



## Article

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### What is the 'Middle East'? : Western-centric knowledge-power perception towards the 'East'

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#### Abstract

Historically, all cultural, geographical, and political names and descriptions have clearly reflected intense categorization, cultural bias, political prejudice, and, more generally, 'otherization' to a certain extent. Orientalism, as an influential political-cultural concept, unambiguously reveals a discriminatory and arrogant Western stance towards the rest of the world, particularly the 'East' and the Islamic world. This general idea, as a mainstream trend, can easily be observed within the context of historical Western usage of the term 'Middle East'. This paper aims to review the term 'Middle East' as an outcome of the Orientalist perspective. It will do so in both cultural and political terms which clearly reveal the critical relationship between 'power' and 'knowledge.' It will also emphasize the importance of using alternative 'regionalist' terms to describe more contemporary realities.

**Keywords:** Western-centric, Orientalism, Middle East, Power, Knowledge,

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## Introduction

The relationship between two significant concepts, 'knowledge' and 'power,' is one of the most critical factors shaping the modern world. In particular, the negative perception and treatment of the 'other' geographies and cultures by Europe and the West have come in part due to this 'knowledge-power' framework for at least two centuries.

Throughout human history, *knowledge* has produced *power*. On the other hand, history's most powerful empires, states, societies, and individuals were known for their ability to develop, use, and shape knowledge. British historian Ian Morris, in his famous book *Why the West Rules — For Now*, comes up with four indicators of development in world history: energy capture, organization, war-making capacity, and available *information* technology. With those indicators he creates a development index covering many thousands of years; his index suggests that over the significant path of known history, apart from the period from approximately 550 CE to the 1770s, the West was more developed than 'the Rest'. Using this observation, he draws an important conclusion: "*geography tells us why the West, rather than some other region, has for the last two hundred years dominated the globe*"[1]. This statement emphasizes the role of the geographical proximity and advantages of the West when compared to the East, in addition to the European mobilization of the resources produced by the relationship between knowledge and power.

Importantly, knowledge is not 'pure'; it is something with the potential to be shaped, molded, and used politically. One of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, Michel Foucault, reveals power to be the ability to shape knowledge. Regarding truth and power, he argues that "*...truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power.*"[2] Foucault also argues that what authorities claim to be 'scientific knowledge' is often just a tool of social control [3]. Here, the main focus of this essay

emerges: What is the relationship between knowledge and power in the context of West-Middle East relations?

### **Orientalism as a case study of the Western-centric knowledge-power relationship**

In his thought-provoking and iconoclastic monograph, *Orientalism*, Palestinian scholar Edward Said presents an extraordinary framework to critique traditional and typical perceptions of the East perceptions that have been constructed by Westerners over several centuries. From a Foucauldian perspective, described above, Said shortly defines Orientalism as a ‘Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient’ [4].

Said argues that much Western study of Islamic civilization was political intellectualism, which was generally financed directly or indirectly by state officials, rather than objective academic analysis. As a result, the Oriental studies field served as a practical method of cultural discrimination and imperialist domination. He criticizes that approach and blames Western Orientalists for their belief that they know more about the Orient than do the Orientals. This arrogant view also shows itself in defining the Orient and Orientals.

Said and other critics of Orientalism find the origin of Western-centric arrogance towards the ‘other’, particularly the ‘Eastern’, in the early Hellenistic descriptions of Persians and other Asiatic societies. The appearance and rise of Islam (most notably through the Ottoman Empire) as a rival challenging Western dominance on the Mediterranean basin created fear and piqued special interest among Westerners. Following long continental wars, the Renaissance, the Reformation process, the discovery of rich overseas regions, and the age of Industrialization created convenient circumstances for the rise and expansion of the European powers while the Ottoman, Iranian and Babur Empires were continuously retreating.

The rise of Orientalist studies perfectly coincides with the geographical expansion of the European powers out of the continent. Said and some other post-colonial thinkers explain this as a well-organized domination of the target region (first analyze, then conquest). Orientalist studies had increased quantitatively and developed qualitatively following Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798. In addition, geopolitical rivalry between the European powers in Asia and Africa,

particularly Britain and France, and eventually Germany and Russia, enhanced the existing Orientalist studies in Europe. Parallel to this, when those Empires collapsed after World War II and could not continue colonial activities, Orientalist studies diminished alongside them.

Following the second world war, the United States replaced traditional colonial empires as the new hegemonic power and subsequently became the emerging center of Orientalist studies (but under an 'academic' cover this time), and correspondingly English also replaced German as the common language of the field [5].

One of the main characteristics of Orientalist studies is the close relationship between scholars and the state authority. In some instances, scholars were appointed directly in colonial institutions, while in most cases they served as counsellor to the high level imperial authorities. For instance, famous Orientalist Snouck Hurgronje went directly from his studies of Islam to being an adviser to the Dutch government on the handling of its Muslim Indonesian colonies. Duncan Macdonald and Louis Massignon were widely sought after as experts on Islamic matters by colonial administrators from North Africa to Pakistan. Massignon had also served as a political assistant to the French High Commissioner in the Middle East, Georges-Picot. In Germany, Orientalists Carl Heinrich Becker and Hans Heinrich Schaeder actively served their Nazi government as advisers [6]. In addition, great geopolitical theoreticians British Halford Mackinder and German Friedrich Ratzel were in service to their governments as officials or advisers. All of these examples reveal the strong relationship between knowledge and power within the European academic context.

