

CENTRAL ASIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST ARE STILL HAUNTED BY THEIR COLONIAL PASTS

BY RAYMOND HINNEBUSCH AND SALLY CUMMINGS

When the Arab Spring erupted in late 2011, many analysts predicted the violence would spread to Central Asia. Like many Middle Eastern states, Central Asian republics are largely authoritarian, neo-patrimonial, and penetrated by outside powers. In both regions, borders have been drawn by imperial powers, cutting across supra-state Islamic, ethnic, and tribal identities.

At the same time, the two regions are different in other ways. Many Middle Eastern states emerged from intense struggles for independence and have since been wracked by instability and war. By contrast, Central Asian states were, generally, born without violent conflict, have had no inter-state wars, and have experienced much less by way of domestic instability.

While Middle Eastern regimes have relied on anti-imperialism and pan-Arab rhetoric to build their legitimacy, most post-independence Central Asian states have maintained close ties with their ex-imperial power, Russia, and suffered from less of a legitimacy deficit. During the Arab Spring, Central Asian states worked together to contain possible spill over, instead of promoting instability against one another, as some Middle Eastern countries did.

To fully understand the reasons for these and other differences, and how they may help explain Central Asia's immunity to the Arab uprising, it is critical to examine the colonial pasts of these neighboring regions and the ways they have been impacted by the empires that ruled over them.

**“WHILE MIDDLE EASTERN REGIMES HAVE RELIED ON ANTI-IMPERIALISM AND
PAN-ARAB RHETORIC TO BUILD THEIR LEGITIMACY, MOST POST-
INDEPENDENCE, CENTRAL ASIAN STATES HAVE MAINTAINED CLOSE TIES
WITH THE EX-IMPERIAL POWER, RUSSIA”**

A Sharp Divergence

Comparing the similarities and differences between Central Asia and the Middle East was

the focus of a research project by the St. Andrews University Institute of Middle East, Central Asia, and Caucasus Studies. The results of the study were published in an edited [volume](#)¹ and summarized in a [journal article](#).² One of the main hypotheses of the study was that variations in empire affect post-imperial stability.

As the study found, the main sources of post-imperial conflict in the Middle East and Central Asia include 1) *irredentism* that arises when groups seek to bring state boundaries into congruence with their identities; 2) *non-inclusive regimes* that do not provide citizens with opportunities to participate politically or engage economically; and 3) *revisionism* that occurs when radical movements or states try to challenge the regional order left behind by empires.

In both Central Asia and the Middle East, most governments have been non-inclusionary, and non-oil states in both regions have been particularly susceptible to civil war. Where the two regions part, however, is on issues of irredentism and revisionism, which are low in Central Asia but high in the Middle East. The reason for this divergence can be found in the impact of regions' colonial past on three factors, detailed below.

**“WHERE THE TWO
REGIONS PART IS ON
ISSUES OF
IRREDENTISM AND
REVISIONISM”**

The Role of Identity

Empire is experienced differently, depending on whether it frustrates or accommodates pre-existing identities. In the Middle East, a strong sense of identity, rooted in centuries of unity under Islam, predated Western imperialism. This sense of self was disrupted when World War I's Western victors fragmented the region into multiple states under their respective spheres of influence.

**“TO REMAIN LEGITIMATE,
MIDDLE EASTERN REGIMES
HAD TO BE SEEN AS ACTING
IN THE INTEREST OF THE
LARGER ARAB-ISLAMIC
COMMUNITY ”**

Powerful supra-state ideologies, like Arabism and Islamism, rose to fill the identity gap. To remain legitimate, Middle Eastern regimes had to be seen as acting in the interest of the larger supra-state (Arab-Islamic) community against widely perceived threats from Israel and the West. Regimes that remained dependent on Western powers were seen as failing in these obligations. Many of these regimes were overthrown in a wave of revolutions in the 1950s-60s.³ During this same period, irredentism was also pervasive. Both then and now, the two peoples denied statehood, the Kurds and Palestinians, were at the center of regional conflicts.

By contrast, Central Asia's republics fostered, rather than frustrated, identities. While Western empires drew Middle Eastern borders for strategic convenience, Soviet ethnographers meticulously took identity, language, and economic viability into account when drawing local borders.

During the Soviet period, the central government in Moscow gave Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Turkmens, and Uzbeks land they had long recognized as their own. Still, some errors were made, including a mismatch between ethnic and political boundaries in the Ferghana Valley, where Uzbeks spilled across the borders of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. As a result of the boundary delimitation process, Tajiks also lost much of their territory to Uzbekistan. Nevertheless, neither these nor other Central Asian groups harbored post-Soviet irredentism.

Since independence, Central Asian states have been free from the de-legitimizing effects of pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic identities. While Islam is part of these new states, it has not, for the most part, taken a revolutionary or politicized form.⁴ For its part, Pan-Turkism has long been a shallow, elite phenomenon that has never been remotely comparable in influence to Pan-Arabism.

