

## Whither West Asia? Exploring North-South perspectives on Eurasia

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## **Whither West Asia? Exploring North-South Perspectives on Eurasia**

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Abstract:

The introduction to the Special Issue explores the relevance of the concept of West Asia for understanding connections between East Asia, Eurasia and the Middle East. It seeks to go beyond the tendency in much scholarly work concerning regional connectivity in Asia to fixate on various permutations of the “Silk Road” or East-West ties more generally. We bring attention, rather, to the simultaneous significance of dense North-South connections that enable the interpenetration of varying parts of Asia and argue that West Asia is analytically helpful in bringing analytical definition to such ties.

Key Words:

West Asia; Silk Road; Eurasia; the Middle East; connectivity

## **1. Introduction**

This Special Issue arises out of an international and interdisciplinary workshop entitled ‘Rethinking Asia: Perspectives from West Asia’. The workshop was held at the University of Sussex Asia Centre in May 2017 and organised in collaboration with the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (The University of Hong Kong) as well as the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies (University of Copenhagen).

The articles included in this volume seek to contribute to scholarly debates about Eurasia as a salient geographical category. They aim to do so by means of in-depth explorations into the nature of connections between Eurasia and what we term in this Special Issue as ‘West Asia’. In recent years there has been an explosion of interest across multiple fields of area studies in the connections and interactions between parts of the former Soviet Union that were previously held to belong to either Central Asia or Eastern Europe. Anthropologists and historians, for example, have explored such connections through investigations into the experiences of labour migrants from Central Asia in Russia (e.g. Reeves 2013 and 2015, Sahadeo 2012). Parallel to the study of such connections, scholars have also increasingly explored the nature of circulations between Central Asia and East Asia, especially in terms of the movement of merchandise and merchants (e.g. Karrar 2016, Marsden 2015, Steenberg 2016). The connections between Central and East Asia is no doubt a topic whose conceptual attractiveness has been enriched by images of historic

and modern 'Silk Roads' (see Special Issue 2017, 8/1 of this journal). Importantly, however, Central Asia's role as a space across which goods and ideas moved has tended to be neglected by historians who have focused on the relationship between West Europe and East Asia taking little account of the importance to this of the space 'in-between' (for an important corrective see Smith forthcoming).

It is striking however that if scholars have theorised the relationship of different parts of the Soviet Union to one another, and addressed the extent to which these also require a consideration of neighbouring regions of Europe, Central Asia and China, there have been fewer investigations of the connections that exist between Eurasia and the societies to the south, those we refer to here as forming 'West Asia' (for an important exception see Skvirskaja 2014). Indeed, the degree to which the connections between Eurasia and West Asia are popularly regarded as novel rather than reflecting historical ties and connections is manifested in the degree to which interactions between the peoples of these regions provoke much anxiety in the world today. Against the backdrop of the rise of the Islamic State movement in Syria and Iraq, the mobility of militants between Central Asia and Russia to the Levant is predominantly framed in the media and scholarship as a one-off development that is reflective of modern-day geopolitical developments rather than also reflecting historically significant transregional connections (e.g. Bleuer 2014, ICG 2015, Zenn 2017). It goes without saying that from the perspective of security analysis such connections and the exchanges of culture and ideas they allow are regarded as being unhealthy and historically out of place. More broadly, scholarship on transnational connections recognises the importance of such connections but treats them as the exception that gives clearer definition to regional units. As we explore below, the tendency to define the societies to the south of Eurasia as belonging to a boxed off region called the Middle East has no doubt contributed to the paucity of scholarship on north-south connections across the former boundaries of the Soviet Union.

In contrast, the papers published in this Special Issue demonstrate the value of a more historicised perspective on such connections and the forms of mobility from which they arise. The contributors to this volume all take for granted the fact that ties and circulations (of traders, religious personnel, exiles and labourers for example) have historically ensured that West Asian and Eurasian contexts have enjoyed intimate and complex relations with one another. Recent patterns of mobility involving individuals and

societies, they suggest, are helpfully understood as modern iterations of older patterns of circulation and connectedness.

