

'Fertile Crescent', 'Orient', 'Middle East': The Changing Mental Maps of Southwest Asia

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ABSTRACT This article looks at three types of mental maps projected on Southwest Asia during the twentieth century and examines how they were assimilated, reframed or refused by political actors in the region itself. (1) The concept of the 'Fertile Crescent' was connected to the archaeological exploration of ancient memorial landscapes that testified to the region's ancient superiority and, hence, could be integrated into local efforts of territorial nation-building. (2) By contrast, the invention of the 'Middle East' was not rooted in historical considerations but corresponded to the strategic needs of Western geopolitics. Backed by military power, institutions, and economic incentives, the concept became, however, a reality imposed upon and sometimes accepted by the region's political actors. (3) Ideas of the 'Orient' have a much longer history: corresponding to Southwest Asia's long-term role in shaping the ancient, medieval and modern Mediterranean world, the 'East' is a palimpsest of conflicting connotations, comprising reminders of its ancient fertility and centrality (*ex oriente lux*) as well as of its decline, romantic/imperialist stereotypes about the correspondence between Islam and the Desert as well as visions of a revived Levant as part of an enlarged Mediterranean region.

The 'Fertile Crescent' in Ancient and Modern Times

Coined in 1916 by the American archaeologist James Henry Breasted (1865–1935),¹ the term 'Fertile Crescent' has now its place in all the better guidebooks on the Middle East. The term refers to a crescent-shaped area of fertile land stretching from the northern littoral of the Persian Gulf up Mesopotamia and Western Iran to Southern Anatolia and from there southward along the eastern shore of the Eastern Mediterranean to the Sinai desert. This region, Breasted claimed, had been, together with ancient Egypt, the cradle of European civilisation: 'Civilisation arose in the Orient, and early Europe obtained it there.'²

In antiquity, however, the term 'Fertile Crescent' had been unknown. No ancient king had ever claimed to rule the 'Fertile Crescent', nor would he have been able to even think of it. For, in order to understand the 'crescent' metaphor, a bird's-eye view from outer space or a modern map would have been required. Moreover, the macro-region thus designed is geo-morphologically far from uniform: it encompasses mountain highlands and sea coasts, river valleys, alluvial plains, oases and steppes, areas allowing for rain-fed agriculture as well as arid zones requiring irrigation. Once invented, however, the term provided a catchy explanatory image that could be used not only for explaining the interplay of space, culture and politics from an environmental point of view but also for advancing hidden political agendas.

1. J.H. Breasted, *Ancient times: A History of the Early World: An Introduction to the Study of Ancient History and the Career of Early Man*, Boston, 1916, §§ 131–32, pp. 100–01.

2. *Ibid.*, p. V.

For Breasted, the 'Fertile Crescent' was, above all, 'a borderland between the desert and the mountains, a kind of cultivable fringe of the desert'.³ Sandwiched between the Arabian desert in the south and the Anatolian and Iranian mountain highlands in the north and east, the Fertile Crescent, in Breasted's words, resembled 'the shores of a desert-bay, upon which the mountains behind look down—a bay not of water but of sandy waste' turned by 'meagre winter rains' into scanty grasslands for a short time in spring.⁴ 'The history of Western Asia', he argued, 'may be described as an age-old struggle between the mountain peoples of the north and the desert wanderers of these [southern] grasslands—a struggle which is still going on—for the possession of the Fertile Crescent, the shores of the desert-bay'.⁵

In the historical drama unfolding on the pages of Breasted's *Ancient Times*, the part of the southern 'desert wanderers' was played by Semitic peoples (Akkadians, Amorites, Assyrians, Arameans, Chaldeans, Phoenicians, Hebrews and Arabs), whereas the 'hardy peoples of the northern and eastern mountains',⁶ the 'nomads of the North',⁷ were mainly of Indo-European origin (Hittites, Phrygians, Armenians, Medes, Persians, Greeks and Romans). 'The history of the ancient world', Breasted claimed, 'was largely made up of the struggle between this *southern Semitic* line, which issued from the Southern grasslands, and the *northern Indo-European* line, which came forth from the Northern grasslands to confront the older civilisations represented in the southern line'.⁸ In a synoptic diagram of ancient history he saw 'the two great races facing each other across the Mediterranean like two vast armies stretching from Western Asia westward to the Atlantic'. The wars between Rome and Carthage (third–second century BC) had been 'some operations on the Semitic left wing', while the Persian conquest of Babylon (sixth century BC) represented 'a similar outcome on the Semitic right wing'. The result of this secular conflict had not only been 'the complete triumph of our ancestors, the Indo-European line', but also a remarkable westward drift of power: 'victory', Breasted wrote, 'moved from the east end to the west end of the northern line, as first the Persians, then the Greeks, and finally the Romans, gained control of the Mediterranean and oriental world'.⁹

As it happens, Breasted's geo-strategic view of ancient history betrayed some striking parallels to the imperialist zeitgeist of his own times. By and large, the area he designed as the 'Fertile Crescent' was geographically coextensive with those parts of the Ottoman Empire that the Sykes–Picot agreement of 1916 had reserved for Great Britain and France. By 1916, when *Ancient Times* was published, the USA had not yet entered the First World War, and the King–Crane Commission had not yet submitted its famous report of 28 August 1919, recommending an American mandate for Asia Minor and Syria. Nevertheless, the language Breasted used for describing the Fertile Crescent indicated how much he was aware of the region's pivotal geo-strategic importance, especially for the control of the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea:

3. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 101 (emphasis mine, T.S.).

6. *Ibid.*, p. 169.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 172–74.

It [the Fertile Crescent] lies like an army facing south, with one wing stretching along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean and the other reaching out to the Persian Gulf, while the centre has its back against the northern mountains. The end of the western wing is Palestine; Assyria makes up a large part of the centre; while the end of the eastern wing is Babylonia.¹⁰

In many respects, thus, the 'Fertile Crescent' was the brainchild of an epoch in which imperialist ambition, military technology and the availability of printed modern maps had made inventing and engineering new and larger 'spaces' a fashionable trade among politicians, geographers and journalists. Like Alfred Thayer Mahan's 'Middle East' (1902), Halford Mackinder's 'pivot area' in the 'heart-land of Euro-Asia' (1904), Ewald Banse's 'Orient' (1908) or Friedrich Naumann's 'Central Europe' (1915), Breasted's 'Fertile Crescent' (1916) mirrored a powerful trend in Western politico-geographical thought that tended to overwrite the classical geographical distinctions between continents, countries and landscapes with large, abstract spaces (*Großräume*), which powerful actors, such as 'empires', 'civilisations' or 'races', were bound to invest with meaning, histories and functions.¹¹

Western intellectuals and boundary-makers were, however, not alone in designing virtual macro-spaces. The 'Fertile Crescent' region that the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 had carved out for Britain and France was also part of the greater Arab kingdom that the Hashemite Emir of Mecca, Husayn ibn Ali (1854–1931), aspired to win as a reward for his 'Arab' revolt against the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. The Arab lands (*al-bilād al-'arabiyyah*) that the Hashemites claimed for their house comprised the Arabian Peninsula, Mesopotamia and the lands of Greater Syria (*bilād al-shām*, i.e. today's Syria, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine and Jordan).¹² These ambitious hopes, as is well known, were in vain: expelled from Syria by the French (1920) and from the Arabian Peninsula by the warriors of Ibn Saud (1925), the Hashemites had to content themselves with two newly tailored component countries of the Fertile Crescent they had never ruled before: Iraq and Trans-Jordan. Reintegrating the lost lands of Syria into the Hashemite bloc remained, however, an important element of the dynasty's regional policy.¹³ In 1943, when the decline of French power seemed to open a new window of opportunities for territorial rearrangements in the Near East, Nuri al-Said (1888–1958), then Prime Minister of Iraq,

10. *Ibid.*, p. 101. In the second, 'revised and largely rewritten' version of *Ancient Times* (Boston, 1935, p. 135), the word 'army' was replaced by 'horseshoe'.

11. Cf. C. Schmitt, *Der Nomos der Erde im Völkerrecht des Jus Publicum Europaeum*, Berlin, 1950, pp. 54–69, 143–56, 188–212; M. Polelle, *Raising Cartographic Consciousness: The Social and Foreign Policy Vision of Geopolitics in the Twentieth Century*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999; J. Osterhammel, 'Raumerfassung und Universalgeschichte', in *idem*, *Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Nationalstaats*, Göttingen, 2001, pp. 151–69; H.-D. Schultz, 'Raumkonstrukte der klassischen deutschsprachigen Geographie des 19./20. Jahrhunderts im Kontext ihrer Zeit: Ein Überblick', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 28/3 (2002), pp. 343–77.

