

# Social Science and the Middle East: myths, pitfalls and opportunities

[Department of International Relations, public lecture, LSE 7 January 2008]

## 1. Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen, Director, colleagues and friends, first, let me thank you for attending this lecture, on what is for many a rather pressed first day of term. Tonight, in the first of two broad lectures I am giving this term, I want to discuss and make the case for the academic study of the Middle East, examine some of the opportunities and pitfalls it presents and also argue that, in a broad social science institution like the LSE, the study of regions and countries, including of the Middle East, has had, and should continue to have, an important place. As many of you know these two lectures I am giving coincide with my leaving the school, after 25 years on the teaching staff, to take up a Research Chair in Barcelona. I do not, however, see these talks as, in a real sense, conclusions, let alone farewells: my association with LSE, first as a Master's student at SOAS, then as a PhD student here, began in 1967 a decade and a half before I became a member of staff, and I would very hope, in building links between LSE and institutions in Catalonia, and in continuing to teach and supervise on a part-time basis for the International Relations Department here, to continue that association. The LSE has been a very important, creative and supportive, part of my life and has done me the great honour of making me a Professor here. I could not envisage life without a continuing link with it. So, rather than being either 'inaugurals' or 'valedictories' I would see these lectures as mid-stream overviews, as, to coin a term, 'transitionals'.

Before moving to academic and intellectual issues, let me briefly resume the reasons for studying the Middle East in terms of public significance and public debate. The Middle East, this term now seen as covering the 22 or so Arab states, plus Turkey, Israel, Iran and Afghanistan, is the area of the non-European or third world closest to Europe. As I shall explain later, the modern Middle East is in large measure a creation of European policies, in drawing the map of states, forming and sustaining the institutions of power, and being the source of most of the political ideas, be they nationalism, socialism,

fascism, populism that have shaped the region's recent history. Here, however, I want to focus, by way of initial engagement with two issues, first our responsibilities, political and moral to the region and its peoples, secondly on how the region affects us, the impact of the Middle East on Europe,

First, briefly, on responsibility. What we today call Europe and the Middle East, two artificial but reasonable terms, have been in interaction for thousands of years. Europe has taken its major religions from that region, indeed the oldest place of worship in London, in Great Victoria St., in the City is a temple to the Persian god Mithras, dating from the second century AD. Within ten minutes walk of LSE stands the fourteenth century Temple church, erected by Crusaders on their return from Jerusalem. Our responsibilities towards the Middle East may not be greater than they are to the rest of the world, or to our European partners, but they are equal: to help, as far as we can, and without overstating Europe's and Britain's potential, in ensuring the peace, stability and prosperity of the region, and to maintain, in regard to the 400 million people of this region the same commitment to international law, democratic freedom and human rights that we apply to ourselves in the rest of the world. One of the greatest myths of the contemporary era, one sustained by fanatics and bigots in the Middle East as much as in the post-imperial and for ever arrogant west, is that somehow the peoples of the non-Atlantic world, and in particular the peoples of the Middle East, are exempt from, indifferent to, or unaware of the basic rights that we have fought, over centuries of revolt and collective political action, and in the wars of the twentieth century, to sustain.

An elementary commitment to international law, universal codes of human rights as defined by the various covenants of the United Nations, and a basic knowledge of human beings, let alone familiarity with these countries, and I have visited every one, would suggest the opposite: every country has its particular cultural, legal and historic features, but the right to independence, to decent government, to individual security, to education, to basic human respect and equality are as universal as the rising and setting of the sun. All nationalisms, even the most benign such as those of the countries of Scandinavia, presume an element of superiority for their peoples, and the Middle East is not exception. Yet, the basic complaint of Middle Eastern peoples, and the underpinning of all the nationalist movements the region has paid host to, whether Arab, Iranian, Jewish, Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian, is not that their peoples are entitled to special

treatment, but that they are entitled to equal treatment with the rest of the world. That commitment, the subject of the outstanding Centre for the Study of Human Rights that we have at LSE, of which I had the privilege of being the first director, contradicts, and overrides, all the claptrap we have heard in recent years about the clash of civilisations, cultural relativism, faith communities and other neo-obscurantist regression to which too many, in political life, as in universities and the press, have ceded ground.

Let me now turn to the second general point I wish to make, concerning the impact on Europe of this region. Most obviously, in a way that is not true for another part of the world, the region's borders and conflicts abut Europe, its migrants increasingly inhabit European cities, you can get on a train or a bus and go there, as I did when I was a student 42 years ago. In four hours of air travel from London you can be in half the countries of the region. In centuries past it provided Europe with all three of the major religions that have, and to some degree still, define a part of our values. Today the Middle East accounts for, and will probably continue to account for, much of Europe's energy needs, many of its markets and much of its investment capital. Most of the hard drugs on our streets, and which have killed many of our young people and will for sure kill more, come from or through the region. In issues of conflict Europe and the Middle East are also locked together, most evidently in the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Europe, it should never be forgotten, has visited much violence on the Middle East, much more than the Middle East has visited upon us, but this does not overshadow or negate the very real, and in all likelihood long-lasting, threat which Islamist violence poses to our societies as it does, on a far larger scale, to Middle Eastern societies themselves.

