**Identity and war: comparisons and connections between the Balkans and the Middle East**

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**Abstract**

While comparisons and connections between the Balkans and the Middle East are often invoked, the authors in this symposium are putting them at the heart of their analysis. In seeking new insights into the relationship between identity and war they engage in “comparative area studies.” The comparisons, connections, and lessons that emerge from these contributions challenge our understandings of the so-called “war on terror”, the dynamics of grassroots peacebuilding, and the language of sexualised violence in war. The symposium contributes to the debate about how comparative area studies can bridge the gap between area studies and comparative politics and international relations.

Analysts of Balkan and Middle Eastern wars frequently borrow from each other.[[1]](#footnote-1) When Lebanon descended into civil war in 1975, analysts characterised the country’s fragmentation as “Balkanisation”. When Bosnia went the same way in 1992, analysts spoke of the capital Sarajevo as “the Beirut of the Balkans” (Bieber 2000, 269-270). While comparisons and connections between the Balkans and the Middle East are often invoked, the authors in this symposium are putting them at the heart of their analysis.

They are engaging in “comparative area studies”, as outlined by Basedau and Köllner (2007), to gain new insights into the relationship between identity and war. The comparisons, connections, and lessons that emerge from the three contributions challenge not only our understandings of the so-called “war on terror”, of the dynamics of grassroots peacebuilding, and the language of sexualised violence in war, they also throw up questions about the very practice of comparative area studies – namely how to avoid reifying regional differences. The symposium thus also contributes to the debate on ways in which comparative area studies can bridge the gap between area studies and the disciplines of comparative politics (CP) and international relations (IR) (Anderson, 1999; Basedau and Kollner 2007; Mitchell, 2004; Szanton, 2004; Teti, 2007).

The pairing of the Balkans and the Middle East lends itself to this project for two reasons. First, both regions share a history as post-Ottoman territories as well as being a historical source of European anxiety over security and migration. Second, while the Balkans experienced violent ethnic and nationalist conflict in the 1990s, wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen carry a strong sectarian dimension. While these are not cases of primordial “ancient hatreds”, the ways in which identity is constructed, instrumentalised, or remembered in and through war is central to understanding their dynamics. Identity is a contributing factor to these conflicts, if not necessarily the cause of them. The Balkan cases may therefore hold lessons for post-war peacebuilding and reconstruction in the Middle East. The aim is to provide suggestions and ideas for connections or comparisons.

The first section of this article introduces ways in which comparative area studies can contribute to bridging the gap between area studies and CP/IR. The second section expands on the politicisation of identity. The third section introduces David’s (2019) comparison of face-to-face encounters in the Western Balkans and Israel/Palestine as a case of “cross-regional comparison”. The unusual pairing reveals that, far from blurring ethnic or religious identities, these encounters can ossify them. The fourth section summarises Sadriu’s (2019) article on “countering violent extremism” (CVE) programmes in Kosovo and Albania. Sadriu’s analysis of the way in which the “war on terror” came to the Balkans through these programmes challenges the geographical boundaries separating Europe, the Balkans and the Middle East. This in turn poses a challenge to comparative area studies not to slip into a “methodological regionalism”. The fifth section introduces Močnik’s (2019) article. Her arguments on the language on survivors of sexualised violence hold lessons for policy makers and civil society dealing with similar cases in Iraq and Syria. The final section concludes with suggestions for further research on the Balkans and the Middle East.

**Comparative area studies, the Balkans, and the Middle East**

Up to about the 1990s, the relationship between area studies and the disciplines of comparative politics (CP) and international relations (IR) had been an uneasy one, especially when it came to the Middle East. Area studies specialists felt they were being pushed into a subservient role of producers of “empirical data”, while their disciplinary colleagues were busy with the supposedly superior task of universal “theorising” (Szanton, 2004, 21). CP and IR specialists meanwhile were accusing area specialists of what Halliday had called “regional narcissism” (Halliday, 1996, 12): They were too busy dealing with the particularities of “their” region to engage in a wider disciplinary conversation, or notice similarities with cases elsewhere.

