

ROUNDTABLE: DISENTANGLING THE “WAR ON TERROR”

## Disentangling the “War on Terror”: Present Pasts and Possible Futures

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As the US-led global “War on Terror” enters its third decade, the structural, physical, and epistemological violence it has wrought continues to shape lives and landscapes in Afghanistan and Iraq. At present, the scholarship of an entire generation of Middle Eastern Studies has been embedded in the geopolitical realities of this indefinite war, even those whose work does not directly confront it. Yet despite the war’s enduring presence, scholars working on Afghanistan and Iraq rarely find the opportunity to reflect with one another on how the global assemblage of international military intervention and the creation of a shifting target of terrorism has narrowed our foci. Instead, these geographies are yoked together in often destructive and superficial ways, erasing older forms of interregional connectivity and longer genealogies of violence.

This roundtable opens with a broad yet urgent question: what does it mean to produce knowledge about Afghanistan and Iraq in the context of this war and its effects? In its discursive framing, its material roots in colonial realities, its impact on resource and capital extraction, and its effects on mobility, temporality, and space, the “War on Terror” has forced anthropologists, human geographers, historians, and political scientists to push the boundaries of ethnographic and theoretical inquiry. What are the insights gained and problematics that persist when we take stock of this knowledge production?

Several contributions begin by interrogating the temporal dimension of this “forever war,” situating its start before 11 September 2001 and challenging the US withdrawal from Afghanistan on 31 August 2021 as a neat endpoint. They argue that contemporary understandings adhere to much longer discursive and material genealogies and demonstrate how looking at the past as it relates to the present can expose contingencies and destabilize categories we treat as fixed, from the state to the tribe to the very definitions of war, insurgency, and terror.<sup>1</sup>

In analyzing regional scholarship on Iraq and Afghanistan, the contributors also urge us to reconsider where we focus our attention as scholars. Flipping the script, they shed light on how the influence of global neoliberal restructuring and pervasive racialization of Muslims in the United States has fed into the rationale and conditions for the war in the first place. What does it mean to study the Middle East in this context? How can we redraw the boundaries of the field in ways that go beyond the nation–state, region, and even the global, positing instead the sociopolitical fabric of the United States as integral to the “War on Terror”? Relatedly, what are the limitations of on-the-ground research in challenging the policy and media discourse that legitimizes actions within the “War on Terror”?

<sup>1</sup> A welcome interrogation of the “tribe” as a unit of academic analysis is the subject of another IJMES roundtable, “Tribes and Tribalism in the Modern Middle East,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 53, no. 3 (2021): 471–516, convened by Peter Wien.

Nuanced ethnographic inquiry might not be the desired antidote to a homogenizing discourse, as changing the discourse does not directly equate to challenging systematic and institutionalized forms of violence.

Finally, a specter that haunts every contribution is the ethical dilemma around authorship, audience, and responsibility. Over the past twenty years, the inequalities that have long plagued area studies have been thrown into sharper relief. Scholars with access—material, symbolic, physical, institutional, intellectual, political, geographical, etc.—are typically located in the Global North and enjoy a disproportionate amount of influence over intellectual discourse.<sup>2</sup> In a climate in which knowledge production is designed to aid interventions and occupations, it becomes all the more imperative to question, critique, and find alternatives to extractive research and the NGO-ization of knowledge production.<sup>3</sup>

This roundtable had its origins at a workshop, *Disentangling the War on Terror*, organized in October 2021 with the support of the Hollings Center and the American Institute of Afghanistan Studies. The aim of the workshop was to bring together scholars of Afghanistan and Iraq to reflect on how the twenty years of intervention following from 9/11 had shaped our work in ways both productive and problematic. Merging the perspectives of scholars of the region, otherwise working in geographic and disciplinary isolation, the following essays offer a set of critical and grounded approaches to disentangling the discursive and material connections between the regional and global forces that shape the “War on Terror.”

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<sup>2</sup> The critique of Western-centric knowledge production and its marginalization of non-white/non-Western voices has been leveled by Iraqi scholars and is a starting point for our contributions; see Zahra Ali and Sonia Dayan-Herzbrun, “Presentation,” *Tumultes* 48, no. 1 (2017): 5–13.

<sup>3</sup> Rochelle Davis, “The 21st-Century Turn to Culture: American Exceptionalism,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 4 (2014): 794–96.

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