This paper will focus on how the seemingly humdrum work of US military logistics in the Middle East—transport of supplies and soldiers, establishment and management of bases and materiel warehouses—is today as transformative as the wielding of violence, though far less understood and studied. In interrogating the relations of US militaries with large commercial firms (headquartered both in the region and outside of it) that provide strategic mobility and logistical infrastructures, I aim to view the role of private enterprise and privatisation of military functions in a different way than what has become fairly prevalent. Significant works of historical sociology have delineated the mechanisms through which warfare as social and political practice, and militaries as vast and powerful institutions, transform social and political relations over time and shape the contours of states, nations, genders, “races”, rights, and social stratification (Aron 1966; Barkawi 2006; Best 1982; Bond 1986; Downing 1992; Enloe 1989; McNeil 1982; Mann 1986; 1993; Shaw ed. 1984; Skocpol 1992; Tilly 1993; Ware 2012). Given the extent to which warfare has been a feature of politics in the Middle East, it is surprising that more has not been written in recent years on the ways in which militaries—as social and political institutions—transform socioeconomic relations, urban landscapes, and strategic infrastructures in the region (but see Abdel-Malek 1968; Ayubi 1996; Barnett 1992; Heydemann ed. 2000; Kandil 2012; Massad 2001; Vatikiotis 1961 most of which study the converse problematic: the effect of extant social relations on the making of militaries). This paper will examine the effect of the deployment, basing, and drawdown of the US military (rather than indigenous militaries) in the region on the emergence of such relations and infrastructures. Geopolitical shifts in the 1970s entailed a pivoting of US military presence to the Middle East, and the Persian Gulf specifically (Palmer 1992; Yetiv 2008). Establishment of recognised and de-facto military bases in the southern littoral states of the Gulf (and Turkey and Pakistan) in the 1990s had a significant impact on how both strategic infrastructures and business sectors developed in these countries. After 11 September 2001, the massive insertion of US military personnel and materiel into the Middle East, South Asia, and East Africa all led to the emergence or consolidation of vast networks comprised of local and international capital, US military formations, and local government accommodations, much of which relied on an often invisible army of “third-country” workers without whom the establishment of both permanent and transient military bases, or the strategic transport of men and materiel would have been impossible. What I aim to do in this project is to examine the political sociology of this major social transformation through tracing the emergence of ports, harbours, transport infrastructures, and logistics businesses in Kuwait. Given that Kuwait has been the staging ground for the War on Iraq, a number of significant logistics firms have emerged (often out of existing corporate forms) to take advantage of such large-scale movement of personnel and materiel. Among them, Agility is notable, both because of its massive size, the fact that after Halliburton/KBR was the largest recipient of US contracts in Iraq, and that it has parlayed its US military contracts into a global commercial reach which now sees it finding new markets in Africa. The paper will analyse how a boom in commercial logistics activity as a result of US military presence or decamping can influence local commercial organisation and urban infrastructure (ports, warehousing, rails, roads, airports, etc.) in the countries that serve as US hosts. I will argue that in this confluence of transnational commerce, US military presence, and local government coercion gives a more comprehensive sense of the broader
sociological effects of the war – not just in the countries that have served as the battlefield, but in the region as a whole.