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Introduction to the international politics of the Middle East

This book and the study of the Middle East

This study takes the Middle East to be constituted around an Arab core, with a shared identity but fragmented into multiple territorial states; the core is flanked by a periphery of non-Arab states – Turkey, Iran and Israel – which are an intimate part of the region’s conflicts and an integral part of its balance of power (Cantori and Spiegel 1970; Ismael 1986: 5–13). Because the Middle East’s unique features defy analyses based on any one conceptual approach to international relations, this study will deploy a combination of several to capture its complex reality.

The Middle East is arguably the epicentre of world crisis, chronically war-prone and the site of the world’s most protracted conflicts. It appears to be the region where the anarchy and insecurity seen by the realist school of international politics as the main feature of states systems remains most in evidence and where the realist paradigm retains its greatest relevance. Yet neo-realism’s¹ a-historical tendency to assume states systems to be unchanging, made up of cohesive rational actors, and everywhere the chief determining factor in shaping state behaviour is quite inadequate to understand the Middle East. The regional system, recent and unconsolidated, has been contested by its units as much as it has shaped them and realism’s assumption that conflict is chiefly the inevitable by-product of a states system’s anarchy misses the main causes of the Middle East’s exceptional war and instability.

Rather, this study will argue that the roots of conflict and much state behaviour are to be found in the peculiar historical construction of the regional system. One aspect of this was an extremely
damaging form of core–periphery relations. The insights of structuralism, the approach to international relations most concerned with such relations, are invaluable to understanding how the Middle East was entrapped in a core-dominated system not of its own making, whose flaws generate intense conflict and whose constraints limit the ability of local peoples to pursue their own destinies and solutions. A second aspect of this was the unique misfit between identity and sovereignty, nation and state, inflicted on the region, a conundrum better addressed by constructivism. Its insistence that systemic structures are not just material configurations of power and wealth and include the cultural norms that derive from identity, helps to understand how the region’s powerful supra-state identities lead to a unique contestation of the state sovereignty which underlays the stability of other regional states systems.

Secondly, this study will argue that the state and sub-state levels are at least as important as the system level in shaping state behaviour. Pluralism’s problematising of the state points to how far realism’s assumption of cohesive units pursuing agreed ‘national interests’ can be misleading in a region where states have been fragmented and permeable: whether states become such ‘rational actors’ is, in fact, highly contingent on a process of state formation that is very much incomplete. The consequent importance of analysing state formation, domestic politics and leadership world views makes the pluralist method of disaggregating the state especially relevant in analysis of the Middle East.

Finally, while the Middle East’s conflicts are chiefly rooted in societal-level reactions to the flawed architecture of the region, this study acknowledges that, once differential reactions are institutionalised in inter-state rivalry and war becomes pervasive, then, as realism expects, the security dilemma increasingly shapes regional relations, motivates the consolidation of states, and forces state elites to follow ‘reason of state’. In this situation, the balance of power does, indeed, become the main key to regional order.

This book will survey the international relations of the Middle East through an examination of three of its central aspects or problems: (1) The emergence of a unique regional system, itself a product of core–periphery relations (treated in chapter 2) and the conflict of identity and sovereignty (examined in chapter 3); (2) The determinants of Middle Eastern states’ international behaviour: chapter 4
examines state formation and chapter 5 the foreign policy process in the Middle East. Chapter 6 uses comparative analysis to elucidate how the interaction between the system level and particular state formation paths shapes similarities and differences in states’ international behaviour. (3) War and order: chapter 7 examines wars, attempts to create regional order and how these have impacted on the structure of the regional system, which, in turn, has reshaped the states that make it up. Chapter 8 assesses the renewed destabilising impact of international attempts to reshape the regional order in an age of unipolarity and globalisation.

Core–periphery relations

According to structuralist analyses, the Middle East, once an independent civilisation, was turned, under imperialism, into a periphery of the Western-dominated world system. As the location of both Israel and of the world’s concentrated petroleum reserves, the Middle East remains an exceptional magnet for external intervention which, in turn, has kept anti-imperialist nationalism alive long after de-colonisation. The region remains, as Brown (1984) argues, a uniquely ‘penetrated system’.

