



**SPECIAL FOCUS: MERIP AND THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE  
PRODUCTION IN MENA STUDIES**

## **MERIP and Political Economy in Middle East Studies**

Joel Beinin

Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA  
Email: [beinin@stanford.edu](mailto:beinin@stanford.edu)

### **Abstract**

The Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) was founded in 1971 as a project of the American New Left in solidarity with and drawing inspiration from the Beirut-centered Arab New Left and anti-imperialist struggles for national liberation in the Middle East and North Africa. The question of Palestine was a central, but certainly not exclusive, concern. From its origins MERIP was committed to political economy as a key method to understanding the Middle East and North Africa. It highlighted the importance of oil in the regional power structure and to the emergent U.S. empire. Many of its articles featured analyses of the social relationships of class and capital. MERIP was wary of “Arab socialism” and pan-Arab nationalism as official state ideologies. Its analysis of the 1979 Iranian revolution won MERIP and its emphasis on the importance of political economy a respected place in Anglo-American academia. Political economy never disappeared from MERIP’s orientation, although its salience declined from the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s. The financial crisis of 2008 drew renewed attention to the structure of global capitalism. MERIP’s history positioned it to participate in the renewed attention to class, capital, markets with more attention to the racialized and gendered character of these relationships.

**Keywords:** political economy; Arab New Left; Palestine; oil; Iranian revolution

The Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) was founded in 1971 as a project directed primarily towards the American New Left. It shared the politico-intellectual precommitments of “the movement.” Those included opposition to U.S. imperialism, support for workers, peasants, and “the wretched of the earth,” and a focus on political economy, or class analysis, roughly understood as examining the matrix of states, markets, and classes, the dynamics of capital, and the historical development of capitalism. MERIP

“was predicated on the notion that Palestine was a central issue, but not the exclusive issue” in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup>

By the end of its first decade MERIP and its authors had made their mark in several arenas that helped to establish political economy perspectives in anglophone Middle East studies as viable alternatives to Orientalism and modernization theory in the service of empire, which was the leading scholarly paradigm from the end of World War II to the mid-1970s. This achievement is especially remarkable because MERIP deliberately chose not to become a traditional academic journal.

Ironically, after MERIP won a respected place for its intellectual positions, the stature of political economy methods began to decline throughout academia, in part due to the influence of post-structuralist and post-modernist theory and the collapse of the Soviet Union (something of a non-sequitur for MERIP, which never embraced Soviet-style Marxism). This was reflected in the diminished number of MERIP articles addressing political economy from the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s. But MERIP never abandoned political economy, and its history positioned it to become an influential actor in the renewed attention to class, capital, and markets, with more attention to the racialized and gendered character of these relationships following the financial crisis of 2008.

The MERIP collective’s initial lodestars were the Beirut-centered Arab New Left and the national liberation struggles in Palestine, Dhofar and the Gulf Arab states, and the newly independent People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen, although MERIP never adopted the party line of any of these movements.<sup>2</sup>

With the notable exception of African Americans radicalized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Black Panther Party, or the influence of Malcolm X, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) was on the margin of the conceptual map of most of the New Left (to say nothing of the great majority of the American people). The Palestinian armed struggle, then at its height, was either denounced as “terrorism” tout court or, among a small minority, uncritically celebrated. Many, even on the left, deemed Israel/Palestine “too complicated” or “too divisive” and avoided it altogether.

MERIP’s first published writing on Palestine/Israel echoed the slogans of the armed Palestinian resistance organizations. But it relatively quickly became a platform for independent views that nonetheless unmistakably supported self-determination for the Palestinian people. MERIP criticized Palestinian attacks on civilians and, influenced by the shifting position of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, published several articles considering the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel long before this became the consensual (and now likely unachievable) position of the international

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Johnson and Joe Stork “MERIP: The First Decade,” *MERIP Reports* (henceforth, *MR*) 100 (Oct. – Dec. 1981): 51.

