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- 1 The present thematic issue of the *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos* contains a selection of papers presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> AEGIS Thematic Conference of the Collaborative Research Group Africa in the Indian Ocean (CRG-AIO). The conference, entitled *New Gulf Streams – Middle East and Eastern Africa Intersected*, was organized by the Center for International Studies of the University Institute of Lisbon (CEI-IUL) during September 16-17, 2021, in partnership with AEGIS-AIO.
- 2 The main aim of this interdisciplinary conference was to address the deep interconnections between the Horn and Eastern Africa and the Middle East. The panels included presentations on migration and cultural connections, politics and international relations, security, and geo(hydro)political issues, as well as topics related to diplomacy and foreign policy, religion, and development. In particular, the debate focused on the most relevant challenges to the current geopolitical, economic, and religious ties between these regions.
- 3 Another important source of discussion was the issue of the “region”. The crystallized heritage of regional or area studies has left a trail of categorical approaches that fail noticeably to acknowledge contextual malleability, and the dynamics of geographic interconnectivity, thus risking semantic ambiguity or outright paradoxical stances. The conference organizers were only too aware of this problematic issue when initially planning for a conference set to bridge two distinct regional areas of research (African and Middle Eastern), in the spirit of the AEGIS-AIO research and networking objectives. Accordingly, reframing and deconstructing “region” was essential to overcome the difficulties the participants felt throughout the conference discussions when seeking to define historical, cultural, political, economic, and territorial spaces and dynamics in the wide interconnected space of the Western Indian Ocean. The conference thus managed to bring together researchers who, usually bound by jargon, interests, and

conditionings of watertight area studies, committed to a rich kaleidoscopic dialogue, and carve up new common grounds.

- 4 The editors of this special thematic issue expect the papers to be read with this background in mind, and that, meaningful as their content may be for area specialists, they are meant to contribute to a larger debate meant to bridge traditionally sealed regional studies: Horn of Africa, Eastern Africa, Middle East, and Western Indian Ocean. The issue consists of six peer-reviewed articles that the authors developed from their conference papers. The first article, “Middle East and East Africa Intersected”, authored by Miguel Ajú and Aleksi Ylönen, discusses contemporary connections of what are conventionally seen as two distinct regions. They argue that the literature focusing on the recent upsurge of the Middle East-Eastern Africa relations centers on the former states’ involvement on security and political grounds in the latter, but that this is currently changing with an increasing emphasis on the economic aspects of the relationship. While there is a perception that the financially well-endowed Middle East powers are dominant in their relationship with East African countries, the authors recognize the need to improve equality and mutual respect in relations between Middle Eastern investors and local African players for building increasingly mutually beneficial economic relationships.
- 5 The second contribution, “The Limits of Hegemonic Regionalism for Explaining Region-Building”, authored by Victoria Silva Sánchez, focuses on the Red Sea as a geographical, political, and cultural water space that binds together, rather than separates, Africa and the Middle East. Yet, she shows how hegemonic regionalism has depicted the Red Sea as a transitional space between two regions rather than a region of its own and points out the argumentative failures of this view when looking for a comprehensive understanding of the regional dynamics of the area. By exploring the case of the Red Sea Council, the author contends that hegemonic explanations need to be challenged through a more dialogical perspective, and opens the case for regions to be questioned and re-defined.
- 6 In the third article, “Challenging International Relations Concepts”, Aleksi Ylönen debates the concepts of state and power in the International Relations discipline’s dominant “realist” discourse and their applicability in the Horn of Africa-Persian Gulf relations. He points out the inability of the IR discipline’s main proto theory, classical realism, and other variations of the realist paradigm, which are often applied to analyze Middle East politics, to analyze and advance the understanding of the relations between the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. Ylönen attributes this shortcoming mainly to the epistemological characteristics of the realist International Relations analysis based on the Western understanding of the state and power as relative and between unitary state entities. He explains that the particular characteristics and nature of the state in the Horn of Africa and the Persian Gulf require a more nuanced analysis that includes domestic dynamics especially due to state weakness and its inability to monopolize foreign relations. In the Horn, strong sub- and non-state actors which compete with the state actors locally play a major role in overall foreign relations as they pursue their own international interactions parallel to the state. Therefore, Ylönen shows that the conventional realist International Relations interpretations applied to the Horn of Africa-Persian Gulf relations fail to recognize the importance of local power and agency in the complex networks of relationships

between state and non-state actors and will likely lead to inaccurate or outright erroneous understandings of their interactions.

- 7 The fourth article, “The Re-Globalization Process in the Indian Ocean”, by Beatrice Nicolini, analyzes the case of the Ibadi press in Zanzibar as a political tool to sustain Omani power in the island and more generally in the Indian Ocean space. The author draws on multiple cultural roots to contextualize the way this interpretation, founded on both traditional magical practices and the *Quran*, has laid the basis for the Zanzibari trade empire. Nicolini notes that, as a line of defense against modernization, the Ibadi press in Zanzibar depicted itself as representing traditional societal values as a means to foster the revival and re-globalization of the flow of communication between Oman and East Africa.
- 8 The fifth contribution, by Silvia Bruzzi, “Marriage, Citizenship and Mobility across the Modern Mediterranean and the Red Sea”, focuses on analyzing marriage practices in Northeast Africa. She points out how the phased collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the growth of deep colonial interactions, and the later processes of nation-building, came to affect the marriage ideas and practices in the region. Bruzzi shows how, in the case of Eritrea and Libya, legal regulations guiding marriage owe to various juridical practices and norms which in turn entail customary, religious, and civil regulations. However, these various regulations were and are challenged through the inter-regional and inter-continental mobility flows, affecting the conception of conjugal bonds and promoting the intermixing of Mediterranean and Red Sea cultural traditions and social practices.
- 9 In the final article, “Living Memories of Domestic Slavery Versus Forced Labour”, Francesca Declich discusses memories of past forced mobility through a case study from Ibo Island in Cabo Delgado. She argues that, surprisingly, some elders on the island, when evoking memories of slavery opt to defend rather than condemn the past practice. Declich offers various possible explanations for this nostalgic and benign perception of slavery, by analyzing relations of dependency based on possible historical reasons as can be examined by conducting archival research, and in particular the discourses and practices of the recruitment processes and the documentation relating to colonial policies on forced labor and servitude.
- 10 Considered together, the articles in this thematic issue point to the need of repositioning regional-based research in such a way that concepts, methods, and perspectives are questioned with the aim of producing better grounded analysis, both in theoretical and heuristic terms.

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## AUTHORS

**GIULIA DANIELE**

Iscte - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa  
Centro de Estudos Internacionais (CEI-Iscte)

Av. das Forças Armadas, 1649-026 Lisboa, Portugal  
giulia.daniele@iscte-iul.pt  
ORCID: 0000-0002-4976-4859

**MANUEL JOÃO RAMOS**

Iscte - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa  
Centro de Estudos Internacionais (CEI-Iscte)  
Av. das Forças Armadas, 1649-026 Lisboa, Portugal  
manuel.ramos@iscte-iul.pt  
ORCID: 0000-0001-7499-3744

**ALEKSI YLÖNEN**

Iscte - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa  
Centro de Estudos Internacionais (CEI-Iscte)  
Av. das Forças Armadas, 1649-026 Lisboa, Portugal  
aleksi.ylonen@gmail.com  
ORCID: 0000-0002-2397-7303