Introduction

Imperialism and Resistance in the Middle East: A Theoretical Catharsis in the Making?

In One Hundred Years of Solitude, Gabriel Garcia Marquez writes, “the world was so recent that many things lacked names, and in order to indicate them it was necessary to point” (Garcia Marquez, 2014: p. 1). From the perspective of the Middle East, we are precisely at such conjuncture, ‘when the world is so recent.’ That is the least because we witness a unique articulation of three structural crises.

First, the structural crisis of neoliberal imperialism has crystallized in a ‘world disorder’ characterized by financial and economic crises (Duménil and Lévy, 2013), intensification of intra-imperialist rivalries and the rise of new global powers, revolutionary openings and counter-revolutionary setbacks (Alnasser, 2009).

Second, the post-Cold War order in the Middle East, characterized by the unparalleled deepening of the United States’ strategic depth in the region, is in disarray. As Jacob Mundy puts it in his contribution to this issue, “the North Atlantic’s intellectual classes now appear to have reached a near-universal consensus that the United States’ preeminent global position is coming to an end. There is equally as much conviction among both supporters of American hegemony and its critics that US policies towards the Middle East since 2001 have played an important role in laying the groundwork for this profound shift in geopolitics” (Mundy, 2023). This is in part reflected in the unsettled nature of the Arab revolutions and counter-revolutions, the relative weakening of the United States’ geo-strategic depth in the Middle East and the increasing influence of new global and regional powers.

Last but not the least, ‘domestic’ crises of hegemony have unfolded in various social formations in the Middle East. The ongoing national uprising in Iran since September 2022, the crisis of the ‘occupation regime’ in Iraq since
the Tishreen Revolution of 2019 and the unsettled and militarized relations of forces in Syria and Libya are but a few examples. What differentiates these crises from the previous ones is a twofold tendency; on the one hand, the incapability of neoliberal imperialism in "presenting and serving the demands of the popular classes" has manifested in a constellation when ‘revolts’ have become “the dominant form of popular politics” (Alnasseri, 2016b: p. 3). On the other hand, ever since the Arab revolutions of 2011, struggles that are initially geared towards domestic change within various nation-states in the Middle East, simultaneously assume a regional character (see Nakhaei, 2020). The unsettled character of the ‘second wave’ of the 2011 revolutions (see Etzbach, 2020) which is no longer limited to the Arabic spaces reflects these dynamics.

Hence, from the perspective of the Middle East, in every sense of the word, be it international, regional or domestic, “the old is dying and the new cannot be born” when “morbid symptoms appear” (Gramsci, 2011: p. 33). The point however is to intervene in a ‘world which is so recent’ by ‘pointing’ to a popular horizon of possibilities and the challenges to it. For four major reasons, I propose that such a task is primarily predicated on the contextualization of the ongoing ‘interregnum’ in its imperialist context of unfolding.

First and foremost, since the beginning of the 20th century, the Middle East has been one of the most internationalized regions in the Global South. The consequent waves of genocidal violence unleashed by the global powers are the most obvious measure of such internationalization. One only needs to recall that during the Gulf War, “equivalent to seven Hiroshima-size atomic bombs” was dropped on Iraq in a matter of six weeks (Simons, 1996: p. 4). Nonetheless, the ‘six weeks that should have shaken the world’, metaphorically and materially poses the question of the centrality of the Middle East to the imperialist structure.

As Sabah Alnasseri notes in his interview in this issue, the importance of the Middle East for the global powers lies not only in “the discovery of oil (and later on gas) in a region where most of the world’s hydrocarbon energy resources are condensed” nor in the region “being situated at the intersection of global trade”. More importantly, as the cradle of civilizations and the center of world religions, “the Middle East not only constituted an original global power, historically speaking, but it could also re-emerge as a global power again”. In this sense, the permanent fracturing of the region since the late 19th century reflects intense intra-imperialist rivalries over the control of the Middle East while collectively “undermin[ing] any possibility of the region constituting a competitive global power” (Alnasseri, 2023).
Second, as Etaine Balibar implies in *Reading Capital*, the history of class struggle in the dominated formations is structurally ruptured by their peripheral incorporation into the capitalist mode of production. That is;

The *event* constituted by the meeting between these societies and ‘Western’ societies in transition to capitalism (in conquest, colonization, or the various forms of commercial connexion) is obviously part of the *diachrony* of those societies, since it determines—more or less brutally—a transformation of their modes of production: but it is no part of these societies’ *dynamics*. This event in their history is produced *in the time of their diachrony without being produced in the time of their dynamics*: a limit-case which brings out the conceptual difference between the two times, and the necessity of thinking their articulation.

