

# THE MIDDLE EAST IN POLITICAL SCIENCE JOURNALS

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## What Do Political Scientists Study on the Middle East?

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The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is a large, diverse region comprising at least 22 countries, with broad variation with respect to religion, language and ethnicity, economic systems and resource endowments, regime type, forms of social organization and state-society relations, and other factors. <sup>i,ii</sup> Anyone who teaches introductory survey courses on the region is (perhaps painfully) aware of the breadth of knowledge and expertise required to do justice to the region. In this piece, we take a close look at political science scholarship on the Middle East, focusing on what researchers study in terms of country coverage and the predominant topics addressed using cases from the region.

Our analyses are based on an original, comprehensive dataset of journal articles on Middle Eastern cases in comparative politics and international relations from 2000 through 2019 in a set of leading mainstream political science journals. Our sample of publications includes the *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Annual Review of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, *World Politics*, *International Organization*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Comparative Politics*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *Perspectives on Politics*, *Political Research Quarterly*, *International Studies Quarterly*, and *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*. This captures a set of widely cited general disciplinary journals; including security-focused journals such as *International Security* or *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, or other specialized journals such as *Party Politics* or *World Development* would likely have changed some of our findings on the margins.

We included articles on Arab countries, Turkey, Iran and Israel, along with publications covering aggregates such as the “Arab region,” “Middle East,” or “North Africa”. We dropped articles that do not entail at least one-third of the empirical evidence based on MENA cases. Our coverage spans the last two decades (2000 through 2019), which allows us to see trends over a period encompassing major events such as 9/11 or the Arab uprisings that have attracted global attention among policy-makers and scholars alike. The resultant dataset covers 20 years, 13 journals, 290 unique authors, and 222 articles, of which 113 are single-authored papers and 109 co-authored.

To contextualize our findings, it is important to note that Middle East focused research in the discipline does not constitute a large proportion of all published articles in mainstream political science journals. The discipline as a whole has witnessed a trend towards increased publishing in peer-reviewed journals over the past two decades. By our count, total articles published in the journals in our dataset have nearly doubled over the past 20 years, rising from 322 articles in 2000 to 649 in 2019. MENA-focused scholarship has also increased during this period, but not at the same rate. From 2000 to 2019, the number of articles per year focusing on the Middle East rose

from 4 to 18 articles, with a peak of 22 articles in 2016. As a percentage of journal content, this amounts to an increase from 1.2 percent in 2000 to 2.8 percent in 2019. As would be expected, articles on the region spiked after the Arab uprisings in 2011, but the proportion of published research on the Middle East remains marginal, as articles on the region never exceed 4 percent of total articles in the selected journals. Due to lack of data on coverage of other global regions, we cannot benchmark this finding in cross-regional comparative perspective. Nonetheless, for a region with at least 22 countries, this seems strikingly low.

### **What do political scientists study in the Middle East?**

Descriptive analyses of our data present a picture of what political scientists study in research on the Middle East. In this essay, we focus on which countries receive the most scholarly attention and, among them, which topics are the primary subjects of research. Together, the results trace how scholarship on different countries in the region - or on the region as a whole - links to broader research programs in political science and how this has evolved over time.

### **Which countries? Geographic coverage of MENA-focused articles in political science**

Which MENA countries or country groupings occupy the most publication “real estate”? Regional and multi-country coverage are the two most popular geographic categories with about 24 percent and 14 percent of geographic share, respectively.<sup>iii</sup> Looking at articles focusing on one country (or a single conflict) within the region, Israel, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Turkey have the largest share of articles. Israel accounts for about 14 percent of all articles, Israel-Palestine about 10 percent, and Turkey about 7 percent. This is surprising given that Arab countries constitute the vast majority of countries in the region and yet none are represented in the highest shares of scholarship on the Middle East. (Although Palestine is an Arab country, the Israel-Palestine category only encompasses articles that focus on dyadic relations between the two countries - not on politics in Palestine itself.) Egypt, Lebanon, and Iraq are the next most frequently studied countries, and receive the largest share of coverage among Arab countries in the dataset. Of the total share of articles in the dataset, those about 6 percent focus on Egypt, 5 percent on Lebanon, and 4.5 percent on Iraq.