This is the context in which Basedau and Köllner (2007) suggested the project of ‘comparative area studies’. They seek to develop ways in which “inter-regional” and “cross-regional” comparisons can help area studies specialists speak to CP and IR. Ahram (2011, 78) argues that area studies contributes the specific “context” in which rational choices are made. Comparative area studies is thus trying to find ways of “integrating” area studies into positivist CP and IR by comparing across regions, especially a “most-different-systems” comparison (Basedau and Köllner 2007, 119). This chimes with similar such suggestions of applying IR and CP concepts to the regions – such as the Middle East – in order to expand the universe of cases covered by the disciplines but leaves underlying assumptions largely intact (Anderson, 1999). This risks overlooking potentially Eurocentric assumptions in the disciplines (Mitchell, 2004). Comparative area studies, applied simplistically, threaten to simply replace the reifications of ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003) with ‘methodological regionalism’ (Thompson, 2013), complete with ‘imagined histories’ and rigid regional boundaries.

In his contribution to the debate on relations between Middle East studies and IR, Teti (2007) took a different tack. He argued that a post-positivist constructivist approach held the most promise to bridge the gap. Constructivist IR acknowledges that identities are intersubjective and continually constructed through interaction. Constructivist analyses thus also play to the strengths of area studies specialists whose language skills and in in-depth field research allow them to trace such identity constructions. To this we may add post-structuralist and post-colonial frameworks, which have found increasing currency in IR, although less so in CP. Such an approach also has implications for the project of comparative area studies. Rather than parsing the salience of discrete ‘variables’, comparison then traces similarities or differences in identity construction.

What is more, if identity is constructed, then the boundary between world regions is itself at stake as well. One way of delineating one world region from another is to draw a clear line between countries in different regions, as quantitative political scientists do when they use region as a dummy variable in large-n studies (Ahram 2011). This takes no note of the fact that there is no “natural” boundary to a region. One solution, proposed by Ahram (2011, 71) is to let the boundary be defined by the problem under study. Buzan and Wæver (2003) for instance arrange regions by “security complexes” – persistent interactions concerned with matters of security. However, as Bilgin (2004) points out, even a concept such as security can lead to a “multitude of perspectives on regional security each one of which derives from different conception of security that have their roots in alternative worldviews.” Bilgin (2004 25-26) therefore speaks of “invented regions” reflecting different conceptions of security. The boundaries between Middle East and Balkans are fuzzy, not least due to shared history of Ottoman rule and both Christian and Muslim religious communities that span across both areas. Both regions have experienced wars involving nationalist, ethnic, and sectarian identities. If the construction of regions is itself a matter of identity, then the politicisation of national, ethnic, religious and sectarian identities during wartime becomes implicated in this act of construction. This is why war and identity are suitable entry points to trace connections, comparisons, and lessons to be learned.

**Politicisation of identity**

Identity is a much overused concept and requires clarification. Brubaker and Cooper (2000, 1) argue that the concept of identity is too “ambiguous” and “riddled with contradictory meanings and encumbered by reifying connotation” to perform successfully as an analytical concept. We understand identity as a collective self-understanding of a group characterised by ‘sameness’ and a solidarity based on some shared attributes which can be objectively observed, but also by their subjective reflection in a group’s consciousness (Harris 2009, 82). There are many groups that fit this description (gender, class, sexuality, political affiliation, religion, profession and so on), but in the present context, we are referring to ethno-national groups and Islam which since 9/11 has been instrumentalised into a transnational collective “identity” subject to politicisation on the global scale. We also engage with regional identity and the constructed boundary between the Balkans and the Middle East. Comparative area studies in general and the comparison of Balkans and Middle East in particular can provide new insights into the dynamics of war and identity.

Shared attributes could mean common ancestry and/or a shared historical past, religion, or even language. In multi-national post-Ottoman (and Austro-Hungarian) territories where ethno-national groups have shared the same territory, the same history, the same customs, political regimes and often religion for generations, the most common distinguishing attributes ripe of politicisation were language and religion (Islam and its various interpretations, and Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christianity). In the Balkans identities were mobilised to redraw state boundaries in the 1990s, while some Middle Eastern states descended into civil war but have so far avoided major territorial revision.