<sup>2</sup> Fadi Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Bonds of Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020) provides an erudite account of the rise and decline of a leading current of the Arab New Left, the Organization of Communist Action in Lebanon, which was allied to the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

community.<sup>3</sup> MERIP also promoted an evidence-based understanding of the internal dynamics of Israeli society, economy, and politics that was rare in both Arab and American Zionist circles in the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> An entire early issue was devoted to “Arabs in Israel,” who many in the Arab world commonly regarded as traitors for remaining in Israel and accepting its citizenship.<sup>5</sup> Today, an issue on this theme would likely be entitled “Palestinian Arab Citizens of Israel” – an indicator of both the development of that community’s political consciousness since the March 30, 1976 Land Day demonstrations and a much deeper understanding of the diverse circumstances of the Palestinian people extending far beyond the circles of MERIP.

Until the gasoline supply shortages of 1973–74, Middle East oil was an esoteric topic rarely integrated into the political history of the region. But as early as its second issue, MERIP began to articulate a political economy analysis foregrounding the Seven Sister’s oligopoly on the production, refining, and marketing of Middle East oil as a central element of the regional power structure and the emergent U.S. empire in the region. MERIP also promptly refuted still widespread mythologies about the causes and supposed impact of the 1973 “Arab oil embargo.”<sup>6</sup> The core of MERIP editor Joe Stork’s *Middle East Oil and the Energy Crisis*, the first book-length critical account of this topic, initially appeared as articles in the magazine.<sup>7</sup> Stork and other MERIP authors emphasized the tightly entwined relationship of the oil firms, the U.S. government, and the absolute monarchies of the Gulf. Subsequently MERIP contributing editor Timothy Mitchell and Robert Vitalis, who authored several MERIP articles on Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the oil industry, expanded on and in some respects departed from MERIP’s early analysis of the Middle East oil industry.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most important of their innovations was to insist that there has never been a scarce supply of oil since the modern, oligopolistic structure of the industry was consolidated, nor was there a market-determined price for oil until power shifted from the producing firms to the producing countries.

<sup>3</sup> MERIP Staff, “Ma’alot: An Account and an Evaluation,” *MR* 29 (June 1974): 21–23. The DFLP’s view was expressed in “What Palestinian State? An Interview with Nayef Hawatmeh,” *MR* 24 (Jan. 1974): 25–26, which appeared alongside the opposing view of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, “Habash: We Reject the Peace Conference and We Call on the [Palestine] Liberation Organization to Reject It Also,” *MR* 24 (Jan. 1974): 26–27. Fuad Faris (i.e., Assaf Kfoury) and Peter Johnson, “A Palestinian State? (Notes on the Palestinian Situation after the October War),” *MR* 33 (Dec. 1974): 3–27, 31 was close to the views of the DFLP.

<sup>4</sup> For example, “Israeli Black Panthers: Up Against the Wailing Wall,” *MR* 3 (Oct. 1971): 1, 3–14.

<sup>5</sup> “Arabs in Israel,” *MR* 41 (Oct. 1975).

<sup>6</sup> A. ‘Asi, “The Arab/Persian Gulf: Oil on Troubled Waters,” *MR* 2 (Aug. 1971): 1–8; Staff “A Political Evaluation of the Arab Oil Embargo,” *MR* 28 (May 1974): 23–25.

<sup>7</sup> Joe Stork, *Middle East Oil and the Energy Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975). The core of the book first appeared as Joe Stork, “Middle East Oil and the Energy Crisis,” *MR* 20 (Sept. 1973): 3–20, 26 and *MR* 21 (Oct. 1973): 3–22, 24, 26.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2013); Robert Vitalis, *America’s Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) and *Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security that Haunt U.S. Energy Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

MERIP authors critiqued the Middle Eastern version of the Nixon Doctrine – the “two pillars policy,” which envisioned Saudi Arabia and Iran as the local gendarmes guarding “our oil” with Israel as a silent partner in reserve. Several articles argued that U.S. arms transfers not coincidentally boosted the profits of leading firms of the military-industrial complex and undermined regional peace and stability.<sup>9</sup> The 1979 Iranian revolution terminated the “two pillars policy.” But because Washington policymakers did not reexamine its premises, direct U.S. military intervention in the Gulf escalated, culminating in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. MERIP covered this trajectory extensively.

