

Beyond Regionalism?

Regional Cooperation, Regionalism and Regionalization in the Middle East

Edited by: Cilja Harders and Matteo Legrenzi

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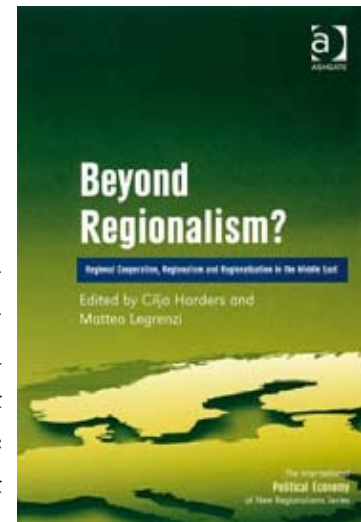
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Looked at from the outside, the Middle East tends to be portrayed as one of the least institutionalized regions of the world. Similar to the arguments put forward about the applicability of democratization and political liberalization strategies, the Middle East is seen as the “anti-case for the analysis of regionalism” as those institutional attempts that have been made are seen as not only structurally weak and functionally hollow, but more importantly irrelevant to the overall development of the region. That this is actually not the case is explained vividly in this excellent volume on regionalism and regionalization in the Middle East. Upon reading the various contributions, it becomes clear that not only is there a case to made for regional cooperation efforts but that what exists has actually contributed to problem solving and towards the development of networks of trust.

Beyond Regionalism is the product of a workshop held as part of the annual Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting organized by the Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies at

the European University. This meeting has produced numerous excellent volumes from the workshops that it brings together and Beyond Regionalism is certainly no exception.

While acknowledging the fact that integrative structures in the Middle East are weak, the book seeks to counter the notion that the movements towards greater institutionalization and broader cooperation are non-present and, therefore, inconsequential. As such, the editors set it as their objective to “first, look for refined theoretical models and approaches, which are attuned to the dynamics and contradictions of a wide range of regionalists projects in the contemporary Middle East ... second, the book offers in-depth case studies of the most important institutional and non-institutional regional actors thus offering a comprehensive picture of the Middle Eastern situation.” (p. 3) These actors include organiza-



tions such as the Arab League (AL), the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), and the Greater Arab Free Trade Area.

The first part of the book attempts to provide a theoretical framework for the case studies to follow and is introduced wonderfully by Fred Lawson's chapter on comparing the different regionalist projects in the Middle East. He successfully not only puts forward a range of typologies in order to better understand the processes in place but also assesses the level of integration on three levels (economic, social and political) in an attempt to put "future scholarship on a firmer footing." That such theoretical points of departure approaches are of explanatory value is made clear in the following chapters although it is also made clear in the chapter by Simone Ruiz and Valentin Zahrnt that what is required is a variety of combination of approaches. An especially valuable angle is the role played by external forces which are factors that can promote and hinder regional integration while at the same time contribute to the collective identity formation. One of the conclusions emerging from the debates presented here is that normative aspects are not the driving factors; nevertheless, interest-level motivations coupled with functionalist approaches suggest that Arab regional cooperation is a developing and forward moving notion.

The second half of the volume provides case

studies which become particularly valuable because in each case there is an attempt to make the connection to the theoretical aspects outlined earlier. Matteo Legrenzi in his look at the GCC argues that in fact it has "evolved into an entity that contributed to transform Gulf politics in several ways." (p. 107). He convincingly puts forward the argument that the GCC has established a distinct political space and that as a result its function as a sub-regional grouping might constitute a model of future policy coordination. The other chapters more or less highlight the opposite spectrum in terms of identifying shortcomings of organizations such as the Arab League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Here, it becomes clear that by trying to represent all the interests of the various constituent elements, the organizations ultimately fall short of their aspirations and capabilities. Anja Zorob then introduces the concept of 'variable geometry' as a complement to the discussion when she focuses on the development of the Greater Arab Free Trade Area and the Mediterranean Arab Free Trade Area.

Beyond Regionalism is a substantive addition to the existing scholarship on regionalism and the editors do a valuable job in terms of maintaining a focus throughout the different chapters and keeping a visible thread running through the book. It can only be hoped that this will lead to further examination of this issue so as to underline the argument that the Middle East is not necessarily the exception to every rule.