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ROUNDTABLE

Why Decolonization?

Convened by Cyrus Schayegh and Yoav Di-Capua

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In December 1960, *Sawt al-'Arab* star broadcaster Ahmad Sa'id traveled to Havana as part of an Egyptian delegation, to celebrate the second anniversary, in early 1961, of the Cuban Revolution's final victory. Hundreds of other foreign delegates were heading there, too.

> In the span of a few days we had discovered the secret for our quick mutual understanding with all the other delegations. In attendance were at least 850 delegates from across Latin America. . .officials, judges, lawyers, journalists, medical doctors, engineers, peasants, teachers, workers and students. We quickly connected to them. . . The secret? It was stronger than the Spanish language which we did not understand, and stronger than the Arabic language that they did not comprehend, and stronger, still, than the English language, which did afford us some measure of exchange of ideas and opinions. But the real secret for our connection to them was our similar circumstances of life, the fact that we both suffered from the same kind of colonialism and the burgeoning revolutionary spirit which aspires towards complete freedom, true democracy, just socialism and the recovery of our countries' resources. It was such an auspicious moment. . .[1]

Sa'id's type of experience of decolonization: beyond the Middle East and North Africa and across it as much as within one country, and not just political in nature but also economic, cultural, and indeed ontological, is at the heart of this roundtable. We showcase contributions to a field that over the last two decades has evolved dramatically.

Decolonization, it is turning out, was not simply the negotiation and management of the transfer of state power ("changing the flag"), central to classic histories of ends of empire.[2] Rather, as David Stenner and Olivia Harrison illustrate in this forum, it was a complex

[1] Ahmad Sa'id, *'A'id min Kuba* (Cairo: al-Dar al-Qawmiyya li-l-Tiba'a wa-l-Nashr, Series Kutub Qawmiyya, #106, 1961), 10.

[2] More recent: Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonisation, 1918–1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

multiphase process open backwards in time and forwards.[3] Also, it was not only political in nature and demand but also economic and, as Paraska Tolan Szkilnik shows here, cultural as well as, indeed, psychological and ontological.[4] Rather than simply concerning the Global South, it was one of a handful of macrohistorical processes shaping the modern world as a whole.[5] As a matter of fact, it molded also postimperial European polities and, as Michael Fischbach shows, the civil rights movement in the United States.[6]

[3] Martin Thomas and Andrew Thompson, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, ed. idem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3, 7. Introductions include Raymond F. Betts, *Decolonization* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Thomas and Thompson, *Oxford Handbook*; Dane Kennedy, *Decolonization: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Jan Jansen and Jürgen Osterhammel, *Decolonization. A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Martin Thomas, Larry J. Butler and Bob Moore, *Crises of Empire: Decolonization and Europe's Imperial States* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Martin Shipway, *Decolonization and Its Impact: A Comparative Approach to the End of the Colonial Empires* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008); Bernard Droz, *Histoire de la décolonisation au XXe sieècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2006). See also Dietmar Rothermund, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Decolonization* (London: Routledge, 2006); James D. Le Sueur, *The Decolonization Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Prasenjit Duara, ed., *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then* (London: Routledge, 2004); Todd Shepard, *Voices of Decolonization: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2015); Jean-Pierre Peyroulou, *Atlas des décolonisations: Une histoire inachevée* (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 2014).

