Dr. Najm Yousefi: Good afternoon friends. We are going to get started with our last panel. I hope everyone enjoyed lunch and had a taste of the Middle East with shawarma and dolma and yogurt and cucumber.

So our very last panel has the title Wither the Middle East. It is focusing on theme of the Middle East as a region, as a concept, as a modern invention. And we have three presenters we are going to start with Mehdi Beyad, who is a student at the school of Oriental and African studies of the University of London. Mehdi graduated with a BA in history from Kings College London in 2012 and spent one year working as a research assistant for a professor of International Relations at Oxford University. Mehdi is currently in the middle of his masters program in Middle East Politics at the School of Oriental and African in London. And he hopes to go on to a PhD program looking competitively at the politicization of the myth of endemic Persian, Arab and [inaudible] in Baathist Iraq and tanave [phonetic spelling] Iraq. And the title of Mehdi's paper is Narrative and Agency: Beyond the 'Invention' of the Middle East.

Mehdi Beyad: Hi everyone. I'm glad to be here. This is actually based on one of the first essays I wrote for my masters so hopefully it's an indication, how I am by the end of the year.

The phenomenon of designations geopolitical regions around the world testifies to the power of the politics of the moment in shaping supposed truths and their competing discourses and the delineations of what we refer to as the Middle East is a striking example of this. And the issue of its invention raises fundamental questions such as a relationship between power and knowledge in international relations and the internal responses to such external objectifications. That the Middle East is a term carries with it the heavy load of euro centricity of course isn't disputed. As I tried to argue however the notion of the external intervention the Middle East should be approached as a discourse. And everyone likes a little bit of Foucault. So Foucault defines discourse as a specific constructive representation of reality and knowledge a way of understanding something and the discourse of the invention of the Middle East may be valid with some historical grounding but there's a logic we should try to escape as it silences potential counter discourses. And again as Foucault says, "For every discourse there is a counter discourse." And the problem with the discourse of invention is that it leaves us with the static and helpless image of the quote unquote invention. So we should try to investigate the discourse's parameters and see what ways is been challenged both geopolitically and idealizationally.

Just to start off with some more descriptive background which I'm sure were all familiar with. Generally speaking the term Middle East is ascribed to Captain Alfred T. Mahan a US Naval officer who wrote an article in 1902 suggesting Britain secure the Persian Gulf and it's coast to protect the route to India. The phrase can be traced further back and some have tried to do this to an article written by General Sir Thomas Edward Gordon, a British Army officer in 1900 where he referred to the independence and the

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and integrity of Persia and Afghanistan, again in reference to India. It was soon after Mahan's use of the term that Valentine Sherow, then head of the Times foreign affairs department copyrighted the term in a series of 20 articles from 1902 to 1903. But more importantly than who exactly invented the term and when is the process of quote/unquote external identification that these actors undertook. Using their own security concerns to superimpose a geographic reality in this case the specific concern being India from a British strategic perspective. This ratification is part of the history of method geographies that are concerned less with definite physical boundaries than with shifting strategic concerns and spatial significance. There is a book written by Martin Lewis and Karen Wigan, called the Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography and they go through this and a lot of detail. And this is where I borrowed this theory from and then applied it to the Middle East. Whilst it is true that many other [inaudible] around the world are similar colonial relics as [inaudible] remind us. I would say the Middle East is an exception in this regard because of intense historical link between its regionalization and the continued presence of Imperial powers much more deep and consequential in other areas of the world. And the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement being a stock manifestation of this as Britain and France split the Ottoman's Middle Eastern empire between them evidencing territorial micromanagement. But at the same time we shouldn't overlook the remarkable fluidity of the delimitations even from the external perspective. There's been a certain instability to the meta-geography as Ronrick Davidson explains in a very famous article called, Where Is the Middle East? No one knows where the Middle East is. Scholars and governments have produced reasoned definitions that are in hopeless disagreement with one another. After Mayhem and Sherow's article the area on the designation constantly shifted. The Arabian Peninsula, Palestine, North Africa, Iran, even Eritrea were all included and excluded in the case of the latter at different times. These manufactured delineations that have come to form the Middle East have crystallized according to dominance security discourses and practices that have been informed by its representation. And this is why parameters shift because strategic priorities shift. The demarcations in the Middle East were therefore obviously invented, if you like, but they are also changeable. The strength of the metageographical discourse is also the root of its instability. That is superimposing the region and its markers, according to shifting concerns. And such debates continue today of course with questions of the position of Turkey and Afghanistan in this Middle East.