In terms of recent history and contemporary public debate, the Middle East is of great and recurrent significance, even if the number of those qualified to speak on it, or who have knowledge of its history or languages, are very few. If we look at the major countries of Europe, then the impact of the Middle East on them has, in modern times, been immense: the Fourth French Republic fell, exactly fifty years ago, in 1958, because of the war in Algeria, even as Sarkozy was elected as President last year on the back of an anti-immigrant and anti-Turkish sentiment; the Soviet Union fell for a variety of reasons, but the war in Afghanistan, a 'bleeding wound' as Gorbachev called

it, certainly played its part, in delegitimizing the state and the army; the history of Spain in the early twentieth century, with the growing tensions of an army embroiled in the wars of Morocco, was strongly affected by events in North Africa, where General Franco first staged his coup d'état of July 1936. The impact of the Middle East on the USA has also been considerable: it was the Iranian hostage's crisis of 1979-1981 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that destroyed the credibility of President Jimmy Carter, and it was the discovery of covert dealings with Tehran, in the 'Irangate' scandal, that tarnished more than anything the reputation of the Reagan Administration. As for the Presidency of George W. Bush, we need only think of the impact of 9/11 in 2001, and of the war raging in Iraq since 2003 to see how far the politics and reputation of the current President have been affected by the region.

In Britain the two greatest political divides of the post-World War II era have concerned the Middle East: Suez in 1956, and the Iraq war today. Indeed the Middle East has ended the political lives of, or at least several discredited, no less than three British prime ministers in modern times: Lloyd George, who led Britain to victory in World War I, and successfully negotiated a treaty with Ireland, was to fall, in October 1922, over the Chanak crisis, the failure of the British government to honour its commitment to prevent a Turkish nationalist advance on Istanbul. Anthony Eden, prime minister during Suez, had to leave office ignominiously, once the USA opposed the invasion of Egypt which he had planned in secret with France and Israel.

Most recently, Tony Blair, a man of considerable intelligence and principle, and with plenty of political courage, whom I voted for in 1997, and on the advisory council of his and Robin Cook's new Foreign Policy Centre I then agreed to serve, made the most disastrous error of his career in aligning Britain with the invasion of Iraq, drawing this country into a war that is as unpopular within the armed forces as it is within the public at large and which has done Britain immense harm across the Middle East and the Muslim world. This is arguably the biggest policy mistake of any British prime minister in modern history. It is too early to judge Blair's premiership as a whole, and much will depend on how things turn out in Iraq: but even were the current Baghdad regime to survive, something that is improbable but, not impossible, and which is, given the likely alternatives, in broad terms desirable, the dismal record of miscalculation, misinformation and delusion, about the USA as much as about Iraq, will remain, as will

his indulgence of corruption in dealings with countries in the Middle East. Those who have followed recent press coverage of the British departure from Basra, and the totally unconvincing arguments, indeed the brazen falsifications, put out by official spokesmen on this matter, can only lament the degeneration of official discourse and veracity which this episode has revealed. Here we may recall the words of the noted historian of the Middle East, Professor Malcolm Yapp, in regard to the overall British record in the region: ‘chucked out, run out and bunked out’, Iraq being a dramatic example of the last. For this reason, and for all those mentioned above, this is a region whose contemporary politics, economics and culture we cannot and should not ignore.

To these issues of political debate we should add the broader challenge of studying, understanding, relating to, and, at times, arguing with a region of the world about which few people have any first hand or specialised knowledge, but which, for all the historical and contemporary reasons already mentioned, arouses passion, of identity and of hatred and fear, in our societies. The real challenge posed by these issues can be met only by serious, sustained and informed study of this region, by continued training of people who know its history, languages and sensibilities, who, among other things, can question claims about the role of culture and religion in politics, who can stand up to the propaganda and distortion put out by diaspora communities of all stripes, who are, in a word, experts, and independent ones, on this region. There are not many such people in the world, less than 50 by my count, and there is a crying need for them, in public life as much as in universities. The failure to train and support such people, and to value and promote their expertise, leaves the way open to the domination of public debate by a wide range of impostors and mediocrities – experts on security, such as terrorism or nuclear proliferation, who divorce their analyses from politics or history; bearded bigots claiming to speak on behalf of faiths and communities; quick fix consultants running from one Beltway fashion to another; spokesmen, lobbyists and propagandists for every one-sided nationalist cause in the region; indulgent and often glossy apologists, modern equivalents of what the Korean terms *munaſiqin*, ‘hypocrites’, in effect PR mercenaries for the authoritarian regimes of the region, regimes who, in pursuit of competition with each other aim to build the tallest tower, the largest state mosque or the most expansive artificial island, but who have never aspired to build a single decent library or fund independent academic research. To say that there is an urgent, and increasing, need for

such people, whether in universities, the media, government or business is an understatement.

Against this background let us also recall what makes LSE such a unique and valuable place, in regard to the Middle East and other troubled areas of the world. We are an independent institution, we do pursue, whatever the difficulties, sustained and high level research and teaching on the region, we do have a large number of alumni, from the region and working as expatriates in the region, who represent the skills and vision of the School. We provide at LSE, with some ups and downs, a context for free and open discussion of the region, something that is of great value. LSE, as so many students here have noted, is a special, perhaps unique place when it comes to the meeting of peoples from different sides of a conflict. For this reason, as well as for general reasons of intellectual and academic openness, I am myself opposed to all forms of boycott and refusal to engage, and would make clear my refusal to accept any such limits: in the past three years alone I have lectured at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and met representatives of Hizbullah and of Hamas. I have also lectured to audiences in the Islamic Republic of Iran and in the Saddam Hussein College of Law and Politics in Baghdad. This I consider to be part of my job: to engage, to listen, to argue, indeed disagreement, based on prior understanding, is the most important part of any international, or so-called intercultural, dialogue. In this too, in the sustaining of the intellectual values we have, and of the broad humanistic, universalistic and, may I add, secular perspective of our founders and predecessors, we have a major responsibility to bear and sustain, and not least in regard to the Middle East and those who live and work in it.