There is a broad range of area studies journals in which it would have been appropriate to publish the articles gathered together in this Special Issue. For example, the contributions could have been framed to address scholarship on the Middle East: an aim of such a collection would have been to add ethnographic depth and historic nuance to the understanding the ways in which Middle Eastern societies are connected to multiple Asian sub-regions. However, we have specifically chosen to publish in a journal committed to rethinking the relationship between Central Asia and Eastern Europe through the prism of Eurasia. We thereby hope that the articles in this volume will stimulate further reflection on the extent to which a recognition of North-South as well as East-West relationships is necessary if the complexity of the dynamics of Asia and Europe is to be fully appreciated. As mentioned earlier, contemporary connections between Eurasia and West Asia are largely made visible through geopolitical struggles and contests, such as those we have seen in recent years involving Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. As the articles in this Special Issue show, however, behind the scenes of such avowedly public diplomatic and military struggles exist a range of networks that bind people together across regional boundaries. The contributions in this Special Issue demonstrate that some of the most influential and important of such networks include those made-up of students, traders and refugees and others comprising religious scholars, activists, and charismatic leaders. These networks – social formations that are rarely recognised as being significant or even visible in studies that focus on state-to-state relationships or geopolitical struggles – have emerged over the course of centuries of interaction and adapted to shifting circumstances. They have ensured historically that the societies and cultures of Eurasia and West Asia are intimately familiar with one another. A central finding of the papers presented in this volume is that contemporary versions of such networks continue to mean that the dynamics of this region are tied to one another in profoundly important ways. Moreover, what all the articles also emphasise is the extent to which the participants of such networks are not silent or peripheral onlookers of state-state relations: deploying ‘everyday’ or ‘informal’ modes of diplomacy (Marsden, Ibanez-Tirado and Henig 2016) based on knowledge that arises from their long-term interactions with neighbouring societies, as well as through the exertion of

critical forms of creative agency, their activities have long-lasting implications for transregional dynamics.

The articles in this Special Issue do not however suggest that the category of West Asia is simply an alternative to that of the Middle East - a geographic category whose genealogy in the post-imperial politics of the twentieth century is now widely recognised. Nor are they making the claim that West Asia is more authentically aligned to the history and identity of the region than other available terms. We are instead aware of the importance that all the geographical categories that we use in scholarly analysis should be dynamic historically (Green 2014): replacing one with another would herald few long-term analytical insights. Similarly, to posit particular geographical categories as being more authentic than others fails to give analytical space for recognising the creative ways in which multiple influences come to shape people's spatial and affective understandings of the worlds in which they live (Bayly 2007).

The approach we do adopt in this Special Issue, rather, is to regard West Asia as a particular geographic scale that is helpful analytically because it illuminates aspects of society and history across regions of the world that are conventionally held as belonging to different culture areas or geographical regions. The category of West Asia is helpful in the analysis of such connections because unlike 'the Middle East' – which posits the existence of a distinct cultural region that is neither Asia nor Europe – it points toward a space that shares certain characteristics and dynamics but that is also inherently part of a wider, expansive continent. Thus, as several of the articles show, exploring regional dynamics through the lens of West Asia also necessitates rethinking powerful assumptions about the boundaries that define Europe and Asia.

## **2. West Asia, Eurasia and the Middle East**

An expanding body of scholarship has sought to go beyond critiques of existing area studies frameworks and suggests alternative geographical categories and concepts for understanding the power and importance of transregional dynamics. At the broadest level, scholarship exploring the nature of inter-Asian dynamics questions the geographical silos in relationship to which work in Asian studies has for long been organised and calls instead for reconceptualising the nature of Asian dynamics from the ground up (e.g. Ho 2017, Tagliacozzo, Siu and Perdue 2015a and 2015b).