### **A classical Orientalist debate: the foundation of the Ottoman Empire**

Important examples of Euro-centric and Orientalist viewpoints towards the Middle East can be observed amid the debate over the foundation of the Ottoman Empire, which was the most significant political entity in the region until the modern era. In Ottoman historiography, there are two main approaches on the question of 'how the Ottoman Empire was formed and expanded? Fuad Köprülü and Paul Wittek stress the role of Turco-Islamic traditions, whereas famous historians H.A. Gibbons and George Arnakis emphasize the contributions of originally non-Islamic and non-Turkish elements to the rise of the Ottoman state [7]. Gibbons's 1916 thesis

clearly reflects the Orientalist tradition that presumes the Turks to be ‘uncultured’ and ‘destructive’[8]. In addition to this arrogant perspective, the date of this publication also points to the conflicting conditions of World War I. These kinds of theses seem to have been written with the goal of legitimizing the war against the Ottoman Turks.

As can be observed throughout history, Westerners invest heavily in the ‘bad, barbaric, uncultured, low-educated, (and) destructive’ characterization of the ‘Orientals’ in order to demonize their targets while highlighting their own ‘superior, intellectual, (and) civilizing’ mission. Reacting to this view, the peoples of the predominantly Muslim countries see the continuous regional wars and Western military interventions as the proof of such a discriminatory approach.

### **Where is the Middle East? Who names the regions and how?**

Another significant example of the relationship between knowledge and power reveals itself in the naming of regions. For instance, the Asia-Pacific region, to which China, Korea, and Japan belong, is called the ‘Far East’. When looking from Europe that name is sensible. On the other hand, such definitions make no sense if looking from Australia or Russia and display arrogance and disrespect to local peoples. However, as highlighted above, the Orientalist approach presumes itself on a position to examine, describe, and define the ‘other’ at will.

The term ‘Middle East’ has a similar history, too. Similar to the mapping of the region by two European high commissioners, British and French officials Sykes and Picot, the naming of the region was designated by Europeans as well. While the term is now widespread both inside and outside the region, it is in fact relatively new. It was coined only at the end of the nineteenth century by the British Foreign Office, and was solidified with its use in an article published by the US Navy in 1902.

It was originally used to describe the region as east of the ‘Near East,’ which includes the Balkans and Anatolia. Geographically, all of these names are Eurocentric; the Balkans is in the east neighborhood of Europe, while it is not at the eastern side of Russia or China. Today, Near East and Middle East are largely used as synonyms. While the origin of the name reveals the

political realities of the nineteenth century, when Britain and France carried enormous weight and power, today the term Middle East is commonly used within the region itself. The four most common languages of the region use the term's translation to describe their own region: al-sharq al-awsat (Arabic), ortadoğu (Turkish), mizrach tichon (Hebrew), khavarmiyaneh (Persian) [9].

As mentioned above, the strong relationship between knowledge and power not only creates the 'power hierarchy' among international actors, but also causes the arrogant naming of regions without consulting the local people. When the British ruled the region as a part of its global empire, this name was used and local elites of the era obeyed the dictate. Today, in spite of the ongoing Western political presence in the region, national governments there have gained more strength, and other global actors—namely Russia and China—have a large presence and high potential in the region. As a result, the name of the area should be restored to reflect the actual balance of power and strength of regional actors.

As a second argument, the term 'Middle East' reveals nothing logically; *middle of what* and *east of where* questions arise. Since it is observed that in most regions and countries in the world cardinal directions are often used — one hears North America and South America; one hears Asia-Pacific and South East Asia and even Central Asia; one also hears about North and South Africa; Central and Southern Europe — the term 'West Asia' may be used instead of 'Middle East' to describe the region more specifically and appropriately.

An alternative name for West Asia is Southwest Asia, perhaps because of another sub-region called Southeast Asia with which it is parallel. However, since the sub-region in question is almost entirely west of the meridian through the Ural Mountains and therefore directly south of European Russia, West Asia is more accurate [10].

### **Conclusion: the way for a better future**

In light of the above discussion, one important result can be drawn easily: as long as the crucial relationship between knowledge and power is misunderstood by Muslim and other poor communities, their centuries-long underdevelopment and Western exploitation will certainly persist in different forms. Contrary to some pacifistic and deterministic beliefs,

underdevelopment is not the destiny of West Asia; that saddening trend can be changed and reversed in time. The peoples of the region need to mobilize their resources in order to transform the current undesirable conditions. The only sustainable way to effect change, however, is to wisely self-criticize and identify existing problems in order to reconstruct the future on the basis of knowledge, as it was in the region's past.

Production of knowledge will generate power in terms of politics, economics, and culture and pave the way towards a free, wealthy, and powerful world for future generations. Otherwise, current conditions of poverty, tyranny, arrogance, and oppression will unfortunately continue.

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