During the 1970s and beyond, the majority of “serious” scholars in Anglo-American Middle East studies held that the social relationships of class and capital were inappropriate categories for the MENA region. Therefore, MERIP looked to its international connections for fruitful examples of political economy analysis. Fawwaz Traboulsi, a prominent figure in the Lebanese New Left, Mahfoud Benoune, a former Algerian *mujahid*, Assaf Kfoury, a Boston-based Lebanese immigrant who wrote under the name Fuad Faris, and, from Paris, Mahmoud Hussein (pseudonym of the Egyptian exiles Bahgat Elnadi and Adel Rifaat) were among those who grounded MERIP’s outlook in the political/intellectual thought and practice of the Arab left.<sup>10</sup>

Fred Halliday (1946–2010), an astonishingly prolific and wide-ranging public intellectual who was based in London for most of his career made a singular contribution to MERIP. Joe Stork connected with Halliday over their mutual interest in South Yemen and reviewed Halliday’s first book, *Arabia without Sultans*.<sup>11</sup> Halliday’s materialist account of the structure of power in the Arabian Peninsula and of its anti-imperialist movements was a natural match for MERIP’s agenda and outlook. He became a contributing editor of the magazine in 1977 and wrote on an array of topics including Soviet Middle East policy, Yemen, the Gulf, Ethiopia, and Iran. From 1976 to 1990, Halliday’s most intense period of engagement with MERIP, he contributed to one-third of all the issues of the magazine.<sup>12</sup>

Another transatlantic influence was Maxime Rodinson (1915–2004), an erudite scholar who combined classical Orientalist training with a materialist historical understanding of the Middle East leavened by seven years of residence in Lebanon and Syria. He was honored in person at MERIP’s fifteenth anniversary celebration and became a contributing editor in 1988. Rodinson first appeared in the pages of the magazine in the form of a review of his *Israel*:

<sup>9</sup> Cathy Tackney, “Dealing Arms in the Middle East. Part I: History and Strategic Considerations,” *MR* 8 (March - April 1972): 3–14 and “Part II: Israel and Egypt Since 1968,” *MR* 9 (May - June 1972):18–28; MERIP Staff, “Nixon’s Strategy in the Middle East” *MR* 13 (Nov. 1972): 3–8; “Arms Dealing in the Middle East,” *MR* 23 (Dec. 1973): 19–22; Chris Paine, “The Political Economy of Arms Transfers to the Middle East,” *MR* 30 (Aug. 1974): 3–26; MERIP Staff, “U.S. Strategy in the Gulf,” *MR* 36 (Apr. 1975): 17–28.

<sup>10</sup> “Middle East ‘71: Towards Repression or Revolution?” *MR* 5 (Dec. 1971):3–10; Mahfoud Benoune, “Maghribin Workers in France,” *MR* 34 (Jan. 1975):1–12, 30.

<sup>11</sup> *MR* 35 (Feb. 1975): 33–34. Halliday’s reassessment of the book appears in *Middle East Report*, 204 (Fall 1997): 27–29.

<sup>12</sup> Joe Stork, “Fred Halliday,” *Middle East Report* 255 (Summer 2010): 46–47.

*A Colonial-Settler State?*<sup>13</sup> Fayez Sayegh, founder of the Research Center of the Palestine Liberation Organization, had characterized Israel as a settler colony two years before Rodinson used the term in his essay in *Les Temps Modernes*, on which his book is based.<sup>14</sup> But Rodinson was the first Western author to employ this terminology. Former MERIP editors Zachary Lockman, Shira Robinson, and Mezna Qato are among those who have deepened and nuanced this conceptualization, which is now widely accepted by scholars of Palestine/Israel.<sup>15</sup>

Rodinson established his reputation in the 1960s during the ascendancy of Marxism in French historical thinking. His major works of that period were a Freudian-materialist biography of the Prophet of Islam, *Muhammad (Mahomet)*, (1961) and *Islam and Capitalism (L'Islam et le capitalisme)*, (1966) – the first book in a Western European language to use the term “capitalism” in a Middle Eastern context. Although Rodinson’s understanding of capitalism in the Middle East has been largely superseded by subsequent scholarship, current academic discussions still engage with his work.<sup>16</sup>

The outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975 was a moment of inflection for MERIP. Its established connections to the Lebanese and Palestinian left informed an in-depth analysis of the early stages of the civil war not readily available elsewhere in English.<sup>17</sup> However, the demise of the Lebanese (and broader Arab) New Left in the wreckage of the civil war and the clear limits of Palestinian armed resistance to Israel, which was perhaps unintentionally marked by Yasser Arafat’s speech to the UN on November 13, 1974, impelled MERIP to look beyond its initial orientation to deepen its understanding of the MENA region.

