

FORUM ARTICLE

# Elusive decolonisation of IR in the Arab world

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## Abstract

Arab social science scholarship, and IR in particular, has been systematically underfunded and sidelined by governments across the region. As such, IR scholars in the Arab world have struggled to produce scholarship in hostile and authoritarian environments, let alone address efforts to decolonise. Of the few initiatives of indigenising social science that exist in the Arab world, the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies (DI) and its founding institution, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS), are the main examples. In this intervention, I will review the attempts to indigenise and decolonise IR within these institutions. I focus on how the DI is implementing three main approaches: increasing access to the discipline, rethinking how we teach IR, and facilitating theory production from the region. I demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of the three abovementioned approaches by drawing attention to performative measures on the part of regional scholars, and pretending localism on the part of scholars in the Global North, which together help to perpetuate neomarginalisation. The shortcomings discussed permeate and distort attempts to decolonise the discipline within the Arab world.

**Keywords:** Arab World; Decolonisation; Pedagogy; Regional Knowledge Production

## Introduction

The Arab world is often described as ‘highly penetrated’; international intervention is rampant, and tangibly felt.<sup>1</sup> This impacts many aspects of everyday life, from how bureaucracies function to the availability of basic services. Higher education and knowledge production are no exceptions.

Many of the most well-known Arab universities began as American missionary projects. In numerous countries, the main institutions of higher education continue to be satellite campuses of Western institutions. The Qatari ambassador to the United States once proudly referred to American satellite campuses in Qatar as a ‘second military base’, by which the Americans can ‘combat extremism’ and impact future generations.<sup>2</sup> While this is perhaps the clearest expression of this relationship, this dynamic is not unique to Qatar; Western institutions and scholars reign supreme across the region – even among universities that are not directly linked to Western counterparts.

<sup>1</sup>Bassel Salloukh, ‘Overlapping contests and Middle East international relations: The return of the weak Arab state’, *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 50:3 (2017), pp. 660–3.

<sup>2</sup>Meshal bin Hamad Al Thani, ‘Remarks at the World Affairs Council’, Washington, DC (25 July 2017). See more: <https://www.facebook.com/QatarEmbassyUSA/videos/on-tuesday-qatars-ambassador-to-the-united-states-he-meshal-bin-hamad-al-thani-s/1935056310108721/>.

Decolonisation initiatives are missing, however, from the regional discussion. This is why Arab scholarship and initiatives are often omitted from work focused on decolonising IR.<sup>3</sup> Of the few initiatives that exist within the Arab world that attempt to indigenise and thus decolonise the discipline, the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies (DI) and its founding institution, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS), are the ones with the most extensive efforts. These institutions were founded by regional scholars, dedicated to producing local knowledge to better confront challenges facing the Arab world from within and without. The founder of ACRPS, Azmi Bishara, rejected affiliation with Western bodies when the project was first proposed in order to maintain this vision.<sup>4</sup>

In this intervention, I will review the approaches to decolonising IR within these institutions, as well as demonstrate their pitfalls. Specifically, I focus on how the DI is implementing three main approaches in an attempt to decolonise the social sciences in general, and IR in particular: increasing access to the discipline, rethinking teaching, and facilitating theory production from the region. Rethinking how IR is taught in the Arab world allows the DI to design courses in a way that is relevant to the Arab student's lived reality. This helps students not only receive adequate training for further participation in academia (i.e., increasing access), but helps demonstrate how knowledge production can be relevant and useful to their political concerns. These two approaches help to facilitate the third, which is to produce theory from the region itself. In that way, Arab scholarship is not constrained by the limitations of existing theory that overwhelmingly stems from the Global North. Rather, Arab scholars can begin to produce theoretical, and *not just empirical*, knowledge from their perspectives.

'Decolonising' IR in the Arab world would require that how knowledge is produced in this discipline, and how it is wielded, no longer stems from outside the region nor exclusively benefits Western ideological projects. The three approaches described above would help to rectify how knowledge is produced, and who it is used by and for – thereby facilitating the goal of decolonisation. It is important to note, however, that while the three approaches are all necessary to decolonising IR, they are insufficient on their own.

I demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches by drawing attention to repeated dynamics of performative measures on the part of regional scholars, and pretending localism on the part of scholars in the Global North. These dynamics together help to perpetuate neo-marginalisation.<sup>5</sup> They also lead to the uncritical reproduction of exclusionary and sexist academic norms and, as Sankaran Krishna puts it, a persistent 'hypermasculine tetchiness' with important yet marginalised topics.<sup>6</sup> The shortcomings discussed permeate and distort attempts to decolonise the discipline within these institutions specifically, as well as the Arab world more broadly.

Although I will include comparisons of other initiatives,<sup>7</sup> the focus of this article will be on the Doha Institute and the lessons we might learn for decolonisation efforts elsewhere. To conduct my analysis, I rely on interviews with the main founder and public intellectual at the helm of this project, Azmi Bishara; an assessment of syllabi used in IR-related classes (specifically within the

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Ajay Parasram's overview of the major work on decolonising IR, in which none feature the MENA region whatsoever. Ajay Parasram, 'Hunting the state of nature: Race and ethics in postcolonial international relations', in Brent Steele and Eric Heinze (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Ethics and International Relations* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2018), pp. 104–05; Amitav Acharya, 'Global International Relations (IR) and regional worlds: A new agenda for international studies', *International Studies Quarterly*, 58:4 (December 2014), p. 11, speaking of a 'global IR', also has the Middle East region as secondary in his analysis and examples used.

<sup>4</sup>Interview with Azmi Bishara, 12 January 2021.

<sup>5</sup>Acharya, 'Global International Relations (IR) and regional worlds', p. 11.

<sup>6</sup>Sankaran Krishna, 'Decolonizing International Relations', *E-International Relations* (13 October 2012), available at: <https://www.e-ir.info/2012/10/08/decolonizing-international-relations/>.

<sup>7</sup>For more information on IR in the Arab world/from an Arab perspective, see the work of the Arab Council for the Social Sciences in supporting the 'Beirut School of Critical Security Studies', the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, and the Ibrahim Abu Lughod Institute at Birzeit University. See also Sari Hanafi and Rigas Arvanitis, *Knowledge Production in the Arab World* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015).

political science, critical security studies, and conflict resolution programmes/departments) and primary data on projects I personally developed in my four years at the DI/ACRPS.

In sum, I use these examples to describe what decolonisation is *not*; as discussed by Somdeep Sen (this forum), decolonisation is not performative, nor metaphorical. Decolonisation of an academic discipline means taking concrete action in expanding access, shifting teaching practices, and generating regional theory. A decolonised IR in the Arab world would look like a local and regional discussion of theory and research, without needing mediation from the Global North for legibility or legitimacy. But the path to this reality, as Lisa Ann Richey and Consolata Raphael Sulley (this forum) describe, is quite ‘messy’ indeed.<sup>8</sup>

## Elusive decolonisation

### *Background on DI/ACRPS*

The ACRPS began as a research centre in 2011 to inform the Arab public on issues of domestic and international politics. Founder Azmi Bishara refers to the DI/ACRPS as a ‘renaissance project’, advancing local knowledge production specifically to assist Arab society in their efforts at self-determination. He also notes that they are ‘objective but not neutral’ in their commitment to democracy and anticolonial struggle.<sup>9</sup>

The Center ‘presumed an Arab public exists’, and by making that presumption ‘tried to constitute it’.<sup>10</sup> This idea of constituting an Arab public went hand-in-hand with the Center’s commitment to Arab liberation and to finding transnational solutions to the region’s problems. Instead of state-specific research output, the entirety of the Arab region was the audience for the Center’s contributions. This addressed directly the question of ‘who is knowledge produced for?’, the answer to which is integral to a decolonising strategy.<sup>11</sup>

The Center was founded in Qatar, a monarchical regime, and is funded by affiliates of the government. Bishara acknowledges this, but insists that the Center’s research agenda is not as heavily impacted as other institutions in the Arab world with ties to state funding. There are ‘few strings attached’, he says.<sup>12</sup> ACRPS also stands in contrast to institutions across the Arab world where there is comparatively more academic freedom, but very little support (such as Tunisia and Lebanon). The Center is thus unique, in Azmi Bishara’s estimation, of being the only institution in the region that has a high ceiling for academic freedom, as well as ample funding to pursue quality research.<sup>13</sup>

In 2016, the focus on interdisciplinary academic research lent itself to the creation of a graduate institute, in the form of the Doha Institute, which offers MA degrees and scholarships for students from across the region. Bishara assumed the role of Chair of the Board of Trustees of the DI, and both institutions continue to function hand-in-hand.