There is also growing recognition within the field of inter-Asian studies that the notion of West Asia makes it possible to bring under one frame of analysis parts of the world that enjoy long-term historic and cultural connections yet that were separated from one another as a result of the use of geographical 'culture areas' created in the context of the Cold War (e.g. Robinson 2012). This argument is particularly evident in the case of the societies along the historic frontier between the Russian and Ottoman Empires. The Caucasus and the Levant, for instance, are regions of the world that enjoy historic ties to one another yet that under the rubric of area studies rubric and Cold War dynamics were divided in relationship to different cultural areas: the Middle East and Eurasia (e.g. Nunan 2011). More recently, Siu and McGovern (2017) have also pointed to the important mediating role of West Asia in the historical establishment of connectivity between Africa and East Asia – a mediating role that historians have also recognised as being critical in the deeper past (Sen 2016). Thus, the category of West Asia is helpful because it moves away from the exceptionalism that is inherent in the notion of 'the Middle East'. Instead, West Asia highlights the need to better understand the connections, ties and circulations between this context and other parts of Asia.

A number of recent studies have drawn attention to the problematic nature of the geographical category 'Middle East' and sought to advance instead a growing recognition of other frames of analysis and geographic categories that this contested term has excluded from area studies literature (e.g. Bonine et al. 2012; Green 2016). Some scholars have brought attention to the ways in which the notions of 'the Middle East' and Central and South Asia have led to the scholarly peripheralisation of borderland regions (such as the territories which today form Afghanistan) that straddle taken-for-granted culture areas (Green 2016). An important body of literature has also focused on the maritime connections between the Arabian Peninsula and multiple contexts around the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea (e.g. Green 2013c, Sheriff and Ho 2014, Tagliacozzo 2009 and 2013).

Much recent scholarship has also focused on the category of Eurasia. This geographical category while powerful in various contexts for many years (e.g. Kroeber 1945) became increasingly intellectually influential after the putative end of the Cold War. In the post-Cold war context Eurasia was deployed by scholars of Europe who were seeking to rethink and contest understandings of 'East Europe' that were premised on orientalising both Russia and Europe's internal other, the Balkans. Thus, the concept of Eurasia has risen

in importance against the backdrop of the supposed end of the Cold War: scholars of Europe who had previously identified themselves as being specialists in the study of East and West Europe turned to Eurasia as a category of analysis predominantly because it challenged such Cold War distinctions. Yet the historical status of the events after 1989 are being increasingly questioned as scholars grapple with the legacies of the global bipolar conflict between East and West (Kwon 2010) and in the context of current day geopolitical developments.

Scholars have also sought to go beyond the temptation to merely expand the limits of geographic region by exploring the political and economic dynamics of such spaces in the past and present. Jack Goody argued that cultural characteristics are often thought to be unique to the West are rather visible across the cultures of Europe and Asia, including especially China (e.g. Goody 2015). Building on Goody's scholarship Chris Hann (2015), distinguishes between the minimal definition of Eurasia – the post-Soviet world – and the maximal definition: continental Europe and Asia. Hann argues not only that recognition of pancontinental connections between European and Asian settings assists scholars in addressing the predominance of Euro-American assumptions in anthropology. He also suggests that the forms of economic embeddedness that have characterised society and polity in the expansive Eurasian realm have the potential of shaping its political and economic development in the present and future. For Hann (2015: 312), Eurasia is shaped by a dialectic that involves both markets and merchants, as well as the state and redistribution.