12. E. Karsh & I. Karsh, 'Myth in the Desert, or Not the Great Arab Revolt', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 33/2 (1997), pp. 267–312; J. Teitelbaum, 'Sharif Husayn ibn Ali and the Hashemite Vision of the Post-Ottoman Order: From Chieftaincy to Suzerainty', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 34/1 (1998), pp. 103–22.

13. Kh. S. Husry, 'King Faysal I and Arab Unity, 1930–33', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 10/2 (1975), pp. 323–40; R.S. Simon, 'The Hashemite 'Conspiracy': Hashemite Unity Attempts, 1921–1958', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 5 (1974), pp. 314–27.

launched an initiative towards Fertile Crescent unity.¹⁴ General Nuri's initiative met with resistance from many camps and finally came to nought. Nonetheless, the idea of promoting unity between Iraq and Syria, the eastern and the western wing of the Fertile Crescent, continued to preoccupy Arab intellectuals and politicians for many decades under various labels and with different intentions.¹⁵ Even the 'Greater Syria' propagated by the secularist Lebanese politician Antun Saadeh (1904–49) and his Syrian National Social Party (founded in 1932) began to take, at least in the 1940s and 1950s, the shape of the Fertile Crescent.¹⁶ And as late as 2003, the Saudi analyst Jamal Kashoggi, quoting Breasted, dreamt that the US invasion of Iraq might help to build 'a prosperous Middle East with Saudi Arabia at its heart crowned by the Fertile Crescent'—the revived 'Fertile Crescent' being 'an integrated region in which Saudi, Iraqi, or Lebanese businessmen can find large and ready markets for their products and services'.¹⁷

Memorial Landscapes and Politics

'Foreign' ideas, adopted by local 'natives' who know how to use them to their own advantage, are a common occurrence in cultural diffusion processes, especially when they are charged with praise of the natives' ancient glory and superiority. Breasted's 'Fertile Crescent' was a construct that telescoped an ensemble of complementary landscapes into a single space in order to explain the early rise and interaction of ancient civilisations to which the West was heavily indebted. Among nineteenth-century European scholars, writers and politicians, exploring the Babylonian, Assyrian, Hittite and Phoenician 'roots' of Western civilisation had become part of a soul-searching exercise in re-negotiating Europe's identity and mission: The impressive size of ancient Oriental palaces, temples and cities was congruent with the era's sense of imperial grandeur. Conservative audiences were fascinated by the idea that the authoritarian monarchies of ancient Asia and Egypt had been capable of building much bigger monuments than the democratic city-republics of Greece and Rome.¹⁸ The discovery and decipherment of ancient Mesopotamian texts suggesting that the

14. Cf. M. Khadduri, 'The Scheme of Fertile Crescent Unity: A Study in Inter-Arab Relations', in: R.N. Frye, ed., *The Near East and the Great Powers*, Cambridge, MA, 1951, pp. 137–77; Y. Porath, 'Nuri al-Said's Arab Unity Programme', *Middle Eastern Studies* 20/4 (1984), pp. 76–98 (pp. 77–78). See also Y. Porath, 'Abdallah's Greater Syria Programme', *Middle Eastern Studies* 20 (1984) 2, 172–89. Nuri al-Said's programme of Fertile Crescent unity proposed to reunite Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Transjordan into one state in which the Jews of Palestine and, if need be, the Maronites of Lebanon, should be granted special regimes of autonomy under international guarantee. Both the new state and Iraq should then adhere at once to an 'Arab League' that other Arab states were free to join.

15. Cf. P. Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics 1945–1958* [1965], London, 1986; E. Kienle, *Ba'th v. Ba'th: The Conflict between Syria and Iraq 1968–1989*, London, 1990; Malik Mufti, *Sovereign Creations: Pan-Arabism and Political Order in Syria and Iraq*, Ithaca, NY, 1995.

16. A. Beshara, *Syrian Nationalism: An Inquiry into the Political Philosophy of Antun Sa'adeh*, Beirut, 1995, pp. 112–22; see also B. Tibi, *Nationalismus in der Dritten Welt am arabischen Beispiel*, Frankfurt am Main, 1971, p. 182–85. It should be noted, however, that Saadeh developed his vision of 'Greater Syria' in opposition both to General Nuri's 'Fertile Crescent' scheme and King Abdallah's 'Greater Syria' project (cf. S.A. Saadeh, *Antun Saadeh and Democracy in Geographic Syria*, London, 2000, p. 67).

17. J.A. Kashoggi, 'Revived "Fertile Crescent" to crown "new" Middle East', *Daily Star* (Beirut), 18 January 2003.

18. Th. Scheffler, 'The Kaiser in Baalbek: Tourism, Archaeology and the Politics of Imagination', in H. Sader, Th. Scheffler & A. Neuwirth, eds, *Baalbek: Image and Monument, 1898–1998*, Beirut/Stuttgart, 1998, pp. 23–24, 35–36.

teachings of the Old Testament might derive, at least in part, from older Babylonian sources appealed to both anti-clerical and anti-Semitic audiences.¹⁹ Together with the discovery of the Indo-European language family, they seemed to prove that the 'roots' of Greater Europe extended over far wider a space than hitherto had been assumed.

However, by exploring the ancient Orient, Western archaeologists also helped change the modern one: they unearthed a multi-layered memorial landscape, the sediments of which could be used for various and often conflicting political purposes in the present. The local inhabitants of modern Southwest Asia are sometimes said to be emotionally unconnected to their region's pre-monotheist past.²⁰ Nonetheless, at least the Europeanised segments of their elites were pleased to learn that their region had been the home of the first 'civilisations' in world history, and that it was from their ancestors that Europe had obtained the cultural achievements that had made her so powerful. They quickly understood that the remote past provided precious resources to legitimise territorial claims or deny the claims of others: under Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909) the Imperial Ottoman Museum in Istanbul was used to support, on the cultural level, the Sultan's imperial centralisation policy.²¹ On the other hand, Egyptian nationalists invoked Egypt's pharaonic heritage in order to promote their country's independence and underline Egypt's claim to be a genuine part of 'Mediterranean' civilisation.²² Christian Lebanese nationalists emphasised Lebanon's 'Phoenician' roots in order to sap pan-Arab, Pan-Syrian and Pan-Islamic claims on their country.²³ Zionist leaders encouraged Biblical archaeology in order to root the modern Jewish state in the soil of the Holy Land.²⁴ The Arab Baath Party, after seizing power in Iraq in 1968, cultivated the legacy of Sumer, Babylon and Assur.²⁵ The rebuilding of Babylon, the capital and the palace of Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562 BC),²⁶ under the rule of Saddam Hussein, celebrated, significantly enough, a Mesopotamian ruler who had conquered the Fertile Crescent and forced the vanquished Hebrews into Babylonian captivity.

One can hardly think of a region better suited to study the interplay of overlapping and sometimes conflicting mental maps than the Fertile Crescent, a former pivot area of world history that has been overtaken, in the course of time, by many of its former peripheries in ever-widening circles, but still preserves

19. Cf. K. Johanning, *Der Babel-Bibel-Streit: Eine forschungsgeschichtliche Studie*, Frankfurt am Main, 1988; R.G. Lehmann, *Friedrich Delitzsch und der Babel-Bibel-Streit*, Freiburg, CH/Göttingen, 1994; S.L. Marchand, *Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750–1970*, Princeton, NJ, 1996, pp. 220–27; Scheffler, 'The Kaiser in Baalbek', p. 31, 39.

20. Cf. H. Kohn, *Die Europäisierung des Orients*, Berlin, 1934, pp. 39–40; S. Al-Khalil, *The Monument: Art, Vulgarity and Responsibility in Iraq*, London, 1991, p. 70.

21. Cf. J. Hanssen, 'Imperial Discourses and an Ottoman Excavation in Lebanon', in H. Sader *et al.*, eds, *Baalbek* (fn. 18), pp. 157–72.

22. D.M. Reid, *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I*, Cairo, 2002.

23. Cf. H. Sader, 'Lebanon's Heritage: Will the Past be Part of the Future?', in A. Neuwirth & A. Pflitsch, eds, *Crisis and Memory in Islamic Societies*, Beirut/Würzburg, 2001, pp. 218–30 (pp. 221–22).

24. Cf. A. Shapira, 'Ben-Gurion and the Bible: The Forging of an Historical Narrative?', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 33/4 (1997), pp. 645–74.

25. A. Baram, 'Territorial Nationalism in the Middle East', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 26 (1990) 4, pp. 425–48; *idem*, 'A Case of an Imported Identity: The Modernizing Secular Ruling Elites of Iraq and the Conception of Mesopotamian-Inspired Territorial Nationalism 1922–1992', *Poetics Today*, 15/2 (1994), pp. 279–319.