Understanding trends at these two institutions helps us to understand regional trends as well, for a number of reasons. First, DI/ACRPS are one of the few initiatives that exist in the region in this form. Unlike other institutions, the DI/ACRPS is not a satellite campus of a Western university, such as the Qatar branches of Georgetown or Northwestern University. DI/ACRPS also does not have a colonial past, in the same way that American University of Cairo or Beirut do. Even spatially, it is important to note, the DI/ACRPS is not insulated from the local population; unlike the American satellites sequestered miles away from the rest of Doha (in an area called ‘Education City’) or the AUC campus 20 miles away from the city in New Cairo, the DI is right across the street from the

<sup>8</sup>Lisa Ann Richey and Consolata Raphael Sulley, ‘The messy practice of decolonizing a concept: Everyday humanitarianism in Tanzania’, *Review of International Studies*, this forum (2022).

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Interview with Bishara.

<sup>11</sup>Zeynep Gulsah Capan, ‘Decolonising International Relations?’, *Third World Quarterly*, 38:1 (2017), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup>Interview with Bishara.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

main public university in Qatar. Indeed, many Qatar University students interested in graduate-level social science transition to the DI directly following their undergraduate degrees.

This is often overlooked, however, because when Western scholars engage with the region, they only focus on a select number of institutions that are structured in ways that feel familiar, with similar organisation and epistemic starting points. There is also a tendency to ignore initiatives in the Arab Gulf states, presuming that independent initiatives simply cannot exist in what are presumed to be American client states. But this omission means that interested scholars miss where innovations in teaching, and the bulk of publicly engaged research, is actually happening in the region. The DI/ACRPS is the main site of such activity, servicing the local *and* regional population, both in its student body, research, and engagement with (and impact on) public discourse.

Finally, the Doha Institute and the Arab Center are the most active institutions in the region in terms of research output and initiatives. Of the limited number of peer-reviewed journals available to scholars in the Arabic language, for example, the majority is based at the Center. Given this fact, decolonisation efforts from this institution set the standard for the broader region, and can tell us a great deal of the overall story of Arab academia. Secondly, contributing to IR as a field of study was of key importance to the DI/ACRPS. This is especially the case given the recognition on the part of the DI's administration that the region is both unstable *and* continues to be colonised in various forms, which lends urgency to their task.

### *Increased access*

Increasing access is not a sufficient strategy to move towards a decolonised discipline; nevertheless, thinking about, and improving on, who has access to contributing to knowledge production is an essential part of the process. This is in line with the recommendation made by Ilan Kapoor in this forum to improve access to marginalised populations, in order to transform decolonisation from a 'topic to be covered in the classroom' to an actual politics that shifts material conditions.<sup>14</sup>

DI/ACRPS have actively pursued initiatives to: (1) to increase access of the Arab perspective in disciplinary discussions; and (2) 'provide opportunities and professionalization to marginalized scholars'.<sup>15</sup> I led the development and execution of a number of these initiatives, and witnessed firsthand the impacts of this approach, as well as its limitations.

The approach of increasing access to the discipline means mitigating the 'leaky pipeline', in which marginalised people are not recruited to the academy despite potential, or are forced to leave prematurely as a result of inequalities in resources and mentorship. This starts not just at the level of who produces knowledge, and where, but also at the level of who is considered a student or 'consume' of such knowledge. This is why it is crucial, for marginalised scholars, to develop 'knowledge about how to be in conferences or in academic meetings, how to write, how to be'.<sup>16</sup> Some examples include targeted recruitment, professionalisation opportunities, mentorship programmes, increased funding, and institutional mechanisms that limit sexist and racist behaviour.<sup>17</sup>

One such project I worked on was the Graduate Winter School programme, intended to foster North-South debate on key issues in IR. This programme brings in scholars from across the globe to discuss new work, in addition to providing space for graduate students. The idea is to not only expose students to critical perspectives, but to help them develop the professional networks they need to succeed. Increasing access is thus the explicit intention.

A second initiative in this vein is the Center's Arab Graduate Student Conference, specifically a space for those with a background from the region. Yet, in spite of their background, many

<sup>14</sup> Ilan Kapoor, 'Decolonising Development Studies', *Review of International Relations*, this forum (2023), pp. 13–14.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Capan, 'Decolonising International Relations?', pp. 6–7.

