

# Varieties of International Influence and the Middle East

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In today's world, international actors attempt to influence the domestic politics of states in myriad ways. International pressure can be exerted by state or non-state actors, target state or non-state actors, and involve military or nonmilitary means. Moreover, it can attempt to influence virtually any aspect of domestic politics. Although international pressure does not always succeed—and sometimes leads to unintended consequences—it is undoubtedly a variable that explains the nature of domestic politics in many countries today.

Studying international influence in the Middle East provides valuable insight into how international actors influence domestic politics. As other contributors in this symposium note (Hazbun 2017; Snider 2017; Stein 2017), linkages between international and domestic politics are essential to understanding a variety of political, economic, and social developments in the Arab world. This article argues that general international relations (IR) theories about international pressure can help scholars of the Middle East to understand important dynamics in the region that have occurred since the Arab uprising. Lessons from the Middle East also provide important research questions about the nature and consequences of international influence that are applicable elsewhere in the world.

This article focuses on two themes related to international influences on domestic politics that illustrate the benefits of cross-fertilization between IR and Middle East studies. Specifically, careful attention to Middle East cases demonstrates the ways that international influence leads to differentiation across countries and polarization within them—in addition to the more frequently studied dynamics of diffusion and convergence. Although these divergent effects are not unique to the contemporary Middle East, they are particularly stark there due in part to the highly partisan nature of international influence. IR scholars will benefit from paying closer attention to these dynamics in the future, especially as research programs about international influences on domestic politics continue to grow.

## WHAT IR THEORY TELLS US ABOUT INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCES ON DOMESTIC POLITICS

Gourevitch (1978) coined the phrase “the second image reversed” to refer to the ways that the international system affects the domestic politics of states. Although that framework can be used to understand patterns of conflict, cooperation, and institutional change throughout history, it has been particularly useful for researchers examining patterns

in contemporary IR, perhaps because of increased global interdependence. The literature that builds on Gourevitch's insights is too large to review in the context of this article, but contributions in political science applying the framework include studies of democratization (Gleditsch and Ward 2006; Pevehouse 2002), economic liberalization (Elkins, Guzman, and Simmons 2006; Simmons and Elkins 2004), elections and electoral politics (Hyde 2011; Kelley 2012), and gender and human-rights policies (Bush 2011; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005; Hughes, Krook, and Paxton 2015). Whereas in many cases, international influences on domestic politics can occur without any direct international pressure, both direct and indirect forms of international pressure matter in all of these issue areas, including via international institutions, state-to-state diplomacy, transnational advocacy networks, and epistemic communities.

The recent IR literature on the second image reversed focuses primarily on how and why similar policies and practices have been adopted in so many countries. Indeed, in recent years, diverse countries around the world have democratized, significantly reduced restrictions on cross-border capital flows, signed bilateral investment treaties, invited observers to monitor their elections, promised to respect certain human rights, adopted gender quotas, joined international institutions, and more. In other words, it is easy to conclude from the IR literature that the “second image reversed” is a framework best used to understand dynamics of diffusion and convergence. However, this framework can be applied as easily to study differentiation and polarization across and within states.

Examination of political developments in the Middle East is especially illuminating in this regard, in terms of both understanding the region and developing new—and potentially more general—IR theories. In what follows, I first discuss how the Middle East reveals differentiation in the international system despite transnational pressures that might encourage diffusion. I then discuss how international pressures in the Middle East often result in domestic polarization—a dynamic that has not yet been integrated into more global IR theories.

## DIFFERENTIATION AS WELL AS DIFFUSION

As noted previously, international influences have led to the diffusion of many specific practices and policies to most countries in the world. However, some countries are left behind when these changes occur. Indeed, international pressure has encouraged the diffusion of political liberalization in

most countries in the world outside of the Middle East. An example of this phenomenon, which Hyde (2011) and Kelley (2012) documented in excellent studies, is how international incentives and norms caused countries around the world to hold national elections and then invite international election monitors to observe them. This type of pressure via monitors generally came late—and, in some cases, not at all—to the Middle East.

Part of the explanation for this differentiation in terms of outcomes may be that international pressure for political liberalization in the Middle East is different than in other parts of the world. Specifically, international efforts to promote

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political liberalization in most of the countries in the Middle East have been half-hearted at best and often combined with forceful international efforts to promote the authoritarian status quo (Brownlee 2012; Bush 2015, 2016; Carapico 2013; Jamal 2012). Moreover, the ideas underpinning foreign assistance in the region do not necessarily reflect those ideas elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, differentiation is not simply the result of internal factors that make countries in the region less responsive to international pressure. Rather, the form and type of international pressure has led to differentiation in the international system. This claim relates to a point made by Solingen (2012, 2015) in a valuable contribution to an earlier symposium on “International Relations Theory and a Changing Middle East.” She argued that Arab rulers effectively built “firewalls” to protect themselves against the pressures of diffusion.

It is worth emphasizing that international influences can have a differentiating effect on domestic politics through two mechanisms. On the one hand, international pressure can lead directly to differentiation because it is applied differently to different countries or because different countries respond differently to the *same* types of pressure. On the other hand, international pressure also has an indirect differentiating effect because it inadvertently leads countries that were not pressured to become less like those that were.