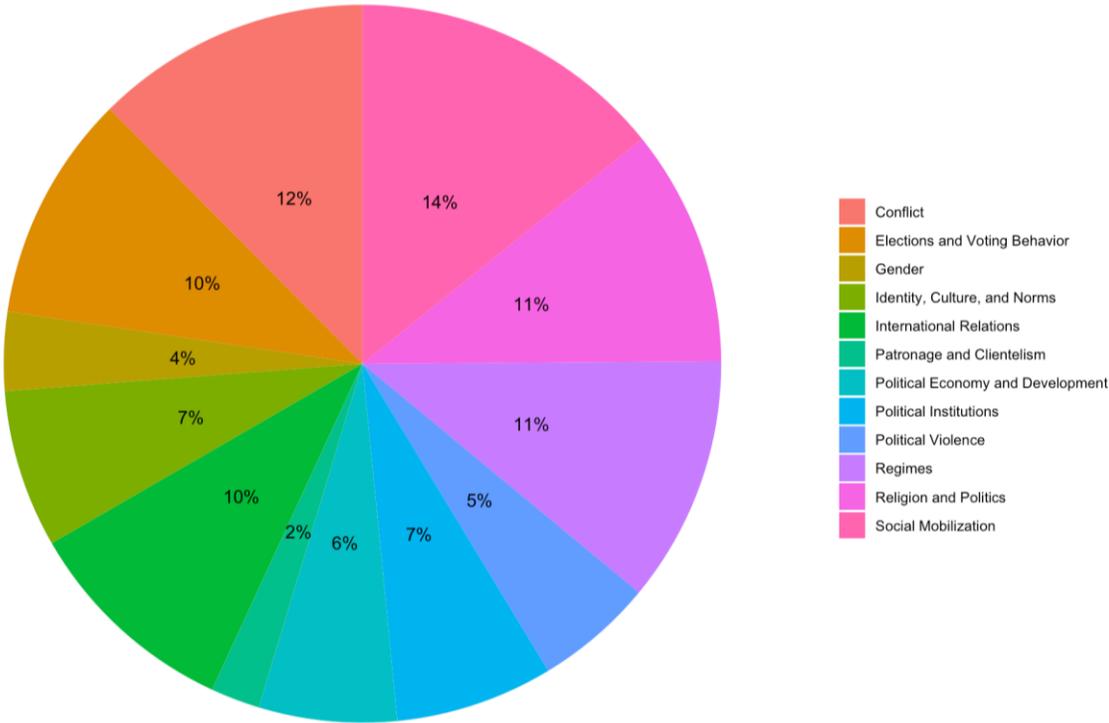
How has coverage of individual countries or country groupings evolved over the past two decades? Mirroring the geographic distribution of articles, regionally-focused and multi-country articles remain the most numerous over time. Those with a general regional focus increased substantially from 2009 to 2012, when they peaked and then gradually decreased, plateauing in recent years. Coverage of Tunisia and Egypt, both of which were the first movers in the Arab uprisings, did not immediately increase after 2011, no doubt reflecting the time lag required for data collection and analysis. In 2014, articles focusing on Egypt began to increase, with a steady albeit gradual climb since then. Coverage of Tunisia started to increase more recently, in 2017, but exhibit an uptick in the last two years covered in our dataset. Over the study period, published research on Israel and Israel-Palestine has remained relatively constant over the study period. In particular, articles on Israel peaked in 2009 and then remained high from 2013 to 2016, with a slight decrease in more recent years. Research on Israeli-Palestinian relations reached a high point in 2007, with a

marginal increase since 2013. Finally, coverage of Syria also shows some interesting trends. While no articles on Syria were published from 2000 to 2015, since then the country has received more extensive scholarly attention, likely as a result of the war and the ongoing refugee crisis.

**Which topics and where?**

Based on the full range of substantive areas of research addressed by the articles in the dataset, our coding scheme encompasses 12 different topics: Political regimes, which includes democracy, authoritarianism, and regime transitions; religion and politics, which includes political Islam; social mobilization and civil society; gender; political economy and development; patronage and clientelism; international relations, which includes interstate relations in the region, the foreign policy of MENA states, and anti-Americanism among Middle Eastern publics; political violence, which largely centers on studies of terrorism; conflict and conflict resolution, which includes international and civil wars; identity, which largely entails research on ethnic and sectarian politics; elections and voting behavior; and political institutions. This approach enables a detailed look at the array of research programs treated in scholarship on the Middle East, although we concede that some of these topics could be combined to generate a more aggregated coding scheme.

Figure 1: Topics in MENA-focused articles in selected political science journals, 2000-2019



The largest number of articles focuses on social mobilization and conflict, with 30 and 28 articles covering those topics respectively. Confirming the importance of the research program on persistent authoritarianism in the Middle East, articles on this topic constitute about 11 percent of

all MENA-focused publications in the selected journals. If research on political institutions and elections and voting are merged in - a logical coding rule in an alternative, more aggregated classification scheme - then scholarship on political regimes would constitute by far the largest share of scholarship on the Middle East in political science journals.