<sup>17</sup> This is in line with the recommendation made by Kapoor in this forum to improve access to marginalised populations, in order to transform decolonisation from a 'topic to be covered in the classroom' to an actual politics that shifts material conditions. Kapoor, 'Decolonising Development Studies', pp. 13–14.

participants are often not exposed to Arab scholarship in their institutions in the Global North, and are detached from the academic discussion happening in their home countries. Participating in the conference is intended to facilitate engagement with faculty discussants from the Doha Institute and interaction with local students. Bishara notes that the Center capitalises on the 'cultural affinities' of Arab students wherever they may be, in order to reintroduce them into the region's 'civilisational context'.<sup>18</sup> In this way, the Center can directly challenge Western dominance of social science broadly. Predictably, IR features prominently in the working groups of the conference, with such themes as international political economy, conflict and postconflict studies, migration, and more.

Finally, the location of these initiatives is crucial; to hold such programmes in the Global South, and in the Arab world in particular, forces scholars who study particular topics to take note of the discussion happening in the periphery. Bishara notes: 'We are making sure that scholars abroad think of us as a source by becoming a crucial location. That is how we will succeed.'<sup>19</sup>

Such events – intended specifically to diversify the field – have had a tangible impact on a number of participants. Some credited the conference for co-authorship opportunities, facilitating job placement, and more. The impact of these events can be summed up with this student comment from a post-conference survey: 'this conference was a message to the world that we can produce very valuable knowledge – but more importantly a message to ourselves that we need not to beg for second/third class inclusion in an academic structure built on our exclusion.'<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, these events have had less impact on maintaining connection with participants in the long term because there was little attempt to follow up or keep participants plugged in to regional developments. The focus instead was on successive iterations of these programmes, particularly with regards to number of applicants, institutions, and countries that were represented. Thus, it became clear that a focus on inclusion can quickly slip into performative metrics.

Another way in which the administration at the DI/ACRPS attempt to increase access is by using their hiring practices to include marginalised scholars from the region, based on future research potential rather than pedigree or biased signifiers of academic promise. To an extent, this has been successful in providing space for traditionally underrepresented perspectives, with a number of postcolonial and critical IR scholars present at the institute. According to Bishara, the administration prefers critical approaches to mainstream ones.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, there is a particular focus on Arabic-language teaching, which expands the ability of the DI to hire faculty who conduct their work primarily in Arabic, and would often only seek employment in their national universities.

Female faculty are underrepresented, however, and retention has been an ongoing problem. As a result, scholars that worked on political science and IR from a feminist perspective are no longer at the DI, and this remains a gap in scholarship and teaching. This dynamic has a stultifying impact on initiatives to diversify the discipline. As Krishna notes, such 'hypermasculine tetchiness' with certain perspectives in IR drives our research to traditional topics in uncritical ways. Lack of female faculty means the focus of research stemming from departments such as Critical Security Studies and Political Science centres on traditional topics, which reproduce disciplinary orthodoxies and do little by way of decolonisation. For instance, researchers in these programmes are focused on terrorism, counterinsurgency, radicalisation, and other such topics. They do not provide a critical perspective or question these approaches, let alone formulate an Arab alternative.

Thus, while increasing access to the IR discipline is an important and worthy objective, such an approach cannot materially change conditions within the discipline if questions of access are not

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. This is similar to the call by Acharya, 'Global International Relations (IR) and regional worlds', p. 3 when he says: 'Centers of learning remain clustered in the developed West. Overcoming this disjuncture presents a central challenge for our discipline.'

<sup>20</sup> Arab Graduate Student Conference post-conference survey, April 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Bishara.

considered holistically. Overall, initiatives that only address inclusion along a single dimension can never be fully inclusive.

### *Decolonising pedagogy*

The second approach at decolonising the discipline is critical pedagogy. How we teach IR in the Arab world determines whether students can utilise the tools and concepts that help them make sense of their political environment. It also has a large impact on whether prospective Arab academics see IR as a worthwhile discipline to pursue in their studies.

Krishna argues persuasively that the discipline of IR fetishises abstraction, and conceals the racial underpinnings of modern history in order to uphold a commitment to certain concepts.<sup>22</sup> As such, to move beyond this fetishisation, we must think critically about what is being overlooked in mainstream IR, and what concepts we reify or take as given which help perpetuate these concealments. Zeynep Gulsah Capan organises these themes into the following questions: ‘how are syllabuses organized, what is the story of the “international” being taught in universities, and how does it want the students to conceptualise the world?’<sup>23</sup> If students are not exposed to critical perspectives, as well as scholarship from the Global South, it is difficult not to reify existing disciplinary hierarchies.