Here I would, however, wish to record here my immense gratitude to the School, to the many colleagues with an interest in the Middle East, and to the students working on or originating from that region, for the collaboration, interaction and support they have given me over these past years. I have really only one word to say, and that is ‘Thank You’, for all the backing, personal, intellectual and moral which they have provided in this regard. The outcome of all this is evident for all of us – hundreds of students who have taken our courses, some dozens of PhDs, many memorable seminars and conferences, and, on a lighter note, but one with many regional resonances and

variations, the gifts which students from the region have tended to bring. One of the secrets of being a teacher at LSE is that you learn as least as much from your students, as they do from you. I recall an occasion when I wanted to find out the different words used, and the nuances of meaning associated with them, in Middle Eastern languages for 'heritage', something no library and no website will tell you. So I contacted a Turkish student, an Israeli, a Persian and an Arab, and without 24 hours had the information on my desk. Perhaps nothing illustrates the different character, and the cultural individuality, of these students than the present they occasionally bring, to mark the completion of a PhD, or the end of the year, or a specific national holiday like Nuruz, 21 March, the start of the Persian New Year. The Iraqis and Gulf Arabs bring dates, the Yemenis coffee, the Sudanese carved ebony, the Egyptians filafil, the Israelis honey or CDs, the 'shamis' – Lebanese, Syrians, Jordanians, Palestinians – bring hilwiat, baklava and other nut laden sweets, the Turks bring raki or luhum, Turkish delight, and the Armenians bring brandy.

Of many incidents I can recall I remember a meeting held in his hall three years by a committee composed jointly of Palestinian and Israeli students, which I had the honour of introducing. I recall the visit to LSE during the Iraqi occupation of his country of Dr. Muhammad al Rumaihi, one of the most important intellectuals in the Gulf: addressing students in the New Theatre, few of whom had ever seen a Kuwaiti before, he put his case with memorable clarity. 'I am like you, a social scientist, a sociologist. My country has been occupied. We need your help'. I also recall a meeting in the Vera Anstey room in early 2005 when Dr. Saad Jawad, an old Iraqi friend from students days, never a Ba'thist, but someone who knew Saddam well and saw him on a regular basis till very near the end, held an audience that included most of the Peninsula Arab ambassadors enthralled by his account. Neither could be clearer, more universally understandable. The Iranian businessman, a staunch monarchist, whom I met at a conference in the early 1990s and who expressed an enthusiastic, somewhat overstated, admiration for LSE and in particular for the Department of International Relations. I remember a visit by a group of academics from the Israeli university of Bar Ilan, led by Professor Efraim Inbar, no dove on these matters, after which a Saudi student, a member of his country's royal family, a graduate of Sandhurst and an officer in his country's armed forces, came up to thank me for arranging the meeting. 'I always meet the nice people', he said, 'but these are the ones I wanted to hear. Only at LSE would that be possible'. I recall too the

MSc student who at the end of the academic year came to me for career advice: he was hoping to go into the arms trade and wondered if I had any special contacts for him. I can recall the Yemeni PhD student who used to ask me at the start of each meeting what Tony Blair thought of the latest speech of President Ali Abdullah Salih and who used to ring me late on a Saturday night, somewhat the worse for wear, from sessions where he and his Yemeni friends were chewing the narcotic qat. I am eternally grateful to the Sudanese PhD student who arranged for the presidential limousine, complete with driver in immaculately cleaned and pressed white uniform, who met a delegation of LSE students and alumni at Khartoum airport in 2005. It turned out that his uncle was in charge of the president's car pool and since the president was at that very moment out of the country, signing a peace agreement in Kenya that brought two decades of war to an end, we had access to this facility. Of many curious requests for consultancy I can only repeat one or two: one from the Israeli embassy who in 1994 called to say they had been asked by the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem to find out if it was legitimate to interpret the word 'jihad' to mean not military action, but political or social effort and mobilisation; one from an Arab businessman who, after being cheated out of a contract by his country's president, had set up a 'Liberation Front' to launch armed struggle in his country and, after laying out a map of his country across my desk, and pushing what I took to be a bugged briefcase towards me, proceeded to enquire where the British, who knew his country well, would advise starting a popular insurrection. Not to be forgotten too is the vivacious LSE alumnus and governor, who, with extensive business interests in the Gulf, once rang me late on a rainy November evening to ask for help with what he at first said was 'some research' he needed in negotiations he was even then conducting with a minister for a major contract. The 'research' turned out to be some jokes he needed to warm the minister up, which, it seems, they duly did. For two hours later our governor rang back to say the minister was very pleased with the jokes, but had inserted a new clause in the contract, according to which he would not sign it unless I liked a joke he was going to tell me. So far as I can recall, it all turned out well in the end, although I believe that LSE has still not received the, very modest, consultancy fee that was due as a result of this, specialised, advice.