The first thing to say about identity is that by itself it does not cause violence. On the other hand, the politicisation of identity, that is the political and societal grievances expressed in overly identity-relevant terms, leads to political tension and can eventually lead to open conflict. The second important point about identity is that per definition it requires “the other,” a differential in order to be sustained (David in this volume). Third, identities are not a given, but are contextual and relational; they are as much a construction as they are reality, lived and experienced (Harris 2019). As such, they exercise a huge influence over people’s lives. The struggle over the boundaries of belonging might be obvious – public and political as in cases of ethnic conflict, but in interaction among people, these struggles also involve honour, prestige, dignity, belonging, support and security (Wimmer 2013, 5). Hence, identities are easily politicised whenever there appears to be any kind of threat to society at large or to a particular group. It is the identification of “the other” as the enemy that leads to open conflict. The pre-condition to coordinated collective action that targets people based on their ethnic, religious or political affiliation and inflicts - intentionally or unintentionally - physical damage, injury or death (Malešević 2013, 19) is the politicised identity.

The politicisation of identity tends to have its own dynamic which consists of a number of mutually enforcing and intensifying elements. This was well demonstrated in the Yugoslav wars. The first is the instrumentalisation of historical narrative about “the other” which is then translated into fear of the possible repetition in the present. Political regimes and various political actors operating on the ground (secessionist movements, paramilitary commanders, external influences) create a context in which this “crisis frame” (Oberschall 2010, 989) becomes an acceptable narrative. In regions with turbulent history and complex intergroup relations, at politically volatile times, the danger of provocative politics of memory lies in the context in which certain elements of history are magnified, for what purpose and by whom (Kolstø 2005, 14). Only a small step from the instrumentalisation of historical injustice is the invocation of victimhood and appeals to rectify the wrongs committed against one’s group. The ever-escalating claims and counter claims of Serbs and Croats about suffering caused by the other was crucial to the commencement of hostilities in the former Yugoslavia and can be observed in the Middle East in the Israel-Palestine conflict and the quick degeneration of other political conflicts into sectarian violence.

The three articles in the symposium trace the politicisation of identities: ethnic or religious identities as deployed in face-to-face encounters in Israel/Palestine and the Western Balkans, Islam in the Balkans and the “war on terror”, and the subjectivities of survivors of sexualised violence in the Balkans, which hold lessons for the Middle East. Comparative area studies are central to their methodology: They compare identity construction, question the boundaries of regional identities, and suggest lessons from one region to another.

**Comparison: Reconciliation and peace building in Israel/Palestine and Western Balkans**

Shared histories and war not only make for connections between the Balkans and the Middle East but also facilitate comparison. Comparisons of conflict and peacebuilding between the two regions are commonplace (Aggestam and Bjorkdahl 2013; Mac Ginty 2011; Tonge 2014). As ever with comparisons, the differences between two cases are as important as the similarities. The diverging histories of state-formation between communist Yugoslavia and Albania and post-colonial Arab nationalist regimes are considerable. David’s study of memory in reconciliation and peacebuilding in Israel/Palestine and the Western Balkans comes close to what Basedau and Köllner (2007, 110) refer to as “cross-regional comparison” of entities in different areas. However, the purpose of comparison is not a positivist project of determining which independent variables determine an outcome – the dependent variable – and draw generalisable conclusions, but to analyse constructions of history in face-to-face encounters taking place in different contexts.

Historical memory forms a part of ethnic consciousness and is constitutive of national identity which is endorsed and promoted by the state through education, symbolisms and official national discourse. Historical memory has its own history; in the official national discourse there is an element of manipulation of memories whereby some historical events are amplified, while others are muted (Harris 2012, 350) and some are simply conflated into one story. History and the memory of it are not necessarily the same - the events and dates may be the same, but the interpretation of the context within which they happened is, as suggested above, the matter of politics, because central to a group’s identity is a shared memory – not an accurate historical account of the conflict between adversaries (Bell 2006, 2).