At the DI, although students are expected to have basic competence in English, the language of instruction is in Arabic. Faculty are obligated to look for Arabic language scholarship, to familiarise themselves with the theoretical contributions of the region, and to circulate that information to their students. A great deal of this scholarship comes from the Center’s own peer-reviewed journals, such as *Siyasat Arabiya*, *Omran*, and *Ostour*.<sup>24</sup>

These requirements are intended to diversify perspectives in the classroom. The assumption is that if Arabic language scholarship is included, then by proxy this facilitates the inclusion of less orthodox, and more critical, work. However, implementation of this requirement is incomplete at best, often taken on as a bureaucratic technicality rather than reflected upon actively in a faculty member’s pedagogical approach. Indeed, looking at syllabi shows that this requirement is often actively ignored.

Courses related to IR come from three programmes at the DI: Critical Security Studies, Political Science, and Conflict Studies. I examined the readings for all syllabi within these programmes from 2017 to 2020 to see the extent to which scholarship from the Global South generally, and the Arab world, in particular, was included.

Table 1 shows the percentage of IR scholarship from the Arab world included in each syllabus and each programme. The highest percentage is 32 per cent, in a course on ‘Understanding Conflict’. Key courses such as ‘Introduction to IR’ and ‘International Security’ have almost no scholarship from the Arab world. These percentages do not change when including scholarship from the Global South. In fact, in all of these courses, there are only two instances of such scholarship.

Furthermore, a look at the content included in these syllabi shows that the emphasis on decolonisation is absent, despite the stated objectives of the institute. In the ‘International Security’ course, for instance, the students are taught the works of classic scholars, such as Kenneth Waltz and James Fearon. And despite the emergence of critical/Global IR as well as Arab-centric security studies, the course does not engage with these important alternatives.

This is perhaps the case because faculty often complain that the theoretical contributions of the Arab world are too few or inadequate to include in their teaching. Adham Saouli, a former

<sup>22</sup>Sankaran Krishna, ‘Race, amnesia, and the education of international relations’, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 26:4 (2001), p. 402.

<sup>23</sup>Capan, ‘Decolonising International Relations?’, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup>Azmi Bishara, ‘Editorial’, *Siyasat Arabiya*, 1:1 (2013), pp. 3–4; Azmi Bishara, ‘Editorial’, *Omran*, 1:1 (2012), pp. 5–6; ‘Ostour as a name’, *Ostour*, 1:1 (2015), p. 2.

**Table 1.** Percentage of IR scholarship from the Arab world by course.

Course	Percentage
<i>Critical Security Studies</i>	
Energy Security	23%
International Security	0%
Environmental and Human Security	15.6%
Critical Security Studies	3.7%
Armed Conflict	0%
Civil-Military Relations	19.3%
Non-state Actors	10%
Strategies of Warfare	11%
<i>Political Science</i>	
International Organisation	0%
Mass Violence	12.5%
Introduction to IR (2020)	3.6%
Introduction IR (2019)	0%
<i>Conflict Studies</i>	
Foundational Readings	20%
Understanding Conflict	32%
Ethics and Legal Issues in Humanitarianism	0%
Postwar Reconstruction	5%

DI professor, notes that theory is ‘dry’ and ‘boring’ to students, with ‘limited’ explanatory value.<sup>25</sup> Saouli’s ‘Introduction to IR’ includes weeks on postcolonial IR, feminist IR, and Marxist IR – but no readings (theoretical or otherwise) from the Arab world, despite recent scholarship emerging from within the DI. Students instead are exposed to Agamben, Arendt, and other scholars from the Global North, as well as devote class time to watching feature films such as *Hotel Rwanda*. This minimisation of theoretical discussion is not specific to this course, but a dynamic replicated across the region.<sup>26</sup>

Since theory is minimised in most of these courses, the bulk of the semester focuses on case studies of various concepts. However, across a number of courses, even the case study readings are written by Western authors. This is surprising, given the rich body of case study work and monographs in Arabic that provide description and empirical analysis.

Moreover, it is important to note that many of the IR courses are offered out of the Critical Security Studies programme. The programme is described on the official website as emphasising ‘critical approaches’ and ‘Arab knowledge-contribution’. Once again, as Table 1 shows, this is not reflected in course materials, which are missing critical approaches and include almost no Arab contributions.