26. Cf. al-Khalil, *The Monument* (fn. 20), pp. 70–71, 73, 115.

aspects of former glory and continuing centrality. Located at the crossroads of the Euro-Asian-African land mass and surrounded by far less fertile areas, the region became a zone of conspicuous agricultural and commercial wealth at a very early date but also a coveted prize for external raiders and conquerors. The unequal distribution of resources (wood, stones and metals) and the absence of natural obstacles to internal migration facilitated frequent inter-state warfare, but also helped develop overarching 'world systems',²⁷ 'intercultural theologies'²⁸ and 'world empires'. Around 8500 BC the first plants were domesticated in the Fertile Crescent, around 8000 BC the first animals; the first chiefdoms arose around 5500 BC and the first states around 3700 BC.²⁹ Under the dynasty of Sargon of Akkad (2334–2279 BC), large parts of the Fertile Crescent (Mesopotamia, Southwest Iran, southern Anatolia and northern Syria) were incorporated, for the first time, into a 'world empire'. By the mid-second millennium BC, increasing commercial, military and cultural links between Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Syria and Egypt had created an even larger, polycentric ecumene, which the neo-Assyrian conquests of the ninth, eighth and seventh centuries were to forge into a single world empire. Since the fourth century BC, the whole region became, in turn, a subaltern part of larger world systems and world empires dominated by external powers: Greeks, Romans, Parthians, Sasanids, Arabs, Turks, Franks, Mongols, Turkomans, European and American powers fought and followed each other in an unending race for formal or informal domination.

Ex Oriente lux: Orient, Mashriq and the Levant

Given the many sediments of her long history, Southwest Asia resembles a palimpsest of mental maps in which memories of ancient superiority and pivotal importance still shine through the lines drawn by the swords of foreign conquerors. Ancient Mesopotamian rulers had considered their region the centre of the inhabited world. Sargon of Akkad had boasted to be 'the king of all lands', ruling from the 'lower sea' to the 'upper sea'. Later Mesopotamian sources referred to him as 'the king of the universe' and 'the king of the four shores' ".³⁰ Even under the neo-Assyrian and neo-Babylonian dynasties (ninth–sixth centuries BC), Sargon's empire provided the pattern and military roadmap to be followed.³¹

Subject to continuous foreign domination since the sixth century BC, this former centre became part of the 'East' of larger mental maps, among them the '*Oriens*' of the Romans, the '*mashriq*' of the Muslim Arabs and the '*Levant*' of European merchants. Even in the eyes of its conquerors, the region remained, however, an important economic and cultural pivot area: With the conquests of Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) the fulcrum of Greek politics shifted eastward; and Constantin the Great's (AD 285–337) decisions to move his capital to Constantinople and adopt Christianity as the Roman Empire's quasi-official

27. G. Algaze, *The Uruk World System: The Dynamics of Expansion of Early Mesopotamian Civilization*, Chicago, 1993.

28. J. Assmann, *Moses der Ägypter: Entzifferung einer Gedächtnisspur*, Munich, 1998, pp. 74–76.

29. Cf. J. Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* [1997], New York, 1999, pp. 99–101, 134–143, 218, 273, 278.

30. G. Jonker, *The Topography of Remembrance: The Dead, Tradition and Collective Memory in Mesopotamia*, Leiden, 1995, pp. 42–43.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 35–70.

religion, reflected, at least in part, the fact that the Empire's eastern provinces were its wealthiest, most populous and civilised parts. The Persian Sassanians (224–651) established their capital at Ctesiphon, near today's Baghdad; and the Arab Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs chose to reside at Damascus (661–750) and Baghdad (750–1258).

As a term of *political* geography, the term *Orient* rose to prominence during the late Roman empire: it referred to the *Dioecesis Orientis* established under Diocletian (284–305), a large administrative unit encompassing the provinces of Libya, Egypt, Palestine, Phoenicia, Syria, Arabia (Petra), Mesopotamia, Osroene, Cyprus and southern Asia minor (Cilicia, Isauria).³² Later on, the name 'Orient' also applied to the eastern half of the Roman Empire that organised itself as an independent state from AD 395, controlling North Africa, Egypt, Syria and Palestine, Asia minor, Greece, the Balkans and the islands of the Eastern Mediterranean. The Roman 'Orient', thus, was not confined to West Asia but encompassed parts of geographical Europe and Africa, too.

Due to the Empire's Christianisation, the secular concept of the Roman Orient had to coexist, however, with the spiritual geography of the Hebrew-Christian Bible. In Biblical geography, the 'East' (Hebrew: *qedhem*, Vulgata: *Oriens*) usually refers to areas east of Jerusalem, i.e. to countries as far as Mesopotamia and Persia.³³ Moreover, the Biblical 'East' carries many mythological and symbolical meanings: According to the book of Genesis, God planted Paradise in the East (Genesis 2:8); and it was from the East that mankind settled the world (Genesis 4:16, 11:2). Expelled from the Garden of Eden, the descendants of Adam and Noah moved westward to Mesopotamia where they became so powerful that they dared to challenge God, thus provoking the Babylonian confusion of tongues and the subsequent scattering of mankind from Mesopotamia over the face of the earth (Genesis 11:1–9).³⁴

The symbolic importance of the East re-emerges in the New Testament: The birth of the Messiah is announced by a star rising from the East (Matthew 2: 2, 9–10); and after his birth wise men (*magoi*) from the East arrive in Judea to pay him homage (Matthew 2:1–12). In a similar vein, the linguistic miracle of the Pentecost—a miracle that reverses the Babylonian confusion of tongues—addresses a panorama of nations, the enumeration of which moves from the east to the west; according to the book of Acts, 'Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs'—all heard the apostles speaking about God's deeds of power in their own languages (Acts 2:9–11). Beginning with eastern nations that were then living outside the realm of Roman control, the list of nations in Acts 2 may be said to testify to the eschatological confidence that the light of the East will finally reach the West

32. See E. Kornemann, 'Dioecesis', in *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, vol. I, 9, Stuttgart, 1903, cols 716–34 (col. 727).

33. Cf. E.G. Hirsch, 'East', in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 5, New York, 1964, pp. 28–29; *idem*, 'West', *ibid.*, vol. 12, New York, 1964, pp. 507–08; T. Kronholm, art. 'qædæm', in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, vol. 6, Stuttgart, 1989, cols 1163–69.

34. The table of nations in Genesis 10:1–32 (descendants of Noah) records, in genealogical terms, peoples settling in western Persia, Mesopotamia, Syria, Arabia, Asia Minor, the Caucasus and Black Sea region, Greece, the Aegean islands, Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia. Cf. D. Sperber, 'Nations, The Seventy', in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 7, Jerusalem, 1971, cols 882–86.

and that Christian universalism possesses far larger a map than the Roman *orbis terrarum*.³⁵

The universal, world-encompassing message of monotheism was powerfully restated by the conquests of Islam in Asia, Africa and Europe. According to the Koran (Surah 55:17; see also 70:40, 73:9), 'God is Lord of the two Easts and of the two Wests' (*rabbu 'l-mashriqayn wa-rabbu 'l-maghribayn*). Etymologically, both 'Orient' and 'Mashriq' share the same topographical connotation: they refer to the direction of the rising sun. In terms of human territoriality, however, the Latin '*Orient*' referred to the eastern parts of the Roman-Christian *orbis terrarum*, while the Arab '*Mashriq*' applied to the east of the Muslim world (*dār al-islām*, *mamlakāt al-islām*), usually denoting the Muslim areas east of Egypt.³⁶

Similar to the Latin '*Orient*', the Muslim '*Mashriq*' was characterised by many aspects of superiority. Both the spiritual centres of the Muslim world, Mecca and Medina, and its political centres, Damascus and Baghdad, were located in the *Mashriq*. The geographers of the Abbasid era usually considered either Baghdad or Mecca as the centre of the world.³⁷ The Arab historiographer Ibn Khallikan (1211–82), in his biographical dictionary, *Kitāb wafayāt al-a'yān*, narrates a fabulous legend according to which, after the Great Flood, the inhabited world was given the shape of a bird: the East representing the bird's head, the North and South its feet, and the West its tail. Ibn Khallikan adds that the West was usually held in contempt by everybody 'because it corresponded to the vilest part of the bird', but that the inhabitants of Andalusia, impressed by the wealth and beauty of their own country, used to say that the bird of that legend must have been the peacock, 'for its beauty lies in its tail'.³⁸ Scholars believe that the image of the world as a *bird* is of Iranian origin.³⁹ The idea of the *superiority* of the bird's head, however, is congruent with a much older pattern of bodily orientation: in the ancient western Semitic languages the four cardinal points of the horizon corresponded to basic directions of the *body* and shared the latter's symbolic taxonomy: the East, i.e. the direction of the face towards the rising sun, corresponding to the 'front', the West to the 'rear', the South to the 'right' and the North to the 'left'.⁴⁰

In terms of political geography, the rapid advances of early Islam to the east, south and west of the Mediterranean were bound to deprive the distinction between 'East' and 'West' of much of its explanatory value. With Muslim kingdoms established in Spain—then the westernmost part of the 'inhabited world'—and Christian states still in control of parts of the Eastern Mediterranean, the distinction between 'East' and 'West' did not lend itself readily to marking fundamental distinctions between 'them' and 'us'. For both Christians and Muslims, the most important pattern of spatial classification beyond the confines of narrow dynastic and territorial rule was the distinction between the realm of the true faith (*res publica christiana*, *dār al-islām*) and the pagan rest of the world. It was not before the fifteenth century, when the last Muslim rulers

35. Cf. G. Gilbert, 'The List of Nations in Acts 2: Roman Propaganda and the Lukan Response', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 121/3 (2002), pp. 497–502.