[4] Christopher Dietrich, *Oil Revolution: Sovereign Rights and the Economic Culture of Decolonization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Giuliano Garavini, *After Empires: European Integration, Decolonization, and the Challenge from the Global South 1957–1986* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Garavini, *The Rise and Fall of OPEC in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Vanessa Ogle, "Archipelago Capitalism: Tax Havens, Offshore Money, and the State, 1950s–1970s," *American Historical Review* 122, no. 5 (2017): 1431–58. For the related literature on economic development, see e.g. Joseph M. Hodge, "British Colonial Expertise, Post-Colonial Careering and the Early History of International Development," *Journal of Modern European History* 8 (2010): 24–46; Stephen Macekura and Erez Manela, eds., *The Development Century: A Global History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), especially Part 2. On the Middle East, see Alden Young, *Transforming Sudan: Decolonization, Economic Development, and State Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Hicham Safieddine, *Banking on the State: The Financial Foundations of Lebanon* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019); Maurice Labelle, "De-Coca-Colonizing Egypt: Globalization, Decolonization, and the Egyptian Boycott of Coca-Cola, 1966–68," *Journal of Global History* 9, no. 1 (2014): 122–42. Yoav Di-Capua, *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre and Decolonization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Ruth Craggs and Claire Wintle, eds., *Cultures of Decolonization: Transnational Productions and Practices, 1945–1970* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016); Omnia El Shakry, *The Arabic Freud: Psychoanalysis and Islam in Modern Egypt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[5] Thomas and Thompson, "Introduction," 2.

[6] Dietmar Rothermund, ed., *Memories of Post-imperial Nations: The Aftermath of Decolonization, 1945–2013* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Elizabeth Buettner, *Europe after Empire: Decolonization, Society, and Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016): Britta Schilling, *Postcolonial Germany: Memories of Empire in a Decolonized Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Hannah Feldman, *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945–1962* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Bill Schwarz, *Memories of Empire. Vol. 1: The White Man's World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jordanna Bailkin, *The Afterlife of Empire* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012); Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); James McDougall, "The Impossible Republic: The Reconquest of Algeria and the Decolonization of France, 1945–1962," *Journal of Modern History* 89, no. 4 (2017): 772–811; Todd Shepard, *Sex, France, and Arab Men, 1962–1979* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018); Marc Matera, "Introduction: Metropolitan Cultures of Empire and the Long Moment of Decolonization," *American Historical Review* 121, no. 5 (2016): 1435–43.

For sure, decolonization was political, but not simply in the sense of power and elite rule, though elites mattered a great deal.[7] It was driven both by a dialectic cycle of European calculations and colonized actions which, presumably, were conditioned by the spectre of the nation-state as the only normative solution.[8] In practice, however, and somewhat paradoxically, the model of the nation-state was not its only imagined or real political end.[9] Continental (con)federations, commonwealths, and leagues and plans for them proliferated, however abortive or circumscribed their writ.[10] Though the political horizon was always unclear, international and transnational solidarity networks—south-south,[11] west-south,[12] and east-south[13]—helped strengthen national

[7] Elizabeth Schmidt, "Top Down or Bottom Up? Nationalist Mobilization Reconsidered, with Special Reference Guinea (French West Africa)," *American Historical Review* 110, no. 4 (2005): 975–1014; Nicole C. Bourbonnais, *Birth Control in the Decolonizing Caribbean: Reproductive Politics and Practice on Four Islands, 1930–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). One can include here, too, Nancy Y. Reynolds, *A City Consumed: Urban Commerce, the Cairo Fire, and the Politics of Decolonization in Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012). But see also Jost Dülffer and Marc Frey, eds., *Elites and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[8] For a focus on European action in a Middle Eastern case, see e.g., Meir Zamir, *The Secret Anglo–French War in the Middle East: Intelligence and Decolonization, 1940–1948* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

[9] In the 1950s regarding France, for example, some fought for full equality within the empire: Fredrick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Adria Lawrence, *Imperial Rule and the Politics of Nationalism: Anti-Colonial Protest in the French Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[10] On Pan-Africanism, see Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism: A History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); Andreas Eckert, "Bringing the 'Black Atlantic' into Global History: The Project of Pan-Africanism," in *Competing Visions of World Order: Global Moments and Movements, 1880s–1930s*, ed. Sebastian Conrad (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), 237–57. On the Arab League, see Yehoshua Porath, *In Search of Arab Unity, 1930–1945* (London: Cass, 1986), 185–96, 236–311; Michael Thornhill, "Britain and the Politics of the Arab League," in *Demise of the British Empire in the Middle East*, ed. Michael Cohen and Martin Kolinsky (London: Frank Cass, 1998), 41–50. The Arab League was born partly due to British interest, which was at play also in late colonial federation projects: Michael Collins, "Decolonization and the 'Federal Moment,'" *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 24 (2013): 21–40.