Of course, I do not claim that the source of research in and of itself achieves the objective of decolonisation, and agree with Bilgin in that ‘the limitations we encounter in the study of world politics cannot be remedied only by shifting our perspective from the north to the south.’<sup>27</sup> Nor is

<sup>25</sup> Adham Saouli, ‘Discipline and flourish: Teaching IR in the Arab world’, *International Studies Perspectives*, special forum (2020), p. 20.

<sup>26</sup> Said Saddiki, ‘Teaching International Relations without IR in Moroccan universities’, *International Studies Perspectives*, special forum (2020), pp. 16–19.

<sup>27</sup> Pinar Bilgin, ‘Inquiring into others’ conceptions of the international and security’, *PS Political Science & Politics*, 50:3 (2017), p. 653.

this an argument about searching for ‘Global South authenticity’, as is aptly criticised by Kapoor in this forum.<sup>28</sup> Rather, it is the content of the research, and the critical perspective from marginalised voices, which facilitates the decolonisation process. Nevertheless, I would argue that this increased inclusion is a necessary condition. Without basic inclusion of various positionalities in our syllabi, we cannot begin to challenge disciplinary orthodoxies.

My experiences in the classroom at the DI revealed the openness of the students to more critical approaches. For example, in mainstream IR, as Krishna points out, themes of ‘theft of land, racism, slavery, and colonialism’ are excised from pedagogical approaches. But given conditions in the Arab world, these themes are very much alive in public discussion. Indeed, conversations in the classroom would often address them. But, professors played out their roles as unthinking purveyors of mainstream IR ‘knowledge’ even as their own lived experiences, and that of their students, clashed with what was on the syllabus.

Krishna writes that ‘to decolonize IR is to deschool oneself from the discipline in its current dominant manifestations: to remember international relations, one needs to forget IR.’<sup>29</sup> At the DI/ACRPS, in spite of the explicit objective of challenging Western orthodoxies, teachers are rooted in the discourse of IR even as international events unfolding around them demand other perspectives.

### **Regional theory production**

Finally, decolonisation of IR must also consider how we facilitate theory production – and not just collection of primary data – from the Global South. As Capan notes, ‘the production of knowledge and who gets to be the knower and who the known is an important component in reproducing the coloniality of International Relations.’<sup>30</sup> This is similar to what Kapoor in this forum calls ‘epistemic decolonisation.’<sup>31</sup>

The Arab world is often perceived as peripheral to knowledge production. Scholars in the Global North behave as if Arab institutions/scholars as only good for facilitating access to data, or providing ‘raw’ material to be analysed and used elsewhere.<sup>32</sup> This is not unique to the region, but is a dynamic replicated across the Global South.<sup>33</sup> It is therefore critical that we facilitate regional contributions to IR theory in order to produce ‘other world-pictures’, and contribute to decolonising the discipline.<sup>34</sup>

In the Arab world, a great deal of research comes from DI/ACRPS publications. Bishara’s objective in providing these publication spaces is to facilitate the creation of regional alternatives to mainstream theories. He has personally generated a massive amount of scholarship on pressing issues of civil war, sectarianism, democracy, and more. The DI also has a range of eight to ten conferences per year, with three or four related to IR topics, that generate edited volumes. These are attended overwhelmingly by regional scholars.

Moreover, the Center has organised its researchers into targeted units, such as the Arab Opinion Index Unit and the Iranian Studies Unit, which generate descriptive empirical research. This includes polling data on foreign policy, datasets on armed actors in the region, and analysis on IR of the MENA region.

<sup>28</sup> Kapoor, ‘Decolonising Development Studies’, p. 12.

<sup>29</sup> Krishna, ‘Race, amnesia, and the education of international relations’, p. 407.

<sup>30</sup> Acharya, ‘Global International Relations (IR) and regional worlds’, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Kapoor, ‘Decolonising Development Studies.’

<sup>32</sup> Laurie Brand, ‘Of power relations and responsibilities’, *POMEPS Studies 8: The Ethics of Research in the Middle East* (2014), pp. 9–11. See also Pinar Bilgin, ‘One model of engagement between MES and IR’, *POMEPS Studies 16: International Relations Theory and a Changing Middle East* (2015), pp. 6–12.

