Proposal

Middle East and Central Asia Futurescapes Academic Network (MECAFAN)

Background

The macro-region of the Middle East and Central Asia (MECA) is increasingly becoming the "ground-zero" of the future. Fleets of robots roam the Grand Mosque in Makkah serving throngs of pilgrims while the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek uses swarms of CCTV cameras and supercomputers to improve urban life and make the city more safe and resilient. In Kuwait, construction of an unprecedented gigawatt-class data centre for artificial intelligence has begun just as the United Arab Emirates has emerged as a near-competitor to both the United States and China in the field of machine learning. Indeed, throughout MECA stakeholders are investing considerable resources into nascent space programs, futuristic mega-cities (such as NEOM in Saudi Arabia and Arkadag in Turkmenistan), green hydrogen energy production, and more basic research, among many other initiatives.

Amidst what is clearly a tumultuous race towards techno-industrial upgrading, one can discern a celebratory zeitgeist regarding the power and promise of technology, rivaling only that of Silicon Valley or Zhongguancun. The accompanying narratives and aesthetics of futurism are ubiquitous, actively promoted by modernizing states, and resonate among national publics. From (Saudi) Founding Day videos to Manga series like *Fi Qadm al-Zaman*, neo-traditionalist representations of Arabian attire and architecture are intermeshed with starship landings and cyborg-pets. Kazakhstan uses the blended imagery of its vast steppes and the infinity of the cosmos to excite its youth about the country's budding space exploration program. Implicit in these messages, all from state actors, is the promise of a "return" to a glorious Islamicate past defined by mastery over the sciences: what better embodiment of that spirit than the Emirati government launching, into a firmament where two-thirds of the stars have Arabic names, a probe with the name of *al-Amal* or "The Hope"?

One can, of course, read this state-led curation of a tantalizing techno-future as part of an attempt to exorcise the haunting specters of the recent past (i.e., the Arab Spring and traumatic post-Soviet transition) and difficult present. A growing body of Arab and Central Asian science-fiction in the form of novels, TV shows (such as the

Egyptian series *al-Nihaya* or the French-Kazakh *Infiniti* series), and even theatrical plays which investigate themes like authoritarianism, dystopian social evolution, post-oil ecological collapse, and the dangers of technology, offer sobering counter-narratives to the stories of the elites. The future then is, by all means, a contested terrain, though much of it, for the moment, is occupied by the visions and blueprints of powerful and wealthy states.

The "Middle East and Central Asia Futurescapes Network" is an initiative by the ANU's Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies (CAIS) to bring together scholars and practitioners to examine the tangible and intangible ways by which the region is being re-shaped and re-imagined through the prism of future-facing technology. This expansive research agenda will probe the logic underlying state-led developmental and aesthetic projects in the techno-scientific and digital spheres (enveloping everything from e-governance, language systems, the internet of things, fintech, renewables, to smart cities); the political-economic, socio-cultural, environmental, and geo-political factors enabling and constraining these projects and their parameters of possibility; the artistic/literary/cultural productions surrounding different conceptions (and geologies) of a Middle Eastern and Central Asian "future"; and to even chart out the emergence of new polyphonic identities across the region transcending the conventional 'pan-Arab' or 'former Soviet' nomenclature.

At its heart, the network, prioritizing attention to local perspectives/sources and interdisciplinary, pushes for a conception of the Middle East beyond exhausted cliches and topics and, more significantly, hopes to generate cutting-edge research on the region's ongoing transformation through the lens of the future. Across the global corpus of science fiction, the future –whether with an optimistic or dystopian register– has often been envisioned and refracted through a Euro-American and East Asian (*ala* Blade Runner or, more recently, Chinese movies like *Wandering Earth*) aesthetic. The MECA is an afterthought in the vast majority of such imaginaries, providing either an origin story of a broken global future (caused by climatic disaster, warfare, or human hubris), or more commonly, an Orientalist repertoire from which to draw upon in exploring themes such as religious fanaticism and mystical excess (ala Frank Herbet's *Dune* or the cult Soviet eastern *White Sun of the Desert*). The MECA, in all of these, is relegated to a future-in-the-past badland; the initiative, by contrast, seeks to cast a more expansive survey of all possible futurescapes of the region, including those envisioned by its people as well.

Outcomes/Activities of MECAFAN

- Building partnerships with like-minded organizations and institutions investigating Middle Eastern and Central Asian futures and their intersection with technology through MECAFAN.

- Procuring funding/grants for MECAFAN earmarked for the hosting of a series of workshops/conferences at the ANU.

- Special issues, in acclaimed Q1 journals, and other publications will be the major outcome of joint collaborations through MECAFAN.

MECAFAN Research Clusters

- Development & Innovation

- Politics & Culture

- Faith & Science

- Sustainability & Environment

- Security & Technology

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