36. Cf. A. Miquel, 'Mashrik', *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edn, vol. 6, Leiden, 1991, p. 720; G. Yver, 'al-Maghrib', *ibid.*, vol. 5, Leiden, 1986, 1183–84.

37. Cf. S. Maqbul Ahmad, 'Djuḡhrāfiyā, I—V' [1963], in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edn, vol. 2, Leiden/London, 1965, pp. 575–87 (pp. 579–80).

38. *Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary*, trans. Bⁿ MacGuckin de Slane, vol. 3, Paris, 1848, p. 179–80.

39. Maqbul Ahmad, 'Djuḡhrāfiyā, I—V' (fn. 37), pp. 576, 581.

40. Kronholm, 'qædæm' (fn. 33), col. 1165.

had been expelled from the Iberian Peninsula and the last Christian principalities of Southwest Asia had disappeared, that 'Europe' became a synonym for Christianity and the 'East' a synonym for the world of Islam.⁴¹

For many centuries after the rise of Islam, however, the shores of the eastern Mediterranean and its hinterland resembled a rag rug of shifting Christian and Muslim suzerainties. It was only slowly that the last remnants of political Christianity in the East dwindled away: in 1291 Acre, the last Crusader stronghold in Palestine, was captured by the Mamlukes, Armenia lost independence in 1375, Constantinople was taken in 1453, in 1461 the Empire of Trebizond was annexed by the Ottoman Turks, Rhodes was evacuated by the Knights of St John in 1523, Cyprus fell in 1573, Crete in 1669.

The encompassing term most frequently used in Europe to refer to both the Christian and Muslim parts of the eastern Mediterranean was the '*Levant*'.⁴² In contrast with the Roman-Christian 'Orient', 'Levant' was a term that reflected the primacy of commercial relations: current already by the thirteenth century, the term was first in use among Italian (most notably Genoese and Venetian) merchants who were trading with a broad range of Mediterranean ports, no matter whether the latter were actually under the control of Orthodox, Latin or Muslim rulers. Major ports of the eastern Mediterranean such as Saloniki, Constantinople, Smyrna and Alexandria, but also 'desert ports' like Aleppo hosted influential European trading colonies. Invested with considerable commercial, judicial and diplomatic privileges, these trading colonies often assumed features of a state within a state.⁴³ Being a rather neutral geographic term without explicit religious and political connotations, the term 'Levant' referred, nonetheless, to a geographic 'East' interspersed with modules of European commercial power and memorial landscapes reminding of the ancient Roman-Christian *orbis terrarum*.

Three Orients—One Middle East

By the nineteenth century, however, the Levant had become increasingly absorbed into a cluster of much broader concepts of the East that were commonly referred to as 'the Orient'. The Orients of the nineteenth century mirrored at least three experiences that went hand in hand with the commercial, military and colonial expansion of European powers in Asia and Africa: (1) the academic discovery of the ancient Orient as the 'cradle' of European civilisation; (2) the romantic discovery of the contemporary Orient as an anti-image of the rapidly changing industrial civilisation of Europe; and (3) the increasing importance of 'Eastern Questions' as a management problem of inner-European politics.

41. Cf. D. Hays, 'Sur un problème de terminologie historique: «Europe» et «Chrétienté»', *Diogenes*, no. 17 (January 1957), pp. 50–62 (pp. 53–55).

42. See the contribution of Desanka Schwara in this issue.

43. Cf. G. Rosen, 'Levante', in J.S. Ersch & J.G. Gruber, eds, *Allgemeine Encyclopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste*, vol. 43, Leipzig, 1889, pp. 276–79; N. Steensgard, 'Consuls and Nations in the Levant', *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 15/1–2 (1967), pp. 13–55; J. Wansborough *et al.*, 'Imtiyāzāt', in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edn, vol. 3, Leiden, 1971, pp. 1178–95.

1. The Academic Orient

In 1838 the Académie Française added a new word to its dictionary of the French language: '*Orientalisme*'. Using an older definition of 1826 attributed to the geographer Malte-Brun (1775–1826), '*Orientalism*' was defined as the 'system of those who contend that the Western peoples owe their origins, their languages, their sciences to the Orient'.⁴⁴ The new term reflected decades of continued European fascination with the progress of Oriental Studies, triggered by landmark achievements like the discovery of the Indo-European language family (since 1784), the decipherment of Assyrian cuneiform texts (since 1802) and Egyptian hieroglyphs (since 1822), or the French *Description de l'Égypte* (1809–28). Since Voltaire's *Essai sur le mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (1756), it had become increasingly common to begin treatises on world history with the history of China. The '*Orient*' defined by the research agendas of the numerous academic '*Oriental*' associations, academies, institutes, libraries, journals and congresses that mushroomed in the nineteenth century was much larger than the Roman-Christian Orient or the Levant: it covered an area reaching from China and Japan to India, Egypt and Africa, sometimes even including Oceania.⁴⁵

2. The Romantic Orient

While the ancient Orient was imagined as Europe's cradle, the contemporary Orient was perceived as its radical '*Other*'. Abusing Karl Kraus's famous aside, it seems that the closer the look one takes at a region, the greater the distance from which it looks back. The more European travellers, writers, painters, scholars and colonial officials travelled, explored, excavated, described and administered the '*East*', the stranger and culturally distant its landscapes and inhabitants appeared to them and the more they felt tempted to condense the bewildering variety of their experiences into one idea: *the Orient*.⁴⁶ When, in the sixteenth century, the French traveller André Thevet published his *Cosmographie de Levant* (travelogue of a voyage to Greece, Turkey, Egypt, Palestine and Syria between 1549 and 1552), he still referred frequently to ancient descriptions of the visited places in sources that were *familiar* to educated European readers, e.g. Pliny, Strabon, Ptolemy or the Bible.⁴⁷ By contrast, when Alexander Kinglake (1809–91), travelling from London to Alexandria in 1834, narrated his arrival at the Ottoman border (then at Belgrade, Serbia), he stressed the *non-familiar*, unexpected aspects of the space he was going to enter: 'I had come, as it were, to the end of this wheel-going Europe, and now my eyes would see the Splendour and Havoc of The East.'⁴⁸

44. *Complément du Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, Brussels, 1838, as quoted in art. '*oriens*', in W. v. Wartburg, *Französisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, vol. 7, Basel, 1955, p. 414; see also art. '*Orientalisme*', in *Trésor de la langue française: Dictionnaire de la langue du XIX^e et du XX^e siècle (1789–1960)*, vol. 12, Paris, 1986, p. 631.

45. Cf. G. Flügel, '*Orientalische Studien, Literatur, Hilfsmittel*', in J.S. Ersch & J.G. Gruber, eds, *Allgemeine Encyclopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste*, 3rd section, pt. 5, Leipzig, 1834, pp. 194–245; art. '*Orient*', in P. Larousse, ed., *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX^e siècle*, vol. 11, Paris, 1874, pp. 1463–64; art. '*Orientalisme*', *ibid.*, pp. 1466–67.

46. Cf. J.-C. Berchet, '*Introduction*', in *idem*, ed., *Le voyage en Orient: Anthologie des voyageurs français dans le Levant au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, 1985, pp. 3–20.

47. A. Thevet, *Cosmographie de Levant* [1554/56], ed. F. Lestringant, Geneva, 1985.

48. Alexander Kinglake, *Eothen* [1844], Cologne, 1997, 14.

One of the most important aspects of the romantic gaze on 'the Orient' was its obsessive focus on *The Desert*, nourished not only by an aesthetic fascination with bizarre landscapes and ruins, but also by the desire to find a striking anti-image of the fertility, dynamism and oceanic outlook of the unceasingly changing industrial civilisation of the West—a desire that often mixed with nostalgic admiration for the 'heroic' and 'simple' lifestyle of Arab Bedouins. In the case of Southwest Asia and Egypt, the Desert also served as visual evidence that regions which once had been the granaries of the ancient world had now been turned into a wasteland by the invasions of destructive Muslim nomads. And finally, the 'Sea of the Desert' often invited comparisons with the oceans that had become the home and life-world of the northern seafaring nations of Europe.