In broader terms, my own association with LSE and with the study of the Middle East at LSE goes back even further than my period as a member of staff. I first developed a link to the LSE, while a Master's student at SOAS in the late 1960s, in which context



those of us interested in Middle Eastern politics used to make the journey once a week to a now disappeared lecture hall on the ground floor, just along the corridor from where we are now meeting, to listen to the then dominant figure in the study of the region within the University of London, Professor Elie Kedourie. I still retain and use the notes I took on his course, and would recall, with some regret, the words with which, on 13 March 1968 I record him as concluding his lectures: ‘well, this is a sad story, but there it is’. That four months after he pronounced those words, in July 1968, the city of his origin, Baghdad, and the country he devoted so much care to analysing, Iraq, was then taken over by the bloodthirsty dictatorship of the Ba’th Party, and who were to remain in power till March 2003, a good thirty-five years, was only to confirm his judgement.

In 1971 I registered for a PhD in the Department of International History, which, after some years of interrupted registration and the publication of other books, was published by Cambridge University Press. The problem was that the country which my PhD focused on, the PDRY, disappeared a sudden and ill-prepared unification with North Yemen, in May 1990, two months after the thesis was finally published. My time in, and work on Yemen, has served me well in many respects, not least in shaping my view that the politics and international relations of the Arabian Peninsula, comprising the 20 million or so peoples of the GCC on one side, and the 20 millions or so in the now reunited Yemen, forms, and should be recognised as forming within academic research, a distinct and coherent sub-region, on a part with North Africa, Egypt and the Mashriq, of the Arab world. I do not consider myself, in the confused and often sentimental meaning of the term, an ‘Arabist’, but I am happy to be called a ‘Jazirist’, someone who specialises in, and promotes the distinct study of, the Arabian Peninsula, or, in the Arabic term now widely diffused, al-jazira.

Yet even this span of time does not do full justice to the association of LSE with the Middle East because, if we look at the history of both entities, the former as an independent centre for the study of the social sciences, the latter as a definable and identifiable region, we will discover, perhaps surprisingly, that they are, despite first appearances, roughly of the same age, the LSE being a little bit older, and that, indeed, the LSE played a distinct role in the very formulation of the term ‘Middle East’ itself. Both were, indeed, products of the international, and intellectual, climate in the two decades prior to World War I, the School being founded in 1895 by the Fabians, to

promote the study of what were termed ‘The Five Es’, ‘Empire’ being one of them, along with Education, Efficiency, Equality and, of course, Economics. As for the term ‘Middle East’ it was first used in 1902 by the American strategist Mahan, in an article in the London Review, as part of his debate with the LSE geopolitics expert, and later director of the School, Sir Halford Mackinder. Mackinder, who, as is well known, wanted to make LSE a training ground for colonial administrators, in his own ill judged joke a ‘Mackindergarten’, believed that the history of the twentieth century would be shaped by control of what he termed ‘the Heartland’, the vast continental mass of Central Asia where, at that time, Britain and Russia were vying for control. Mahan believed that it would be sea power, and control of sea routes, particularly from the Mediterranean through to the Indian Ocean, that would be decisive: in the swathe of twentieth century history, and in the light of the battles of the Atlantic and Pacific, it would seem that the argument has gone to Mahan, but it may, ironically, turn out that, given the pivotal place in recent years of Afghanistan, and Pakistan, a country that did not exist a century ago, and the competing roles of Russia, China, Iran and the USA, that world history in the coming epoch will be shaped, at least to a considerable extent, by developments in Mackinder’s heartland. That is certainly the initial declaration of intent from no less a person than Senator Barrack Obama, who, while calling for a speedy withdrawal from Iraq, has committed himself as his top priority to victory in Afghanistan. Either way, be it in the original formulation, indeed invention, of the ‘Middle East’, or in the geostrategic uncertainties that beset us today, our former Director’s intuitions have played their part in defining, and understanding, the politics of this region. And for this reason, we can say with justice that the London School of Economics and the Middle East have been partners since their respective inceptions, and remain, as we move into the second century of each, coeval and interlocked.

Fourthly, we must consolidate and develop our capabilities and experience in the field of fund-raising. I shall in March, be submitting a detailed report to the Research Committee on this matter and will here just summarise some of the main points. I have myself been engaged, with the ODAR and with successive directors, in trying to raise money from the region for over a decade, most recently in the context of our aim to set up a Middle East Centre. I have made over a dozen trips to the region in pursuit of relevant funds and contacts. We should continue and develop the efforts we have made, over a decade and more, to raise funds for research, teaching and fellowships on the

Middle East, sustaining the existing informal programme that we have, and looking for broader funding and support. In this regard we can note some major successes, among them the establishment of a Turkish chair, a major programme on Palestinian economic development, the ongoing work on Afghanistan, a major gift by KFAS to the CSGG, and major donations, to the Library and to the new Academic Building, by donors with Middle Eastern interests.

However, we must and can learn from our experiences. We should continue this work with a clear sense of our own priorities and independence, a degree of caution about the agenda, seriousness and professionalism of those associated with the region who offer us funding, and a degree of exigence, if not vigilance, with regard to the many friends, helpers, alumni, associates, who volunteer to help us. Many are serious and committed, but some, and some of the foundations we have had dealings with us in recent times, less so, endowed as they are with more money and self-importance than they have either good sense or good manners. I have enjoyed working with the Director and Dr. Blair on these fundraising ventures, and with some of our alumni and friends, less so with some of the others who have come our way, a veritable caravan of mountebanks and flibbetijibbets whom it has been our fate to encounter, host and humour, so far to little effect, in recent years.

