WRITING ABOUT INSECURITY AND GLOBAL POLITICS IN BEIRUT

By Waleed Hazbun, University of Alabama, Karim Makdisi, American University of Beirut, and Coralie Pison Hindawi, American University of Beirut*

Writing in a 1925 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, the African-American scholar and civil rights activist W. E. B. DuBois questions if "our research is not directed to the right geographical spots."[1] Reflecting on his travels and interviews with Africans, DuBois highlights the value of external perspectives formulated from what he refers to as the "ground of disadvantage." We suggest the US-centered field of International Relations (IR) can similarly benefit from contemporary scholarship developed abroad, especially in locations that have been in the shadow of American power, such as Beirut, Lebanon and other locations in the Middle East.

Teaching students from Lebanon and other parts of the Arab world about global politics requires recognition of how others experience insecurity and situate themselves within the emerging multipolar global system. As IR scholars with experience writing from, teaching in, and conducting research in Beirut we agree with our former colleague at the American University of Beirut (AUB) Patrick McGreevy, who writes that the "experience of being so often on the wrong end of the stick of US hard power provides Arabs with a certain perspective on the United States."[2]

These perspectives from the region can help sustain forms of scholarship lacking in most IR journals, books, and syllabi in which local actors are rarely recognized to have agency beyond supporting or opposing the prevailing US vision for regional order. Instead, we seek to foster approaches based on local understandings of insecurity that recognize the destabilizing impact of recent US policy and in which local actors might play a meaning role in shaping practices of global governance.

EXPERIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

As the recent APSA President David Lake recognizes, "Our life experiences shape our intuitions, which in turn guide our theoretical suppositions."[3] Exposure to alternative perspectives does not simply provide additional data, but more critically, it also enables pathways for the production of different forms of knowledge. Beyond engagement with diverse non-American students, our experiences in Beirut are defined by our complex relationships to North American political science,[4] our collaborations with scholars based in Europe, and our commitment to build ties across the Global South. Working at an English-language, American-style university in the Arab world leads us to resemble what Edward Said has called "exiles," in that we are familiar with multiple contexts and perspectives, and "this plurality

*Authors listed alphabetically.

of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music, is *contrapuntal*."[5]

As a result, we have sought to cultivate contrapuntal insights across multiple dimensions, including academic disciplines, theoretical approaches, national contexts, and languages. Our work is defined by living between, on the one hand, the close affinity of IR scholarship with American strategic interests; and, on the other hand, our experience of living in a community and region that is often suspicious about, if not actively opposed to, America's role and actions in the region. For many, crossing a range of political perspectives, the U.S. has long been viewed as a major source of regional insecurity and instability. While IR debates within North America often include "critical" perspectives, these approaches are generally critical in the sense that they offer alternative ways to understand US interests, discourses and policies. In contrast, our research and teaching has sought to closely follow how Arab political elites, scholars, and activists, as well as communities across the broader society, differently understand the sources of insecurity their states and societies face.

Buffered from the expectations of North American academia and policy relevance, our scholarship has been directly shaped by experiences of living in Beirut. Collectively, together with our students, we have felt the regional consequences of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, experienced the impact of the devastating 2006 War between Israel and Lebanon, witnessed the spill-overs from the war in Syria and occupation of Palestine, and closely followed the ongoing conflicts in Libya and Yemen. Our location has obliged us to think and teach about civil war, refugees, transnational jihadism, sectarianism, occupation, and violence not merely as de-contextualized security issues, but as complex social realities with their attendant contradictions and disputes anchored in contested histories.

CONTEXTUALIZING "INSECURITY"

Following postcolonial critiques of IR, we note that the problem of "security" is usually posed as a question of how to promote a Western-dominated order while somehow ignoring what can be palpably felt from locations such as Beirut: the hierarchical power relations and means of violence deployed to sustain such an order.

