

X180: Middle Eastern and African perspectives on Malcolm X

Malcolm X looked to the Middle East and Africa for inspiration. How did those societies look back at him?

1. Introduction: A unidirectional focus on Malcolm X

Malcolm X continues to fascinate. In the past decade and a half, a flurry of books was published about him; two biographies won Pulitzer Prizes.¹ Clearly the greatest scholarly interest in Malcolm X has always stemmed from the United States, though not exclusively so: A German biography was published in 2015² around the time British authors contributed detailed accounts of key episodes of Malcolm's time abroad.³

Outside of academia, it has been observed that sales of books on Malcolm X spiked during the 2011 Egyptian revolution⁴, and that current Muslim youth movements in European countries reference Malcolm X.⁵ Two Netflix series introduced him to a broader audience in recent years, one of which led to the exoneration in 2021 of two men wrongfully convicted for his 1965 murder.⁶

Conceptually, scholarship on Malcolm X is characterized by a focus on Malcolm's own perspective and typically seeks to refine – or update – our understanding of his ideas: Did he exaggerate his criminal past for rhetorical effect in his Autobiography?⁷ Did he criticize Israel to gain the support of Arab governments, or because his "lived experiences brought him a deeper personal and intellectual understanding of Palestinian liberation"?⁸

Besides his own, scholarship on Malcolm X has almost exclusively focused on the perspective of *American* actors: The US government; the American civil rights movement, especially Martin

¹ Manning Marable's biography of Malcolm X won the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for History, Les Payne's won the 2020 National Book Award for Nonfiction and the 2021 Pulitzer Prize for Biography. See Manning Marable, *Malcolm X. A Life of Reinvention*, Viking, New York, 2010; and Les Payne, *The Dead Are Arising. The Life of Malcolm X*, New York, Liveright, 2020.

² Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson, *Malcolm X, Der Schwarze Revolutionär*, Munich, C.H. Beck, 2014.

³ Marika Sherwood, *Malcolm X Visits Abroad April 1964 – February 1965*, Hollywood CA, Tsehah Publishers, 2011; Stephen Tuck, *The Night Malcolm X Spoke At The Oxford Union*, Oakland CA, University of California Press, 2014.

⁴ Hisham Aidi, 'Du Bois, Ghana and Cairo Jazz: The Geo-Politics of Malcolm X', *Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Politics*, London, Routledge, 2018, p. 425.

⁵ Payne, *The Dead Are Arising*, p. 517.

⁶ The six-part series "Who Killed Malcolm X?" led to the reinvestigation of Malcolm X's 1965 murder and, in 2021, to the exoneration of two men wrongfully convicted for it. See Rachel Dretzin and Phil Bertelsen (dir.), *Who Killed Malcolm X?*, Fusion, 2020; and Marcus Clarke (dir.), *Blood Brothers: Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali*, Netflix, 2021.

⁷ Brandon M. Terry, "Malcolm's Ministry", *New York Review of Books*, 25 February 2021.

⁸ Hamzah Baig, "Spirit in Opposition: Malcolm X and the Question of Palestine", *Social Text*, Vol. 37, Issue 3, 2019, p. 59.

Luther King, Jr.; his family, including his wife, siblings, children, and mother⁹; the American public and media; and – outside of the United States – two American expatriate communities Malcolm met with in Ghana and Egypt¹⁰.

Methodologically, the scholarship on Malcolm X has always relied heavily on reinterpretation of old sources, first and foremost Malcolm's own words as recorded in speeches and interviews. Indeed, along with the redacted FBI files published in 1991¹¹, Malcolm X's Travel Diaries, accessible to scholars since 2008 and published in 2013¹², are among the very few significant new primary sources scholars have relied on in the over 60 years since his death.¹³

The result is a US-centric, unidirectional inquiry that contrasts with the predominant narrative of Malcolm X's life: Most biographical accounts highlight his deep interest in the Middle East and Africa as the inspiration behind the last of several transformations that characterized his life; and how his travels to those regions led him to "adopt true Islam's universalism" and influenced his intellectual evolution towards "a politics of Third World revolution."¹⁴