Less work has sought to address not merely Eurasia's shared characteristics but also the types of societies and networks that enable the circulations that result in the interpenetration of Eurasia's societies, and also those beyond. Scholarship that seeks to go beyond a focus on the transmission of ideas and cultural forms between distinct regions, and focuses instead on the recurring circulations that result in interpenetrated societies (e.g. Thum 2017) is especially visible in relationship to work on Islam and Muslim life. There are now several excellent studies of the connections between Russian Muslims and their co-religionists in West Asia. Eileen Kane (2014) for example has explored the 'Russian Hajj' demonstrating the important role this event played for Russian Muslims and the imperial state. In similar terms, Nile Green (2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2015) has shown how developments in infrastructure and technology (especially in rail and steamships) at the turn



of the twentieth century increased contact between Muslims in Russia, West Asia, and South Asia, as well as between Muslims from all these realms and East Asia's societies. While there have been some insightful discussions of the form taken by such connections in the contemporary period (e.g. Marsden 2015; Shami 2000; Stephan-Emmrich 2017) there remains an overwhelming tendency for images of West Asia's connections to Eurasia to be dominated either by geopolitical contests or security studies.

The problems associated with the category of 'the Middle East' and the analytical benefits of the notion of West Asia have also attracted the attention of thinkers working in spaces beyond the field of academia. From the perspective of influential opinion formers in the region, the use of the category 'West Asia' corrects the Western-centric view of geography and replaces it with a vision that has more traction in the region itself. For instance, Dr Rangin Dadfar Spanta, the former Foreign Minister of Afghanistan argued in a speech held at the Herat Security Dialogue in November 2016 that as an Afghan he 'looked West' to parts of Asia that were termed 'the Middle East' by European and American powers. In similar terms, the analytical focus on Western - often orientalisng - constructions of 'East Europe' has invested insufficient attention into the ways in which the identity formations of Southeast Europe and the Balkans are shaped through looking south and west to the parts of Asia with which they have historically enjoyed deep and intimate connections (Ballinger 2017; Rexhepi 2017). Indeed, when viewed from the perspective the Crimean Tatars, dispersed communities of Meshkhetian Turks, or Turkic Christian Gagauz communities of Ukraine and the Black Sea region, the category 'East Europe' renders invisible yet more aspects of the interpenetration of West Asian and European societies (cf. Skvirskaja 2014)

Important issues are at stake in the use of geographical categories; this is perhaps especially true in the case of the Middle East. The political significance of geography is visible in today's world in which geopolitical shifts are leading to new types of political, economic, religious, and cultural dynamics. Novelty however also calls upon actors involved to legitimise change by recalling past ties and connections. Now is a unique and critical juncture to explore and test the analytical value of the category of West Asia with the aim of contributing both to the study of transregional dynamics, as well as understanding the connections and networks that connect different regions of Asia to one another and beyond.

### 3. Introduction to the articles

The first contribution, by the anthropologists Magnus Marsden and David Henig, explores the intricate networks and webs of connection that have for centuries made possible interactions between Muslims living in different parts of Asia. While historians have explored such connections in detail in recent years, and even given labels to the wider geographies in which they have operated (such as the Balkan to Bengal Complex and Islamicate Eurasia) anthropological scholarship continues to be shaped in important ways by the intellectual straightjackets of regional scholarship. As a result, Marsden and Henig suggest, insufficient attention has been paid to the lived nature of the connections that bind parts of Eurasia, Central Asia and the Middle East together. Marsden, for example, has conducted fieldwork in Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, China and Turkey with families from Central Asia who conduct business across all of these locales. More importantly, perhaps, is the fact that they hold an intimate knowledge of life and commerce in these diverse contexts because these are places in which their families have worked, travelled and resided over centuries. David Henig's fieldwork has focused on Sufi networks (that collectively arise from the Rifa'i Sufi brotherhood) that are based in the Balkans (most especially in Bosnia Herzegovina, as well as in Kosovo and Albania) but that are also connected to multiple nodes of religious experience and learning beyond, such as in Istanbul, northern Syria, and the Iranian holy city of Mashhad.