And it is also important to ask to what degree is regionalization has been purely external, in other words, what internal processes and actors have challenged the designations. Are we at risk of denying the agency of the invented region in inventing itself? This is where the approach of realist scholars s Kenneth Waltz risks leaving us with the worldview where the Middle East is at the total mercy of the international powers and Imperial machinations throwing us into an epistemology that privileges the global North over the global South. Those are the words of Mohammed Aub [phonetic spelling]. Even reading Roderick Davison's very detailed article, leaves one feeling that the Middle East has been fixed and discussed unchallenged by actors of the region itself. Almost this helpless entity. Of course designations of the

region have stemmed from external attentions but to what extent has this dynamic been purely one directional? Indeed there is plenty of evidence to suggest that there has been plenty of formative self-created power from the inside. For example, the Syrian occupation of Lebanon which began in 1976, the war between Arab and Jewish forces in 1948 following the withdrawal of the British and UN resolution partition, the formation of the United Arab Republic between Egypt and Syria in 1958. These are just a few examples of how they impose borders and divisions in the region have been challenged whatever the political and ethical merits of the campaigns aside. In recent decades have seen a clash, of what you can call, meta-geographies or meta-narratives with various political cultures developing in the region which actually put forward their own visions of the Middle East. Taking what was initially imposed on them or invented for them, if you like, and attempting to redefine it and reinvent it. On one hand there's the idea of an Arab Middle East deriving from notions of panour [phonetic spelling] security concerns whose proponents regard the historical Middle East as Western imperialism's attempt to keep the Arab people disunited. And these people would exclude Iran, Turkey and Israel from their project. And then there's the idea of the Muslim Middle East or the Islam's perspective which includes such anti-status quo discourses and those of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas whose articulations share common emphasis on Muslim unity.

[Inaudible] claims that Islamists in the Middle East necessarily operate within Middle East centered conception but I don't think this is necessarily true and point to someone like Khomeini. Who for example his pan-Islam did not extend to Iraq or Saudi Arabia but it did extend to Pakistan and Afghanistan. Then you also had President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey who had this D8 the developing group of eight countries whose coalition included Malaysia and other countries outside of the quote/unquote Middle East. So the phenomena of pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism have thus not only had compete effects on the geographical shape of the region but there have been ideational challenges to the external epistemologies of the region offering alternative views on what the Middle East actually means as well as what it should look like. And when assessed more fully they also present differing systemic approaches to international relations in the region. Dealing with such questions as how it should be organized, what political models in the used and regional interaction. Admittedly such developments may not have changed of the Middle East was to the initial external quote/unquote inventors, but there was undoubtedly this degree of self-invention and self-reflection. In many case concretely actually affecting the geography of the borders. Imperialism may have literally constructed the system its state components. As Ray Henabush [phonetic spelling] puts it, but as Fred Halliday reminds us, "It did not manage to keep control of them as within the strategic complex shaped by international domination the States and actors in the region continued to play an autonomous role." And the above processes leads us onto the interplay between the ideational Middle East and its meta-geographical form between the Middle East as an idiom reference to physical place and the Middle East as a political episteme with its attached meanings. And as we are to see again, much like the boarded entity the characterization of the Middle East can't just be

reduced to two a millistatic absolute invention from the outside. Charting the genealogy behind the notion of mutton at least essential to understanding the dynamics and context behind its development. Here, Edward [inaudible] [inaudible] can prove instructive where he suggests where the imaginative framework of the modern Middle East as conceived by large sections of Western academia and political interests shares a common archaeology mid-19th century Oriental scholarship. An ideological project that was created and sustained by European imperialism in an effort to understand and know the orients that was being subjugated. In an interview 1976 Professor Said claimed that most current Middle East experts continue to operate within the confines of the clichés handed down to them and by Orientalist scholars of the 19th century. The era of Orientalizm was lazy and irrational and uncivilized. Today's Middle Easterner is violent, uncultured, incapable of any sophisticated political thought or independent governance. And there does seem to be a degree of continuity when you consider, for instance, a book like Raphael Patai's The Arab Mind which was published in 1973, suddenly saw a resurgence shortly before the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Or like when someone like Bernard Lewis who is considered an expert in Middle East studies, says that we either bring them freedom or they destroy us. But admittedly a particular reading of Professor Said's work overemphasizes the potency and presence of Orientalism discourse today and because of this it underplays interaction coming from the quote/unquote "other side". A lot has already been done and the way the historical critique of Professor Said texts should make us question its contemporary application. For example, whether we talk about [inaudible] distinguishing between essence and existence in the 10 to 11 centuries, or the seventh century Turkish [inaudible] assessing strengths and weaknesses of the Ottoman Empire, that he was a part of but at the same time talking about the Greek Byzantine and Christian empires. We should recognize throughout the orient has been speaking righting and investigating not only about itself but also about others and not aligning itself to any sort of characteristics imposed to itself, imposed on itself by the outside.