In fact, some American authors have remarked this unidirectional focus: Recalling Malcolm's visits to the Middle East and Africa and his endeavors to link US Black politics to the anti-colonial movements of the time, Joseph observes that "these events abroad [...] remain largely hidden from the public."¹⁵

2. Research objective: Assessing Malcolm X's international reception

I propose to turn the current predominantly American perspective 180° through a primary-source-driven analysis of contemporaneous regional sources in multiple languages. My objective is to complement the existing literature's unidirectional view of Malcolm X with an international perspective that gives agency to the societies that most inspired his final transformation, and to ultimately better gauge his reception abroad.

Main research questions include:

- Was Malcolm X widely known in the Middle East and Africa, i.e. did he make the news there, and how much coverage did he receive?

⁹ Anna Malaika Tubbs, *The Three Mothers: How the Mothers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and James Baldwin Shaped a Nation*, New York, Flatiron Books, 2021.

¹⁰ The Afro-American community in Cairo and its reception of Malcolm X is the subject of a novel by David Graham DuBois, ... *And Bid Him Sing*, Palo Alto CA, Ramparts Press, Inc., 1975.

¹¹ David Gallen (ed.), *Malcolm X, The FBI File*, New York, Skyhorse Publishing, 1991.

¹² Herb Boyd and Ilyasah Al-Shabazz (eds.), *The Diary of Malcolm X, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz 1964*, Chicago, Third World Press, 2013.

¹³ The mentioned Netflix series "Who Killed Malcolm X?" relied extensively on previously unknown police and US government records. Also, Patrick Parr used new primary sources including prison records and interviews and correspondence with former prison staff for his book on Malcolm X's life up to his release from prison in 1952. See: Patrick Parr, *Malcolm Before X*, Amherst and Boston, University of Massachusetts Press, 2024.

¹⁴ Marable, *Malcolm X. A Life of Reinvention*, 2010, p. 12.

¹⁵ Peniel E. Joseph, *The Sword and the Shield. The Revolutionary Lives of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.*, New York, Basic Books, 2020, p. 19.

- Was the evolution of Malcolm X's thought on religion and race acknowledged? For example, after his split with the Nation of Islam, was his message distinguished from the Nation's, and did observers take sides in their confrontation?
- Was press coverage substantive, i.e. were his ideas, and those of the Nation of Islam while he spoke on its behalf, reported and debated? For example, was his project to ally the African American struggle for civil rights to the global struggle for human rights understood and debated?
- Did contemporaneous anti-colonial movements in the region debate, accept or reject, Malcolm X?

3. Literature review: Malcolm X's reception in the Middle East and Africa

The proposed research will complement the extensive biographical literature, as well as studies examining the transnational ties of African Americans during Malcolm X's time. The following review highlights how neither strand focuses on the perspective of the societies Malcolm X embraced politically and spiritually.

Biographical literature on Malcolm X

Even the most detailed biographies largely stick to reporting Malcolm X's itinerary abroad and do not investigate how he was received there. Goldman's account (1979) of Malcolm's encounters abroad is squarely focused on Malcolm's experience, not that of his hosts. His descriptions of individual meetings remain anecdotal and are based on suspect documentation, for instance his claim without evidence that Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser "rather admired Malcolm", or his quotation of an American diplomat that Kenyan government officials "didn't know who in the hell [Malcolm] was."¹⁶

Perry (1991) explains the roles of a number of regional contacts like the influential Saudi Azzam family, who intervened to grant Malcolm X permission to enter Mecca.¹⁷ But the closest Perry comes to relating local views is the anecdote about Saudi king Faisal "criticizing the Black Muslim movement", and telling Malcolm that "there was an abundance of material written in English about Islam, so that ignorance was no excuse."¹⁸

¹⁶ Peter Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1979, p. 208 and p. 214.

¹⁷ Bruce Perry, *Malcolm. The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America*, Barrytown NY, Station Hill Press, 1991, p. 265.

¹⁸ Perry, *Malcolm. The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America*, p. 267.