*BALIBAR, 2015: p. 302.*

These historical disjunctions however are not just limited to the transition to the dominance of the capitalist mode of production. Rather, they are sustained in and through the imperialist structure and take various concrete forms which are not limited to “open and direct intervention on a massive scale” (Poulantzas, 1976: pp. 22–23). In the Middle East, these historical disjunctions are all the more accentuated due to the frequency and intensity of direct interventions ranging from coups, military invasions (see Alnasseri, 2009), sanctions regimes (see Nakhaei, 2021) and the so-called ‘low-intensity warfare’ (see Mamdani, 2002). Historical references to substantiate this hypothesis are not few. For instance, just as the CIA-sponsored coup against Mosaddegh’s National Front, dismantled “one of the earliest ‘possible histories’ of ‘Third Worldism in Iran” (Nakhaei, 2020: p. 2), the imposition of the ‘sanctions warfare regime’ on Iraq aborted a revolutionary scenario in the years after the Gulf War by sustaining a weakened Ba’ath regime (Nakhaei, 2021). That is why “the Israeli occupation regime is the role model in an economic-dispossessive, security-industrial, political-oppressive, and racist sense for the neoliberal-imperialist intervention in the Middle East: permanent war, drones, sophisticated bombs, rubber bullets, tear gas, systematic oppression, expropriation, violent seizure of resources, intensive exploitation, and settler-colonialist housing, real estate in their naked, non-monetary mystified form” (Alnasseri, 2016b: pp. 1–2).

What is central to my argument however is that these historical disjunctions also extend to the domain of theoretical struggle. As critical analyses have explicitly or inexplicitly pointed out, the imperialist structure overdetermines the deepening, continuity and/or re-emergence of the popular terrain of theoretical struggle in the dominated formations through three major processes;
“epistemicide” or the annihilation of previously existing knowledge systems in the dominated formations (de Sousa Santos, 2015), “scientific imperialism” whereby the center designates the object of analysis for the periphery through a “vertical division of labor” (Galtung, 1971: p. 92), and various forms of ‘cultural imperialism’ as conceptualized by Said (1994) and Fanon (2007). Nonetheless, the often-overlooked question is neither of these dynamics per se, but how the imperialist structure imposes formidable obstacles to its own conditions of intelligibility through sustaining historical disjunctions in the domain of theoretical struggle. Put differently, imperialism is antithetical to critical knowledge, even of its own.

Let me give an example. On March 5, 2007, a car bomb exploded in Baghdad’s Al-Mutanabbi street, killing 30 people and wounding 100 others. Named after the renowned 10th-century Arab poet, the street has been “recognized as the consortium par excellence for booksellers, scribes, and bookstores in Iraq” since the Abbasid era (Al-Musawi, 2012: p. 20). What particularly magnified the scale of destruction on March 5, was how the initial fire sparked by the car bomb, transformed the colossal collection of books into kindling for even more ravaging fires (Jelly-Schapiro, 2023).

However, what differentiated this ‘explosion’ from all the others in the years after the 2003 invasion, was obviously not the technical details surrounding it, but rather its strategic location. After all, Al-Mutanabbi street is not an ordinary urban space. As “the heart and soul of the Baghdad literary and intellectual community” (Beausoleil, 2012: p. 15), Al-Mutanabbi street had long reflected various conjunctures of class struggle as they pertained to the struggle of various forces for cultural hegemony in Iraq. That is why, as an urban space, Al-Mutanabbi street was among the most important historical materializations of a popular terrain of theoretical struggle in Iraq. For instance, in the 1960s, during the heyday of the Iraqi Communist Party, the composition of books, posters and other literati artifacts in this urban space (see Beausoleil and Shehabi, 2012), reflected the making of what Antonio Gramsci might have termed an anti-imperialist, national-popular ‘common sense’. In sharp contrast, the March 5 explosion occurred in a radically different constellation. As Sabah Alnasseri points out in his interview in this issue, in the years after the 2003 invasion, the United States inaugurated a ‘regime of occupation’ based on insecuritization, sectarianization, creation of multiple instabilities and fragmentation of the previously existing ‘national’ space, to further its strategic depth in Iraq and the region (Alnasseri, 2023).