In nationalist discourse the state belongs to the core ethnic/religious majority. If, as in the new states in the Balkans and in Israel, the founding myth of the state is a war, the nation (its state, its identity and the war) become the dominating ideology in which the nation’s survival and its destiny are daily reinforced in official political discourse. In the process, the troubled past comes to dominate the present. In post-conflict societies this dynamic constitutes the main obstacle to intergroup reconciliation.

It is therefore assumed that intergroup dialogue projects in which fears, stereotypes, motivations and misconception can be discussed and broken down to mutually comprehensible narratives and eventually spill throughout the whole society, will achieve peace among conflicting sides. This requires forgiveness, atonement, accountability, acknowledgment of traumas suffered and caused, and most importantly - faith in future coexistence. Reconciliation is assumed to be best achieved through “face –to-face” encounters and indeed, in both Western Balkans (Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia) and Israel/Palestine, there are very many projects of this kind.

David’s article challenges this “facing the past” agenda. Based on research on Israeli/Palestinian “face –to- face” encounters, as well as on dialogue groups in Western Balkans, she shows how these projects ossify historical narratives and consolidate ethnic identities, thus showing little promise for healing and reconciliation of inter-ethnic relations. She evidences a staggering number of projects in Israel/Palestine which thrive to this day, despite the Oslo process being dead and Israeli-Palestinian relations deteriorating ever further. It seems that the reconciliation initiatives simply carry on while their ultimate aim – elimination of misconceptions and mutual understanding – remains elusive, certainly for the time being.

In contrast to Israeli-Palestinian case, the situation in Western Balkans is very different. While Israelis and Palestinians often live side by side, they never truly mix. The conflicts of the 20th century have torn asunder what historian Menachem Klein (2014) had termed the “lives in common” of Jews and Arabs in early 20th century Palestine. In Western Balkans, coexistence and friendship between Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks is an experience of Yugoslavia and still alive. They shared the state, education system, language, work, military service, common cultural, sport and artistic endeavours and public spaces. Yet, it ended in bloodshed. Depending on winners and losers of the wars of succession in the 1990s - independent state for Croats, a shrunken much diminished Serbia, and a Bosnia and Herzegovina which was constitutionally divided along ethnic lines – the Yugoslav experience is seen differently by all ethnic groups. The regional reconciliation in the Balkans has an additional aim – European integration. It is assumed that reconciliation, economic cooperation and European integration are mutually reinforcing and almost interchangeable.

For the young generation who grew up in strongly nationalistic successor states, ethnic animosity is the reality, caused by their parents’ generation with which they may not agree, but are powerless to alter due to their surroundings, media and politicians (Piersma, 2019). In the post-Yugoslav space, it is not the common Yugoslav experience that determines interethnic relations, but the war that ended it and consequently, it seems that differentiation is not along ethnic lines, but along generational ones. It is possible to imagine that the generational gap and European integration will eventually achieve what the reconciliation processes have thus far failed to do.

 In Israel-Palestine, there is no generational gap. Not only is the conflict ongoing, its impact on daily life is felt by Palestinians of all ages and places – “Palestinians in Israel are discriminated, the Gazans are trapped and Palestinians in Occupied Territories are subject to restrictions and monitoring in every aspect of their life” ( David 2019). The difference between Jews and Palestinians is much more profound: - actual power (im)balance, clashing perceptions about the past and culturally and politically embedded stereotypes. David describes how even when Jewish Israelis and Palestinians found mutual empathy, understanding and had positive experience in a face-to-face encounter, both groups often ascribed exceptionalism to the members of that particular encounter, but did not come to think of the opposite group much differently.

David’s article demonstrates the problem with recruiting participants of dialogue groups on the basis of their ethno-national identification. There is a difference between people who come to embrace a difference and people who are representing “a people.” Once their personal stories become framed, they soon become Serbs, Croats or Bosniaks; they become “us” and “them.” Memory is constructed in a particular social and political context that encourages certain visions of ethnic identity. While both the Israeli/Palestinian case and the Balkan cases are very different, they provide evidence that these meetings bring together people who are assigned ethnic or religious identities, even in cases when they may have started with blurred identities, rather than evidence of reconciliation. David’s “cross-regional comparison” – in Basedau and Kollner’s terms – shows that identity is constructed in similar and antagonistic ways in those two very different cases.