One indicator of that process, which extended into the early 1980s, was Fred Halliday’s article arguing for a two-state solution to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict.<sup>18</sup> In the spirit of promoting debate and refusing any party line, the same issue contained an opposing point of view. But Halliday’s stature, his substantial contributions to the MERIP project over the previous five years, and his more persuasive argument resulted in his view becoming the dominant one in the MERIP circle for the next two decades.

<sup>13</sup> Reviewed by Rene Theberge, *MR* 21 (Oct. 1973): 25–26.

<sup>14</sup> Fayez Sayegh, “Zionist Colonialism in Palestine,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 2.1 (2012): 206–25.

<sup>15</sup> Omar Jabary Salamanca, Mezna Qato, Kareem Rabie, and Sobhi Samour, “Past is Present: Settler Colonialism in Palestine” and Zachary Lockman, “Land, Labor and the Logic of Zionism: A Critical Engagement with Gershon Shafir,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 2.1 (2012): 1–8, 9–38; Shira Robinson, *Citizen Strangers: Palestinians and the Birth of Israel’s Liberal Settler State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Kristen Alff, “Landed Property, Capital Accumulation, and Polymorphous Capitalism in Egypt and the Levant, 1850–1920” in Joel Beinin, Bassam Haddad, Sherene Seikaly, eds., *A Critical Political Economy of the Middle East and North Africa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 25–45.

<sup>17</sup> “Lebanese Fascists Attack Palestinians,” *MR* 37 (May 1975): 30–32; “Lebanon Explodes” *MR* 44 (Feb. 1976).

<sup>18</sup> Fred Halliday, “Revolutionary Realism and the Struggle for Palestine,” and Khalil Nakhleh, “A Palestinian Option: A Reply to Fred Halliday” *MR* 96 (May/June 1981): 3–12, 13–15.

From the mid-1970s to early 1980s several doctoral students – Judith Tucker, Philip Khoury, Beshara Doumani, Eric Hooglund, Zachary Lockman, and I – who drew inspiration and guidance from Maxime Rodinson, Fred Halliday, and soon-to-be contributing editors Ervand Abrahamian and Hanna Batatu – became MERIP editors or associates. Rashid Khalidi became a MERIP editor in the mid-1980s and contributed six articles on Palestine from 1983 to 1991. This cohort was prominent among those who established a respected place for political economy and Palestine studies in anglophone Middle East studies. That accomplishment was embodied in the election of several members of this generation of MERIP editors as members of the board and ultimately as presidents of the Middle East Studies Association of North America beginning with Rashid Khalidi in 1993, myself in 2001, Zachary Lockman in 2006, and Judith Tucker in 2017.

Of course, MERIP associates and authors did not achieve this alone. The seminar that began convening regularly at the University of Hull (UK) in 1974 was also influential. The Hull seminar published the *Review of Middle East Studies (RoMES)* “to encourage the production of theoretically relevant work informed by a critical appreciation of the Middle East and its history.”<sup>19</sup> There were several points of thematic and personal overlap between the Hull seminar participants and MERIP. Roger Owen (1935–2018), co-editor of *RoMES* with Talal Asad, contributed his first article to the tenth anniversary issue of *MERIP Reports*, subsequently authored eight more, and became a contributing editor in 1985.<sup>20</sup> Owen’s stature as an esteemed economic historian added luster to the MERIP project. The short-lived American Middle East Studies Seminar, whose members included many MERIP authors and associates, also contributed to the transformation of the conventional wisdom of anglophone Middle East studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Another significant shift in Anglo-American Middle East studies during this period was the emergence of women’s studies, especially in the disciplines of history and anthropology. As in other regions of the world, the initial goal of Middle East women’s studies was to retrieve and represent the voices and agency of women – a more modest project than the fundamental challenges to conventional wisdom posed by gender studies as articulated by Joan Scott and others.<sup>21</sup> MERIP’s initial approach to the study of Middle Eastern women was informed by Marxist-feminism.