Let us not forget: we are not the ‘demandeurs’, they are. We do not need donors who prohibit us from collaborating with other countries and institutions in the region. We do not welcome funders who forbid us to use the word ‘democracy’. We can do without others who endow chairs and then consider themselves entitled, on the basis of no qualification or respect, to lampoon the research topics of our PhD students. We do not want windbag and PR oriented conferences. We should not be grovelling to the whims and prejudices of expatriate and diaspora communities. We do not need students or staff who abuse their freedoms as individuals to misappropriate the name and reputation of the School for controversial causes. Equally, we do not need alumni and donors who object to the exercise by staff and students of these legitimate freedoms. We do not need governors who oppose and badmouth major projects to which the School, in the form of the Director and the relevant supervisory committees, have given their backing. Let us remember: we have a job to do, and, overall, we do it well. It is up to us to seek further resources for that, but it is incumbent on those who offer to help us, be they in the UK

or elsewhere, to understand and inform themselves about what we do, to respect our autonomy, intellectual and political, and to conduct business with us in a professional manner and not waste our time

If I express some irritation on this matter, it is, I can assure you, because I have reason to do so. Yet at the end of the day, there are many rich people in the world, and many foundations and donors with more money than ideas or good manners. There is only one LSE. I shall never forget that, and I trust that you will not either.

## 2. The LSE and the Middle East

My aim, therefore, tonight is to draw out, in summary form, some of the main themes that I see as underlying the academic study of the Middle East and, in particular, the strengths, and possible development, of the relationship between that region and the LSE. Recently, there has been some interest, within the School and without, in setting up a formal Middle East Centre, on a rough par with the European Institute, the Asia Centre, and other focuses of regional interest, teaching and research within the School. While LSE is not, does not, and should not, aim to provide the kind of focus on areas and countries that are offered in other specialist institutes within the University of London, or in the British education system as a whole, not least because of the specialist library and language implications involved, we have, over the years, and in an intermittent and sometimes haphazard manner, hosted specialists on a range of countries, from China to the Americas, and should in my view continue to do so. Whether or not a Middle East Centre gets off the ground, something which, as I shall indicate later, may pose some particular problems, there is in existence, and has been for many years and decades, a teaching and research complement working on this region. Out of the 360 or so academic staff now at LSE I am aware of at least eight who have a specialism in, and teach and research on, the region, either as their main focus or as part of their overall academic work: whether or not we have a formal Centre, something that may bring opportunities but also headaches, LSE already has, and, I repeat, has had for many decades strength and distinction in the field of the Middle East: in addition to Elie Kedourie, I would mention Ernest Gellner, who worked on the sociology of Muslim

societies and Matthew Anderson, a major historian of the Ottoman Empire. The list of courses taught, of conferences held, of books published, of PhDs completed is impressive, as is the list of alumni who are now figures of influence and importance throughout the public life, and universities, of Middle Eastern countries, be it in the Arab world, in Turkey, in Israel and, indeed, including figures in Iran.

To give an idea of the impact of LSE let me first mention two unlikely and war-torn countries. When I visited Sudan with a group of LSE students in 2005 we found, among our alumni, a great granddaughter of the Mahdi, the nationalist leader who had fought the British in the 1880s, now a minister and with an MSc in Social Policy from the LSE. The political attaché at the US embassy had a PhD from the anthropology department. The deputy head of the Political Science Department at the University of Khartoum had a PhD from the International Relations Department. The head of the UNDP was a Japanese graduate of the MSc in Economics. Afghanistan may appear to be an unlikely place to single out, but it is worth noting that a few years ago three of the key UN personnel in that country, the number two in the mission in Kabul (Dr. Yuichi Inouye), the head of UN operations in Kandahar (Talatbek Masadykov), and an important figure in the provincial town of Kunduz (Antonio Giustozzi) were all at one time LSE PhD students, while the current Afghan ambassador to the UN, Zahir Tanin, was a research officer at the LSE, working with myself on an ESRC funded project, in the mid-1990s, a project out of which we not only published two major pieces of academic research on that country but also, in collaboration with the BBC, completed a thirteen part oral history of Afghanistan in the twentieth century, a series that broadcast from Bush House across the road, gave to the people of that country and for the first time an account of their modern history. Even now, work on Afghanistan is part of a major, six country, study of crisis states being conducted by DESTIN, with a multi-million pound project from the Department for International Development. If we turn to the more familiar issue of the Arab-Israeli dispute and its place in the broader Middle East, we may note, first, that amongst the most prominent authors on this and related topics are many staff and graduates of the LSE: in regard to Israel, Professor Shlomo Avineri, author of a major history of Zionism, and Dr. Rami Ginat, author of major works on Syrian and Egyptian politics, in the Arab world Dr. Muhammad Hafez, author of a major study of Islamist armed groups, Professor Fawaz Gerges, author of the most authoritative works on Al Qaida and its politics. Here mention should also be made of the Oslo Accords of

1993, an agreement much maligned in subsequent years, an imperfect treaty no doubt, but in view the best chance for a broadly just and lasting peace between Jews and Arabs in Palestine that we are likely to see, and an agreement undermined by a convergence of political opportunists and fanatics on both sides. Of those who, within the Norwegian Foreign Ministry and related think tanks, played a key role in brokering this deal, many were alumni of LSE, among them Marianne Heiberg and Terje Roed-Larsen<sup>1</sup>. In my view, and despite the delight with many in the Middle East and in the west combined to tear down, and then danced on the grave of, the Oslo Accords, our Norwegian alumni deserve a special respect and commemoration. LSE should indeed be proud of them, as professional negotiators, and peace-makers, necessarily idealists, in the best internationalist mould.

### 3. Two Obstacles: Theoretical Generalism, Regional Particularism

Against this background let me draw out four main arguments, or themes, that I see as underpinning this commitment to the region.