It is commonplace in scholarly and public discourse to underemphasise the historic connections between Muslims living across these spaces largely because of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and subsequent attempts to separate Balkan Muslims from their co-religionists in Asia. In more recent times the activities of Asian Muslims in the Balkans have been treated by scholars of International Relations as being inherently suspicious and connections between Balkan Muslims and Muslims in other parts of the world have largely been viewed through the lens of security. Both ethnographic cases – of Central Asian business families and of Balkan Sufis – demonstrate the importance of recognising the deep history of present day transregional connections. Marsden and Henig suggest that West Asia is a helpful scale through which to explore the play of such connections over time.

The second article is by Oleg Yarosh, a scholar of Islamic tradition and the lived nature of Sufi Islam in Europe, especially in Germany and Ukraine. In his article, Yarosh documents the role played by travel and mobility in the extension of Sufi brotherhoods across an expansive West Asian realm that incorporates the Muslim societies of the Russian Caucasus and the Muslim-majority societies of the Levant. Critically, while the Sufi brotherhoods that Yarosh has studied have come to be associated with the Levant (Syria and Lebanon) the leadership of both brotherhoods came to the region from elsewhere. Early leaders of the Naqshbandiyya-Haqqaniyya for instance hailed from families of Daghestani origin who left the Russian Caucasus in the early and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in the context of the Crimean wars. These families of muhajirun (emigrants) were joined by later waves of Daghestani Muslims who fled their homeland against the backdrop of a failed uprising against the Russian administration in Dagestan and Chechnya (1877 – 1878). In the context of the modernising Turkish state, which was hostile to religious authorities and especially those involved in Sufi brotherhoods, these families moved to Damascus and other cities in the region in the 1920s. The other Sufi brotherhood explored by Yarosh in his contribution (the al Ahbash) was founded in 1930 and is intricately connected with the life history of a Sufi Sheikh from the town of Harar in Ethiopia. The Sheikh was expelled from Ethiopia after clashing with anti-Sufi Salafi Muslims in 1948. As with the case of the Sufis from the Russian Caucasus, this Sufi leader also established himself as a figure of charisma and insight having spent time in Beirut, Damascus, and Jerusalem. Yarosh also explores how from their base in the Levant these brotherhoods established important communities in Germany and Ukraine, in the context of both Western interest in Sufi Islam and the growing presence of Muslim migrant communities in those countries. In a manner similar to the Sufi networks documented by Henig, the Naqshbandiyya-Haqqaniyya and al Ahbash continued to play a connective role across multiple context of West Asia against the backdrop of the imperial rivalry of the Russian and Ottoman Empires, as well as the emergence of a fragile nation state system in the region. Indeed, the networks created by these Sufis also facilitated the maintenance of connections between European and West Asian communities in the era of mass migration.

The third contribution in the Special Issue, by Serkan Yolacan, is also interdisciplinary in nature, in that it covers both the territory of history and anthropology. Yolacan's focus is on the Azeris, a Turkic speaking group who are predominantly Shi'i

Muslims and inhabit Transcaucasia, a region that forms a historic land bridge between Iran, Russia and Turkey. Yolacan emphasises the extent to which Azeris have inhabited the backyard of multiple empires and have as a result learned how to forge multiple contacts and loyalties, as well as linguistic competencies. The article emphasises the ways in which Azeris have put such aspects of their identity and history to use, deploying the skills of ‘informal diplomacy’ (Marsden, Ibanez Tirado and Henig 2016) in order to ‘cross-pollinate ideas, projects, and resources among neighbouring realms and even rival empires’. In this sense, while the frontier realm – Transcaucasia – from which the Azeris hail was transformed from a ‘homeland’ into a ‘borderland’, Azeris did and continue to exert agency in complex ways across the fields of politics and economy on a vast transregional and West Asian scale. Actors identifying with a space often depicted as being peripheral came to play a central role in West Asian dynamics. There are fewer cases that better capture this complex mode of agency than that of Rıza Sarraf, an Azeri Iranian businessman who was able to use his ties to the political elites of both Iran and Turkey in order to become a key player in a complex scheme for supplying the Iranian economy with gold. In similar terms, Azeri academics based in Turkey were called upon to represent Turkey’s position to Russian audiences and Russia’s position to Turkish audiences in the wake of the political crisis between the two countries in November 2015, when a Russian jet was shot down by Turkish forces over the Turkish-Syrian border.