[11] Ronald J. Stephens and Adam Ewing, eds., *Global Garveyism* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2019); Christopher J. Lee, ed., *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives* (Athens, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2010); Nataša Mišković, Harald Fischer-Tiné and Nada Boškovska, eds., *The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War: Delhi-Bandung-Belgrade* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2017); Jürgen Dinkel, *The Non-Aligned Movement. Genesis, Organization and Politics (1927–1992)* (Boston: Brill, 2019). See also Brenda Gayle Plummer, *In Search of Power: African Americans in the Era of Decolonization, 1956–1974* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); John Munro, *The Anticolonial Front: The African American Freedom Struggle and Global Decolonization, 1945–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[12] See e.g,. Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), esp. 119–41; David Stenner, *Globalizing Morocco: Transnational Activism and the Postcolonial State* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), esp. chs. 3 and 4; Fritz Keller, *Gelebter Internationalismus. Österreichs Linke und der algerische Widerstand (1958–1963)* (Wien: Promedia Verlag, 2010).

[13] Specifically, see James A. Mark and Peter Apor, "Socialism Goes Global: Decolonization and the Making of a New Culture of Internationalism in Socialist Hungary 1956-1989," *Journal of Modern History* 87, no. 4 (2015): 852–91; Katherine McGregor, "Opposing Colonialism: The Women's International Democratic Federation and Decolonisation Struggles in Vietnam and Algeria 1945-1965," *Women's History Review* 25, no. 4 (2016): 925–44; and also Steffi Marung, "The Provocation of Empirical Evidence: Soviet African Studies between Enthusiasm and Discomfort," *African Identities* 16, no. 2 (2018): 176–90. More broadly, see David Engerman, "The Second World's Third World," *Kritika* 12:1 (2011): 183–211; Eric Burton, ed., "Socialisms in Development," special issue of *Austrian Journal of Development Studies*

causes and/or were an end by themselves, to overcome the white color line and Northern imperialism.[14] As Jeffrey Byrne argues here, as the 1960s drew to a close and nation-states struggled to emerge as stable political entities, this intricate and delicate process by which the Global South came into being as a coordinated entity bound by solidarity, socialism and the history of common experiences gradually unraveled. Its slow ending is as important to the understanding of decolonization as its brave beginnings.

At least some elements in this unraveling process had to do with the artificiality of the nation-state as a model and a solution to post-colonial needs. Indeed, at their most aspirational, some decolonizing actors wished to remake the nation-state logic and racial foundation of the modern international order.[15] They helped shape the postwar debate about human rights, too.[16] In parallel, the newly independent nation-state was not the only decolonization space. Some states self-consciously functioned as linchpins between multiple regions, for instance Arab-African Egypt and Algeria.[17] Certain cities—Dar es Salaam, Cairo, and Paris, among others—became hubs for activists from various countries.[18] There were transnational networks like the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization, founded in Cairo in 1957.[19] Institutional spaces mattered, too, like the United Nations and the League of Nations in New York and Geneva and UN regional

XXXIII, no. 3 (2017); and Fritz Taubert, "La décolonisation comme problème de l'histoire des Relations internationales: La guerre d'Algérie et les pays de l'Est," *Outre-Mers* 98/373-374 (2011): 45–62. See also the literature on the global 1960s: Jian Chen; Martin Klimke; Masha Kirasirova; Mary Nolan; Marilyn Blatt Young; Joanna Waley-Cohen, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties: Between Protest and Nation-building* (London: Routledge, 2018); and the journal *The Sixties*.

[14] However, see also Maurice M. Labelle, "Tensions of Decolonization: Lebanon, West Africans, and a Color Line within the Global Color Line, May 1945," *Radical History Review* 131 (2018): 36–57; colonized attempts to draw a white/non-white color line, reach back deep into the colonial period: Carina Rey, "Decrying White Peril: Interracial Sex and the Rise of Anticolonial Nationalism in the Gold Coast," *American Historical Review* 119, no. 1 (2014): 78–110.