Thursday, September 6, 1962 DAILY NATION

BLACK SECT 'NOT TRUE MUSLIMS'

THE report in your issue of August 30 to the effect that the United States Congress is to investigate the activities of so-called "Black Muslims" in the States is interesting. A friend of ours touring the United States has sent us some publications showing the way which this sect operates, and its beliefs.

For the information of your readers and other Muslims, we would like to state that having gone through these publications, we are surprised as to why such a sect should call itself "Muslims."

They do not preach or practice anything that Islam teaches, and as you state in your daily, they call their mosques "temples" and their leaders are called "Ministers."

The Islamic ideology is that God is one, that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is His prophet, and that he is the last of the prophets.

Any group or sect which calls itself Muslim must first accept these principles and there can be no compromise on them.

The leader of the so-called "Black Muslims," Elijah Muhammad, calls himself a prophet and a study of his speeches in the publications of the sect reveal very clearly the political trends of the Negro community. We are not concerned with the political aspirations of American Negroes, but to use Islam as a cloak for their activities is to be condemned.

S. A. Rahoon,
Secretary-General,
Young Muslim League,
Nairobi.

Consulate given a warning

THE Portuguese Consul in Mombasa has denied allegations of the robbery of property belonging to Indians in Mozambique, but this has in fact been confirmed by the Portuguese Consul-General in Nairobi.

In typical distortion, the Nairobi Consul-General euphemistically describes this seizure of Indian property as "having been frozen" under a decree of the Portuguese State, which property will be duly "liquidated" and the "balance of the liquidation will be deposited and frozen in the bank of issue."

DECREE

He then cites a decree in an apparent effort to justify this, but we all know that even when dictatorship use decrees to rule this does not give them sanctions of law or justice.

Letter to the editor in *The Daily Nation* (Kenya), 6 September 1962.

Marable's biography (2010) covers all three of Malcolm's visits to the Middle East and Africa with an unprecedented level of granularity but hardly investigates Malcolm's reception there. Where consideration is given to his reception abroad, it relates to Malcolm's experience, not his counterparts'. For example:

"A high point for Malcolm during his Egyptian stay [in 1964] was a reception in his honor in Alexandria, hosted by the Supreme Council on Islamic Affairs... More than eight hundred Muslim students representing ninety-three countries were present to hear the SCIA announce that it would award Malcolm's organization twenty tuition-free scholarships to attend Al Azhar University. *Malcolm was overwhelmed, writing to Betty that the event was 'the biggest and warmest reception of my life' "* [my emphasis].¹⁹

Waldschmidt-Nelson's (2015) assertion that "African newspapers published articles about Malcolm's travels on a daily basis as well as a few of his own texts"²⁰ is based on other biographies, none of which actually analyze said press coverage.

Assensoh's *Malcolm X and Africa* (2015) never asks what his hosts thought of Malcolm. We learn of an encounter of potential significance, with the Angolan rebel leader Jonas Savimbi in November 1964 in Geneva²¹. But Assensoh shares no further details and provides no source of this information, which, it must be noted, is not reported in any of the biographies. Lubin (2015) adds color to Malcolm's encounters in Beirut in 1964, during which Malcolm "met with members of Lebanon's newly formed Muslim Brotherhood", though he provides no further information on the Brotherhood's reaction to, views of, or conclusions from that meeting.²² Les Payne (2020) contributed important new insights into Malcolm's life and assassination, but not regarding his reception abroad.²³

Perhaps the most targeted study of Malcolm X's time abroad is provided by Sherwood (2011), whose analysis is limited in time to the final year of Malcolm's life and geographically to English-speaking West Africa. But Sherwood is not primarily concerned with the views of those who met Malcolm. Rather, her motivation is to understand how his political philosophy might have evolved through his encounters in Africa had he lived longer – the "destination he was prevented from reaching".²⁴

Lacy (1968) represents the exception: His rich account of Malcolm's visit to Accra in May 1964 introduces us to Ghanaian student politics of the time, as well as the debate that played out in the Ghanaian press after Malcolm's departure.²⁵ In so doing, Lacy provides the kind of granular understanding that scholarship generally lacks on the topic of Malcolm X's reception abroad - one

¹⁹ Marable, *Malcolm X. A Life of Reinvention*, p. 364.