**Connections: Albanian Islam, wider Muslim world and ‘war on terror’**

Comparison across regions proceeds on the basis of differences but an alternative approach questions the reification of regional identity and to question the constructed boundaries of Europe, Balkans, and the Middle East. This is what Sadriu does in his contribution. There is much that connects the Balkans and the Middle East, not least the legacy of Ottoman rule. Both the Balkans and the Arab countries tend to define their Ottoman legacy in largely negative terms as “spectres of the past” (Yilmaz and Yosmaoglu 2008). This is not least due to the fact that both Balkan and Arab nationalisms of the late 19th and early 20th centuries defined themselves in opposition to Turkish rule. Religious and sectarian differences also play into this construction of ethnic and national identities. Finally, the two regions are the space where the difference between “East” and “West”, Europe and the Orient, is constructed, negotiated, and imposed (Said, 1978; Todorova, 1994). Both local actors and European powers weaponise religious or “civilizational” connections during wartime.

This became clear during the post- 9/11 politicisation of Islam and the continuing politically mislabelled “war on terror”. Sadriu builds on work in critical security studies and geography that rethinks the spaces in which the “war on terror” is fought, and which goes beyond the obvious sites in Afghanistan and Iraq to include other areas such as the Balkans, Britain, Eastern Europe, and Guantanamo Bay (Blakeley and Raphael 2016; Gregory 2004; Li 2010). He explores the impact of “Countering of Violent Extremism” (CVE) programmes on local politics in Albania and Kosovo. By exploring this link, he makes the case for an important scholarly conversation between the Balkans and Middle East studies on the topic of critical security studies. More importantly, he is not merely comparing “variables” that affect the two regions but puts the politicised construction of regional identities – East/West, Islamic/secular, Europe/Middle East – at the heart of the analysis. This follows Teti’s suggestion to pay attention to identity construction to bridge area studies and IR.

The CVE programmes politicise Muslim religious identity and promote an image of the homogenised Muslim subject as a threat and in “need of containment and treatment” (Sadriu 2019). They reduce all distinctions between Muslims, whether political, historical, national or ethnic affiliations to two dimensions: good and bad Muslims whereby the former stands for moderate Islam and the latter for extremist political Islam.

Sadriu puts these programmes into the historical context of the politics of Islam in Albania and Kosovo. The Balkan Wars (1912-13) led to the defeat of the Ottoman Islamic State. The creation of an independent Albania by great powers (1913) left large numbers of Albanians outside of its borders in Kosovo, Bosnia and Macedonia. Kosovo was conquered by the Kingdom of Serbia which was followed by the systematic murder of Albanian Muslims while sizeable colonies of Serbs from Serbia and Montenegro were moved to many areas of Kosovo to tip the ethno-religious balance. In Albania, Islamic scholars were officially separated from their religious leadership in Istanbul, Sharia courts were disbanded and Western dress encouraged. In Kosovo (Bosnia and Macedonia) forced modernisation and secularisation was slower; Serbia and later Yugoslavia feared local rebellion and were reluctant to attack religious institutions. On the other hand, the Albanian, strongly nationalist communist regime was much more oppressive and intent on erasing the nation’s historic connection to Islam and succeeding in cutting Albanian Muslims from the wider Islamic world.

The collapse of Yugoslavia brought more religious freedom to Kosovo, but it re-invigorated the Serbo- Muslim conflicts there and even more dramatically in Bosnia. Sadriu’s paper does not engage with the bloody wars of succession on the territory of the former Yugoslavia which ended with the ejection of Serbian troops out of Kosovo in 1999. Kosovo’s still not fully recognised statehood (2008) is a result of western efforts, the USA and the EU to end conflicts across the Balkans. While during the Cold War the answer to peace in the Balkans was the multinational Yugoslavia, in the post-Cold War world, the answer to peace was once more the establishment of nation-states under the leadership of nationalist elites.