#### **POLARIZATION AS WELL AS CONVERGENCE**

International pressure also often has polarizing effects *within* countries’ domestic politics. In some cases, the polarization effect is deliberate: international actors provide their partisan allies with various forms of support, including money, technical and security assistance, and rhetorical backing. Perhaps most obvious, these forms of support can help partisan allies win elections—but they also help them pursue their policy goals and stay in power through means outside of elections. Drawing on evidence from a public-opinion survey in Lebanon, for example,

Corstange and Marinov (2012) found that voters became more polarized on the issue of foreign relations when they were exposed to messages about the electoral interventions of the United States and Iran (see also Marinov 2013).

In other cases, the polarization effect is not deliberate: international actors may end up dividing a country’s people despite not trying to do so. Survey experiments in Jordan and Tunisia suggest that there is reason to think that election observers as well as other international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) may have this type of polarizing effect when they attempt to provide new political information to local audiences. For example, when international NGOs endorsed

women’s representation in an authoritarian environment, their statements prompted more favorable responses among people who support the incumbent regime (Bush and Jamal 2015). Likewise, when election-observation groups issued reports on local election quality, their assessments were taken differently depending on whether an individual supported the winning or losing party (Bush and Prather 2017). The differential responses in both cases were in some sense partisan, whether because political affiliations shape individuals’ prior beliefs and thus their likelihood of updating in response to new information or because individuals’ partisan affiliations cause them to be resistant to information that contradicts their prior beliefs.

There is no reason why these polarizing effects of international pressure should be unique to the Middle East. However, it is no accident that it is in this region where the scant research on how international actors polarize the domestic political environment has blossomed most fully. Indeed, many of the region’s weak states have various state and non-state actors that are competing for local authority as well as international support (Hazbun 2017; see also Salloukh 2017).

More important, the Middle East is arguably the world region where multiple international actors most regularly and clearly take sides in domestic politics today.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, Iran and Qatar are commonly perceived to intervene in the region on the side of Islamist forces and, although they may give lip service to supporting democratic principles, they clearly are not countries that are in the habit of promoting democracy abroad. On the other hand, countries ranging from Saudi Arabia to the United States and European states commonly intervene on the side of secular forces in the region. The United States and European states also claim to support democratic principles in the Middle East. Their actual commitment to promoting democracy in the region is ambivalent at best and—as noted previously—often combined with considerable support for regime maintenance. That said, these

countries do offer democracy-aid programs to most Arab states, which target potentially sensitive issue areas including, among others, elections, civil society, and women's political participation (Carapico 2013; Snider 2015).

Because multiple foreign countries in the Middle East try to exert international pressure on domestic politics in competing directions, it is easy to understand how the domestic public sphere might be polarized. Yet, several important questions remain unanswered about the nature and scope of international actors' polarizing effects in the region. For example,

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are international actors—which typically do not share a common identity or ideology with people in target countries—more likely to polarize domestic audiences than regional or nongovernmental actors? Do “hard power” types of international influence (e.g., economic or military aid and investment opportunities) polarize more or less than “soft power” types (e.g., technical assistance and media)? Do democratic political institutions magnify or moderate the polarizing potential of international pressure? Future research is needed to answer these and other questions about polarization.

At the same time, the research agenda on the international sources of domestic polarization must look beyond the Middle East in search of broader theories and empirical tests. Similar dynamics of polarization due to international pressure seem likely to occur in other world regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa, Central and Eastern Europe, and the post-Soviet world. By also focusing on other regions, it will be possible to identify the importance of the number and type of intervening countries and the nature of target countries' domestic institutions and cleavages for the likelihood of polarization. It is hoped that scholars working at the nexus of IR and comparative politics in other parts of the world can learn from those who have studied these issues in the Middle East.

### IMPLICATIONS

Research on the second image reversed has been a dynamic area of IR in recent years. Studying the processes of diffusion and convergence that occurred as a result of international pressure—for example, democratization and economic liberalization—has been important. However, diffusion does not always reach the entire population of countries, and it is important for our understanding of contemporary world politics to continue investigating where and why international diffusion stops and what the consequences of these growing differences in the international system might be. To use Valbjørn's (2017) framework, cross-fertilization between IR and Middle East studies helps us to understand the scope conditions of general IR theories about diffusion.

Moreover, international influences can polarize domestic politics within countries—and this dynamic also likely has

significant consequences. Valbjørn's (2017) framework implies a way that studying a “new Middle East” suggests the need for new, possibly general IR theories about the polarizing effects of international pressure that can be tested using evidence from other world regions. The international sources of domestic polarization were present in the Arab world before the Arab uprisings. However, the events since 2011 arguably have strengthened them and certainly have drawn our attention. In other words, scholars of IR have much to gain from studying international pressure in the Middle East. ■

### NOTES

1. See Snider (2017) for a discussion of what we can learn from looking closely at the forms taken by foreign assistance in the Middle East.
2. For insight into how concerns about regime survival shape states' decisions in the Middle East regarding how and where to intervene in other countries, see Gause (2017) and Ryan (2015).

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