A starting point for understanding the persistence of highly unequal core–periphery relations even after the retreat of imperial armies from the region, is Galtung’s (1971) structural model of imperialism. In his view, two mechanisms sustain penetration by the Western ‘core’: (1) the core created and left behind client elites and classes which have an interest in dependent relations, and (2) regional states were linked to the core, in feudal-like north–south relations, while horizontal (south–south) relations were shattered. Indeed, imperialism’s fragmentation of the Middle East into a multitude of weak states dependent on core states for security against each other, and its division of the unified regional market into small economies exporting primary products to the core and dependent on imports from it, approximates Galtung’s model. According to Moon (1995), the effect of such a structure on the foreign policy making of dependent states is to create a ‘constrained consensus’ from the overlap of local elites’ economic interests, world views (through Western education), and threat perceptions (fear of radical movements) with those of core elites. As a result, rather than balancing against intrusive external power, as realism might expect,
dependent elites typically ‘bandwagon’ with a global patron to contain more immediate regional or domestic threats.

However, core–periphery relations merely set the outside parameters within which Middle East regional politics are conducted. Moreover, far from being static, they are constantly contested and periodically stimulate anti-imperialist movements which, if they take state power, attempt to restructure these relations. Whether nationalist states can do this, however, depends on systemic structures. When there is a hegemonic power (UK, USA) able to ‘lay down the law’ on behalf of the world capitalist system (in the Middle East ensuring its access to cheap energy), and especially if the regional system is simultaneously divided (the usual condition), it is easy for external powers to exploit local rivalries to sustain their penetration of the region. Conversely, when the core was split, as under Cold War bi-polarity, nationalist states were able to exploit superpower rivalry to win protection, aid and arms from the number two state, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), enabling them to pursue nationalist foreign policies, and to dilute economic dependency. Moreover, as Thompson (1970) has shown, the Middle East is a partial exception to Galtung’s feudal model in that, while fragmented economically and politically, it enjoys trans-state cultural unity which nationalist states have exploited to mobilise regional solidarity against the core. Thus, the conjuncture of the Cold War and the spread of Pan-Arabism allowed Nasser’s Egypt to sufficiently roll back imperialist influence to establish a relatively autonomous regional system. Additionally, in the rise of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), south–south solidarity produced exceptional financial power that, while failing ultimately to raise the region from the economic periphery, arguably transformed the position of the swing oil producer, Saudi Arabia, from dependence into asymmetric interdependence. However, favourable conditions for regional autonomy have, particularly since the end of the oil boom and Cold War, been largely reversed. The West’s restored ability to intervene militarily and impose economic sanctions and loan conditionality has revived key features of the age of imperialism at the expense of regional autonomy. No analysis of the international politics of the region can be convincing that does not take account of the profound impact of the ongoing struggle for regional autonomy from external control.
Between identity and sovereignty: the construction of a regional system

In the Westphalian states system, on which the Middle East regional system was ostensibly modelled, the principle of state sovereignty is usually accompanied by a rough correspondence of identity and territory. The consequent ‘nation-state’ provides the basis of the state’s legitimacy and underlies acceptance of the norm of sovereignty. This correspondence is assumed, if only as an ideal type by the realist school of analysis, to make possible a relative consensus on the national interest that is thought to shape a state’s foreign policy.

In the Middle East, however, imperialism’s arbitrary imposition of state boundaries produced a substantial incongruence between territory and identity, with the result that loyalty to the state was contested by sub-state and supra-state identities. This built irredentism into the fabric of the system: in many states, the trans-state connections of sub-state groups and dissatisfaction with borders generated protracted conflicts which spilled over in state-sub-state or inter-state wars, e.g. the role of the Kurds in conflicts between Turkey and Syria, Iran and Iraq. Additionally, as constructivist analysis shows, Pan-Arab norms deriving from a shared supra-state identity became as important in shaping Arab state behaviour as the distribution of material power stressed by realism. The contradiction between the global norm of sovereignty, in which state interests are legitimately the object of foreign policy, and the regional norms of Pan-Arabism (or, to a lesser extent Pan-Islam) which expect these interests to be compatible with the values of the indigenous supra-state identity community, have caught Arab foreign policy making elites, in Korany’s (1988: 165) words, between the logics of raison d’état and of ‘raison de la nation’. While they have tenaciously defended the sovereignty of their individual states, legitimacy at home has depended on their foreign policies appearing to respect Arab-Islamic norms. For more ambitious states, supra-state identity presented the opportunity to assert regional leadership by championing Pan-Arab or Islamic causes.