That is precisely why the location of the March 5th explosion was not a coincidence but rather a necessary and predictable one. After all, the United States’
imperialist project of rule and domination in Iraq necessitated a frontal attack (see Eakin, 2008) on the popular terrain of theoretical struggle so that the ‘national-popular’, and its remnants could neither be remembered, imagined nor theorized. What is more, the absence of such terrain of struggle during a protracted period of direct imperialist intervention on a massive scale would impose huge obstacles in analyzing the complexity of the imperialist structure and providing an accurate strategic orientation for resisting it. It is in this sense that the attack on Al-Mutanabbi street represents a violently haunting metaphor for the ways in which imperialism is structurally antithetical to critical knowledge, even of its own! And it is in this spirit that Jean Baudrillard’s celebrated book, titled The Gulf War Did Not Take Place (Baudrillard, 2009) might be approached in tandem with Edward Said’s monumental work, Orientalism (see Said, 2014). That is, the violent materiality of Orientalist discourses takes shape within an imperialist context where the necessary relation between ‘criticism of weapon’ and ‘weapon of criticism’ is permanently ruptured. To quote Marx:

> The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses. Theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates ad hominem, and it demonstrates ad hominem as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter.

MARX, 1844.

This brings me to the third point. From a theoretical perspective, however, it is hardly enough to emphasize the antithetical relation between critical knowledge and imperialism in the Middle East. One must take a step further and point to the more concrete ways in which imperialism evades critical knowledge. I propose that due to the frequency and intensity of direct interventions in the region, the imperialist structure has historically imposed its problemarique on the terrain of theoretical struggle in a particularly distorted manner. That is, the overt (e.g., colonial conquest, military interventions) marginalizes the covert (domestic contradictions which are already overdetermined by the imperialist structure) (Nakhaei, 2020: p. 3).

The case of Iran’s popular terrain of theoretical struggle is particularly illuminating here since the conceptualization of the relation between the ‘external factors’ and the country’s domestic contradictions has historically oscillated between ‘externalist’ and ‘internalist’ approaches. The ‘externalist approach’
came to the fore in and through the pertinent effects of the 1953 coup which turned Iran into a relaying post for the United States’ new imperialist strategy in the Middle East. In the post-coup years, coming to terms with the defeat of the National Front and providing a revolutionary orientation for action, went hand in hand with the emergence and dominance of ‘dependency approaches’ within Iran’s popular terrain of theoretical struggle (Nakhaei, 2020: p. 2).

Much like the dominant critical analyses of the coup against Allende in Chile, the Iranian dependistas ascribed an “immediate and exhaustive role” to the United States in the “installation, maintenance and evolution” of the post-coup regime. As such, this paradigm not only reduced the contradictions of Iran’s post-coup social formation to an unmediated contradiction between ‘the people and imperialism’, but in doing so, it conceptualized the monarchical political regime as one which was akin to a colonial regime. As Poulantzas argued with regards to the dominant analyses of Chile, such a “mechanistic and topological conception of ‘external factors’”, prevented an accurate examination of “those internal conjunctures which are precisely what enabled ‘outside intervention’ and the ‘hand of the foreigner’ to be effective” (Poulantzas, 1976: p. 22). It is then not surprising that in providing an orientation for action, these approaches promoted a frontal attack on the regime through guerrilla warfare; a strategy which was “better suited for wars of national liberation” (Nakhaei, 2020: p. 3) in a colonial context and as such, had limited capacities in organizing the popular classes.

The ‘internalist approach’ which still dominates Iran’s popular theoretical terrain of struggle, came to the fore in a radically new context; the 1979 revolution which had a “late character” compared to similar developments in the region, the ascendancy of an ‘Islamist’ political regime which seemingly opposed the American imperialist strategy in the region, the suppression of the ‘left’ and a short civil war followed by an eight-year-long ‘regional’ war with Iraq (Nakhaei, 2020: p. 3). All in all, these dynamics, directly challenged the externalist approaches and posed the question of the specificity or even the exceptionality of Iran’s internal contradictions. Nonetheless, in breaking with the previously prevalent ‘mechanistic and topological conception of external factors’, the imperialist context of post-revolutionary struggles came to be increasingly underestimated, if not ignored (Nakhaei, 2020: p. 3). What is essential to note here is that the oscillation between ‘externalist’ and ‘internalist’ approaches in understanding the relationship between the ‘imperialist structure’ and Iran’s domestic contradictions is not just an issue of ‘bad analysis’ which could have otherwise been avoided. Rather, they reflect how historical disjunctions are inscribed on the domain of theoretical struggle in Iran. As Jacob Mundy’s contribution to this issue implies, these dynamics surrounding
the debate on imperialism are not just limited to Iran. A case in point is the predominance of analyses which reduce imperialism in the Middle East to the “oil Spigot” or military interventions (Mundy, 2023).