The first substantial MERIP essays on Middle Eastern women appeared in 1976.<sup>22</sup> Judith Tucker’s article “Egyptian Women in the Work Force: An Historical Survey” prefigures her *Women in Nineteenth Century Egypt* (1985), the first book-length history of women in a modern Middle Eastern country in a European language. Appearing in the same issue as Tucker’s article was

<sup>19</sup> Talal Asad and Roger Owen, *Review of Middle East Studies* 1 (1975): 1.

<sup>20</sup> Roger Owen, “The Arab Economies in the 1970s,” *MR* 100 (Oct. – Dec. 1981): 3–13.

<sup>21</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91.5 (Dec. 1986): 1053–75.

<sup>22</sup> Judith Tucker, “Egyptian Women in the Work Force: An Historical Survey” and Amal Samed, “The Proletarianization of Palestinian Women in Israel,” *MR* 50 (Aug. 1976): 3–9, 26 and 10–15, 26. See also Judith Gran, “Impact of the World Market on Egyptian Women,” *MR* 58 (June 1977): 3–7.

Amal Samed's contribution on "The Proletarianization of Palestinian Women in Israel" (unlike a year earlier, Arab citizens of Israel were now unequivocally identified as Palestinians). Mona Hammam also contributed several articles on Egyptian women.<sup>23</sup> Hammam reviewed the two books that launched academic Middle East women's studies: Elizabeth W. Fernea and Basima Bazirgan's *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak* (1977) and Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie's *Women in the Muslim World* (1978), in an issue devoted to "Women and Work in the Middle East."<sup>24</sup>

Most of MERIP's early treatment of women focused on Egypt. The field research of younger academics in Iran and Yemen broadened MERIP's range.<sup>25</sup> At the same time it began regularly considering women's experiences as imbedded in broad social processes like labor migration and the 1979 Iranian revolution. By the time Suad Joseph became an editor in the mid-1990s, MERIP had embraced gender studies as a method, although not necessarily the entire agenda elaborated by Joan Scott.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to a deeper appreciation of gender, the central themes in MERIP's intellectual development beyond the mid-1970s were the Iranian revolution, critical analysis of the self-proclaimed "Arab socialist" regimes (Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Algeria), and a more sophisticated understanding of imperialism beyond its initial loose embrace of dependency theory, a popular variant of (some would say deviation from) Marxian political economy in the 1960s and 1970s.

Conventional wisdom considered Iran along with Lebanon, Turkey, and Tunisia as exemplars of successful "modernization." When the 1979 revolution belied that notion, a path was opened for an alternative understanding of Iran and ultimately the entire MENA region. MERIP began publishing critical analysis of Iran and the U.S.-Iranian alliance in the mid-1970s.<sup>27</sup> Two of the most prominent and prolific contributors to MERIP's Iran coverage – Fred Halliday and Ervand Abrahamian – were established authorities on Iran by the time the revolutionary movement gained momentum in 1978.

<sup>23</sup> Mona Hammam, "Egypt's Working Women: Textile Workers of Chubra el-Kheima" *MR* 82 (Nov. - Dec. 1979): 3-7. Marissa Escribano's photo essay on Egyptian women, and Judith Tucker's translation of an interview with Um Muhammad, a hospital attendant, originally published in the Egyptian Marxist journal, *al-Tali'a*, also appeared in that issue.

<sup>24</sup> *MR* 95 (March - April 1981): 28-30.

<sup>25</sup> Cynthia Myntti contributed "Yemeni Workers Abroad: The Impact of Women" *MR* 124 (June 1984): 11-16 to an issue on "Women and Labor Migration," which also included Elizabeth Taylor, "Egyptian Migration and Peasant Wives" (3-10). Mary Hegland, "Political Roles of Iranian Village Women," *MERIP Middle East Report* 138 (Jan./Feb. 1986): 14-19, 46 appeared in an issue on "Women and Politics in the Middle East" which also featured articles on Palestinian women by Julie Peteet and Sudanese women by Sondra Hale.

<sup>26</sup> The beginnings of this development might be traced to Suad Joseph's introductory essay to the "Women and Politics in the Middle East" issue, *MERIP Middle East Report* 138 (Jan.-Feb. 1986):3-7.