Conversely, the smallest share of MENA-focused articles center on the topic areas of gender and patronage and clientelism. The relatively low proportion of publications on the latter topic may seem surprising, given the growing importance of research on clientelism in the region in the past decade. In part, this finding may arise because of overlap with the category of “political economy and development.” In addition, because our coding criteria classify the primary topic based on the outcome in question, we may downplay the weight of this research program in MENA-focused political science scholarship.

The evolution of topics covered in MENA-focused scholarship exhibits variation in the rise and decline of distinct research programs. Research focusing on social mobilization and regimes spiked dramatically after the Arab uprisings in 2011. The widespread protests across the Arab world and their aftermath attracted broad attention from global media outlets, mirrored in the increase of academic work published on mobilization, civil society, persistent authoritarianism and emerging democracies immediately after 2011. Additionally, articles on social mobilization peaked again in 2018, likely as researchers carried out and analyzed additional data collection initiatives.

A similar initial spike did not occur in articles focusing on elections and voting behavior at the same point in time. Articles on this topic remained stable after 2011, with an increase between 2013 and 2015. Two factors are noteworthy here: first, the large share of articles on electoral politics in Israel and, second, the time lapse between mass mobilization and political change, on the one hand, and the holding of elections after incumbent autocratic regimes were ousted or at least conceded some political liberalization measures, on the other. Furthermore, publications on elections dropped in 2016 and remained low until 2019. Articles covering conflict in the region rose in 2016, increasing from 4 articles in 2015 to 9 articles in 2016. The geographic areas responsible for increased scholarly attention on conflict are Iraq, Israel and Israel-Palestine, and Syria, with less coverage on other conflict-affected countries such as Libya and Yemen.

Finally, articles focusing on political economy and development increased slightly after 2010. This is likely due in part to widespread demands by protestors for economic and social rights in addition to civic and political freedoms during the Arab uprisings. Nonetheless, political economy and development remain relatively marginal topics in MENA-focused scholarship, despite their importance in daily life to citizens in the region.

Which countries or groupings of countries generate the most empirical material for different research programs? A large share of articles on conflict and political violence are based on studies of Israel and Israel-Palestine, which collectively account for about 83 percent of articles on political violence and about 39 percent of articles on conflict. An additional 21 percent of all articles on conflict are based on studies of Iraq, while 11 percent focus on Syria. Research focusing on Israel also constitutes a large part of the research on elections and voting behavior, making up

roughly 44 percent of all articles on this topic. Lastly, articles on the region as a whole account for the overwhelming majority of articles on political regimes, and multi-country and region-wide studies generate much of the empirical material for publications on social mobilization and religion and politics. Of particular note, Egypt alone accounted for 13 percent of articles written on social mobilization.

Although the share of articles on the Middle East remains strikingly low, it has more than doubled in the past two decades. (Again, let's not get carried away here: The share of MENA-focused articles in the selected journals only amounts to about 4 percent of the total.) However, the distribution of country coverage and the array of research topics are uneven across scholarship on the Middle East.

The majority of articles in our dataset focus on the region as a whole or sub-regional aggregates such as the Levant, North Africa or the Gulf. Looking at scholarship on individual countries, Israel and, next, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict account for a major share of research, followed by scholarship on Turkey. In part, this may reflect data availability since, until recently at least, these countries and contexts generated more off-the-shelf data and may have offered more permissible research environments, depending on the precise topic in question. Arab countries constitute a lower share of published research in mainstream political science journals, with the highest proportion based on findings from Egypt. (Again, we do not mean to imply that Egypt or any Middle Eastern country, for that matter, accounts for a high proportion of scholarship in political science empirical research as a whole.)

Our analyses of over-time trends also point to the evolution of research programs in the region, with social mobilization, elections, and conflict becoming increasingly important in the wake of the Arab uprisings and the eruption of conflict in Syria and other countries in the region. These patterns will likely evolve as a result of the further tightening of restrictions on research activities by autocratic regimes, the constraints on data collection posed by the novel Coronavirus pandemic, and evolving research methods, some of which will actually facilitate data collection under different conditions.