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Hierarchies and/or violence are present in all aspects of geopolitical relations with external powers and international institutions that seek to build political order in the region. Local actors, when they are recognized to have agency, are viewed in terms of how they sustain such an order—or else represent threats to it. They are rarely understood in terms of their own interests and understandings of insecurity and almost never play a meaningful role in shaping the practices of global governance.[6]

Lacking agreed parameters for a regional security order, and with many states fragmented between political forces with rival security interests, the development of security studies within the Arab region generally lacks common norms and expectations to identify sources of insecurity. The alternative approach we seek to develop follows Pinar Bilgin's call for closely examining the "insecurities experienced by various state and non-state actors in the Arab world, as well as the military, economic, and societal dimensions of insecurity."[7]

A key contribution of such scholarship is its effort to explore how these local and regional conceptions of insecurity are often at odds with those embedded and enforced by the "international community." Much of our research draws on local readings and counter-

discourses/narratives to explore the limits of Western-dominated institutions and security regimes such as over arms control,[8] the UN and peacekeeping,[9] or the shifting role of the US in the region following the Arab Uprisings.[10]

A central feature of our contrapuntal approach is to excavate and explore rival understandings of insecurity and the contexts that sustain them. In particular, we have sought to highlight how the US "global war on terror" after 2001 reconfigured the US-dominated "international community's" view of the requirements for peace and security in countries such as Lebanon.[11] For instance, most of the vast IR and security studies scholarship and policy debates addressing the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war works squarely within the US-Israeli parameters defined by the US "war on terror." This scholarship tends to offer little acknowledgement of the rival understandings of diverse actors in Lebanon and their agency in disrupting, shaping or adapting to larger forces at play around them. In contrast, we suggest that efforts to craft a UN Security Council resolution to bring an end to the 2006 war had to negotiate between rival narratives that, in turn, were shaped by developments on the ground. Such narratives included those within Lebanon and Israel; as well as those of Qatar (that represented the Arab bloc in the Security Council during this period) and regional rivals including Syria and Iran, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia on the other hand.

Similarly, while much of US-based scholarship about chemical weapons in Syria is focused on President Obama's statement about "red lines" or claims of Syrian violations and impunity, we highlight the competing narratives about the Syrian chemical weapons disarmament process. We explore what the coexistence of such rival understandings, ultimately embodied in the construction of a hybrid international disarmament mechanism, illustrate about perceptions of security and arms control practices in the Middle East.[12]

These efforts to make the study of global politics and security more inclusive and pluralistic reflect the challenging contradictions within the global system. The notion of "human security," developed as a critical approach for rethinking security, and concepts such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) have come to enjoy considerable support from scholars and political elites in Western states and are often invoked to justify foreign intervention in the Middle East and elsewhere. In contrast, we seek to explore the significance of such concepts and doctrines for peoples who have, in frequent instances, suffered insecurity from the failures of their own states and from a too narrowly defined "international community" embodied in the United Nations.[13]

The effort to explore and address these rival understandings is not a call for the privileging of a particular geopolitical position or subjectivity. Rather, it offers a challenge to scholars of IR and security studies to broaden the scope of their research and understanding by engaging with both diverse understandings of insecurity as well as scholarship from the region.

PRODUCING SCHOLARSHIP IN BEIRUT

In recent years, Beirut has evolved as a hub for innovative field research, scholarly knowledge production, and institutional development about issues of security in Lebanon and the wider Arab world. As Mohammed Bamyeh observes in his survey of social science knowledge production in the Arab world, Lebanon is at the "forefront" of independent scholarly output in the region.[14]

Beyond our own work, research on security issues in Lebanon has helped to develop concepts and approaches, such as the notion of "hybrid-sovereignty," a focus on the role of non-state actors, and critical approaches to understanding sectarianism and the notion of "weak states."[15] This research is also

increasingly relevant to understanding security politics across the Arab world, where external interventions, civil wars and huge civilian population displacements have resulted in highly fragmented polities and the exacerbation of social tension. Such scholarship, especially when based on extensive local fieldwork and nuanced historical contextualization, contributes to our effort to map the diverse understandings and lived experiences of insecurity in the region.

Colleagues at AUB's Center for Civic Engagement and Community Service (CCECS) and the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) have played prominent roles in exploring everyday insecurities resulting from unregulated urbanization, environmental and water stress, and Palestinian and Syrian refugee flows in Lebanon.[16]

Working in Beirut also provides relatively safe ground, compared to many other locations from the region, in regards to possible surveillance, repression, or punishment for researchers (and their informants) addressing political sensitive topics such as security and sources of insecurity. Yet in Lebanon, as elsewhere in the region, researchers face the dilemma between seeking either international academic acknowledgement by publishing in recognized English language outlets based abroad but with limited concern for regional issues or local relevance and impact by writing for regional or Arabic language newspapers, journals, and policy briefs. Our AUB colleague Sari Hanafi sums up this dilemma with the expression "publish globally and perish locally vs publish locally and perish globally."[17]

Most recently, we have also been part of a transnational collaborative effort to foster scholarship by junior scholars from and based in the region that seeks to begin to bridge divides outlined by Hanafi while fostering new sources for contrapuntal insights. This project was initiated and funded by the Beirut-based Arab Council for the Social Sciences (ACSS). It published a collectively written manifesto, "Towards a Beirut School of Critical Security Studies,"[18] that maps the project's ongoing efforts to work through critical approaches to the study of security and global politics and reflects on how its collective experiences organizing a bilingual Beirut-based summer school on critical security studies for graduate students and junior scholars living and working in the region have helped shape the project.