<sup>27</sup> "Repression in Iran," *MR* 25 (Feb. 1974): 18-19; "Iran on the Move: Investments and Aid to India and Egypt, Troops to Oman," *MR* 29 (June 1974):14-15; Chris Paine and Erica Schoenberger, "Iranian Nationalism and the Great Powers: 1872-1954," *MR* 37 (May 1975): 3-28; Helmut Richards, "Land Reform and Agribusiness in Iran," *MR* 43 (Dec. 1975): 3-18, 24.

Halliday's *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* appeared that year. Although he did not anticipate so prompt an upheaval, the book dissected the material and social contradictions in Iran that impelled the revolution.<sup>28</sup> Like almost every observer of contemporary Iran, Halliday seriously underestimated the power of the religious opposition to the Shah's rule. But he recovered quickly from this lapse and from 1980 to 2001 contributed over a dozen articles on the political and religious forces in Iran and the course of its revolution. Ervand Abrahamian, who became a contributing editor in 1980, authored ten articles on Iran from 1978 to 2006. His *Iran Between Two Revolutions* is an essential text for understanding the historical sociology of the 1905 and 1979 revolutions; his later work has deepened our understanding of the CIA's role in the 1953 coup that ousted Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh.<sup>29</sup>

Eric Hooglund, Mary Hegland, Lois Beck, Erika Friedl, Iraj Imam-Jomeh, and Asef Bayat began their academic careers while publishing in MERIP's seven Iran-themed issues in the six years following the revolution. Hooglund, a MERIP associate and editor for over a decade and since then a contributing editor, contributed a dozen articles on Iran from 1983 to 2009, beginning with his review of *Iran Between Two Revolutions*.<sup>30</sup> MERIP's coverage of Iran dramatically enhanced its stature and established it as a respected authority in anglophone academia and beyond. The number of new subscriptions to the magazine in 1980 exceeded the total number of subscribers in 1978.<sup>31</sup>

From its beginnings, MERIP was wary of the ideologies of "Arab socialism" and pan-Arab nationalism and the states that propounded them. It was sympathetic to Mahmoud Hussein's critique of the Nasserist regime in Egypt.<sup>32</sup> MERIP editor Karen Pfeifer's "State Capitalism in Algeria" was the first substantial original critical analysis of an "Arab socialist" regime by a member of the collective.<sup>33</sup>

As soon as it appeared in 1978, MERIP, along with many others, recognized Hanna Batatu's *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'thists, and Free Officers* as a brilliant achievement and a model of political economy and *long durée* historical analysis of the "Arab socialist" regimes. MERIP devoted several review essays to Batatu's masterpiece.<sup>34</sup> He became a contributing editor in 1982 and authored articles on both Iraq and Syria. MERIP's issue on "Wealth and Power in the Middle East" featured an exchange between Batatu and 'Isam al-Khafaji, who had a dimmer view of Iraq's Ba'thist regime than Batatu.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978).

<sup>29</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); *Oil Crisis in Iran: From Nationalism to Coup d'Etat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>30</sup> Eric Hooglund, review of *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, *MR* 113 (March/April 1983): 30–31.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Johnson and Joe Stork "MERIP: The First Decade."

<sup>32</sup> Fuad Faris (i.e., Assaf Kfoury) review of Mahmoud Hussein, *Class Conflict in Egypt: 1945–1970* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974); Mahmoud Hussein, "The Revolt of the Egyptian Students," *MR* 11 (Aug. 1972): 10–14; *MR* 29 (June 1974): 24–26.

<sup>33</sup> Karen Farsoun (Pfeifer), *MR* 35 (Feb. 1975): 3–30.

<sup>34</sup> *MR* 97 (Jun. 1981): 22–32.

<sup>35</sup> *MERIP Middle East Report* 142 (Sep. - Oct. 1986).