This brings me to the final point which concerns the important effects of the crisis of neoliberal imperialism on the popular terrain of theoretical struggle in the Middle East. Critical analyses have often focused on what the crisis of neoliberal imperialism leads to; a revolutionary anti-capitalist opening (see Harman, 2003), a hegemonic transition to China (Arrighi, 2010), a return to a new form of bi-polarity (Tunsjø, 2018) or a multipolar global constellation of power (see Desai, 2016). Nonetheless, what is often overlooked by such longue durée assessments is not just the possibility of a protracted crisis, but how the pivotal issue for the Middle East as the most internationalized region in the Global South is the crisis itself.

As Andre Gunder Frank argued many years ago, the (semi-)peripheries “experience their greatest economic development ...if and when their ties to their metropolis are weakest” (Frank, 1966: p. 24). Nonetheless, “when the metropolis recovers from its crisis and re-establishes the trade and investment ties... the previous development and industrialization of these regions is choked off or channeled into directions which are not self-perpetuating and promising” (Frank, 1966: pp. 25–26). The major point though is that crises in imperialist relations open up spaces for new projects of domination and emancipation which are ‘relatively autonomous’ from the global powers. I shall return to this point later. For the time being, however, what is essential to note is that crises in imperialist relations also have pertinent effects on the domain of theoretical struggle in the dominated formations in general, and the Middle East in particular. That is, if imperialism is antithetical to critical knowledge—even of its own —, it then follows that crises in imperialist relations may facilitate new spaces in the terrain of theoretical struggle for a more systematic theoretical engagement with the imperialist structure. This is an especially relevant and urgent task for the Middle East, given the accentuated effects of historical disjunctions on the ways in which the imperialist structure has been theorized in the region. Put differently, the crisis of neoliberal imperialism is significant for the terrain of theoretical struggle in the Middle East in so far as it can provide the conditions of possibility for a ‘theoretical catharsis in the making’. To quote Antonio Gramsci:

The term “catharsis” can be employed to indicate the passage from the purely economic (or egoistic-passional) to the ethico-political moment that is the superior elaboration of the structure into the superstructure in the minds of men. This also means the passage from “objective to subjective” and from “necessity to freedom”. Structure ceases to be an external
force which crushes man, assimilates him to itself and makes him passive; and is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives. To establish the “cathartic” moment becomes therefore, it seems to me, the starting point for all the philosophy of praxis, and the cathartic process coincides with the chain of syntheses which have resulted from the evolution of the dialectic.


Nonetheless, crises in imperialist relations tend to facilitate a ‘catharsis’ in the domain of theoretical struggles by imposing specific problematiques. In the case of the Middle East, the crisis of neoliberal imperialism has posed the question of the relation between the ‘external’ and ‘internal’ in a radically new form. As I have argued in my previous works, this crisis has led to a precarious conjuncture whereby hegemonic struggles in the region have become regionalized in two decisive manners; On the one hand, the advent of ‘neo-nationalist bourgeoisie’ (Nakhaei, 2020) projects which revolve around the peripheralization of new spaces in the region that have emerged as a result of the global powers’ loss of grip on the world order (Alnasseri, 2023). More concretely, in the cases of Turkey, Iran and Egypt, the ‘neo-nationalist bourgeoisie’ form of development revolves around the ascendency of a ‘regional accumulation strategy’, an assertive political and military embedment in the region and the promotion of a variety of ‘pan’ identity discourses (Alnasseri et al., 2011; Alnasseri, 2016a; Nakhaei, 2020). On the other hand, the extension of the domestic terrain of domination to a regional one is “not a one-way path” and conditions the form of resistance to this project as well. As such, regional projects of domination have “a boomerang effect” (see Alnasseri, 2011: p. 125) which among other issues internalize the various forms of resistance beyond the country in question, in its ‘national’ terrain of struggle. Put differently, since the Arab revolutions of 2011, there is an accentuated tendency for struggles that are primarily geared towards domestic change within various nation-states, to simultaneously adopt a regional character. It is then not surprising that ‘Woman, Life. Freedom’ as the main slogan of the ongoing uprising in Iran, originated in Kurdish women’s liberation struggles in Turkey and Syria (see Torkameh, 2022).