After the fall of the communist regime in the country, Albanians reconnected with the wider Muslim world in a variety of ways. Volunteers fighting in Syria were only a fringe expression of this process. Sadriu argues that the global programmes in countering extremism aided the nationalist elites in restricting Albania’s newly re-kindled Islam and its relation to the global Muslim community. Ironically, the “war on terror” and CVE programmes are global efforts, aimed at curtailing the threat of extremism. but the containment of them is entrusted to “strong secular leaders” within the nation-states (Sadriu 2019).

This exposes a number of false premises at the heart of “war on terror”: Muslims do not form a homogenous bloc. Empires and colonialism have shaped institutions and identities of peoples that do not necessarily fit the model of the nation-state into which they were decanted from the beginning of the 20th century. While the radicalisation of Muslims is viewed purely as an ideology spread by “bad Muslims”, the other factors contributing to violence, such as other grievances, poor governance and foreign policy orientation, are obscured. In other words, the “war on terror” seen through the prism of violent ideology spread by “bad Muslims” impacts domestic politics. This is particularly the case in the Balkans and the Middle East where states’ governance structures are either weak or authoritarian.

For example, despite the fact that the majority of armed Muslim volunteers in Syria are coming from Western Europe, the Balkans became a key site for CVE engagement. This is justified by the fact that states such as Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia are new states, emerging from communism and therefore have a low capacity to counter violent extremism. It is true that these post-conflict states suffer from many deficits, mostly poor governance, corruption and ongoing ethnic disharmony. However less clear is why these factors should make the Balkans more susceptible to extremism when evidence shows that the highest number of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria come from France and Belgium and the UK.

The war in Syria, the emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and attacks on European capitals from 2014 onwards has led to all Muslims – despite many claims to the contrary by all governments - being treated with suspicion and their religious identity as a potential source of extremism. It has also impacted on local politics in the Balkans. Sadriu stresses the agency of local politicians who instrumentalise the “war on terror”. It presented an opportunity for political class and their allies and donors to reaffirm their “Western” and European identity which in itself is not without long historical roots in the whole region. More problematic however is that it allowed to remove the opposition, mostly Islamic one, as in Kosovo and Bosnia and obscured the prevailing corruption and other than Islam-related factors contributing to low state capacity.

The Balkans are engaged in accession to the EU and promote “Balkan Islam” – white, secular and European – contrasted against its supposedly darker, more fanatical Middle Eastern variety. It is through concepts and identities such as “Balkan Islam” that the boundary between East and West, Europe and the Middle East is being constructed. Local elites are adapting the global security practices of the “war on terror” and, in the process, reproduce and securitise the tropes of fundamental difference between the regions. This has implications for the project of comparative area studies: he does not compare the effect of discrete variables but emphasizes the boundary between “areas” or regions itself in his analysis. It stands to reason that all religions have various interpretations and are practiced with a varied intensity, devoutness, and political expressions across and within countries and that Islam is no exception. Sadriu argues that there is no Balkan Islam as such, but that Western actors are shaping Muslim subjectivities in the Balkans.

**Lessons: Sexualised violence in Bosnia, Syria and Iraq**

Comparisons and connections between the Balkans and the Middle East not only span the past but the experience of each region also holds lessons for the other on how to manage conflict and build peace. As Basedau and Köllner (2007 114) note: “Area specialists can provide decision-makers with indispensable contextual knowledge needed for foreign-policy formulation and implementation as well as for development co-operation.” It is not just policy makers who can learn but also civil society. Močnik’s article on the victimhood of war-rape survivors in Bosnia Herzegovina holds lessons on “how we can improve the narratives which serve survivors”, not least in the Middle East’s recent conflicts in Iraq and Syria.