The Egyptian economist Samir Amin developed a unique version of dependency theory into what he called “global historical materialism.” MERIP recognized Amin’s importance and the necessity of addressing his theoretical arguments. Its initial engagement with Amin was Nigel Disney’s critical review of *Accumulation on a World Scale: A Critique of the Theory of Underdevelopment* followed by a more positive rejoinder.<sup>36</sup> MERIP subsequently published a pre-publication excerpt of the English translation of Amin’s *The Arab Nation: Nationalism and Class Struggle* (London: Zed Press, 1978) with an introduction by Philip Khoury and Judith Tucker contextualizing its arguments.<sup>37</sup>

MERIP went on to publish several sharp critiques of dependency theory.<sup>38</sup> The most iconoclastic contribution to MERIP’s tenth anniversary issue was Gavin Kitching’s critique of Marxian theories of imperialism, especially dependency theory.<sup>39</sup> MERIP’s issue on the Third World debt crisis included a full exposition of Bill Warren’s argument against dependency theory, succinctly summarized in the title of his posthumous book, *Imperialism: Pioneer of Capitalism*.<sup>40</sup> As always, MERIP remained theoretically flexible, but from the early 1980s on, most authors rejected dependency theory in favor of empirical examinations of processes of capital accumulation and class formation, including an early evaluation of what came to be known as neo-liberalism and analysis of the formation of local capitalist classes.<sup>41</sup>

This essay has surveyed MERIP’s contributions to the emergence of political economy perspectives in Anglo-American Middle East studies during its first decade and a half. However, the exposition here been more linear than is warranted. Many would identify an epistemological break in Middle East studies with the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978, the same year that Hanna Batatu’s magnum opus appeared. MERIP published a long, positive review of *Orientalism*.<sup>42</sup> But it devoted more attention to Said’s views on Palestine, on which he contributed an article which contained some of the

<sup>36</sup> Nigel Disney, review of *Accumulation on a World Scale: A Critique of the Theory of Underdevelopment* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), *MR* 51 (Oct. 1976): 21–24. Michael Moffitt responded in “Response: Samir Amin’s Marxism,” *MR* 55 (March 1977): 25–26.

<sup>37</sup> Samir Amin, “The Arab Nation: Some Conclusions and Problems,” *MR* 68 (June 1978): 3–14.

<sup>38</sup> Patrick Clawson, “Egypt’s Industrialization: A Critique of Dependency Theory,” *MR* 72 (Nov. 1978): 17–23. See also Karen Pfeifer, “Three Worlds or Three Worldviews?: State Capitalism and Development,” *MR* 78 (June 1979): 3–11, 26.

<sup>39</sup> Gavin Kitching, “The Theory of Imperialism and Its Consequences,” *MR* 100 (Oct. - Dec. 1981): 36–42.

<sup>40</sup> Gary Nigel Howe, “Warren’s Revision of the Marxist Critique”; and Fred Halliday review of Bill Warren, *Imperialism: Pioneer of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1980), *MR* 117 (Sept. 1983): 19–23, 23–25.

<sup>41</sup> James M. Cypher, “Militarism, Monetarism and Markets: Reagan’s Response to the Structural Crisis,” *MR* 128 (Nov. - Dec. 1984): 7–18; Jim Paul, “The New Bourgeoisie of the Gulf,” *MERIP Middle East Report* 142 (Sep. - Oct. 1986): 18–22. Adam Hanieh subsequently extensively and innovatively addressed this topic in *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) and *Money, Markets, and Monarchies: The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Political Economy of the Contemporary Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>42</sup> Basim Musallam “Power and Knowledge,” review of Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978) *MR* 79 (June 1979): 19–26.

arguments that appeared in *Orientalism*.<sup>43</sup> MERIP devoted two positive reviews to Said's *The Question of Palestine* in its tenth anniversary issue. In MERIP's history to that point (and I believe subsequently as well), only Batatu's *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* received comparable treatment. Beshara Doumani, who subsequently became an editorial associate and then a contributing editor, noted that "What Said does not grapple with is the material context of these ideas and the economic, political and strategic factors that motivate the imperial policies of the capitalist countries of the West" – a typical MERIP-style point.<sup>44</sup>

Many associate *Orientalism* with the beginnings of post-colonial studies. Although the more extravagant claims of post-modernist and post-structuralist theory, with which it was often associated, are no longer fashionable, post-colonial studies has made vital contributions to Middle East studies. Not the least of them has been to de-exceptionalize the MENA region by emphasizing comparable imperial discourses and practices across the globe, in much the same way as political economy methods do.