First, I would make a general case, not specific to the Middle East, for specialist teaching and research. The teaching and research on distinct regions of the world, with the necessary historical, linguistic, culture and other specialist knowledge associated with this, should be a part of the programme of any broad social science institution. Area studies in the more formal, perhaps traditional, sense should remain the concern of specialist colleagues, such as, in London University SOAS, SEESS or ISA, but in a programme which offers broad theoretical, methodological and comparative teaching, at undergraduate and postgraduate level, to students, which is, by general orientation, 'general', there should also be provision for study, in greater depth of particular countries and regions. This is so not only because of student demand, and public demand for knowledge of these areas, but also because, as classical social theorists, even economists, knew well, and too many contemporary theorists have forgotten, the task of theory is in the end to explicate, and explain, the world in which we live.

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<sup>1</sup> See the obituary of Marianne Heiberg *LSE Magazine* Summer 2005, p. 45.

If we look across the range of general, often theoretical or general policy, topics taught at LSE, in what are now, by my latest count, twenty-four different subject departments and centres, it is at once obvious how, in a two way process of interaction, the study of particular regions can benefit from the comparative and theoretical investigation of such subjects, even as theories and paradigms themselves can be tested, indeed challenged, by the encounter with specific countries and events. To take a random selection of topics from my own Department: the causes of war, the role of great powers, the impact or lack thereof of international institutions, the role of domestic factors in foreign policy, the interaction of regional political with economic forces, the role of non-state groups, be they civil society organisations, religious bodies or militarised opponents of existing states, indeed the whole gamut of questions taught by International Relations in general, or by specific theoretical approaches such as Historical Sociology, International Political Economy or the state-centred approach known as Realism, all can be applied to, and, in a reflexive manner, can be enriched by being applied to, a region such as the Middle East. The same exercise can be applied to most, if not all, of the specialisms of the departments and centres at LSE.

To make this general case is, however, to run up against a number of obstacles, two of which I will mention here. One is the trend, increasingly evident in disciplines such as economics and political science, but now spreading its shadow across the social sciences as a whole, of forms of theory and methodology that are abstract and without purchase on particular societies. This is reinforced throughout the contemporary academic world by a devaluation, when not neglect and disparagement, of the skills associated with country and regional specific work – languages, knowledge of history, sensitivity to culture (except, and I shall return to this, in a distorted and inflated form), straightforward experience of living in, and working on, particular countries. To make the case for the study of the Middle East, indeed for any country or region, involves taking on this form of abstraction and deracination and the implications they have for job descriptions, appointments, promotion and publication, in a word for how we as academics, and intellectuals, value our colleagues and our work. To say that this disparagement of area studies, indeed of any engagement with particularity and variety, is most evident in the USA is self-evident, but there are many in US universities who resist it, and many, far too many, on this side of the Atlantic who embrace and enforce it. I would value much more highly a job candidate, or aspirant to promotion, who could

read or speak a foreign language, had lived and researched in other countries and cultures, who had sat in a village in Yemen or a favela in Brazil, or even worked a year or two in Moscow or Rome, than someone who had been cited in a supposedly top ranking disciplinary and meta-methodological journal. As we all know, this is not the way it is, or is going.

I mentioned earlier that there are two major obstacles to the study of the Middle East within the social sciences and this brings me to the second obstacle, one that comes from within regional studies, and in particular from within the study of the Middle East itself. This is based on the denial not of specificity, which we are invited to celebrate, but of generalisation, of comparison, of the location of modern, in this case Middle Eastern, states and societies within their contemporary international and historical context. This approach is sometimes termed, and usually abused, as ‘Orientalism’, a term to which I, from a generation that learn much from Maxime Rodinson, Albert Hourani, Bernard Lewis, Elie Kedourie, Anne Lambton and others, give some greater respect. Being accused of being an ‘Orientalist’ is a bit like some of the other supposedly insulting terms that have been applied to me – a media don, or a Trotskyist, or a liberal, or an eclectic, also a feminist and a humanist – ones that are not strictly valid, but to which, at least in my own interpretation, I give due honour and respect, and from which I would seek to learn. In the words of the fine Irish song the Isle of Inishfree, ‘There are those who say that I’m a dreamer, and sure enough there’s truth in what they say’. This, all things considered, is my view of orientalism.

Where I would diverge from the rigidity of some earlier historians and social scientists, is in asserting that, in many, indeed, most respects, the Middle East is not that particular, or unique, or different from the rest of the world. All regions, all countries, indeed all nine billion of the individuals who now inhabit this world, have their own particularities, and all, for sure, think of themselves as more distinct, more autonomous, more wonderful, than they are. So it is with the Middle East. Every country, like every individual, puts on their own clothes: what in London is an English breakfast becomes in Scotland a Scottish Breakfast, in Ireland an Irish breakfast and in Sydney Australian beach tucker. But it remains more or less the same breakfast. Most countries seek to give their national airlines, not to mention their parliaments, culturally and historically



specific names, but they all do more or less the same thing: Shura and Majlis, Knesset and Duma, Hural and Daíl, Reichstag and Cortes are parliamentary bodies whose variety such as it is derives not from the culture or history of the country but from the political character of the state within which they are located.