Among the most insidious of war crimes is rape. After thousands were raped during the Bosnian war and Rwandan genocide, in 2008 UN Security Council resolution 1820 recognised sexual violence as a tactic of war. Yet, in 2013-14, some three thousand Yazidi women were kept as sex slaves by the ISIS in Mosul in a genocide committed against the Yazidi community. One of the survivors, Nadia Murad, who managed to escape after a 3 months long ordeal received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016 and continues to seek justice. She shares the 2016 prize with Dr. Denis Mukwege, who treated tens of thousands of rape victims (women, girls and even babies) in the Democratic Republic of Congo between 1988-2003 (*The Economist*  13 October 2018). There is a long history of sexualised violence sustaining ethno-sectarian hierarchies in the “neo-patriarchal” regimes of Iraq under Saddam Hussain and Syria under the Hafiz and Bashar al Assad (Ahram, 2015). ISIS builds on this legacy through imposing shame on subjugated ethnic or sectarian groups and building a bond among recruits. Other actors – not least the Syria regime – also deployed sexualised violence in the conflict (Washington Post, 11 March 2019). The lessons from dealing with the aftermath of sexualised violence in Bosnia can inform the support given to Syrian and Iraqi survivors.

Despite a wide recognition of war-inflicted rapes as a socio-political phenomenon, they persist to happen, as during the brutal 2017 expulsion of Rohyingya people from Myanmar (*Pulitzer* Centre, 11 December 2017). In the 20 years of its existence, the International Criminal Court has yet to convict anyone for sexual violence as a war crime. Nevertheless, more knowledge about the complexity and dynamics of mass rape during conflicts against a particular people may yield convictions in future. Importantly, more knowledge about the legacy of war rapes may help the survivors and prevent further atrocities.

Močnik’s article, based on her own experiences of working with survivors of war-inflicted rapes in Bosnia-Herzegovina, challenges some of the existing assumptions about “war and rape” produced in the last 20 years. She questions the extent to which the existing knowledge about survivors changed their lives for the better. How does current research engage with the collected evidence and how do the thus created narratives respond to their current needs, representation and social status? She contends that very few of those who have testified repeatedly in the hope of breaking the silence have benefitted from this exposure. She argues that “for post-war society to bring justice to survivors and adopt a constructive approach toward healing ( as individuals) and reconciliation ( as a collective), academics must do their part in de-constructing representation which involves fixation of victimised identity and the attachment of this identity to female survivors” (Močnik 2019).

Reflecting on her own ethnographic research, she makes three important points about the identity of a survivor. First, survivors come from very different backgrounds, different regions, and with different social status. They have little in common except their war experience and even that varies depending on their current individual circumstances. Second, the accepted practice of the anonymisation of participants contributes to the idea of collectiveness – assigning numbers or changing names contributes to the depersonalisation of survivors. The view of survivors as collective category – women and belonging to a certain ethno-religious group - led to atrocities against them in the first place. Third, identifying survivors by their ethno-religious background and/or region only exacerbates existing divisions and prioritises certain experiences above others.

The issue of language is also important. The term “survivor” rather than “victim” is now, following the work of Gloria Steinen, an accepted norm. Equally, the still widely used term “sexual violence” is problematic because it associates war-inflicted rape with sexuality, rather than with pain and hate and therefore “sexualised violence” is a more appropriate term. Finally, citing Cathy Winkler, Močnik highlights the subtle distinction between “people raped” instead of “raped people.”

As in the other two articles, the important lesson is that dentity is not only about self-perception, but also about the perceptions of others. In situations of conflict (and post-conflict) the ascription by others is decisive. Survivors’ identities are similar in the sense that stigmatising perceptions of society of their suffering perpetuate survivors’ isolation as victims. In contrast, the term “survivor” signifies agency, coping, resistance, recovery and survival, but not a victim of a certain ethnic group. Močnik warns that while portraying women solely as victims is inadequate, so is the glorification of survivors many of whom have no interest or capacity beyond testifying. She recalls one women saying that she is a victim, not for what she survived, but for what she has to live with today - no one listens and everyone ignores her needs.

Indeed, survivors are being ignored by the state which has other political priorities and pressures. In fact, testimonies presented in Močnik’s article show that the recognised concept of victimhood (passive and helpless) may be more empowering in some instances because it pressurises society more effectively into recognising the scale of horror these women have survived.

The main lesson from Mocnik’s account of war-inflicted rapes in Bosnia, apart from adopting more nuanced ideas on victims’ identity, is the homogenisation of identities. The individual experiences and the legacy of war have been largely reduced to ethno-nationalist rhetoric without recognising all backgrounds, ethnic or religious, economic or class. This collective victimhood, Močnik argues, served well in building resilience and breaking the silence, but is inadequate and incorrect today. We know what and how it happened. We also know that it continues to happen in current conflicts, so future work should be dedicated to prevention and listening to survivors - all survivors, including silent ones.