Just as the vastness, emptiness and borderlessness of the Sea had made it an ideal screen onto which to project abstract politico-juridical lines,⁴⁹ the 'sea of the desert' invited thinking in terms of large spaces. The German maverick geographer Ewald Banse (1883–1953) deserves to be credited with having translated the romantic fascination with the desert into a virtual geo-cultural macro-space. A tireless and enthusiastic writer, from 1908 Banse developed and propagated his concept of the 'Orient' as a distinct 'cultural continent' (*Kulturerdteil*) stretching from Morocco to Afghanistan over an area of 16,82 million km² (of which 9,65 million km² were in Africa and 7,18 million km² in Asia).⁵⁰ According to Banse, the unity of this cultural continent consisted, above all, in four characteristic features: (i) its climatic aridity or semi-aridity, i.e. the importance of desert and steppe areas; (ii) the minimal access of its component regions to navigable seacoasts; (iii) the paramount impact of camel-breeding nomads on the Orient's cultural life; and (iv) the predominance of Islam, which Banse considered to be ideally suited for the lifestyle of desert dwellers.

By focusing on the region's aridity and landlockedness, Banse echoed a stereotype shared by many of his contemporaries. Already Hegel (1770–1831) had assumed a historical correspondence between the rigid and abstract monotheism of Islam and the emptiness of the Arabian desert;⁵¹ and the extraordinary popularity of the medieval Arab historiographer and philosopher Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) among nineteenth- and twentieth-century European intellectuals was due, not least, to the pivotal role of desert nomads in his analysis of the rise and fall of Muslim civilisations. Evidence contradicting the paradigm of the allegedly desert-based, a-maritime outlook of Oriental civilisation were overlooked or reframed: Breasted, for instance, deemed it necessary to decouple the history of the seafaring Phoenicians from his history of 'West Asia', including it instead in a section about the Aegean world of the eastern Mediterranean.⁵²

49. See C. Schmitt, *Der Nomos der Erde* (fn. 11), pp. 54–69, 143–56.

50. E. Banse, 'Der Orient—ein geographischer Begriff?', *Deutsche Rundschau für Geographie und Statistik*, 31/1 (1908), pp. 1–7; *idem*, 'Der Orient: Begriff, Fläche, und Volksdichte', *Petermanns Geographische Mitteilungen*, nos 11 and 12 (1909), pp. 302–04, 351–55; *idem*, *Der Orient*, 3 vols, Leipzig, 1910; *idem*, *Das Orientbuch (Der alte und der neue Orient)*, Straßburg/Leipzig, 1914; *idem*, 'Orient', in *Ewald Banse's Lexikon der Geographie*, vol. 2, Braunschweig/Hamburg, 1923, pp. 240–43.

51. G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (1822–31), Frankfurt am Main, 1986, pp. 430–31.

52. Breasted, *Ancient Times*, p. 104, see also *ibid.*, §§ 396–405, pp. 266–273.

3. *The Orient of European Politics*

In the 'Eastern Question' preoccupying European policy makers throughout the nineteenth century, desert nomads played at best a marginal role. In some cases, especially in the Arabian Peninsula, the preservation of powerless Bedouin sheikhdoms was even considered to be in the West's best interest. The foremost concern of the 'European Concert' that had emerged from the Napoleonic wars was how to manage the disruptive effects of Ottoman decay on the internal balance of power in Europe. For many decades, the problems relating to this structural crisis were referred to as 'The Eastern Question' or *La Question Orientale* and attributed to an 'East' that was only in part considered Europe's cultural 'Other': regions like Greece or Macedonia (and sometimes even Asia Minor and the Holy Land) were rather considered part of Europe's classical heritage; and in 1855, after the Crimean War, even the Ottoman Empire became an official member of the European Concert.

For a long time, there seemed to be no other East but the Ottoman one, at least in terms of European crisis management. It was only with the increasing involvement of European powers in East Asia during the late nineteenth century, and particularly during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, that Europe 'awoke to the fact that there were now two Eastern questions, Far and Near'.⁵³ With the 'Far East' increasingly in the headlines, the realm of the Ottoman Empire, hitherto considered as *the* East, was increasingly referred to as the *Near East*;⁵⁴ and in 1902 a book by the British archaeologist David Hogarth (1862–1927), entitled *The Nearer East*, defined that region as comprising Albania, Montenegro, southern Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, Ottoman Asia, Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula and large parts of Iran.⁵⁵

It did not take long before a *Middle East*, too, was invented. In an article on 'The Persian Gulf and International Relations', published in 1902, the American navy captain Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914), author of a much acclaimed study on *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (1890), argued that the Russian advances in Central Asia and the projected German Berlin–Baghdad railway, might put Britain's control of the maritime communication lines between Suez and India in jeopardy. Britain, Mahan argued, would be well advised to secure its control of the Persian Gulf region, a vaguely defined area he referred to as the Middle East: 'The Middle East, if I may adopt a term which I have not seen, will some day need its Malta, as well as its Gibraltar The British Navy should have the facility to concentrate in force, if occasion arise, about Aden, India, and the Gulf.'⁵⁶

Mahan's term was almost immediately taken up and popularised by the journalist Valentine Chirol (1852–1929). In a twenty-issues series on 'The Middle Eastern Question' that first appeared in the London *Times* and then as a book in

53. R.H. Davidson, 'Where Is The Middle East?', *Foreign Affairs*, 38/4 (1960), pp. 665–75 (p. 666).

54. The article 'Orient' in Pierre Larousse's *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX^e siècle* of 1874 (cf. fn. 45), p. 1463, still knows only of an 'Extrême Orient' (comprising China, Japan and Annam) but not of a 'Proche Orient'. By the mid-1890s, however, 'Near East' had become part of common parlance in Britain (Davidson, 'Where is The Middle East?', p. 666).

55. D.G. Hogarth, *The Nearer East*, New York, 1902.

56. A. Mahan, 'The Persian Gulf and International Relations', *National Review* (London), September 1902, pp. 27–28. Cf. Davidson, 'Where is The Middle East?', p. 667; R. Adelson, *London and the Invention of the Middle East: Money, Power, and War, 1902–1922*, New Haven, 1995, pp. 22–26.

1903,⁵⁷ Chirol warned that large-scale railway construction in Asia was not only changing the balance between land-power and sea-power,⁵⁸ but also eroding the old spatial configuration of Asia: the 'pressure of European ambitions'—and most notably the Russian advances in Central Asia, Persia, and Afghanistan and the 'German railway invasion of Asiatic Turkey'⁵⁹—was 'destined to rob India of the precious advantages of a quasi-insular position she has hitherto derived from the survival, all along her land frontiers, of decadent Oriental states, incapable of any serious aggressive effort'.⁶⁰ The 'Middle Eastern Question', in Chirol's reading, consisted in the fate of the countries that India needed as its security belt: Persia and the Persian Gulf, Mesopotamia, Kuwait, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet. Defined like this, the 'Middle East' was not a 'historical region' in itself, but rather an abstract space encompassing a heterogeneous blend of landscapes and countries, the common denominator of which happened to be their location at the western and northern approaches to India. Invested with British power, it was, however, destined to impact on the history of Southwest Asia and the spatial self-perception of its inhabitants.

In 1921 Winston Churchill (1874–1965), then Secretary of State for Colonies, created a *Middle East Department* in the Colonial Office, charged with supervising Iraq, Palestine, Trans-Jordan and Aden.⁶¹ The label of the new department indicated that, seen from London, the Middle East had now reached the shores of the Mediterranean and that the Arab world was regarded as a glacis of British India and the Gulf area. The label was also congruent with a decision of the Royal Geographical Association's Permanent Commission on Geographical Names which, in 1920, had opined that after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire the name 'Near East' should only apply to the Balkans, whereas the Asian regions between the Bosphorus and India should be referred to as the 'Middle East'⁶²—a definition that historians such as Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975) hastened to invest with historical depth: Greeks, Rumanians, Bulgarians and Serbs, Toynbee wrote in 1922, were 'Near Eastern' nations,⁶³ because they were rooted in a 'civilisation which grew up from among the ruins of Ancient Hellenic or Graeco-Roman civilisation in Anatolia and at Constantinople',⁶⁴ whereas the term 'Middle Eastern' should apply to people belonging to 'the civilisation which has grown up among the ruins of the ancient civilisations of Egypt and Mesopotamia',⁶⁵ i.e. Arabs, Turks and Persians.