“SINCE INDEPENDENCE, CENTRAL ASIAN STATES HAVE BEEN FREE FROM THE DE-LEGITIMIZING EFFECTS OF PAN-TURKIC OR PAN-ISLAMIC IDENTITIES”

Inclusion and Modernization

Whether empires create enduring anti-imperialist sentiments also depends on the indigenous elite’s political integration and the rate of economic modernization.

For many Western empires, colonies were acquired for commercial reasons and located far from the imperial state. As a result, political integration and inclusion in imperial governance did not, by and large, occur in these places. By contrast, in the Soviet Union, regional elites were assimilated into Soviet political culture and represented in central bodies that governed the empire, albeit through authoritarian practices.

Russians did not, *as an ethnic group*, dominate their empire as the British did theirs.⁵ As a result, non-Russians could simultaneously be part of the Soviet system, as well as their own national group (in what was termed “dual assimilation”). The Middle East’s indigenous people could, however, never be British or French, though there were some limited moves in that direction in Francophone North Africa.

“RUSSIANS DID NOT, AS AN ETHNIC GROUP, DOMINATE THEIR EMPIRE AS THE BRITISH DID THEIRS”

Economically, Western imperial states incorporated the Middle East into the global economy by breaking up the Ottoman Empire, snapping regional interdependencies, and reorienting economic links, so that colonies supplied raw materials to Western industries and served as markets for Western manufacturers. The West’s Middle Eastern subjects were taxed to support their occupiers’ armies and pay off debts incurred before Western conquest. Imperial powers invested very little in education or development in these colonies, with the exception of

modernizing the agricultural export sector and building infrastructure linking the region to global markets.⁶

In the Soviet empire, Central Asia's various economies were centrally run, with budgets controlled by Moscow. While the more peripheral parts of Central Asia, like Tajikistan, remained underdeveloped, the Soviet Union did make significant industrial investments in the region.

“THE SOVIETS PROMOTED MASS LITERACY AND URBANIZATION IN CENTRAL ASIA, WHICH BROUGHT THE REGION EVEN CLOSER TO RUSSIA”

Though Russians made up the majority of skilled workers, engineers, and managers, natives received priority for local government jobs. The Soviets also promoted mass literacy and urbanization in Central Asia, which brought the region even closer to Russia. Following independence, many Central Asian states experienced a reversal in these developmental gains.

Differences in Mobilization Against Empire

Because of these factors, the Middle East witnessed a far greater degree of nationalist mobilization against imperialism than Central Asia did. While the Central Asian republics begrudgingly separated from the Soviet Union after its implosion in 1991, many Arabs fought to end Western rule, as well as the socio-economic and political inequalities created by their Western overlords.

“THE MIDDLE EAST WITNESSED A FAR GREATER DEGREE OF NATIONALIST MOBILIZATION AGAINST IMPERIALISM THAN CENTRAL ASIA”

Since the failed [Baghdad Pact in 1955](#), it has been unpopular in the Middle East to associate with former imperial masters or other powerful Western countries, like the United States. In the post-imperial era, counter-hegemonic movements and revisionist states have repeatedly sought to break links with the West, using supra-state identities, like Pan-Arabism (Nasser's Egypt, Saddam's Iraq) or Pan-Islam (Khomeini's Iran), to legitimize their efforts.

By contrast, in Central Asia, pre-independence autonomy movements and grievances against Moscow did not generate mass anti-Soviet sentiment before or after independence. Indeed, Central Asian populations voted to maintain their relationship with the Soviet Union just before its break-up. In striking contrast to the Middle East, Soviet credentials helped legitimize Central Asia's emerging, post-independence leaders. The idea of a Commonwealth (CIS) joining Russia and its former colonies was also popular and officially established in 1991, and continues to this day.

“IN STRIKING CONTRAST TO THE MIDDLE EAST, SOVIET CREDENTIALS HELPED LEGITIMIZE CENTRAL ASIA'S EMERGING, POST-INDEPENDENCE LEADERS”

Central Asia's pro-Russian thrust has manifested in nostalgia for the Soviet era, as well as emigration to Russia. At the elite level, a shared post-Soviet political culture continues to exist. These sentiments have made current, Russian-led security arrangements less controversial than the United States' military presence and security treaties in the Arab world. This includes the [Collective Security Treaty Organization](#), which is a mutual defense alliance between Russia, Belarus, Armenia, and various Central Asian republics.

**“AT THE ELITE
LEVEL, A SHARED
POST-SOVIET
POLITICAL
CULTURE
CONTINUES TO
EXIST”**

Arab Uprising vs. Central Asian Quiescence

When they first began to unfold, the Arab Spring protests raised questions about whether similar uprisings could spread to Central Asia. Two revolutions in Kyrgyzstan, as well as the 2005 [Andijan riots in Uzbekistan](#), suggested that, two decades after independence, Central Asia might experience the kind of instability found in its neighbors to the south.

