

Peace, Conflict and Security in the Middle East State of the field and lines of work for ACSS

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Summary

The author presents a survey of existing research on peace and security issues in the Middle East and proposes lines of work for working groups in areas of particular relevance to the region. The survey covers academic publications from 2000 to 2008 as well as publications produced by Arab centres and key researchers who have worked on specific initiatives.

The author states that security is an elastic concept that encompasses several disciplines and topics, including strategic studies, political developments, societal needs as well as governance issues. In this survey, she defines the field in a fairly broad manner, covering military, strategic, social and political issues. She argues that peace and security is one of the weaker and least studied fields in the Arab region due to several reasons: the persistence of nationalist visions and ideologies, the impact of direct foreign intervention in the region that has bred a sense of powerlessness within the strategic community, the dependence of the majority of Arab countries on foreign military protection for their security and finally the image of the Arab region as both a generator and a victim of terrorism.

As a result, Arab debates on peace and security seem inhibited and the region is reluctant to engage intellectually in global debates framed outside the region or to produce alternative approaches. Most of the debates seem either rooted in the old left-wing, nationalist or internationalist ethos, are largely anti-Western, or enshrined in the current neo-liberal trends.

She delineates some areas that have seen important developments at the global level and where Arab thinking has been either absent or slow to engage with. These are: 1) The redefinition of the boundaries of the region as the Greater Middle East and 2) New concepts of security which reflect shifts in definitions and a focus on whose security is being sought and identifying types of new threats

Kodmani defines the areas where work is needed as 1) Setting new norms and principles based on empirical research from the regions in conflicts; 2) Revisiting the concepts of sovereignty and intervention/humanitarian intervention which have till now been altogether rejected on the grounds that they were used as pretexts for foreign intervention; 3) Investigating possibilities for security building mechanisms that could mediate, intervene or exert pressure on conflicts of the region; 4) Providing insights into the rebuilding of conflict-torn societies especially through studying societies' dynamics and behaviour in situations of conflict and occupation and suggesting alternative approaches to reconstructing their polities 5) Addressing the nexus of individual security and civil and state violence, and the interlocking challenges of security, governance, freedom and development; 6) Studying the role of non-traditional actors in conflicts including women and children as victims of conflict; the role of NGOs and civil society; the role of the media; the role of religious networks in structuring communities and providing security in conflict areas. 7) Reflecting on security and the nation-state and the increasing shift in Arab thinking about the real nature of the threats that focus on domestic insecurity; 8) Examining security sector reform to focus on questions such as state security and national security, national security versus human security. 9) Developing an Arab research agenda on transitional justice using the existing body of work on some specific issues such as Palestinian refugee compensations and legal remedies.

Finally, the author focuses on the need for south-south comparisons on all the issues and areas identified above through the creation of working groups and participation of Arab scholars or institutions in global networks.