Reframed like this, the distinction between Near and Middle East tended to absorb aspects of the age-old cultural divide between 'Europe' and 'Asia' and often overlapped with the political distinction between those successor regions of the Ottoman Empire that were deemed mature enough to rule themselves and those still in need of Western 'mandatory' tutelage. Belief in a fundamental

57. V. Chirol, *The Middle Eastern Question or Some Political Problems of Indian Defence*, London, 1903.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 394.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

60. *Ibid.*, p. viii.

61. Davidson, 'Where Is The Middle East?', p. 668 f.; see also Adelson, *London and the Invention of the Middle East* (fn. 56), pp. 197–201.

62. Davidson, 'Where Is The Middle East?', p. 668.

63. A. Toynbee, *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey: A Study in the Contact of Civilisations* [1922, 2nd 1923], New York, 1970, pp. 25–26.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

65. *Ibid.*, *Western Question*, p. 9.

cultural incompatibility between Occident and Orient was not a rare occurrence these days. In a landmark paper concerned with the historical identity of Europe, the German Protestant theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) argued in 1920 that mankind as a whole was no longer an appropriate subject of scholarly research and should be replaced by the study of individual civilisations (*Kulturkreise*).⁶⁶ Distinguishing the ‘Mediterranean–European–American’ civilisation from the ‘West-Asian Islamic’, ‘Egyptian’, ‘Hindu’ and ‘Chinese’ ones, Troeltsch drew, *inter alia*, a line between European and Islamic culture. This did not sit well with a number of German Orientalists who had grown up in the Wilhelminian tradition of German–Ottoman strategic partnership. In a conference paper read in 1921, the German Orientalist and politician Carl Heinrich Becker (1876–1933) argued that West Asian Islam and the Western world should not be considered separate civilisations since both had been moulded by the heritage of Hellenism.⁶⁷ Similar views were voiced by Becker’s friend and disciple Hans Heinrich Schaeder (1896–1957).⁶⁸ Supporting Becker’s and Schaeder’s line of reasoning with a geographical theory of the unifying impact of the ‘Mediterranean’ climate, the Jerusalem-based historian Hans Kohn (1891–1971) propagated the vision of a common ‘*Mediterranean*’ cultural space reaching from Gibraltar to Persia and Central Arabia.⁶⁹

Macro-spaces and Territorial Nationalisms

Projecting large strategic spaces on the landscapes of Southwest Asia did not keep Europe’s colonial powers from dividing them into considerably smaller entities after 1918. In order to control so vast and pivotal a region from the outside, a divide-and-rule policy seemed to be the most appropriate strategy. The boundaries between the political entities created after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire were tailored in a complex international bargaining process in which the smallest shift of boundaries in Southwest Asia depended on larger international issues whose range extended, in the words of a historian, roughly from the Rhine to Kirkuk and from the English Channel to the Gambia.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, the way the map of Southwest Asia was reconfigured after the First World War also betrayed a certain historicist desire to revive the region’s pre-Islamic pasts: ‘Palestine’ was modelled on the image of the Biblical Holy Land. ‘Iraq’ resembled a modified remake of ancient Mesopotamia (Babylonia and Assyria).⁷¹ ‘Lebanon’ was thought to be the natural heir of the ancient

66. E. Troeltsch, ‘Der Aufbau der europäischen Kulturgeschichte’, *Schmollers Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft im Deutschen Reich*, 44 (1920), pp. 633–80.

67. C.H. Becker, ‘Der Islam im Rahmen einer allgemeinen Kulturgeschichte’ [1921], in *idem*, *Islamstudien*, vol. 1, Leipzig, 1924, pp. 24–39. Cf. J. van Ess, ‘From Wellhausen to Becker: The Emergence of *Kulturgeschichte* in Islamic Studies’, in M.H. Kerr, ed., *Islamic Studies: A Tradition and Its Problems*, Malibu, CA, 1980, pp. 27–51 (44–49).

68. Cf. Becker, ‘Der Islam’, p. 24; van Ess, ‘From Wellhausen to Becker’, pp. 47–48. For Schaeder’s concept of ‘Eurasian history’, see his posthumous anthology, *Der Mensch in Orient und Okzident: Grundzüge einer eurasiatischen Geschichte*, Munich, 1960.

69. H. Kohn, *Die Europäisierung des Orients* (fn. 20), pp. 23–36.

70. H.F. Frischwasser-Ra’anan, *The Frontiers of a Nation. A re-examination of the forces which created the Palestine Mandate and determined its territorial shape*, London, 1955, p. 146.

71. The British traveller, policy advisor and amateur archaeologist Gertrude Bell (1868–1926) was not only one of the key figures who designed Iraq’s boundaries but also founder of Iraq’s National Museum, established between 1923 and 1926—and looted in April 2003, during the US occupation of Baghdad.

Phoenicians—who were sometimes even credited for having been the cultural masterminds of ancient 'Syria'.⁷²

As the boundaries between the new entities were often drawn in disregard of previous administrative boundaries, commercial links and ethno-religious divisions, they remained contested, on various grounds, by the disadvantaged parts of the local population. France, which had adopted a mix of ethno-religious and territorial criteria in order to split Syria into several states,⁷³ finally had to give in and accept the country's unity in 1942–43. Nevertheless, the window of opportunities for space-engineering and space-revising that had opened after the First World War (and seemed to reopen again after World War II) helped create a historicist sense for geo-historical configurations among the region's local inhabitants. In Lebanon, for instance, the Christian journalist and banker Michel Chiha (1891–1954), invoking the country's Phoenician heritage, promoted the idea of pluralist Lebanon moulded geographically by the spatial proximity of its seacoast (which destined the country to become a cosmopolitan merchant republic) and its mountain slopes (which had made the country a refuge of independent-minded religious minorities).⁷⁴ The secularist writer and politician Antun Saadeh, on the other hand, opposed the political fragmentation of the Levant and propagated the idea of a 'Greater Syria', 'Syrian Fertile Crescent' or even '*Suraqiya*' (i.e. Syria and Iraq), arguing that the large region between Mesopotamia and Egypt formed a coherent geographic and historical space.⁷⁵

Concepts of *geographic* nationalism were particularly appealing to Christian audiences who were afraid of the prospect of becoming discriminated against in states based on explicit Muslim or Arab identities. For them, nationalisms based on the idea of a geographically conditioned community of fate and paying homage to the pre-Islamic roots of its territory were seen as the best guarantee for building a secularist political culture.⁷⁶

Given the zeitgeist of the interwar period, the prospects of territorial patriotism in Southeast Asia were, however, still dim. In Turkey and Iran, ethnic nationalisms prevailed; and in Iraq King Faisal I (1885–1933) and his successors, charged with ruling an extremely heterogeneous country, opted for neutralising the many divisions between Sunni and Shiite, tribal and urban, ex-Sharifian and local Arabs by making Iraq the champion of pan-Arab nationalism.⁷⁷ This meant, however, latent and sometimes overt discrimination against the country's non-

72. See, for example, Henri Lammens, *La Syrie et sa mission historique. Conférence faite à la Société Sultanieh de Géographie le 23 Janvier 1915*, Cairo, 1915, pp. 15–17, 22.

73. The State of Damascus and the State of Aleppo (both created in 1920 and united to form the State of Syria in 1925), the Territory of the Alawites (established in 1920, upgraded to a state in 1922, annexed to the State of Syria 1936–39, again under separate administration from 1939–42), the State of Jabal Druze (created in 1922, annexed to the Syrian State 1936–39, again under separate administration 1939–42), and the autonomous Sanjak of Alexandrette (created in 1925 and ceded to Turkey in 1939). Cf. Raymond O'Zoux, *Les États du Levant sous Mandat Français*, s.d., 1931, 71–108; N.A. Ziadeh, *Syria and Lebanon*, Beirut, 1956, pp. 46–61.

74. See, for instance, his famous lecture *Liban d'aujourd'hui* [1942], 2nd edn, Beirut, 1994.

75. Cf. S.A. Saadeh, *Antun Saadeh and Democracy in Geographic Syria* (fn. 16), pp. 67–74.

76. In Syria, the idea to neutralise ethno-religious tensions by a promoting Syrian patriotism was first developed in the 1860s, after the traumatic Muslim—Christian clashes of 1860–61 that had triggered a French intervention (cf. Samir M. Seikaly, 'Transcending Sectarian Strife: *Nafir Sūriyyah* as Message and Medium', in Th. Scheffler, ed., *Religion between Violence and Reconciliation*, Beirut/Würzburg, 2002, pp. 211–15; N.S. Yared, *Secularism and the Arab World*, London, 2002, pp. 149–80).