When the Arab uprisings did not spread to Central Asia, [analysts](#) argued that the region's [immunity](#) was a result of better economic conditions created by job opportunities in Russia, lack of viable opposition parties, more effective repression of Islamists, low Internet penetration, more robust controls over civil society, and popular fear of instability.

But, there was more to it than this. Building on their experience with containing the “Color Revolutions,” Central Asian states increased their security measures and targeted social media, in particular. While a shared Arab identity and language facilitated the uprisings' contagious effects across the Arab world, in Central Asia, there were barriers to transmitting shared grievances because of different national languages, as well as a news media dominated by the Russian tongue. Large geographic landmasses with low population densities also impeded [the formation of coordinated opposition movements in the region](#).

**“THE LEAGUE OF ARAB
STATES BECAME AN
INSTRUMENT FOR
GULF MONARCHIES TO
ENCOURAGE UNREST
IN RIVAL STATES”**

In the Middle East, the League of Arab States was used by Gulf monarchies to encourage unrest in rival states, specifically Syria. By contrast, the member states of regional organizations in Central Asia pooled their resources to defend the status quo. [Joint exercises between Russian and Central Asian forces in the Collective Security Treaty Organization](#) were explicitly aimed at preventing the spread of unrest.

International conditions were also less favorable for revolution in Central Asia. The United States needed stable regimes in the region to guarantee its supply lines in Afghanistan. China had energy access arrangements with local regimes, while Russia was determined to counter what it saw as Western inspired subversion in its “Near Abroad.” In the Middle East, the United States and the EU had long been engaged in democracy promotion. And, while

generally ambivalent about the revolts, they accepted the overthrow of their Egyptian and Tunisian allies and actively intervened to oust the Libyan regime.

More importantly, as demonstrated above, Middle Eastern countries were more vulnerable to revolution than Central Asian regimes because of the differential impact made by empires that had once ruled them. Middle Eastern countries suffered from greater legitimacy deficits compared to their Central Asian counterparts. Western imperialism and periodic post-imperial intervention, notably in Palestine and Iraq, kept anti-imperialism alive in the Middle East and delegitimized alliances with former imperial states and the United States. This contributed to the weakness of Arab governments in the face of revolutionary forces.

In the Middle East, powerful transnational Islamic movements also defied and operated across artificial state boundaries, while, in Central Asia, transnational Islam remained weak because of its late emergence, blanket state-led repression, and the secularization of society under Soviet rule. These transnational Islamic movements, particularly ISIS, have had devastating effects on the Middle East.

**“WESTERN IMPERIALISM AND PERIODIC POST-IMPERIAL
INTERVENTION, NOTABLY IN PALESTINE AND IRAQ, KEPT ANTI-
IMPERIALISM ALIVE IN THE MIDDLE EAST”**

The Power of Imperial Legacies

The experience of empire continues to affect the development of states in the Central Asian and Middle Eastern regions. In Central Asia, empire did not leave behind intractable conflicts or inspire anti-imperial movements among the region’s initially “reluctant sovereigns.”⁷ The situation was almost completely reversed in the Middle East. The legacy of this differential experience is playing out and will likely continue to unfold in both regions, for some time to come.

1. Sally Cummings and Raymond Hinnebusch (2011), *Sovereignty After Empire: Comparing the Middle East and Central Asia*, Edinburgh University Press.
2. Sally Cummings and Raymond Hinnebusch (2014), "Empire and After: Toward a Framework for Comparing Empires and their Consequences in Post Imperial Middle East and Central Asia," *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 27:1, 103-131.
3. Valbjørn, Morten (2011), "Culture in the Middle East: the "western Question and the Sovereignty of Post-Imperial States in the Middle East," in *Sovereignty after Empire*, pp. 222-241.
4. Frederic Volpi (2011), "Pathways of Islamist Mobilization against the State in the Middle East and Central Asia," in *Sovereignty After Empire*, pp. 242-26.
5. Dominic Lieven (2003), *Empire: the Russian Empire and its Rivals*, London: Random House; Terry Martin (2001), *An Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
6. D.K. Fieldhouse (2006), *Western Imperialism in the Middle East, 1914-1958*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press; Alex Callinicos (2009), *Imperialism and Global Political Economy*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
7. Mohira Suyarkulova (2011), "Reluctant Sovereigns? Central Asian States' Paths to Independence," in *Sovereignty After Empire*, pp.127-43.

Sally Cummings is Professor of International Relations at the University of St Andrews. She is author of ten books and edited volumes on Central Asia, the Middle East and the Balkans, including *Sovereignty After Empire* (2011, with Raymond Hinnebusch) and *Understanding Central Asia* (2012).

Raymond Hinnebusch is Professor of International Relations at the University of St Andrews. He has authored and edited nine books on Middle Eastern politics, including *The International Politics of the Middle East* (2015, 2nd ed.) and *Syria: Revolution from Above* (2001).