

Shaping the Middle East

As **Fred Halliday** prepared to leave LSE after 25 years he offered five pointers for the continued study of the Middle East in one of two farewell – or, as he preferred to call them, transitional – lectures.

LSE is a unique and valuable place in which to study the Middle East. It is an independent institution, where academics pursue, whatever the difficulties, sustained and high level research and teaching on the region. And the School provides a context for free and open discussion of the Middle East, something that is of great value.

With this in mind – and drawing on 25 years experience at LSE – I would like to set out five themes which should, in my view, govern the social science study of the Middle East at LSE.



History

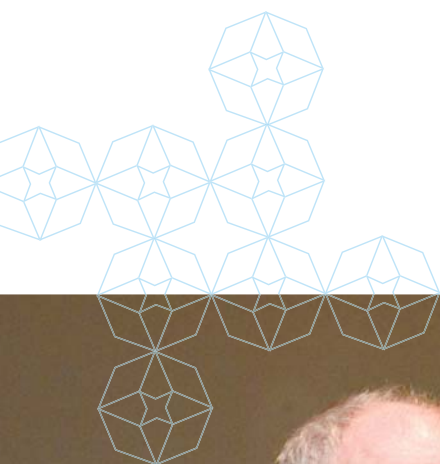
We need to see the region not in its millennial abstraction and mystification, but as, like Europe, Latin America and East Asia, a product of modern international economic, political and social forces. History is indeed essential to explaining the map that we have, the conflicts within it, the character of states and economies, but this should be modern world history, not the invocation of timeless and hypostatized forces. As in Europe, some contemporary Middle Eastern states have a degree of continuity with those of a thousand years ago: Iran, Oman, Yemen, Egypt and Morocco can make such a claim. But the character of these states today, and the activities they engage in, owe little or nothing, beyond the symbolic, to earlier times.

The use of religion and culture in contemporary Middle Eastern society is not the result of some age-old, atavistic, historically continuous influence of holy texts and unshifting identities, but rather the result of the impact on the region of the ideologies and tensions of the modern world (and the region's response): neither Ayatollah Khomeini, nor Osama bin Laden, can be understood by reading ancient books or dredging up medieval thought patterns. They are, in the content of their ideology, in their mode of political action, in their uses of violence, and, most importantly, in their stated objective, which is to capture and retain control of states, part of the modern world.



States

As in all politics and international relations, the starting point for the study of this region should be the state, this seen in historical sociological terms as consisting of the institutions of coercion, administration and territorial delimitation: it is states that shape identities, religions, economies. There is no such thing as the Middle Eastern state, the oriental state, the Arab state, the Islamic state: there are entities which rule, coerce, tax, spend, mobilise, in the modern regional and international context in which they find themselves. And, equally importantly, it is the desire to control the state, or else to set up their own separate state, as today with the Kurds, Palestinians and Southern Sudanese, and earlier with the Zionist movement in Palestine, that explains the politics of opposition groups, be they democratic, authoritarian or insurrectionary.



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Culture

In the Middle East as elsewhere, be it China, Poland, or the Midwest states of the USA, issues of culture and religion do matter in explaining political attitudes and behaviour. But culture broadly defined, including religion, does not in itself explain modern politics, social behaviour or international relations. Nor can the cultural legacy or past of a country explain its character today. Culture matters as far as the language and presentation of political and social issues is concerned, and cultural or ethnic affinity can serve, in international relations, to motivate some forms of solidarity and concern, be this among Muslims, Armenians or Jews. But far too much of the study of the contemporary Middle East takes culture as a given, and as, in social science terms, an independent and explanatory variable, instead of seeing it as itself shaped by modern, domestic and international forces: the latter is much more important than is conventionally realised, for much of the content and power of Islamist ideology is a form of nationalism, one that is a reaction to foreign control and influence, real or imagined, and much of its programme is a straightforward third world populist one, of an independent state, general redistribution of wealth and cultural and social conservatism.

We need to turn the issue of culture and politics on its head. Much more important than the question of how culture has affected, or now affects, international relations, is that of how international relations, and global forces, be they war, economic change, ideological fashion, not to mention the rising demand for oil, have shaped local cultures and reformulations of religion, as well as forms of state, society and economy.



Economics

Fourthly, amidst all the talk of Islam, ethnic hatred, history, culture and so forth, it is easy to forget the role, important in many cases, if not quite determinant 'in the last instance', of economic factors. One of the best introductory moves in understanding the modern Middle East, how it was formed, and why it has the social and political forms it has, is to study economic history: hence the importance of the work of such writers as Charles Issawi, Roger Owen, Caylar Keyder, Galal Amin, and, in the person of the first and current incumbent of the Chair in Turkish Studies at LSE, Professor Sevket Pamuk. If one wants to understand why and how external powers have dominated, partitioned, controlled and intervened in the Middle East, then economic factors remain central to the story, not only in regard to oil and gas extraction, which form the largest industries

and the most traded commodities in the world, but also in regard to markets, and, of enormous if often only partly visible importance, to the recycling and reinvestment of oil revenues.