In regard to the Middle East, all sorts of delusions about its particularity can be found. First, history is no more an explanatory factor in the Middle East than it is anywhere else. There is a tendency, one found among ‘Orientalist’ writers, and also replicated in so much of the political rhetoric coming out of the Middle East itself, according to which the Middle East of today, the states, political forces, the ideologies, the violence, and so forth, can only be explained by going back into the mists of time, into the identification of long-standing historical forces, mentalities, and conflicts. But the forces that shaped the modern Middle East, the region all twenty-five or so states within it, are modern, contemporary and international forces, be they the industrial revolution, colonialism, world wars and cold war, nationalism, socialism, populism, and now globalisation. I would go so far as to assert, as a valid generalisation, and, like all such generalisations one that is, in the best LSE and Popperian sense, liable to falsification, that nothing which happened in the Middle East before 1918, that is before the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of the contemporary state system, is relevant to explaining the region today.

Secondly, the Middle East is far from being, in terms of the incidence of inter-state war, or deaths in conflict in modern times, the bloodiest part of the world. Nothing, except the eight year Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988, what I term the ‘Second Gulf War’, that in Iraq since 2003 being the ‘Fourth’, compares to the wars of Korea and Vietnam, to Southern Africa or Central America, let alone, let us please recall, to the wars of modern Europe. Thirdly, the range of inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts there, of which the Arab-Israeli conflict is one among many, are not substantially different, or more impossible of solution, than those of other parts of the world: what is lacking is political will, within the region and internationally.

#### 4. Substantive Themes

In the face of both of these obstacles, the disparagement of regional and country-specific knowledge and engagement on the one hand, the overstatement of Middle Eastern singularity on the other, I would return to my central theme: that the kinds of general, theoretically rigorous and comparative, social science taught at LSE, and in all twenty-four of its current manifestations, from development, social policy, economic history, to management, gender and global governance requires engagement with a region of the importance and proximity of the Middle East, even as the study of the region, which should once and for all shed its particularist cobwebs, would benefit from, and indeed requires, awareness of such broader intellectual and disciplinary frameworks.

##### (i) History

In this regard, let me briefly lay out some of the themes which should, in my view, govern the social science study of the Middle East. First, as already indicated, we need to see this region not in its millennial abstraction and mystification, but as, like Europe, Latin America, 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 hypostatised 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 of the impact on, and response of, the region of the ideologies and tensions of the modern world: neither Ayatollah Khomeini, nor Osama bin Laden, can be understood by reading ancient books or dredging up mediaeval thought patterns. They are, in the content of their ideology, in their mode of political action, in their uses

of violence, and, most important, in their stated objective, which is to capture and retain control of states, part of the modern world. Like nationalists and fundamentalist politicians elsewhere, they use, invoke, select, reinterpret, and at times invent, elements from the past, to meet contemporary needs, and to mobilise their supporters in pursuit of political and social power.

## (ii) States

Secondly, 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 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 this 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.

## (iii) Culture

Thirdly, 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 the language, the presentation, of political and social issues is concerned, and cultural or ethnic affinity to 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, 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 Islamism 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. 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.

#### (iv) 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, Ceylan Keyder, Galal Amin, and, in the person of the first and current incumbent of the Chair in Turkish Studies at LSE, Professor Shevket 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, themselves the largest industry and the most traded commodities in the world, but also 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, culturally specific the Arab world or Iran are, 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.

An awareness of economics, and of economic history, may also serve to highlight and refocus two difficulties that beset much contemporary research on the Middle East. The

first is the problem of data, and statistics. One of the greatest problems about studying the Middle East is not that people, or states, or elites, there are driven by considerations and values different from those in the west, or in East Asia, but that they are able to do so with so little accountability and transparency. This is not because there is no money, or because the values of officials and elites are different, but rather the opposite, that those with money, and lots of it, do not want others to know. In researching and teaching the Middle East, I am struck by how few books there are on, say, class formation, or the internal workings of the oil industry, or the relations between the state and the private sector, if indeed in many countries there is one. There are no, repeat no, statistics on the Middle East that are reliable, with the single, and itself sometimes contested, figure for the territorial extent of a particular country. All the rest – population figures, oil output and exports, oil revenues, disbursements of foreign aid – are guesses, sometimes partially informed, sometimes not. And here, little noticed by many, is one of the major obstacles to any process of informed public debate, let alone democratisation, in such countries, the lack of credible statistics on public finances – what money has come in, and from where, and to which institutions, and, not least, which individuals it has gone.

Here I want to say something about the Gulf states, about which so much, most of it rather inaccurate and indulgent, has been written in recent times. These are not old-style dictatorships, of the Iraqi, Iranian or Egyptian kind, but nor are they democracies, or liberal societies: rather they are what the late John Rawls called ‘well ordered authoritarian states’ like Singapore. In this case, all the talk of the transition to democracy, of financial transparency, and of ‘emerging’ this and that, amounts to little until, and unless, there are available figures of a credible kind on the finances of the state and their disbursement and unless the press and media are freed from the censorship and self-censorship that prevails. As all who know and work in such countries know, we are some way from that yet. And the more money there is, the more there is to hide. And in all of this, the censorship policies of governments, the collusion and self-interested silence of international banks and corporations, and, not least, the timidity and vapidness of the expatriate media only serve to preserve the wall of silence. The English language press, from one end of the Gulf to another, is a disgrace. What money has done, in regard to all the oil producers, be they monarchies or republics, is to buy complicity and, in many respects, silence: one can look through years of Gulf

English language papers, and specialist weeklies, without finding any discussion of corruption, of cancelled contracts, of mistreatment of migrant workers, of the denial of gay and women's rights, of censorship of books and internet sites. No wonder that one of my former students, now senior adviser to a Middle Eastern bank, refers to himself as 'Abu Dekor', 'the Father of Interior Decoration', painting one wall to say there is no inflation, another to say there is no unemployment, and a third that there is no corruption.

