



SEARCHING FOR THE CONTOURS OF AN ARAB WORLD

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Is it the Middle East or West Asia? The Arab world or the Muslim one? Or is the “region” better distinguished by oil-producing states versus non-oil, monarchies versus republics? Determining a regional definition can be a difficult if not impossible task, given that the area in question traces its origins directly to British imperial geopolitics. The geographer Karen Culcasi has called for entirely abandoning the term, arguing that the

merging. An “Arab” from Darfur is different from a Nile riverain “Arab”. In specific contexts, being an Arab or an African can relate to questions of lineage, class, education, dress, food; nomadic versus pastoralist, urban versus rural. The complexity and contextual specificity of what it means to be “Arab” is by no means unique to Sudan. Similar disputes can be witnessed across the “Arab” region.

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Middle East lacks a continental base, unlike East Asia or Western Europe. But establishing an alternative is not straightforward. Alternatives like the Arab world or homeland impose a categorisation over non-Arab geographical imaginations. Many in the so-called Arab world hold firmly to non-Arab identities (e.g., territories such as the Amazigh). What it means to be an Arab is no less complex or contested than being Middle Eastern or Muslim; like the Middle East, the Arab and Islamic world are geographical ideas entangled with power.

It is tempting to dismiss the idea of an Arab region as a myth. Is there any common thread that holds Sudan, Egypt, Lebanon, the UAE and Iraq together? The UAE has stronger historical links to Iran and India than Sudan or Morocco. Even the commonality of Arabic in the Arab world shows notable variation. But dismissing the idea of the Arab world as a myth tells us little about the social power of this term. The precarity of identity or regional categories does not weaken their social force or meaning.

In Sudan, for instance, what it means to be an Arab or African can be a matter of life or death, particularly in the current conflict. At the same time, these terms are constantly shifting and transforming, even at times

Much ink has been spilt in the raging debates over the idea of whether there is such a thing as an Arab, Middle Eastern or Islamic city. Janet Abu-Lughod famously debunked the concept of an Islamic city in the 1980s, arguing that Western (mainly French) Orientalists advanced the idea of an Islamic city, but drew from a narrow sample of primarily North African cities for which they needed to make a credible argument for a generalised Islamic urban typology. All cities are constantly being made and remade by various forces, including economic, political and religious relations, as well as their geographical and historical context. The geographical connections that the regional concepts of the Arab, Middle Eastern and Muslim world bring into view, while constantly in flux (and dependent on who you are engaging and when) are no more or less accurate than any other geographical frame. All are connected to power relations, trying to privilege or make visible specific histories and geographies over others. That said, we can—with caution and without essentialising—illuminate specific trends that both hold an Arab region together (generally defined as the Arabic-speaking countries) and are worth considering at a regional rather than national or global scale. ☉