77. Cf. H. Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, Princeton, NJ, 1978, pp. 13–36.

Arab minorities: Assyrians, Kurds, Turkomans and Turks.⁷⁸ Moreover, given the special relationship between Arab history and Islam, Arabism—unlike Turkish or Persian nationalism—seemed barely capable of developing into a purely secularist ideology. In fact, Faysal's father, the Sharif Husayn ibn Ali, had tried in vain to proclaim himself caliph of the Islamic *umma* in 1924 before he was expelled from Mecca by the Wahhabi warriors of Ibn Saud. Nonetheless, galvanised by pan-Arab and pan-Muslim solidarity movements for the numerous anti-colonial risings that flared up in North Africa and Southwest Asia after the First World War, Arab nationalism enjoyed immense popularity and finally found some kind of administrative expression in the establishment of a loose regional organisation, the Arab League, in 1945.

Regionalism, Arabism and Islamism

During the Second World War the disruptive dynamics of competing nationalisms in Southwest Asia were kept in check by the overwhelming presence of Allied forces, which imposed, for the first time in history, a 'Middle Eastern' regime on the region: in order to coordinate military operations against the Axis powers in the Mediterranean, Africa and Southwest Asia, a large military province, the 'Middle East Command', was established by the British Army in 1939. With its boundaries in permanent flux, but endowed with a resident Minister of State, a military Commander-in-Chief and an economic infrastructure, the Middle East Supply Centre, the Middle East Command had authority over a vast area, including Malta, Greece, Crete, Cyprus, Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, Egypt, the Sudan, the three Somalilands, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Palestine, Trans-Jordan, Syria, Iraq, the Arabian peninsula and Iran.⁷⁹ Similar to the Mahan-Chirol Middle East of old, the Second World War Middle East was not a historical region but a strategic space projected onto parts of three continents by the necessities of Allied warfare.

Western attempts to institutionalise this 'regional' approach after the Second World War by creating a multilateral Middle East Command or Middle East Defence Organisation, were, however, only partially successful.⁸⁰ The idea of an integrated regional defence structure proved to be acceptable to the 'Northern Tier' states bordering the Soviet Union, i.e. Turkey and Iran.⁸¹ For the region's southern states, however, an imminent threat by the USSR was less evident. The Arab states felt threatened by Israel and by the continued presence of French and British forces in the Arab world. For many of them, the Cold War provided a historic opportunity for playing the East and the West off against one another in order to develop an independent Arab space.

During the 1950s and 1960s, dreams of Arab unity and restored grandeur were popular all over the Arab world and became a powerful ferment of the latter's

78. See, for instance, L. Lukitz, *Iraq: The Search for National Identity*, London, 1995, pp. 22–49, 107–28; L. Chabry & A. Chabry, *Politique et minorités au Proche-Orient: les raisons d'une explosion*, Paris, 1985, pp. 263–77.

79. Cf. Davidson, 'Where is the Middle East?', p. 669; W.B. Fisher, *The Middle East: A Physical, Social, and Regional Geography* [1950], 5th edn, London, 1963, pp. 1–3.

80. Cf. Fritz Steppat, 'Regionale Sicherheitsbestrebungen im Mittleren Osten' [1955], in *idem, Islam als Partner: Islamkundliche Aufsätze 1944–1996*, Beirut/Würzburg, 2001, pp. 15–54.

81. On the concept of the 'Northern Tier' see G. Fuller, *The 'Center of the Universe': The Geopolitics of Iran*, Boulder, CO, 1991, pp. 208–18.

political reality. However, they never materialised in sustained political or economic integration. Rivalries and mutual distrust between the authoritarian elites that rule most Arab countries proved to be powerful obstacles to regional economic integration and the development of common policies.⁸² Paradoxically enough, the absence of natural and cultural obstacles to unification is a key factor for understanding the region's chronic disunity. Desert regions are rather easy to traverse but difficult to unite. There is, as Ghassan Salamé put it, 'no protective Pyrenees range, no line of Vosges, no Oder–Neisse, but fundamentally a kind of permanent competition between *'asabiyyas*, each one trying to dominate the other or at least to make it dependent'.⁸³ The ubiquity of the Arab language and the availability of transistor radios from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf enabled charismatic leaders like Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918–70) to mobilise the 'Arab street' in neighbouring Arab countries through inflammatory radio speeches without investing much time in building stable collective structures.⁸⁴ Emphatic appeals to Arab unity were often used as a weapon to denounce rival rulers as traitors to the national cause and, thus, have rather turned into a means of increasing mutual distrust and non-cooperation instead of overcoming them.⁸⁵ Moreover, a deep authoritarian aversion against federal or consociational solutions has helped alienate non-Arab minorities like the Kurds in Iraq, the nilotic population groups of southern Sudan or the Kabyles in Algeria.

The most important alternative mental map of the Muslim local population, the House of Islam (*dār al-islām*), possesses strong symbolic unifiers—the centrality of the Koran, the pilgrimage to Mecca, ritualised daily prayers in public, and a ubiquitous memorial landscape of mosques, shrines and centres of religious learning—what it provides, however, is not a regional map but a global one. On the regional level, pan-Islamic solidarity suffers from similar weaknesses to pan-Arabism: it is ridden by interstate rivalries and by increasing conflicts between authoritarian Muslim governments, on the one hand, and radical Islamist opposition groups, on the other. It has still not been able to develop a theologically accepted formula for the democratic inclusion of non-Muslims as equals, and it lives in an uneasy tension with the many heterodox Muslim population groups of Southwest Asia.

Space-building after the Cold War: Middle-Easternism vs. Mediterraneanism

The demise and final break-up of the Soviet Union fundamentally altered the spatial parameters for Muslim, Arab, Turkish and Iranian regionalisms. The emergence of independent Muslim states in former Russian Central Asia and the Caucasus in 1991—Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan—has sometimes been seen as a territorial enlargement of the 'Middle East', sometimes even as the emergence of a 'New Middle East'

82. Cf. A. Dawisha, 'Requiem for Arab Nationalism', *Middle East Quarterly*, 10 (2003) 1, at: <http://meforum.org/article/518>.

83. Ghassan Salamé, 'The Middle East: Elusive Security, Indefinable Region', *Security Dialogue*, 25 (1994) 1, pp. 17–35 (p. 23); *'asabiyya* (arab.: group solidarity), a term frequently used by Ibn Khaldun to denote and measure the coherence of tribes, clans, dynasties and other social groups.

84. See Ghassan Tuéni's analysis of Nasser's 'gouvernement par le transistor', in J. Lacouture, Gh. Tuéni & G.D. Houry, *Un siècle pour rien: Le Moyen-Orient arabe de l'Empire ottoman à l'Empire américain*, Paris, 2002, p. 142–43.

85. Cf. R.H. Pfaff, 'The Function of Arab Nationalism', *Comparative Politics*, 2/2 (1970), pp. 147–67.

besides the 'older Middle East'.⁸⁶ Turkey, Iran, Saudi-Arabia, but also Islamic extremists, have seen this as a historic opportunity to expand their respective zones of influence⁸⁷ into an area that, according to Harold J. Mackinder (1861–1947),⁸⁸ forms part of the famous Pivot Area of the Euro-Asian Heartland. Paradoxically enough, however, it was not only the 'Middle East' that was enlarged by the break-up of the Soviet Union, but also 'Europe': in 1992, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan joined the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE); in 2001, Armenia and Azerbaijan also joined the Council of Europe. Not surprisingly, the Black Sea and Caspian regions are sometimes already considered 'Lakes of Europe'.⁸⁹

At the same time, however, the demise of Soviet power deprived Arab nationalism of its most important external ally and of any realistic prospect of defining or controlling an independent 'Arab' space in Southwest Asia. The wars against Iraq in 1991 and 2003 have seen the Arab world deeply divided and incapable of any collective action, confirming, at least indirectly, Bernard Lewis's prognosis of 1992 that the Arab world's future might 'more closely resemble that of Latin America—a group of countries linked by a common language and culture, a common religion, a common history, a common sense, even, of destiny, but not united in a common polity'.⁹⁰ As a result, 'regional' approaches have risen to prominence again, i.e. attempts to create cooperation structures based on geographic and not on ethnic or religious commonalities.

After the second Gulf war (1991), Shimon Peres, then foreign minister of Israel, published a visionary agenda for a *New Middle East*, 'modelled on the European Union', as 'a regional community of nations, with a common market and elected centralised bodies' and a 'Benelux' solution of the Palestine problem.⁹¹ The crucial problem of the 'Middle East' approach was, of course, how to make Arabs and Israelis accept each other as part of the natural order in a shared space.