A dose of economic realism, and first hand knowledge of the region, may also help to dispel some of the propaganda, when not nonsense, that has been diffused in recent years about a supposedly different basis for conducting economic life in the region, be it the 'Islamic economics' of the Iranian revolution, the twists and turns of Sabbath prohibitions and rabbinical verdicts in Israel, or the now, widespread, talk of 'Islamic banking'. Here, as much as in the exercise of political power, or in the subjugation of women, we can see how supposedly religious or cultural values are used to rebrand, if not disguise, what are, on closer examination, universal forms of resource and power manipulation.

Anyone who has studied the economic history of the Muslim world, from the trading activities of the Prophet Mohammad in Mecca and Medina in the seventh century, to the banks and finance houses of the Arab Gulf today, will know that business is conducted as it is everywhere on sound capitalist principles. As the greatest authority on this matter, and one of my great inspirations, the late Professor Maxime Rodinson has shown in his great work *Islam and Capitalism* (pp.16-18 of the English translation) there is, in fact, no Koranic or authoritative prohibition on the taking of interest, only, as in most religions, a condemnation of excess, or profiteering, what is known as *riba'*. But Muslim scholars have long differed on what *riba'* means, some confining it to profiteering in essentials like foodstuffs. Nor, in the end, do the supposedly 'Islamic' banks of today provide a fundamentally different service. What they do is, first, give a degree of local affiliation or allegiance to investors, much as does the Bradford and Bingley Building Society, or the Chase Manhattan, and, secondly, serve as a more friendly recipient for investors with cash, in the sense of asking less questions about the origin of the funds, that do, in this era of client identification and post 9/11 controls, many financial institutions of the west. Islamic banking is capitalist banking, with a

different cover, a means, in the end of ensuring that more money, whether it comes from the exports of the oil producers or from Afghanistan, is put into circulation. It is, as the British ambassador to one Gulf state put it to me, 'a means of getting the money out from underneath the bed'. Its relation to tradition, sanctity, the Koran and all that is purely presentational. And one concluding note on this: if Islamic authority, and what is often misleadingly called 'shariah' prohibits excess profits, then where are the voices of criticism when it comes to exorbitant, and in terms of production costs, totally unjustified increases in the price of oil? If ever there was a case of *riba*', one to which all Islamic oil producers subscribe, it is rent that OPEC and its free-riders, like Russia, extract from the sale of oil.

#### (v) 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 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, one in which each is aware of the other and of how, especially in recent years, opposition and armed groups operate across frontiers. Part of this formation of a region is the drawing in of states previously excluded, notably Afghanistan, part of Mahan's Middle East, but virtually outside it from the end of World War I until the 1980s, as well as the exclusion of regions, such as the Balkans, Cyprus or the Horn of Africa, which were previously included. Yet even as such regional forces are at play, be it in regard to nuclear weapons, migration flows or terrorism, the twenty-five 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, like the Arab-Israeli dispute, or the Iran-Iraq war, or, now the multi-layered war in Iraq, we should be careful in how far we see them 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 in 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: the one occasion when 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 of Sunni and Shia has 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. By contrast, and not least in the light of recent tragic events in Pakistan, one can surmise that the wars of Afghanistan have had, and may in the future, have enormous, regional and strategic implications.

The other dimension of regional proportion that we need is that of the relative role of external and internal forces. Historically, in the nineteenth century, in 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 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. As I have already suggested, these forces and actors were, and are, important, but we should not allow this external perspective, let alone the easier availability of 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. Recent work on the Cold War has shown that, for all the external concern and influence, and the, in comparative terms not very extensive, external intervention in the region during the Cold War, it was the major regional states that took their own decisions and shaped their alliances with powerful external states accordingly. In terms of state formation, 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. 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: for 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 pose the greatest challenge and which may have the greatest impact. We have already seen, in the Iranian revolution of now thirty years ago, as in the spread of influence of the Muslim Brotherhood through many key states, including Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Kuwait, and, most spectacularly, the rise of Al Qaeda and related or 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, Ramalla, Amman to name but the most obvious eight, yet a third of the total, this question, the survival of the current state itself must be the dominant uncertainty about the future. And, to repeat, this is an issue not of culture, or history, or tradition, or identity, it is a question of power, and, closely related to this of course, continued control of, and access to, wealth. Once again, I would submit, the Middle East turns out not to be so different.

## 5. Looking Forward

So much for the academic and general case for studying the region. Let me now conclude with a set of more practical proposals for the study of this region, and for its place in an institution like LSE.

First, I would emphasise that in our conception of contemporary social science, and in our strategy for institutions and departments working on this, the study of regions and specific countries, along with the study of history, should be an integral part of the programme.

Secondly, I would submit that the Middle East is, as much as any other region of the world, susceptible to, and creatively welcoming of, analysis in general social science terms, as it is of universal rights and responsibilities as enshrined in international law and conventions, even as, through its own history and state systems, it provides

challenges, and contrapuntal enrichment, to the theories and comparative projects involved.

Thirdly, the LSE should, as part of its overall and periodic review programme, look at the teaching and research on regions and countries that are currently carried out within the School and, where substantial and credibly long term deficiencies, take measures, through the relevant committees, through departments, and through the initiatives of the central administration, to remedy these deficiencies. As was once said by Gorbachev, ‘if not now, when? If not we, who?’

Thank you, and good evening.

Ends