MERIP participated in the post-colonial studies/cultural studies turn in Middle East studies, as exemplified by articles in the magazine and in *Middle East Report Online* and in the books of editors Barbara Harlow, Timothy Mitchell, Paul Silverstein, Susan Slyomovics, Ted Swedenburg, and Lisa Wedeen among others.<sup>45</sup> The themes of several issues of *Middle East Report* that have appeared during the last decade illustrate MERIP's enduring attention to culture, gender, art, and technologies of rule.<sup>46</sup>

The era of neo-liberal ascendancy compelled intellectual introspection, reconsideration, and a broader view of modalities of popular politics and cultures of resistance, but never a complete abandonment of political economy. There was a decline in the proportion of articles devoted to traditional political economy topics from the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s. But, the same themes that motivated the founding of MERIP – the U.S. empire in the MENA region, popular struggles, and Palestine – are well represented among the issues of the last decade.<sup>47</sup>

The 2008 financial crash reminded the world that capitalism remains prone to crises and revalorized capitalism as a category of analysis, while the

<sup>43</sup> Edward W. Said, "The Idea of Palestine in the West," *MR* 70 (Sep. 1978): 3–11.

<sup>44</sup> Stu Cohen and Beshara Doumani, "Contesting Zionism: Two Views of Edward Said's *The Question of Palestine*," *MR* 100 (Oct. - Dec. 1981): 44–48.

<sup>45</sup> A representative sample of *MER* and *MERO* articles: Barbara Harlow, "Prison Text, Resistance Culture," 164–65 (May/June 1990); Timothy Mitchell, "The Ear of Authority," *MER* 147 (July/August 1987); Paul Silverstein, "Headscarves and the French Tricolor," *Middle East Report Online*, Jan. 30, 2004; Susan Slyomovics, "The Moroccan Prison in Literature and Architecture," *MER* 275 (Summer 2015); Joan Gross, David McMurray, Ted Swedenburg, "Rai, Rap and Ramadan Nights: Franco-Maghribi Cultural Identities," *MER* 178 (September/October 1992); Osama Esber, Lisa Wedeen "Three Poems by Osama Esber," *Middle East Report Online*, March 9, 2021.

<sup>46</sup> *MER* 275 "Inside the Inside: Life in Prison"; *MER* 269 "Gender Front Lines"; *MER* 263 "The Art & Culture of the Arab Revolts."

<sup>47</sup> *MER* 294 "Exit Empire"; *MER* 290 "New Landscape of Intervention"; *MER* 283 "America First 2.0"; *MER* 292/293 "Return to Revolution"; *MER* 282 "Transnational Palestine"; *MER* 279 "Israel's War Record in Gaza"; *MER* 253 "Apartheid and Beyond."

hangover from the frenzy of triumphalist free market globalization of the 1990s encouraged examination of the global connections of phenomena previously considered in regional terms. MERIP editors and contributors have been a part of the post-2008 political-economy friendly atmosphere in academia. Current and former MERIP editors and contributing editors Muriam Haleh Davis, Shana Marshall, Timothy Mitchell, and I and board member Adam Hanieh contributed to *A Critical Political Economy of the Middle East and North Africa*, which seeks to provide a “big picture” analysis of the region. What might be termed MERIP’s “expanded political economy” has featured topics like environment and nature, health care, humanitarian relief, the scarcity of water, and the consequences of direct U.S. military intervention, which broaden the understanding of the constitution of the social formations of the MENA region beyond the topics MERIP emphasized in its formative period. Recent contributions of both the founding generation and the current generation of editors and authors continue to address the core political economy topics that defined MERIP in its first decade and a half, albeit perhaps with less optimism than was characteristic of that era.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Representative examples include: Toby Jones, “Saudi Alchemy: Water Into Oil, Oil Into Water,” *MER* 254 (Spring 2010): 24–29; Kevan Harris, “Class and Politics in Post-Revolutionary Iran: A Brief Introduction,” *MER* 277 (Winter 2015): 2–5 as well as several other articles in that issue themed “Iran’s Many Deals”; Karen Pfeifer, “Rebels, Reformers and Empire: Alternative Economic Programs for Egypt and Tunisia,” *MER* 274 (Spring 2015): 2–8, 48; Shana Marshall, “The Defense Industry’s Role in Militarizing US Foreign Policy” *MER* 294 (Spring 2020); Sami Zemni, “Tunisia’s Marginalized Redefine the Political,” *MER* 298 (Spring 2021).

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