[15] Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); Alex Lubin, *Geographies of Liberation: The Making of an Afro-Arab Political Imaginary* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014). See also Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017); Manu Goswami, "Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms," *American Historical Review* 117, no. 5 (2012): 1461–85.

[16] Roland Burke, *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Steven Jensen, *The Making of International Human Rights: The 1960s, Decolonization, and the Reconstruction of Global Values* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). See also Daniel Maul, *Human Rights, Development, and Decolonization: The International Labour Organization, 1940–70* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

[17] James Brennan, "Radio Cairo and the Decolonization of East Africa, 1953–64," in *Making a World after Empire*, 173–95; Tareq Ismael, *The U.A.R. in Africa: Egypt's Policy under Nasser* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1971); Jeffrey Lefebvre, "The United States and Egypt: Confrontation and Accommodation in Northeast Africa, 1956–60," *Middle Eastern Studies* 29, no. 2 (1993): 321–38; Jeffrey Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[18] Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); George M. Roberts, "Politics, Decolonisation, and the Cold War in Dar es Salaam c.1965–72" (PhD diss. University of Warwick, 2016); Zoe LeBlanc is working on a dissertation on Cairo.

[19] Reem Abou-El-Fadl, "Building Egypt's Afro-Asian Hub: Infrastructures of Solidarity and the 1957 Cairo Conference," *Journal of World History* 30:1-2 (2019): 157–92.

headquarters.[20] Decolonization, in sum, helped reconfigure not only national but also regional and transnational and global spaces of politicocultural action and belonging, rendering more complex the question "who is 'us'?"—as Ahmad Sa'id's quote shows.

On one level, the early take on decolonization by scholars of the MENA mirrored dominant Euro-American historiography. We treated decolonization as not less, but also not more, than a formal political story: the transition of power from sinking colonial empires to emerging nation-states during the early Cold War.[21] Area studies scholars also, however, looked beyond the moment of independence to examine the twists and turns of post-imperial politics, the experiences of newly liberated societies, and the shaping of nation-states. They spent most energy on nationalism, in particular Pan Arabism, taking its postwar bloom as proof that decolonization had succeeded and that this project was finite in nature.[22] Behind this approach stood the belief that the study of nationalism, especially of Pan Arabism, can fully account for what in fact is a rather illusive inner national domain. After more than two decades of intense engagement with nationalism and its postcolonial critique we have learned much about the reproduction of the nation in many spheres of life, from the intimate realm of family to gender relationships and the economy, politics, and culture.[23]

Still, the story of decolonization as a constructive revolutionary endeavor that sought to radically and holistically transform all aspects of life within an ethical global context is yet to be fully explored. The study of nationalism and, in some iterations, of anti-colonialism, is too insulated to account for the complex transregional and global character of decolonization.

[20] Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Connelly, *Diplomatic Revolution*; Alanna O'Malley, *The Diplomacy of Decolonisation: America, Britain and the United Nations during the Congo Crisis 1960–1964* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018); Jennifer Foray, "Go Fight Us in New York: The United Nations and the Origins of Postwar Decolonization," lecture, Graduate Institute Geneva, 14 November 2017.

[21] The most prolific proponents of this understanding of decolonization are historians of the British Empire such as William Roger Louis who edits *The Oxford History of the British Empire*. See also William Roger Louis, *Ends of British Imperialism: The Scramble for Empire, Suez and Decolonization: Collected Essays* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006); Simon Smith, *Ending Empire in the Middle East* (London: Routledge, 2012). A fresh look, turning around the concept of (divergent US and British) mental maps, is Aiyaz Husain, *Mapping the End of Empire: American and British Strategic Visions in the Postwar World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014). For recent critiques of the political literature on decolonization, see Abdel Razzaq Takriti, "Colonial Coups and the War on Popular Sovereignty," *The American Historical Review* 124, no. 3 (2019): 878–909; Abou-El-Fadl, "Building Egypt's Afro-Asian Hub." The now classic treatment of the role of decolonizing and postcolonial countries in the Cold War is Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). More recent interventions include Prasenjit Duara, "The Cold War as a Historical Period: An Interpretive Essay," *Journal of Global History* 6, no. 3 (2011): 457–80; Robert McMahon, ed., *The Cold War in the Third World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); James Leslie and Elisabeth Leake, eds., *Decolonization and the Cold War: Negotiating Independence* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

[22] The standard on the topic is: Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003). For a recent rethinking of this field see: Peter Wien, *Arab Nationalism: The Politics of History and Culture in the Modern Middle East* (London: Routledge, 2017).