²⁰ Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson, *Malcolm X, Der Schwarze Revolutionär*, p. 240.

²¹ Assensoh and Alex-Assensoh, *Malcolm X and Africa*, p. 61.

²² Alex Lubin, "Between the Secular and the Sectarian: Malcolm X's Afro-Arab Political Imaginary", *Journal of Africana Religions*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2015, p. 92.

²³ Payne, *The Dead Are Arising*, 2020.

²⁴ Sherwood, *Malcolm X Visits Abroad April 1964 – February 1965*, p. 9.

²⁵ Leslie Alexander Lacy, "African Responses to Malcolm X", in LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal, *Black Fire: an Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, New York, Morrow, 1968.

that is nuanced and diverse in opinion, and grounded in the views of those Malcolm encountered, not his own.²⁶

Literature on postcolonial international solidarity

The literature on African Americans' transnational ties with postcolonial societies also considers Malcolm X. For example, Plummer (2012) highlights how Malcolm underscored the "link between the [Vietnam] war and racial oppression".²⁷ In a chapter on "Malcolm X and the rise of global solidarity" Frischbach (2018) recalls Malcolm's embrace of the "interconnectedness between Arabs and American Blacks", recounts his relationship with Arabs in the US, and describes his challenge to them to "make more of an effort to reach the millions of colored people in America who are related to the Arabs by blood."²⁸ But neither Frischbach nor any other author on transnational solidarity investigates the views of those Malcolm expressed solidarity with.

4. Feasibility and initial findings

My ongoing archival investigation suggests that there is strong reason to believe that the volume of material, including contemporaneous newspaper and magazine articles, academic papers and books in various languages, will be sufficient to sustain a systematic analysis. And while press coverage was typically most frequent during Malcolm's visits to each publication's country and peaked after his death, that finding itself contradicts *The New York Times'* claim after his death that the world was paying "Little Attention to Malcolm Slaying".²⁹

Preliminary insights include:

- i. **Regional sources can challenge our understanding of Malcolm's reception abroad.** For example, Malcolm X was received by Al Azhar University in Cairo as an emissary of the Nation in 1959, again after his split from the group in May 1964; and a third time in August of that year when Al Azhar certified his credentials to teach Islam. While these encounters suggest religious acceptance, that inference may contrast with what was written – or omitted – in Al Azhar's in-house magazine *Majallat al Azhar* during the same period.



Majallat al Azhar, June 1962.

²⁶ The 26-minute documentary "Malcolm X And The Sudanese" is a rare example of a deliberate attempt to document a non-American perspective. See Sophie Schrago (dir.), "Malcolm X And The Sudanese", 2020, available at <https://vimeo.com/394471323>.

²⁷ Brenda Gayle Plummer, *In Search of Power. African Americans In the Area of Colonization, 1956 - 1974*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 140.

²⁸ Michael R. Frischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, Stanford University Press, 2018, p. 11.

²⁹ "World Pays Little Attention to Malcolm Slaying", *New York Times*, 28 February 1965.

In 1962 this monthly magazine published a two-part review of C. Eric Lincoln's seminal "The Black Muslims in America" (1961).³⁰ Its author, the renowned Egyptian intellectual Abbas Al Aqqad (1889 – 1964), reports the Nation of Islam's beliefs as described by Lincoln, including the manifestation of Allah in 1930s Chicago and the Nation's leader Elijah Muhammad being his prophet. But Al Aqqad conveniently "excludes" the possibility that "people who read the Quran and know about the prophet's life" would hold such beliefs.

