. 2004. "Is the 'Orientalist' past the future of Middle East studies?", *Third World Quarterly,* 25, 2, pp. 423 - 433.

predictable, but to see it coming would have been to see something at odds with the way in which the 'Middle East' and 'Islam' were thought of. It would also have meant acknowledging that methods and theories seeking grand universal explanations ('the Muslim character does not permit change'; 'in Islam, tyranny is preferred to no power'; 'the Middle Easterners are incapable of managing their own affairs without Western assistance'; 'Muslim women are silenced and oppressed') were in danger of failing to match real situations ('change is happening'; 'people do not want tyrants'; 'they are organising change themselves'; 'women are participating in what is happening').

As far as Mediterranean studies as such are concerned, this is indeed a very recent and still fragile field of study involving a very limited and often closed number of researchers, even in countries such as Spain where the Mediterranean area has become a major branch of its foreign policy. This warrants the question whether there is such a thing as Mediterranean studies as an academic area, given that Mediterranean studies, as we know them, have a lot to do with the European Union's external politics and colonial history (which explains why some Mediterranean regions, such as the Balkans and to a certain extent even Turkey, have been largely ignored). Indeed, the Mediterranean as such only became relevant as a subject of study after the end of the Cold War, when European scenarios for conflict moved from the eastern to the southern periphery, which explains why, to a large extent, Mediterranean studies have been determined by a 'security-driven agenda', and hence why international relations is the discipline in which the most coherent, although still limited, community of Mediterranean researchers can be discerned.[54]

'Middle East' and/or 'Islamic' studies are fertile with new avenues of research, but first it is necessary that the specialists in our field review their notions and the boundaries of their subject. Indeed, we might do well to discard altogether the idea that 'Middle East', the 'Mediterranean', or 'Islam' represents a tangible object of study. In the foreseeable future, it does not seem probable that these labels will be torn to pieces and the concepts of 'Middle East' and/or 'Mediterranean' studies be totally abandoned, but in the meantime an effort should be made to convey the message that studying Islamic *Cultures* and *Civilizations* is something polifacetic and not necessarily related with religion and Muslims, and that it does not make us 'experts' on *Islam*. Someone studying Moroccan politics is an expert on that, and not on the 'Middle East' or the 'Mediterranean', and a researcher dealing with Afghan economy has an expertise on that and not on 'Islam'.

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[54] GILLESPIE, Richard and MARTÍN, Iván. 2009. "Researching the Mediterranean and the Middle East in the United Kingdom, Spain and Europe: present challenges and future initiatives", in GILLESPIE, Richard and MARTÍN, Iván (eds.). 2009. *Researching the Mediterranean*. Barcelona: British Council/Fundació CIDOB/IEMed/WOCMESBarcelona2010, pp. 156-157.

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