[23] The bibliography on nationalism is enormous and cannot be cited in full here. See for instance, "Relocating Arab Nationalism: Special Issue," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, no. 2, May 2011: 203–312.

This, then, is the entry point for this forum. Engaging new source material, the contributors collectively help to look at modern MENA history from a new angle, seeing it not as an insulated collection of distinct state/country projects but as a field embedded in multiple, contrasting, even contradictory ways in the world. They show how decolonization was a global process characterized by the building of multilingual and transnational webs of practices and meanings. The study of decolonization, their texts imply, offers MENA historians ample possibilities to investigate the history of "their" region against African, Asian and Euro-American contexts—in line with the post-Cold War historiographical shift toward transnationalism.[24]

In parallel to our contributors' texts, we would like to make two sets of points. Firstly, we suggest that rather than treating decolonization exclusively as a historical era, or as a period, we should also begin to consider it as a broader human condition whose manifestations, while anchored in the postwar era, transcend it in significant ways. Taking our cues from Arab intellectuals of the late 1940s, at the heart of the matter lies their unique understanding of the meaning of freedom (*al-huriyya*). This kind of freedom was comprised of several key concepts. The first was authenticity (*al-asala*) and the concern that the Arab subject was culturally inauthentic. Seeking to come to terms with the schizophrenic cultural effects of colonial modernity, Arab intellectuals sought to reestablish their individual and collective existence on terms that were endemic and internal to their heritage. The second foundation was social justice (*al-`adala al-ijtima`iyya*). Shared by intellectuals of all stripes, Islamists as well as Europhiles, the quest for social justice aimed at addressing the wretchedness of the poor, sick, illiterate and disenfranchised postcolonial subject. Defined as a problem of basic human dignity (*al-karama al-insaniyya*), it conjoined the material aspects of underdevelopment and unequal distribution of resources with the subhuman subjectivity of many "liberated" citizens. Related to this, the other prevalent concept was that of sovereignty (*al-siyada*). This concept conjoined the quest for concrete political sovereignty (raw power as a necessary condition for addressing all postcolonial concerns) and the dire need for a new form of collective identification, or identity, which transcended the self. Indeed, there is a very tight link, yet to be explored, between decolonization and self-transcendence. Taken as a whole, this was the regional understanding of freedom in the wake of empire. As the opening quote illustrates, the task of decolonization was to develop a global peripheral view that would assist societies in retrieving this freedom and fulfilling its potential.

A derivative of the quest for freedom and one of the most dominant manifestations of decolonization, was the ambition to temper with "the self" and forge a new collective ontology. Envisioned mostly via revolutionary means and through the formation of a new revolutionary ethos, the ultimate destination of this journey was not simply to unite the Arab world (as scholars of Pan Arabism would have it) but to create a new Arab subject (*al-insan al-`Arabi al-jadid*). Both Nasserism and Ba`thism were committed to this project via a radical ontological reimagining of the meaning of freedom (the Iranians had their own Islamic version). The millions who followed them in the 1960s did not speak of

[24] For instance, Richard H. Immerman and Petra Goedde, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For transnational history more generally, see Pierre-Yves Saunier, *Transnational History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier, eds., *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

decolonization (which does not have an Arabic equivalent).[25] Instead, they spoke of "*al-thawra,*" thus inviting us to rethink and re-engage the Arab revolutionary era and its long term consequences as part of the broader framework of the universal ethics of liberation.