In all, between 1959 – when Malcolm X was first received at Al Azhar, and 1968, this journal carried at least six articles on various aspects of Islam in America, including several by Mahmud Yusuf Al Shawarbi, who prominently features in Malcolm X biographies as a US-based Middle Eastern Muslim Malcolm consulted during his transition to Sunni Islam. But not once does this publication discuss the Nation of Islam's eccentric religious beliefs. Were its doctrines and mythology not considered to warrant further discussion, or did other considerations forbid doing so?

ii. **The reception of Malcolm X by contemporaneous anticolonial movements warrants broader investigation.** While the literature on international solidarity provides a US-centric perspective on the African American interest in postcolonial societies, to what extent this was reciprocated remains to be determined. For example, the official organ of the Algerian Liberation Movement, *Al Moudjahid*, frequently reported on anticolonial revolutions in other countries as well as US international politics, but it did not specifically discuss Malcolm X.

Readers of *Révolution Africaine*, published from 1962 in French in Algiers to "express Algeria's solidarity with other liberation movements around the world"³¹ would have read multiple long and detailed articles on the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X, both before and after his death. Would a thorough review of the publications of contemporaneous African national liberation movements show that he was recognized as an ally?



"A Turning Point?" Full page story in *Révolution Africaine* (Algeria) on Malcolm X's 'Organization of Afro-American Unity'.

³⁰ "What Is Said About Islam: The Black Muslims in America", *Majallat al Azhar*, June 1962 and July 1962.

³¹ Nacer-Eddine Layadi, "Algeria: The Costs of Clientelism", in Carola Richter and Claudia Kozman (eds.), *Arab Media Systems*, Cambridge, Open Book Publishers, 2021, p. 290.

- iii. **Interpretation of individual sources can be challenging; but a holistic analysis of coverage can provide insights.** For example, a systematic analysis of the full archive of the Egyptian *Al Ahram*, the region's largest daily newspaper at the time, shows that coverage of Malcolm X was limited (seven mentions 1959 – 65), and only substantive in the immediate aftermath of his assassination; but not for lack of interest in American racial politics, on which *Al Ahram* reported extensively (54 articles in the same time frame³²). The question to ask is therefore not whether Malcolm X was unknown altogether, but, rather, why this paper chose not to report on him more often?

5. Methodological approach

Key elements of my methodological approach to the topic are building the empirical base and defining the limits of the topic of study.

Regional primary sources

In order to 'look through the eyes' of the societies Malcolm X repeatedly visited and sought to ally to his cause, and to relocate the empirical center of study to those regions³³ I have started a collection of contemporaneous regional sources from the Middle East and Africa.³⁴

Systematized in a database these records can be mined, represented graphically, and linked to identify relationships.³⁵ Indeed, I am particularly interested to complement a qualitative analysis with quantitative methods to show, for example, the volume of coverage across time and space, and around key biographical events.

Delimiting the topic of study

My preliminary research confirms that reporting on racial politics in America was extensive in contemporaneous Middle Eastern and African sources. This suggests that



"Africa's revolution liberated America's Negroes", reporting on Martin Luther King, Jr. in Egyptian weekly *Al Musawwar*, 17 July 1964.

³² For this analysis, articles on US racial politics were identified as those containing the terms "American Negro(es)" (Arabic: *zanji/zunuj amrika*), the prevalent term used at the time in *Al Ahram* to refer to African Americans, and those mentioning Martin Luther King, Jr.

³³ An inspiration for this approach for the study of postcolonial history is provided by Cyrus Schayegh (ed.), *Globalizing the U.S. Presidency*, London, Bloomsbury Press, 2020.

³⁴ While I have to date collected around 1000 contemporaneous press articles, academic papers and books stemming from the Middle East and Africa, audio (i.e. radio) and audiovisual (i.e. television) material could enrich this empirical database, though its availability from regional sources remains to be determined.

³⁵ The Wilson Center Digital Archive's visualization tool serves as an inspiration.

Malcolm X's coverage should be analyzed in the context of reporting on the broader American civil rights movement.

Such a wider scope of analysis would allow for comparison of attention paid to Malcolm X in the Middle East and Africa with other prominent figures of the time, particularly Martin Luther King, Jr., to whom Malcolm X was sometimes juxtaposed, and the Nation of Islam's most prominent member and international media sensation, heavyweight boxer Muhammad Ali Clay. Both received extensive coverage.

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