<sup>33</sup> Acharya, ‘Global International Relations (IR) and regional worlds’, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Arjun Appadurai, ‘The future of Asian studies’, *Viewpoints* (1997), p. 6. As cited in Acharya, ‘Global International Relations (IR) and regional worlds’, p. 4.

The Center's peer-reviewed journals have also recently undertaken a number of key initiatives to provide an Arab perspective to IR theory. For instance, *Siyasat Arabiya* – the Center's politics and international relations journal – released a special issue on the topic of IR methodology, and critique of mainstream methods from an Arab perspective.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, recognising that the lack of engagement with the Global North has limited the institute's ability to push Arab scholarship and theory development further, Bishara has also directed the center to undertake translation efforts from Arabic to English and French, and worked with publishers such as Bloomsbury, Hurst, and Stanford University Press to translate books for Western audiences. In that vein, they also developed *Almuntaqa*, an open-access journal that translates Arabic-language peer-reviewed articles into English.

Given the limitations of both access initiatives and pedagogical reframing described above, some issues remain. IR research at the Center continues to engage with the discipline from a mainstream perspective, and is less concerned with contributions from, and engagement with, the broader Global South. Much of the focus is also again on metrics, that is, how many articles translated, number of edited volumes, etc. Nevertheless, this is not to say that these efforts are irrelevant. They remain a necessary first step to facilitating theory production from the Arab world. And this is worth pushing to its farthest extent; not only are contributions from the region missing from IR, which is problematic in terms of how people in the region utilise research findings, but this lack of theory leaves a number of gaps in our understanding of important concepts.<sup>36</sup>

## Regional comparisons

The DI is not unique in the dynamics described above. Other initiatives from within and outside the region have emerged to address issues of access, pedagogy, and/or knowledge production. These include programmes by the Arab Council as well as the Arab Political Science Network. Nevertheless, they struggle with similar issues, lending credence to the idea that decolonising the discipline requires greater interrogation.

For instance, many of these initiatives have been exclusionary despite their stated intention of increasing access. Acharya describes this as 'neomarginalisation', that is, when attempts to 'respect diversity and become more inclusive' lead to 'opposite outcomes', specifically by ignoring empirical realities and diversifying in very narrow ways.<sup>37</sup> This often means excluding scholars from the region, or including them in superficial ways, while elevating Western scholars.

APSN's IR teaching workshop is one example. This initiative brought together scholars from 'across the Arab world' to discuss IR pedagogy and reflect on how to contribute an Arab theoretical perspective – according to the official website.<sup>38</sup> However, the reality was that those invited were a small network of well-known scholars, the vast majority of whom were trained in Western institutions. It is unclear how this initiative increased access to regional scholars outside narrow circles. Thus passing off the findings and conclusions of this workshop as a 'regional' intervention serves to further marginalise an Arab perspective, rather than expand our understanding.

These dynamics prove Acharya's point on 'presumed marginality'. Scholars associated with such initiatives or critical approaches often criticise exclusion, 'but do little exploration of alternative forms of agency' stemming from the Global South. This is because 'recognizing that agency might risk undermining the central part of their narratives.'<sup>39</sup> And we see these types of omissions in their work repeatedly; very few initiatives of this type have included the DI/ACPSR despite its outsized role in regional knowledge production.

<sup>35</sup> *Siyasat Arabiya*, 41 (November 2019), available at: <https://siyasatarabiya.dohainstitute.org/ar/41/Documents/Siyasat41-2019-Issue.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> Bilgin, 'Inquiring into others' conceptions of the international and security', p. 652.

<sup>37</sup> Acharya, 'Global International Relations (IR) and regional worlds', p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> See the official event page here: <https://www.arabpsn.org/events/teaching-international-relations-in-the-middle-east/>.

<sup>39</sup> Acharya, 'Global International Relations (IR) and regional worlds', p. 5.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that external initiatives are doomed to replicate these trends. One useful contrast is the Summer School programme run by the Beirut Critical Security Studies Collective. In spite of the fact that many members of the collective are based in the Global North, they acknowledge this positionality and proactively include those of marginalised backgrounds *from the region*. Participants in the summer school come from universities in the Arab world unaffiliated with Western institutions. Moreover, the founders point out that they attempted to engage in ‘modes of decolonization in practice’, by accepting both English and Arabic work in the school.<sup>40</sup>