Viewed from this angle, the quest for freedom (material, political and ontological) that the study of decolonization exposes and accounts for, was not only the business of the new nation-state and its secular ideological apparatus and elites. It was also shared by Islamists of all stripes. And while their solution differed considerably from those proposed by Nasserism, for instance, the intellectual oeuvre of someone like Sayyid Qutb should be understood as an engagement with this exact same problem of freedom. In that sense, the study of decolonization invites us to overcome the prevalent split in the field between the study of Islamic subjects and the study of, essentially, all the rest.

The second set of points concerns questions that the MENA case poses for the study of political dimensions of decolonization beyond "our" region. Let us highlight three issues. First, historians often talk of a sequence of space-specific waves of decolonization: in Latin America, around 1800; in the Balkans, from the 19th to the early 20th centuries; in Africa and Asia, in the 1940s-60s; and in Eastern Europe and the USSR, in the 1990s. Not fitting neatly, the case of MENA suggests that this scheme, centered on the moment of independence of specific polities within a presumably distinct region, obfuscates as much as it illuminates. After all, different MENA areas were part of different waves and times: think of Algeria, independent in 1962, and Iraq in 1932—and if we speak of ex-Ottoman provinces, what to do with Albania and Greece, independent in 1913 and 1830, respectively? Also, some countries reoriented their demand for independence. While around 1920 Arabs in *bilad al-sham* (Greater Syria) insisted that they deserved independence not less than European ex-Ottomans like Romanians, by the 1940s their reference point was Asia.[26] Zionism/the Yishuv/Israel is part of this picture, too, by the way, and exemplifies how much the context and very meaning of "national liberation" shifted over time.[27]

Second, although with the exception of Algeria, most overall accounts of decolonization marginalize our region, one could argue that MENA was oftentimes a forerunner. In the 1920s, the A Mandates, Syria-Lebanon, Palestine-Transjordan, and Iraq were meant to become independent in the (undefined) future, at least in principle. In practice, Iraq did so, if "lightly," in 1930; Syria and Lebanon obtained constitutions and elections around 1930, too; and in the Yishuv—a special case, to be sure—there was the para-state Jewish Agency. In the 1930s, the only two non-Western polities that joined the League of Nations after its official foundation, in 1920, as freshly independent countries were Iraq, in 1932, and Egypt, in 1937, following the 1936 Anglo–Egyptian Treaty.[28] In

[25] The common usage is *ma ba'd al-kulunyaliyya*, which is, essentially, post-colonialism or, in its earlier iteration, the period right after colonialism.

[26] A point expanded on in Cyrus Schayegh, "The Mandates and/as Decolonization," in *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates*, ed. idem and Andrew Arsan (London: Routledge, 2015), 412–19.

[27] Dmitry Shumsky, *Beyond the Nation-State: The Zionist Political Imagination from Pinsker to Ben-Gurion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

[28] As both had been British ruled, their trajectories may be compared to the five British colonies that were formally separate members of the League of Nations from its start: South Africa, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and India.

1945, the Arab League was the postcolonial world's first regional multistate league.[29] The independence, in 1943, of Lebanon and Syria— completed in 1946—can be seen as Asia's first decolonization. The dispute about Iran's oil nationalization, in 1951–53, was an early milestone in postcolonial countries' political and international legal assertion of sovereign rights over their resources.[30] (Related, the 1953 coup d'etat in Iran, led by the CIA, as well as CIA support for the 1949 coup in Syria, were that agency's first such operations worldwide.[31]) Egypt's successful Suez Canal nationalization and its political defeat of the tripartite Aggression in 1956 were a decolonization milestone and clarion call far beyond the Middle East.[32] So was the Algerian War for Independence from 1954 to 1962.[33] This was the case also for its eventual galvanizing effects on European public opinion, certainly of the left.[34] Last but not least, by the late 1960s, Palestine became a—perhaps *the*—focal point and symbol for self-liberation and the continuation of anticolonial struggles worldwide as well as a vital counterinsurgency laboratory.[35]

Finally, building on the view that decolonization has had a "globalizing" effect, "trigger[ing] all sorts of changes ranging from global geopolitics and new transregional alignments to major migratory movements and bitter culture wars over the legacies of empire," one can argue that it had a "regionalizing" effect, too.[36] In MENA, the common experience of a rising struggle against a foreign imperial presence—whatever the different and, over time, shifting political goals—helped reshape and deepen regional senses of identity. This included not only Arabic-speaking countries but others, too.[37] And early on, these

[29] The Pan American Union dates back to 1890, sure, but the imperial United States was central to it. (Then again, as already noted, Britain had a hand in founding the Arab League.)