The second largest commodity in value terms is, of course, drugs, and here too Middle Eastern societies, producers such as Afghanistan, and countries for the transit of money and of drugs themselves, which include many in the region, are central to the world market. For all the talk of how different, unique, and culture-specific the Arab world or Iran is, it is money, in terms of rent appropriation, corruption, pure greed in many cases, not to mention the current way of ostentatious and culturally questionable spending in the Gulf states, that explains much of what goes on. All Middle Eastern societies, indeed all Muslim societies too, are driven by money and the competition for it, as are all others.



Political actors

Finally, we need to get into proportion the role of different forces, and of different kinds of state, in the recent and contemporary history of the Middle East region. By this I mean above all two things. On the one hand, we can see how, in terms of external perception, and in terms of the activities of local forces, a definite region does exist, where competing and/or neighbouring forces within the region are aware of each other and of how, especially in recent years, opposition and armed groups operate across frontiers. Yet even as such regional forces are at play, be it in regard to nuclear weapons, migration flows or terrorism, the 25 countries of the region remain distinct and in some ways separated from each other, a system of interacting units but not a homogenous whole.

This means that with specific conflicts, such as the Arab-Israeli dispute, or the Iran-Iraq war, or now the multi-layered war in Iraq, we should be careful how far we see these conflicts as dominating, or defining, the region as a whole. It is often implied, by Israelis and by Arabs, that the Palestine question is 'the' Middle Eastern question, or that it determines the region as a whole. That it is an important, tragic and dangerous conflict we can agree, and it has certainly, in some periods, shaped the politics of its neighbours, be it Egypt in the late 1940s or Lebanon in the 1980s. But the Arab-Israeli dispute is far from being the only, or the formative, conflict in the Middle East, and, indeed, the influence of Israel on the politics of its neighbours has, beyond the disruptions of now six wars, been limited: on the one occasion that Israel did try to establish a client state in the region, in Lebanon in 1983, it failed.

As for what the regional impact of the Iraq war will be, it is too early to say, and, for sure, the spread of violence and the rising conflict between Sunni and Shia have had, and will continue to have, repercussions across the region. Again, however, it is too simple, or at least far too premature, to claim that what happens in Iraq will determine the history of the region as a whole.

The other dimension of regional proportion that we need to consider is that of the relative roles of external and internal forces. Historically, in the 19th century, in the two World Wars, under colonialism, and in the Cold War, it was conventional to see the Middle East through the lens of external, or 'great', powers – Britain, France and Russia, and later also the USA. Today there is a temptation still to do this, whether through an emphasis on globalisation or the policies of the Bush administration, or, as is common in continental Europe above all, analysing the Middle East through the prism of EU policy and the Barcelona Process. These forces and actors were, and are, important, but we should not allow this external perspective, let alone the easier availability of western archives and contacts, to obscure what has, at least since the 1950s, been the case, namely that the dominant drivers of Middle Eastern regional politics are the regional states themselves.

In terms of modern state formation and international politics, above all in matters of waging war, Turkey and Iran, Israel and Egypt, Yemen and Saudi Arabia, Algeria and Morocco, not to mention the uncontrollable Libya, acted on their own accord. The same is evident today: even as the USA and/or the European Union express their views on the region, the local states pay scant attention. Thus the Palestinians elect Hamas, the Israelis build their settlements and their wall, the Turks refuse to compromise with Kurdish nationalism, the Iranians defy western pressure, the Saudis maintain their autocratic regime, the Egyptians and Tunisians manipulate their elections, all the oil producers push up prices and so forth.

If there is a challenge, political and analytic, to the dominance of regional states, it comes from a different quarter: in the broader context of modern Middle Eastern history, and, above all, in the light of the situation in Iraq today, it may be a third kind of actor – not great powers, and not regional states, but non-state or actors from below, be they violent or peaceful – which may pose the greatest challenge and which may have the greatest impact. We have already seen, in the Iranian revolution of now 30 years ago, in the spread of influence of the Muslim Brotherhood through many key states, including Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Kuwait, and, most spectacularly, in the rise of Al Qaeda and related or Al Qaeda inspired organisations, how it is these forces, not the governments of the region, or London, Moscow or Washington, who shape the politics of the region. If you are sitting in positions of power in Middle Eastern countries today, in Baghdad, Kabul, Islamabad, Beirut, Damascus, Riyadh, Ramallah, Amman to name but the most obvious eight, yet a third of the total, this question, of the survival of the current state itself, must be the dominant uncertainty about the future. ■



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