As such, the decisive regionalization of hegemonic struggles in the Middle East has made any ‘topographical and mechanistic relation’ between the imperialist structure and the domestic contradictions unfeasible (Nakhaei, 2020: 4). That is why Danish Khan’s contribution to this issue, Articulated Imperialism in Pakistan: A Dialectic of ‘Strategic’ and ‘Dependency’ Fixes is significant. Pointing to how the “role of the internal political economic factors of the peripheral countries tends to remain largely muted in the analysis of imperialism”, Khan...
analyses the “significance of domestic political economic factors in mediating and regulating an imperialist political settlement” through the “dialectic of strategic and dependency fixes”. At the same time, Khan argues that such an analysis of Pakistan is indispensable to the debate on imperialism and resistance in the Middle East. That is the least because, “since the inception of Pakistan in 1947, core countries of the global North have primarily seen it through the prism of their geo-strategic and political interests in the ‘Middle East’ rather than the Indian-subcontinent (South Asia)” (Khan, 2023). This emphasis is not only on par with the regionalization of hegemonic struggles in the Middle East, but more importantly, it invites us to re-think the imperialist context of the re-shaping of the Middle East, and realistically imagine its reconstitution in and through anti-imperialist struggles.

The above emphasis on the moment of crisis in imperialist relations however is not tantamount to overlooking the continuities of the imperialist structure in the Middle East. For instance, in his contribution to this issue, Garbiel Polley analyses how some currents within the ‘radical left’ in the United States overlooked the ‘settler-colonial’ nature of imperialist relations in Palestine” in the 1950s and hence maintained “an equivocal understanding of Israel’s links to imperialism” (Polley, 2023). Now, I propose that the crisis of neoliberal imperialism is equally ‘cathartic’ concerning the continuities of the imperialist structure in the region. That is the least because, it poses the question of the continued settler-colonial nature of the Israeli occupation regime, despite a crisis in imperialist relations (S. Alnasseri, personal communication, December 4, 2022).

All in all, the idea behind dedicating a special issue to imperialism and resistance in the Middle East is to take seriously the opportunities that the crisis of neoliberal imperialism presents in terms of a systematic and sustained theoretical engagement with the imperialist structure. This task is certainly not without its limitations. After all, the contributors to this issue have all tried to intervene in a ‘world which is so recent’ by ‘pointing’ to a popular horizon of possibilities and the challenges to it. What is more, other exemplary scholars and activists from the region were unable to submit their works due to political pressures which are still inscribed on the terrain of theoretical struggle in the region.

Nonetheless, these challenges by no means imply a pessimistic scenario. What writing about the Middle East teaches one, is that the mere possibility of a theoretical engagement with imperialism materializes not because of an imperialist structure that is antithetical to critical knowledge, but despite it (Nakhaei, 2020: p. iii). In this sense, the Middle East is not unlike Ray Bradbury’s dystopian novel, Fahrenheit 451 where in a ‘McCarthian’ setting, firemen are ironically in charge of burning books and the ‘rebels’ memorize books to evade ‘epistimicide’. This is how towering intellectuals such as
Samir Amin, Aijaz Ahmed, Mahdi Amel, Ghassan Kanafani, Iqbal Ahmed and Edward Said maintained the ‘weapon of criticism’ against all the odds of neoliberal imperialism. Hence, it is up to us to struggle for the establishment of “the ‘cathartic’ moment” (Gramsci, 1971: p. 367) in the domain of the theoretical struggle, particularly because the crisis of neoliberal imperialism has made this more likely. In this spirit, my endless gratitude goes to all the contributors to this issue as well as the editor-in-chief of the Journal of Labour and Society, Immanuel Ness, who was central in dedicating this issue to the topic of imperialism and resistance in the Middle East. Last but not the least, I wish to dedicate this introduction to all those who died on March 5, 2007, when a car bomb exploded in Baghdad’s Al-Mutanabbi street. It is as if Al-Mutanabbi’s famous poem prophetically speaks to all those who died on that day.

“[You are]... the one whose writing even the blind see and the one whose poems have brought hearing to the deaf The horses and the night and the barren desert know...[you], so too, war and combat and paper and pen”

Larkin, 2008

That Al-Mutanabbi street is coming back to life once again after the March 5th, bombing is nothing but the reaffirmation of the motto of popular struggles during the Arab revolutions of 2011:

“If, one day, the people wills to live, Then fate must obey”

AL-SHABBI, N.D.

Nima Nakhaei
Guest Editor, Department of Politics, Ross Building South, Room 672, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON, Canada M3J 1P3
nakhaei1363@gmail.com

References


de Sousa Santos, B. *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).


Mamdani, M. “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism.” *American Anthropologist* 104(3) (2002), 766–775.