[30] Dietrich, *Oil Revolution*.

[31] For a conceptualization, using British cases, see Takriti, "Colonial Coups."

[32] Brennan, "Radio Cairo." Related, see Carole Fink et al., eds., *1956: European and Global Perspectives* (Leipzig: Leipziger Uni-Verlag, 2006); Guy Laron, *Origins of the Suez Crisis: Postwar Development Diplomacy and the Struggle over Third World Industrialization, 1945–1956* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

[33] Byrne, *Mecca*; Jeffrey Ahlman, "The Algerian Question in Nkrumah's Ghana, 1958–1960: Debating 'Violence' and 'Nonviolence' in African Decolonization," *Africa Today* 57, no. 2 (2010): 66–84.

[34] James Le Sueur, *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics during the Decolonization of Algeria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); Christoph Kalter, *The Discovery of the Third World: Decolonization and the Rise of the New Left in France c. 1950–1976* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Talbot Imlay, "International Socialism and Decolonization during the 1950s: Competing Rights and the Postcolonial Order," *American Historical Review* 118, no. 4 (2013): 1105–32.

[35] Thomas Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive: The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Laleh Khalili, "The Location of Palestine in Global Counterinsurgency," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42 (2010): 413–33.

[36] Thomas and Thompson, "Introduction," 4–5. There were feedbacks between regionalizing and globalizing effects, too. See e.g. Reem Abou-El-Fadl, "Neutralism Made Positive: Egyptian Anticolonialism on the Road to Bandung," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 2 (2015): 1–22.

[37] Naghmeh Sohrabi, "Remembering the Palestine Group: Friendship, Global Activism, and the Iranian Revolution," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 51, no. 2 (2019): 281–300; Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, "The Origins of Communist Unity: Anti-colonialism and Revolution in Iran's Tri-continental Moment," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45, no. 5 (2018): 796–822; Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965–1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), also on the Iranian involvement.

regionalizing effects mattered doubly because colonies coexisted for a long time with three if not five (however "light") sovereign states: Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia; and, from 1930 and 1936, respectively, Iraq and Egypt. The very existence and experience of those states served as models and interlocutors across and beyond the region, and/or they used their independence in the region and beyond *vis-à-vis* still colonized countries. Examples abound. Consider the effect of the Anglo–Iraqi Treaty of 1930 on Syrian and Lebanese politics; the role of interwar Iraq and Saudi Arabia as training and testing grounds for Arab nationalist state builders; Turkey's rekindled interest in the Arab world in the 1930s; Egypt's role in North African decolonization up to the 1950s; and Arab interest in the course and fate of Iran's oil nationalization.[38] Such interactions between coexisting postcolonial and (still) colonial polities helped shape the region—a pattern observable elsewhere, too.

In conclusion, the history of decolonization in our region is not only fascinating per se. It also allows us to revisit a range of issues: from everyday life experiences to the interplay between politics, culture, and truly ontological questions of life, dignity and identity; from the question of how "the region" was formed on the ground and in people's minds in the modern period to the question of how it related to, and was embedded in, networks beyond the region, around the world.

[38] Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 201; William Cleveland, *The Making of an Arab Nationalist: Ottomanism and Arabism in the Life and Thought of Sati' al-Husri* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971); Amit Bein, Kemalist Turkey and the Middle East: International Relations in the Interwar Period (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Stenner, *Globalizing Morocco*; Lior Sternfeld, "Iran Days in Egypt: Mosaddeq's Visit to Cairo in 1951," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 1 (2016): 1–20.