The fourth article in the Special Issue is by Diana Ibanez Tirado, an anthropologist. Her article explores the intersections between multiple Asian regions, including West Asia, Central Asia, and Eurasia. Ibanez Tirado documents such intersections by deploying student mobility to look at peoples’ experiences of the shifting connections and disconnections between varying parts of Asia. She also brings attention to the value of life trajectories for understanding the implications of particular types of inter-Asian connectivity for individuals, communities and the networks they form. A key aspect of the connections explored by Ibanez Tirado is state-level support and finance for student mobility. In the 1980s and early 1990s for instance Moscow was a central node for student-migrants, insuring the injection of old links between Eurasia and West Asia with new impetus. The subsequent political and economic demise of the Soviet Union however, alongside a rise in visible antipathy towards migrants in Russian cities led West Asian students from countries such as Yemen and Iraq to move onwards, often as refugees to countries in Western Europe and North America. In the

current context, students from countries that thirty years ago may well have travelled to the USSR for education, increasingly chose China as a suitable destination instead. Not only do Chinese universities offer attractive bursaries to international students, but so too is learning Chinese and becoming familiar with the country an attractive prospect for young people wishing to enter the world of business, perhaps especially those from families that have already launched business activities in China. As a result, the Chinese international trade city of Yiwu is currently a node for students from across West and Central Asia. Yet while Yiwu is a site at which West and Central Asian students meet, interactions between West and Central Asia have become less visible over the past decade: while ten years ago, Central Asians frequently travelled to Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Egypt to study and trade, the security-focused regimes of the Central Asian Republics increasingly seek to impose restrictions on the ability of their young people to travel to such locales for fear of the subversive ideologies with which they might return. Connections between Eurasia and West Asia in other words wax and wane and the interactions that do take place between the people of such regions might be more productively explored in third contexts (such as East Asia) rather than in historic sites of interaction such as Egypt's Islamic universities or the bazaars of Damascus.

The fifth contribution to the Special Issue is by Şebnem Akçapar, a sociologist. In her article Akçapar focuses on inter-Asian circulations of refugees. She compares in particular the case of Afghan refugees in Delhi with that of Iranian refugees in Istanbul. Importantly, the theme that provides the connective thread of these two articles is that of religious conversion: the Iranians and Afghans with whom Akçapar has worked have both converted to various forms of Evangelic Christianity. As in the case of the other articles in this Special Issue, Akçapar is keen to point out that both of the cities in which she has conducted fieldwork have been the focus of earlier waves of refugees and forced migrants. Delhi of course received millions of refugees in the context of the partition and the creation of Pakistan, while Istanbul was a destination point for Muslims leaving the Russian Empire during the Ottoman period, and Muslims leaving Greece, the Balkans and Bulgaria during the early years of the Turkish Republic. A key reason for those earlier waves of forced migration were discourses that depicted religions as civilizations bounded by impregnable cultural differences and the rise of the nation state with its various forms of nationalism. In the context of such processes, it not only became conventional to analyse what had hitherto

been intricately connected regions through the simplifying lens of nation-states and culture areas, but also to associate such areas with a single, dominant religious tradition. Indeed, as several scholars have shown, the study of Islam was an overwhelming 'zone of theory' within anthropological work on the Middle East until very recently (Abu Lughod 1989). In her article, Akçapar contests this tendency of associating regions with single religious traditions. At the same time, she also brings attention to the creative agency and choice-making processes that mobile people in West and South Asia bring to their religious experiences and identities.