The project of Euro-Mediterranean partnership launched at the Barcelona Conference of 27–28 November 1995 suggested a different spatial framework, namely the Mediterranean. The Barcelona Process includes fifteen European Union member states and twelve Mediterranean partner states. Arabs and Israelis are only part of a far larger structure. In contrast with the 'Middle East' framework, the success of Euro-Mediterranean partnership, thus, does not only depend on Arab–Israeli reconciliation, although it would surely profit from it.⁹²

The choice of the spatial framework also implies a different philosophy of negotiation. 'In the last analysis', Roderic Davidson wrote in 1960, 'a term of

86. Bernard Lewis, 'Rethinking the Middle East', *Foreign Affairs*, 71 (1992) 4, pp. 99–109 (p. 104).

87. Cf. Graham Fuller & Ian Lesser [et al.], *Turkey's New Geopolitics: From the Balkans to Western China*, Boulder, CO, 1993; A. Banuazizi & M. Weiner, eds, *The New Geopolitics of Central Asia and Its Borderlands*, London, 1994; Bülent Aras, *The New Geopolitics of Eurasia and Turkey's Position*, London, 2002; A. Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, New Haven, 2002.

88. H.J. Mackinder, 'The Geographical Pivot of History', *Geographical Journal*, 23/4 (1904), pp. 421–44.

89. L. Kühnhardt, *The Lakes of Europe*, Bonn, 2002.

90. Lewis, 'Rethinking the Middle East' (fn. 86), p. 101.

91. Sh. Peres (with A. Naor), *The New Middle East*, New York, 1993, pp. 62, 173–74, see also 69–72.

92. M. Sid-Ahmed, 'Mediterraneanism and Middle-Easternism', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, no. 508, 16 November 2000, p. 10. For a comparison of 'Mediterranean' and 'Middle Eastern' approaches see also S.E. Ibrahim, 'Future Visions of the Arab Middle East', *Security Dialogue*, 27/4 (1996), pp. 425–36 (pp. 428–31).

convenience like Middle East may on occasion become a term of great inconvenience. Not only is the term amorphous, but it seems to imply that the Mediterranean lands have no close relationship with the United States and the West generally, but are Asian in outlook.⁹³ Indeed, since its invention in 1902, the term 'Middle East' has been used to denote a non-Western space, a region to be controlled, ruled or confined by the West but not assimilated. The idea of the Mediterranean, however, rather implies a philosophy of dialogue and free exchange. At least since the 1830s, the term has been charged with images of common space.⁹⁴ Hegel, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1821–31) stated that imagining the Ancient World without the Mediterranean would be tantamount to imagining Rome or Athens without the *forum* where everybody met.⁹⁵ In a similar vein, the Saint-Simonien Michel Chevalier (1806–79), in his 'Système de la Méditerranée' (1832), imagined the future Mediterranean as a 'vast forum' of Occident and Orient.⁹⁶

Focusing attention on processes of dialogue, cooperation and exchange in a *maritime* environment is a welcome corrective to the classical focus on aridity, nomads and the desert that continues to dominate Western images of the 'Middle East' and Islam.⁹⁷ After all, Southwest Asia borders on five seas—the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, Islam arrived by ship in Indonesia and East Africa, and Sinbad the Seafarer is a figure of an Oriental fairy tale.

This is not to neglect the importance of aridity and desertification in Southwest Asia. But these phenomena have to be put in their proper context. Desertification, soil erosion and deforestation in the Fertile Crescent started long before Islam. They are part of the ecological collateral damage caused by the early successes of the very same agricultural and urbanised civilisations that once had made the Fertile Crescent the centre and the granary of the inhabited world.⁹⁸ Rapidly shrinking seed-yield ratios already occurred in the Sumerian period and contributed time and again to the demise of Oriental empires. 'Ecological suicide' (Diamond) was the price paid for cultural splendour and political centrality.'

Today Southwest Asia, once the epitome of agricultural affluence, faces a lack of water resources unprecedented in other areas of the world.⁹⁹ The management of this looming crisis is at the heart of many an agenda for a *New Middle East*.¹⁰⁰ A regional approach towards managing the lack of water might indeed help

93. Davidson, 'Where is the Middle East?' (fn. 53), p. 675.

94. Cf. M.-N. Bourgié & B. Lepetit, 'Remarques sur les images de la Méditerranée (1750–1850)', in M.-N. Bourgié et al., eds, *Enquêtes en Méditerranée: Les expéditions françaises d'Égypte, de Morée et d'Algérie*, Athens, 1999, pp. 13–26; A. Ruel, 'Le concept de Méditerranée à la fin du XIX^e siècle', *ibid.*, pp. 31–41.

95. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (fn. 51), p. 115.

96. M. Chevalier, 'Système de la Méditerranée', *Le Globe*, 20 January–12 February 1832 (as quoted in M.-N. Bourgié & B. Lepetit, 'Remarques sur les images de la Méditerranée', p. 22).

97. See, for example, X. de Planhol, *Les fondements géographiques de l'histoire de l'Islam*, Paris, 1968; N.R. Keddie, 'Is There a Middle East?', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 4 (1973), pp. 255–71; E. Gellner, *Muslim Society*, Cambridge, 1981; M.I. Midlarsky, 'Environmental Influences on Democracy', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 39/2 (1995), pp. 224–62; G.M. Kressel, 'The Desert's Burden', *Middle East Quarterly*, 5/1 (1998), pp. 49–57.

98. Cf. Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (fn. 29), p. 410–11.

99. Cf. A. Soffer, *Rivers of Fire: The Conflict over Water in the Middle East*, Lanham, MD, 1999; M.T. Klare, *Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict*, New York, 2001, pp. 138–89.

100. Cf. Peres, *The New Middle East* (fn. 91), pp. 115–32.

transform the region from a disunited region 'in itself' into a region 'for itself'. Once more, thus, the Fertile Crescent could become a model centre of innovative solutions to be copied in later times by other regions. As the ancient Fertile Crescent had been a cultural forerunner in solving the management problems of affluent agricultural societies, the New Middle East might become a forerunner in managing the scarcity of natural resources.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG Untersucht werden drei Arten kognitiver Karten, die im 20. Jahrhunderts auf Südwestasien projiziert wurden, einschließlich der Art und Weise, wie diese von politischen Akteuren in der Region selbst adaptiert, modifiziert oder abgelehnt wurden. (1) Das Konzept des 'Fruchtbaren Halbmonds' ist verbunden mit der archäologischen Erforschung antiker Erinnerungslandschaften, welche wiederum die Überlegenheit der Region seit Urzeiten belegen und somit in Örtliche Bemühungen territorial fixierter Nationalbildung eingebaut werden konnten. (2) Im Gegensatz dazu gründete die Erfindung des 'Mittleren Ostens' nicht in historischen Überlegungen, sondern entsprach den strategischen Bedürfnissen westlicher Geopolitik. Gestützt auf militärische Macht, Institutionen und wirtschaftliche Anreize gerann dieses Konzept indes zu einer Realität, welche den politischen Akteuren der Regionen aufgezwungen und von ihnen mitunter angenommen wurde. (3) 'Vorstellungen vom Orient' haben eine weitaus längere Geschichte: Entsprechend der Langzeitfunktion Südwestasiens bei der Prägung der antiken, mittelalterlichen und modernen Mittelmeerwelt ist der 'Osten' ein Palimpsest widerstreitender Konnotationen, welches Bezüge sowohl zu seiner antiken Fruchtbarkeit und Zentralität (*ex oriente lux*) als auch zu seinem Niedergang, zu romantischen und imperialistischen Stereotypen über den Zusammenhang zwischen 'dem Islam' und 'der Wüste' wie zu Visionen einer wiederbelebten Levante als Teil einer erweiterten Mittelmeerregion aufweist.

RÉSUMÉ Cet article considère trois représentations géographiques du Asie du sud-ouest Moyen-Orient du vingtième siècle et comment elles ont été assimilé ou rejeté par les acteurs politiques de la région au vingtième siècle. Le concept de Croissant fertile est le premier et correspond aux explorations archéologiques du paysage antique qui pouvait être intégrer a un discours de création d'État. Par contre le Moyen-Orient correspond a des besoins stratégiques de la géopolitique occidentale. Avec l'appui d'institutions militaires et économiques le concept devient une réalité acceptée par les acteurs politiques. L'idée d'Orient, plus ancien, réfère au rôle considérable de la région dans la formation du monde méditerranéen antique, médiéval et moderne. L'Est est un palimpseste de concepts en conflit et comprend le souvenir de sa fertilité et de sa centralité (*ex oriente lux*) et aussi de son déclin et des stéréotypes romantico-imperialistes sur les correspondances entre le désert et l'Islam ou le rôle méditerranéen du Levant.

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