Of course this isn't to deny Professor Said's central premise that Orientalism was a systematic attempt to invent the orient control and domination. But it is to acknowledge of the agents of the Orients throughout were never silent themselves. This brings us to the modern period where narratives of immense power are coming from the actors of the region have attempted to characterize the Middle East and its peoples. And we should see some of the latest uprisings across the region and continuation of a long history of contestation resistance from the supposed Middle East model imposed from outside to its characterization as rigid and passive indeed a very threat to the quote/unquote invention itself possibly the biggest threat yet to date. I won't delve too deeply into the uprisings about what's being written about already. And I think it's just a bad idea to start making conclusions about it just three or four years on. Things are constantly changing but we could be witnessing the greatest challenge yet to the invention. There is no controversy that the Middle East was a term initially generated by actors outside the region as a reference point for external strategic concerns and designs. My aim has not been to reveal what the Middle East really is or to create a reformulation of how to characterize the whole region. I haven't done

that because I don't think I can. I've attempted to show the analytic shortcomings of restricting ourselves purely to the framework of an external invention. Much like a critical reading of Orientalism isn't meant to discount the presence of one discourse but to acknowledge the presence of another. This essay or this piece is an attempt to show the invention of the Middle East is not necessary and inaccurate claim but it is a restrictive. We should go beyond this claim and question the form of the invention. It is not singular. It's not static. And it is not unchallenged. And we have to acknowledge the people and the political actors in the region have shown that they can re-create and constantly reinvent themselves and not align themselves with characteristics imposed on them from the outside. Of course is just a short introduction and I think we should … future policy research probably consider the possibility behind this whole discourse of invention there is. I started off with Foucault so I might as well finish with Foucault. "There might be a regime of truth behind this notion of the invention of the Middle East."

Thank you.

Audience applauds.

Audience member: So forMehdi, I was wondering… You touched on it a little bit. Would you ever say we could possibly reach a term that would have any quantal logical stability. You referenced early on in your paper about securitization being one of the biggest issues. Is there a way in which we could kind of grapple with this, in terms of like how everyone sees the Middle East as something that is politically referred to but we don't see something like our reference to Africa or Asia as places that need to be securitized? Could we also challenge this a little bit further?

Mehdi Beyak: [inaudible] has an article about the Middle East as a security discourse. He says, [inaudible] He asks the question can the Middle East even be described as a geopolitical system? [Inaudible] and then he basically says there is there is no objective [inaudible] if you ask an Islamist you would get a different answer and Arabist would give you a different answer. And then the move that we've seen so far the Arab uprising started and a lot of analysts stopped using the term Middle East at all, they started using West Asia. The question is do the people in the region themselves describe the place as? [Inaudible] but in terms of an agreed-upon term to describe the region that is detached from external security interest, there doesn't seem to be any sort of consensus on that. And increasingly can be seen for external actors even there's no consensus on how to visualize the region [inaudible] since the uprising started. To be honest I don't think there's any that will indicate any sort of stability in the region. Whether that's a problem or not is another question.

Audience member: Thank you.

Dr. Najm Yousefi: If I could piggyback on that question. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I got the impression you concluded your presentation by quoting Foucault and suggesting that, well there is this term out there and it holds some truth, right? So, I get the impression that there is some [inaudible]-logical you mentioned to this that despite the fact that it was invented, not by the people of the region, but you know, the world over those that play the role of the Middle East politically and so forth. So how do we reconcile these two seemingly conflicting aspects of the Middle East-the term the Middle East as a concept?

Mehdi Beyak: The thing with my research was that I was almost less interested in in the term itself rather than what it kind of denoted. And what the history of the term and the origins of the term denoted. And when you say Middle East, I mean, back in London the first thing your talk in Middle East studies is, the term was externally created. It is not of local origin. St started in the early 1900s and then people started appropriating it from the outside. That is the theoretical starting point of Middle Eastern studies. But my interest was more with if you read too much into that then you're denying the role of peoples in the region themselves have had in challenging the geographical form and the ideation form as well from the outside. Whether or not they deem it [inaudible] the term Middle East or not I think is another question but it's more about seeing this as a multidirectional process and seeing the region as something that's much more contested rather than, oh it is created from the outside. Then that's the starting point and that's the end point is well. I think it's almost more than a physiological rather than a concrete one. It is difficult to point down but I think the key is to see that it's not just coming from one way. There is the role of the "other" [inaudible].