The sixth and final contribution to the Special Issue is by an anthropologist, Paul Anderson. In his article Anderson explores the place occupied by Syrians in historically shifting forms of inter-Asian connectivity. Thanks to formal agreements between Syria and the USSR, Syrian merchants presided over a vibrant export of Syrian goods to the USSR. With the collapse of the USSR these merchants expanded their activities geographically to Central Asia and southern Russia. Some of these Syrian merchants were themselves of Circassian background and from families that had migrated from the Caucasus to the Levant in the late nineteenth century. The early 1990s saw migration from Syria to Russian cities in the Caucasus (such as Sochi, Nalchik and Kras) in the context of the Circassian national return movement after the fall of the USSR. During this period, Moscow-based Syrian migrants began to visit to China (especially the cities of Yiwu and Guangzhou) where they increasingly provisioned commodities for the Russian market. As a result of Bashar al Assad's policies in the 2000s Syria and the city of Aleppo in particular became an important conduit for low grade Chinese commodities – a form of transnational commerce facilitated by the trading offices of earlier waves of Syrian trader-migrants to China. Over the course of the past five years, the conflict in Syria has led to new forms of migration to China, especially of young men who do business without formal registration or access to much capital or credit. As a result, this latest wave of migrants is often connected to one another through 'extended familial trading relations of patriarchal connectivity', although the aspiration to become autonomous actors in long-distance trading networks remains an important ambition for these traders. Anderson's rich ethnographic material clearly demonstrates the extent to which analyses of the Syrian economy which focus on war in the country alone are problematic because of the methodological nationalism that underpins them, i.e. the assumption that the effects of the conflict are primarily shaped by and

contained within the borders of discrete nation states. Required instead is a transnational and inter-Asian approach that recognises the ways in which “internal” transformations of Syria’s war economy are also part of a broader reconfiguration of social hierarchies and commodity routes across Asia.

#### **4. Conclusions and future prospects**

An analytical focus on West Asia raises a wide range of themes and issues for scholars concerned with questions of transregional connectedness within and beyond Asia. The contributions to this volume identify an important range of networks (of students, traders and merchants, refugees, and religious organisations) that stand to offer critical insights into the history, transformations and implications of such connections. The articles in the volume also point to some of the specific types of contexts in which it is possible to gather rich and multi-layered data on the dynamics of such networks and the individuals who form them. These include informal market places, trading cities, Sufi lodges, student canteens and churches used by refugees. Finally, the contributions to this issue also put forward and apply important concepts relevant for the analysis of such forms of connectedness, including some of a spatial nature (e.g. Islamicate Eurasia), others that offer tools for understanding particular social groups (e.g. mobile societies) and still more that aim to explore the intersections between connected spaces and emergent forms of hierarchies and inequalities.

There is however considerable scope for further conceptual, theoretical and empirical work in this rich field. What are the geographical configurations of West Asia and how far do these parallel cultural, social and political dynamics? What explains the widespread use of the term Middle East and the general neglect of thinking in Europe and the USA about West Asia? In which intellectual traditions (e.g. Ottoman, Iranian, Soviet, post-Soviet, Islamic, South Asian) has the analysis of West Asia been pronounced and effective, and in what ways? How far have recent attempts to re-imagine or even fashion empires (e.g. in Turkey and in Russia) brought new attention to the category of West Asia or made it more accessible to particular types of communities and networks? What are the implications of the term West Asia – political, economic, religious and cultural? Where might opposition to the term be especially felt, and what might this reveal about the nature of current and past geographical dynamics? How far has the term West Asia come to be

associated with one or another religious tradition in the manner that the Middle East was with Islam? Or does the appeal of West Asia lie in its capacity to encompass religious diversity and complexity? How does the concept of West Asia relate to other geographical categories and how might it change our perception of Africa, Asia and Europe at large? We hope that this initial collection of articles will encourage scholars specialised in the study of different regions to collaborate in addressing these and many other issues of critical importance.

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