Močnik’s account holds lessons for Middle Eastern cases of sexualised violence. Turkish non-governmental organisations providing psychosocial support to Yazidi survivors of “genocidal sexual assault” by ISIS reported difficulties of gaining the trust necessary to support the women (Yuksel et al, 2018). The Yazidi community also struggles with the legacy of the violence. In a break with long-standing communal norms, Yazidi elders allowed the return of children born as a result of rape to live in the community (Guardian, 27 April 2019). As Basedau and Köllner (2007) have noted, comparative area studies can contribute to policy debates. Močnik shows us that this is not only true for “high policy” but also the practices of civil society.

**Conclusions**

This symposium opens up space to analyse the connections, comparisons, and lessons between the Balkans and the Middle East. The contributors were building on the project of developing comparative area studies as a way of bridging the gap between area specialists and the disciplines, as first proposed by Basedau and Köllner (2007). The focus on identity and war opened up new avenues in such a project: The contributor took up Teti’s (2007) suggestion to use constructivism as a means to bridge the gap between area studies and IR.

This approach has yielded several insights about similarities between war and identity in the Middle East and the Balkans. For example, in Kosovo secular elites instrumentalise the threat of “radical Islam”. In Bosnia, the victims of sexualised violence are now having to deal with reconciling their experiences which were a result of ethnic labelling with an added ”identity” of a victim or a survivor. This holds lessons for Middle Eastern cases of mass sexualised violence. Israelis and Palestinians are locked in mutually incompatible historical narratives about their ethnic identities, thus maintaining the threat to both groups. Face-to-face encounters entrench rather than weaken these narratives.

These contributions suggest future directions of research on the Balkans and the Middle East. Firstly, cross-regional comparisons can throw light on identity construction in specific contexts of war and post-war situations; Former US President Bill Clinton had famously compared the war in Syria to the situation in Bosnia, where he had been responsible for international intervention (*Reuters*, 1 June 2012). However, identity cannot simply be reduced to a “variable” that is everywhere the same. David’s sensitive treatment of Israel/Palestine and the Western Balkans shows how a non-reductive comparison can be constructed.

Secondly, comparative area studies can trace connections and local agency. This could include studies of how Western intervention shapes both Middle Eastern and Balkan states and how local agency in turn shapes how these interventions play out. Sadriu did this when he showed how Islam in Albania became a security concern in the “war on terror” – which was originally targeted at the “Greater Middle East” – and how local politicians were able to utilise these interventions for their own political ends. Global narratives on Islam and the local history of Islamic identity became implicated in a very political game. Another topic that binds together the Middle East and the Balkans is migration. This could include research on the “Balkan route” taken by refugees travelling from, or via, the Middle East to reach Western and Northern Europe. Or it could include comparisons of the previous “refugee crisis” in the 1990s, when hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Yugoslav successor states were seeking refuge in Western Europe.

Finally, Middle Eastern countries can learn from the Balkan experience – and the failures – of building peace. This is not a matter of mechanically applying formulae of power-sharing that promise to square the circle of political representation in “deeply divided societies”, but to take local identity constructions seriously. Močnik’s discussion of the identity of survivors of sexualised violence holds lessons for similar occurrences of mass violence in Northern Iraq and Syria. Močnik asks what language can restore agency to survivors and notes that this can include claiming victimhood. This is not to say that the same terms are necessarily applicable in Northern Iraq or Syria, but simply that survivors also need a language that gives provides agency and justice.

The most important general lesson of this symposium is probably the most difficult one to learn. Politicisation of collective identities, whether ethnic, religious or national leads to the polarisation of societies and reiteration of narratives that caused conflicts in the past, thus narrowing the space for reconciliation. It enforces ethnic labelling on societies and maintains boundaries among people when what is desired is the blurring of boundaries both physical and symbolic. It is those vertical boundaries on which conflict and violence thrives.

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