

International Conference
Perspectives on West Asia

Its evolution as an area of study in the changing geopolitical discourses

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies,

Kolkata

The Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies will be convening an International Conference on West Asia on 17-18 January 2011.

The conference will deal with (i) how West Asia is currently constructed? (ii) the “securitization” of West Asia where it is intermittently viewed in terms of security roles and problems and (iii) alternative perceptions of West Asia.

West Asia (Southwest Asia) is a term that refers to the western most part of Asia. The term is partly coterminous with the *Middle East*, which describes the geographical position in relation to Western Europe rather than the location within Asia. Due to the perceived Eurocentrism, international organizations such as the United Nations, have replaced *Middle East* with *West Asia*. In the Western academia, the term *Middle East*, which replaced the term *Near East* continues to be the favored expression, although it reflects spatial perspectives firmly anchored in a Eurocentric world.

West Asia broadly refers to those countries that are members of the League of Arab States, Israel (with its Jewish and Arab population), and the non-Arab countries of Turkey and Iran (which have small Arab populations). These countries are clustered into three sub regions. 1) North Africa, which includes the countries of Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia, 2) The area along the eastern part of the Mediterranean is the Fertile Crescent (Levant of the colonial times) that includes Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as non-Arab Turkey to the north. 3) Lastly, the oil-producing countries of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula, namely, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen and the non-Arab, Persian state of Iran. The UN also includes Armenia and Azerbaijan (parts of Caucasus) in its extensive categorization of West Asia. Afghanistan is also sometimes included in a broad definition of “Western Asia.”

The debates questioning the logic behind the clustering of countries, which are as varied historically and culturally, as Iran, Turkey, Israel, Somalia, Yemen and Tunisia under a single category (Middle East/ West Asia) arose from time to time. Yet, the grouping (West Asia/ Middle East) does have an underlying principle, as the category of nations do share historical experiences in the spread of Islam, the reach of the Ottoman Empire and the experiences of European colonialism. **The point, here, is not to settle on a better or more accurate category but, as Schwedler and Gerner (2008) have pointed out, to recognize the myriad ways in which the region coheres as a whole around some issues, less so around others.**

Contemporary West Asia is typically portrayed as a region of intrigue and war, the cradle of terrorism and religious extremism. Journalists more often than not report stories of conflict and dispute, abuse of power and privilege accompanied by anxious calls for reform and political change. The impression conveyed is that the region is unique. However, authors like Cammock, Pool and Tordoff (1993) and Bromley (1994) reiterate that there are no myths to explode, that West Asia is just like any other developing region. From their perspective, this region, like any other region, suffers from the effects of modernization, lack of political participation, slow economic growth and foreign indebtedness to the West, competition for arms and increasing urbanization.

In recent times the growing interest in the region has been accompanied by an increasing number of academic journals, texts and books devoted to the study of the area. From the mid 1990s, a vast array of subject areas covering West Asia, from political discussion groups, government and official websites, research centers, libraries and cultural developments could be accessed through the World Wide Web (www.)

The two major centers of West Asian (Middle Eastern) studies globally are the United Kingdom and the United States of America. The current debates over West Asia (Middle East) involve questions of national interest and security, for the United States and the United Kingdom, particularly since the events of September 11, 2001 and July 7, 2005. As a result, arguments for further development of West Asian (Middle Eastern) studies with a strong academic base are linked with questions of national security and international stability. In Asia, among others, India and Singapore now have specialized academic centers on West Asian and Middle East studies, besides such academic programmes in the countries of the region itself. Such programmes seek to cultivate interest in these areas as also reflect on the common problem zones afflicting the different parts of Asia, especially issues of conflict resolution and peace processes.

The seminar intends to explore the following themes:

- Territorial Conceptions of the region (West Asia): perceptions of the region in geographical, political, cultural and economic terms. Insights into the complex web of relationships of influence and control/interstices and continuities that characterize the region.
- Democracy and Development in West Asia: an informed understanding and analysis of the political, social and economic approaches, processes and movements for democracy and development within the region.
- The United States and West Asia: focusing on an inquiry into the post World War II American initiatives and policies — economic, political, diplomatic and military in/towards the region, as well as the attitude of the region towards the United States.
- Intra-regional politics of West Asia: this includes, exploring intra-regionalism through empirical and theoretical perspectives in the West Asian context—the

politics of conflict and cooperation. Has there been a resurgence of regional awareness and a consequent increase in intra-regional cooperation?

- The Israel-Palestine Question —the region’s core issue? : An assessment of the centrality of the Israel-Palestine Conflict in the regional context.
- The Politics of Resistance: dissecting political realities, moving beyond the ‘Palestinian movement of Resistance’ and delving into the movements (or sub-movements) within, for instance, the role of Hamas.
- India in West Asia: concentrating on India’s historical links with the region and her interests in the region, the contours and dilemmas of her policy towards West Asia and the changing perspectives in an era of globalization.

The travel costs of the participants from Asia will be covered by the organisers. The Institute will be providing local hospitality for the duration of the conference. The proceedings of the conference will be subsequently published as a book. Participants are requested to respond within December 10, 2010 with a title, 500 word abstract and a brief one page CV to

info@makaias.com
priyasingh70@gmail.com