## Endnotes

### Cammett and Kendall Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Giles, Micheal W, and James C Garand. 2007. "Ranking Political Science Journals: Reputational and Citational Approaches." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 40 (4): 741–751.
- <sup>ii</sup> Teele, Dawn Langan, and Kathleen Thelen. 2017. "Gender in the Journals: Publication Patterns in Political Science." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50 (2): 433–447.
- <sup>iii</sup> Articles coded as "multi-country" are those covering 2 to 3 countries; articles coded as "regional" focus on the MENA as a whole or a sub-region, such as the Gulf, the Levant, and North Africa.

### Hintz Notes

- <sup>4</sup> Lisel Hintz, *Identity Politics Inside Out: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey*. Oxford University Press, 2019.

### Adar Notes

- <sup>5</sup> Kingsley, Patrick. 2019. "The World Condemns Erdogan's War on Kurds. But Turkey Applauds." *New York Times*. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/16/world/europe/Turkey-Kurds-Erdogan.html>.
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- <sup>7</sup> Ozkan, Behlül. 2014. "Turkey, Davutoglu, and the Idea of Pan-Islamism." *Survival* 56 (4); Taspinar, Omer. 2008. "Turkey's Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism." *Carnegie Papers* 10; Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2008/10/07/turkey-s-middle-east-policies-between-neo-ottomanism-and-kemalism-pub-22209>; Hintz, Lisel. 2018. *Identity Politics Inside Out: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; Danforth, Nick. 2016. "Turkey's New Maps are Reclaiming the Ottoman Empire." *Foreign Policy*. Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/10/23/turkeys-religious-nationalists-want-ottoman-borders-iraq-erdogan/>.
- <sup>8</sup> Synder, Jack. 1991. *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. Also see Sonmez, Goktug. 2017. *The Interplay between international and domestic factors in Turkey's grand strategy-making*. PhD Thesis. SOAS, University of London.
- <sup>9</sup> "Bu Ülkede Artık Kimsenin Yaptığı İhanet Yanına Kâr Kalmayacak", *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı*,

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<sup>10</sup> Göçek, Fatma Müge. 2011. *The Transformation of Turkey: Redefining State and Society from the Ottoman Empire to the Modern Era*. London, UK: I.B. Tauris.

<sup>11</sup> Akturk, Sener. 2015. "The Fourth Style of Politics: Eurasianism as a Pro-Russian Rethinking of Turkey's Geopolitical Identity." *Turkish Studies* 16(1): 54-79. Gurcan, Metin. 2017. "The Rise of the Eurasianist vision in Turkey." *Al-Monitor*. Available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/05/turkey-rise-of-euroasianist-vision.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Bargu, Banu. 2018. "Year One: Reflections on Turkey's Second Founding and the Politics of Division." *Critical Times* 1(1): 23-48. Also see Turkyilmaz, Yektan. 2018. "Quo Vadis Türkiye." *Gazete Duvar*. Available at <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/forum/2018/06/01/quo-vadis-turkiye-1-yazilmis-oykuleri-unutmal-bir-devlet-kendisine-savas-acarsa/>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/military-expenditure>.

<sup>14</sup>

<https://www.defensenews.com/industry/2019/03/13/turkey-targets-defense-and-aerospace-exports-to-counter-growing-national-deficit/>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://eraiturkey.com/news/aviation-and-defense-industry-in-turkey/>.

<sup>16</sup> "Turkey: New drone software to spot terrorists with ease." *Anadolu Agency*. 03.03.2019. Available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/turkey-new-drone-software-to-spot-terrorists-with-ease/1407978>.

<sup>17</sup> Gingeras, Ryan. "The Turkish Navy in an Era of Great Power Competition." *War on the Rocks*. 30.04.2019. Available at <https://warontherocks.com/2019/04/the-turkish-navy-in-an-era-of-great-power-competition/>.

### Canbolat Notes

<sup>18</sup> Hintz, Lisel. *Identity Politics Inside Out: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey*. (New York: Oxford University Press 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Ozdamar, Ozgur and Sercan Canbolat, "Understanding new Middle Eastern leadership: An operational code approach." *Political Research Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (2018): 19-31.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen G. Walker, Mark Schafer, and Michael D. Young, "Systematic Procedures for Operational Code Analysis: Measuring and Modeling Jimmy Carter's Operational Code." *International Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (1998): 175-189.

<sup>21</sup> Ozgur Ozdamar, Sercan Canbolat and Michael D. Young, "Profiling Leaders in Turkish." In Forum "Coding in Tongues: Developing Non-English Coding Schemes for Leadership Profiling." *International Studies Review* (2020) online first: <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viaa001> (accessed 3/19/2020).