Although these efforts may not result in a coherent approach or a distinct theory of security, together they aspire to engage in global debates bringing in new perspectives and voices in the long-overdue project of making IR more "global."

[1] W. E. B. DuBois, "Worlds of Color," *Foreign Affairs* 3, no. 3 (April 1925): 423.

[2] Patrick McGreevy, "The American Question," in *Practicing Transnationalism: American Studies in The Middle East*, eds. Eileen T. Lundy and Edward J. Lundy (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 25.

[3] David A. Lake, "White Man's IR: An Intellectual Confession," *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 4 (December 2016): 1115.

[4] Two of us hold PhDs from US institutions and one recently relocated to the US after teaching at the American University of Beirut for 8 years.

[5] Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 186 (emphasis in original).

[6] Waleed Hazbun, "The Politics of Insecurity in the Arab World: A View from Beirut," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50, no. 3 (July 2017): 656-9; Karim Makdisi and Vijay Prashad eds. *Land of Blue Helmets: The United Nations and the Arab World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

[7] Pinar Bilgin, "Inquiring into Others' Conceptions of the International and Security," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50, no. 3 (2017): 654.

[8] Coralie Pison Hindawi, "Iraq: Twenty years in the shadow of Chapter VII," in *Land of Blue Helmets: The United Nations and the Arab World,* eds. Karim Makdisi and Vijay Prashad (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 194-211; Karim Makdisi and Coralie Pison Hindawi, "The Syrian chemical weapons disarmament process in context:

Narratives of coercion, consent, and everything in between," *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 8 (2017): 1691-1709.

[9] Karim Makdisi and Vijay Prashad, eds. *Land of the Blue Helmets: The United Nations in the Arab World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

[10] Waleed Hazbun, "Beyond the American Era in the Middle East: An Evolving Landscape of Turbulence," in *New Conflict Dynamics*, eds. Rasmus Alenius Boserup, Waleed Hazbun, Karim Makdisi and Helle Malmvig (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2017), pp. 31-41; http://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/830699/2017_DIIS_New_Conflict_Dynamics_in_the_Middle_East_and_North_Africa_web.pdf.

[11] Karim Makdisi, "Constructing Security Council Resolution 1701 for Lebanon in the Shadow of the 'War on Terror,'" *International Peacekeeping* 18, no. 1 (2011): 4–20.

[12] Makdisi and Pison Hindawi, "The Syrian chemical weapons disarmament process in context."

[13] Coralie Pison Hindawi, "What If R2P Was—Truly—Everyone's Business? Exploring the Individual Responsibility to Protect," *Alternatives* 41, no. 1 (February 2016): 29–48.

[14] Mohammed Bamyeh, *Social Sciences in the Arab World: Forms of Presence* (Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences, 2015), 129; http://www.theacss.org/uploads/English-ASSR-2016.pdf.

[15] See, for example, Najib B. Hourani, "Lebanon: Hybrid Sovereignties and U.S. Foreign Policy," *Middle East Policy* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 39-55; Bassel F. Salloukh, "Overlapping Contests and Middle East International Relations: The Return of the Weak Arab State," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50, no. 3 (2017): 660–63.

[16] See, for example, Rabih Shibli, "Reconfiguring Relief Mechanisms: The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon," Research Report, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut (February 2014), http://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/20140224ifi_pc_unrwa.pdf.

[17] Sari Hanafi, "University systems in the Arab East: Publish globally and perish locally vs publish locally and perish globally," *Current Sociology* 59, no. 3 (2011): 291-309.

[18] Samer Abboud, Omar Dahi, Waleed Hazbun, Nicole Sunday Grove, Jamil Mouawad, Coralie Pison Hindawi and Sami Hermez, "Towards a Beirut School of Critical Security Studies," *Critical Studies in Security* 6, no. 3 (2018): 273-295.