When it comes to IR theory development, the Collective is also active.<sup>41</sup> Members argue that theoretical contributions from the Arab world can illuminate new concepts and connections in the wider discipline. Thus they have worked on expanding our understanding of securitisation, regionalisation processes, the concept of the ‘human security’ state, transnational identity and insecurity, and more.<sup>42</sup> They have been explicit about their goal of ‘pluralising IR’ more generally through such work.<sup>43</sup>

There are obstacles to their attempts, nevertheless. One of the founders of the Collective, Samer Abboud, describes the ‘double burden’ of theory development from the Arab world. He argues that Arab scholars have to contend with the tough task of theory development and concept formation, *in addition to* ensuring their own legibility in the wider field. Abboud notes also how difficult it is to create the environment for Arab scholars to theorise, given both political and institutional obstacles.<sup>44</sup> To alleviate these issues, the collective is working on the development of alternative publication spaces that would remain open to regional scholars. Recognising their positionality and acknowledging the limitations of their initiatives allows the collective to engage more meaningfully as a result.

## Discussion

As previously noted, where the DI/ACRPS has succeeded is in increasing access and facilitating inclusion for regional scholars, in a manner that is much more effective than other attempts from outside the region. Nevertheless, as Parasram makes clear, the ‘politics of “inclusion” is no longer the limit’ of such work.<sup>45</sup> Critical pedagogy and regional knowledge production should emerge concurrently as a crucial aspect of the decolonisation effort. However, both teaching and theory production from the DI continue to perpetuate mainstream ideas. There is little by way of ‘delinking’ Arab academia from Eurocentric approaches, or engaging with decolonisation attempts from other parts of the Global South. Thus, the objective of decolonisation remains elusive.

Moreover, the limitations of decolonisation in IR need to be acknowledged. Abboud notes such a project ‘does not change lived conditions of people on the ground’.<sup>46</sup> Similar to Bhabha, who argues that ‘we must not merely change the narratives of our histories, but transform our sense of what it means’,<sup>47</sup> Abboud is suggesting that decolonising IR remains a disciplinary question, and does not necessarily enhance the understanding of those directly suffering.

Despite this gap, there remains a necessity for critical scholarship in the region. Aside from contributing to the wider discipline, decolonising Arab IR would be valuable in shaping new forms of governance or imagining new realities, especially when political opportunities emerge. Without

<sup>40</sup>Samer Abboud, Omar S. Dahi, Waleed Hazbun, Nicole Sunday Grove, Coralie Pison Hindawi, Jamil Mouawad, and Sami Hermez, ‘Towards a Beirut School of critical security studies’, *Critical Studies on Security*, 6:3 (2018), p. 277.

<sup>41</sup>See the call for applications here: {<https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/38222>}.

<sup>42</sup>Bilgin, ‘Inquiring into others’ conceptions of the international and security’, p. 654.

<sup>43</sup>Abboud et al., ‘Towards a Beirut School of critical security studies’, pp. 284–7.

<sup>44</sup>Interview with Samer Abboud, 28 December 2020.

<sup>45</sup>Parasram, ‘Hunting the state of nature’, p. 113.

<sup>46</sup>Interview with Abboud.

<sup>47</sup>Gurminder K. Bhambra, ‘Postcolonial and decolonial dialogues’, *Postcolonial Studies*, 17:2 (2014), pp. 115–121, available at {<https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2014.966414>}.

focusing on theory development, we will not only inaccurately describe and analyse political phenomena but also, when the need for expertise arises, continue to apply concepts, theories, and findings to the Arab world that may not be relevant or helpful. Without this, Arab scholars can never attain what Bishara considers the final step of decolonisation: freeing our understanding from the binary of West versus non-West, or colonised and coloniser. He conceives of this as a two-step process. First, Arab researchers must move beyond colonial methods and forms of knowledge. Subsequently, and importantly, Arab researchers must also liberate themselves from what Bishara describes as ‘auto-paralysis’ (شلل ذاتي), that is, defining their work only within the decolonial framework and in opposition to what emerges in the metropole.<sup>48</sup> Bishara argues that Arab researchers should aspire to make theoretical contributions not by dismissing the West, or reifying it, but by liberating their understandings of this paradigm altogether. As Anzaldúa notes, ‘the possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react.’<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Interview with Bishara. This is similar to the point Kapoor in this forum makes on ‘knee-jerk reactions to Eurocentrism’. Kapoor, ‘Decolonising Development Studies’, p. 12.

<sup>49</sup>Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), p. 101.