While this ‘dualism’ is a constant, the relative balance between supra-state identity and state sovereignty has evolved – been ‘constructed’ – over time by the interactions of states and the actions of state builders, in favour of the latter (Barnett 1998). Several forces interacted to define this evolution. Imperialism and the creation of
Israel stimulated Pan-Arabist movements crossing state boundaries, which created conditions for competition between states over Pan-Arab leadership. Although Pan-Arabism enjoined co-operation among Arab states it was, ironically, constructed out of this competition for Pan-Arab leadership. Nasser’s disproportionate ability to mobilise trans-state support in this contest allowed the assertion of Egyptian hegemony in the region and Cairo’s construction of a ‘Pan-Arab regime’ which constrained the sovereign right of states to seek security outside regional collective arrangements. At the same time, however, this competition stimulated state elites’ defence of sovereignty through anti-hegemonic (anti-Cairo) balancing and encouraged state formation aiming to immunise states from trans-state ideological penetration. The rivalries of Arab leaders, expressed in disagreements over Arabism and unleashing the Pan-Arab ‘outbidding’ that brought on the disastrous 1967 defeat by Israel, helped ‘de-construct’ the Pan-Arab regime. Thereafter, the regularity of war and much increased insecurity greatly accelerated the impulse of the individual Arab states to fall back on self-help and power balancing, while trans-state rent flows released by the oil boom helped consolidate states, making them much less vulnerable to Pan-Arab or Islamic ideological penetration. Although attempts were made to agree on a form of Arabism, defined in Arab summits, compatible with sovereignty, the divergent routes Arab states took to protect themselves from war and to exit from it ‘deconstructed’ Pan-Arab constraints on reason of state. Islamic solidarity, institutionalised in the Islamic Conference Organisation has been unable to substitute for Arabism. As realism expects, heightened insecurity moved the system toward the Westphalian model, but this evolution, far from inevitable, was a ‘constructed’ outcome of internal state-building and of inter-state relations and, to this day, is far from complete. No analysis of the Middle East can succeed without taking account of the identity-sovereignty dynamic that constitutes the regional system.

States and foreign policy

Especially in the Middle East, the state cannot be assumed, as realism does, to be a unitary actor responding chiefly to system-level determinants (external threats and opportunities). Indeed, where this model of the state does not hold, foreign policy may be more
immediately shaped by domestic conflict or may sacrifice state interests to supra-state ideological causes. An understanding of the behaviour of states, therefore, requires analysing how state formation affects foreign policy and opening the black box of decision-making.

State formation

Analysis of a state’s formation is, for several reasons, crucial in understanding its international behaviour. First, whatever the constraints put on states by their systemic environment, there is never only one possible response to it. Thus, while some states challenge the status quo, others support it; indeed, the same states may change from supporters to challengers, as Iran and Iraq did after their respective revolutions. This points to how the initial composition of regimes, notably whether their dominant social forces are essentially satisfied or dissatisfied, locks states into differential (status quo or revisionist) reactions to the system. This, in turn, is shaped by such factors as whether or not, at its formation, a state’s boundaries satisfied its identity and whether the dominant social forces incorporated into the regime were of privileged or plebeian origin. Once set on a particular tangent, subsequent evolution is ‘path dependent’: although changes in the composition of the ruling coalition are bound to alter a state’s original policy bias, and although systemic pressures may deflect it from its course, initial – revisionist v. status quo – foreign policy directions have proven quite durable.

Second, Middle East states, new and artificial, have started off so fragmented, unstable and permeable to trans-state forces that realism’s unitary rational actor confronting an external chess board cannot be assumed and is only one possible product of a contingent state formation process. Indeed, the dominant models of Middle East foreign policy analysis assume low state formation: the ‘leader-dominant model’ views leaders as free to translate their personal idiosyncrasies into policy (Clapham 1977) while what might be called the ‘domestic vulnerability model’ (Calvert 1986; David 1991) assumes regimes, facing greater threats at home than abroad, adopt belligerent or rhetorical foreign policies to appease domestic opinion. In both cases foreign policy rationality is sacrificed. Neither model is adequate, however: even authoritarian regimes face domestic constraints and, particularly in the Middle East, even domestically unstable states must attend to external enemies. Indeed,
because their strength determines whether the region’s states become actors in or victims of their ‘rough neighbourhood’, both internal and external threats have spurred significant efforts to consolidate states and there is evidence that this has endowed decision-making elites with greater autonomy to make rational decisions and greater capacity to implement them. As such, in explaining states’ foreign policy behaviour, it is necessary to differentiate their levels of state formation. In summary, the direction and the effectiveness of Middle East states’ foreign policies are intimately connected with their internal formation.

**Foreign policy determinants: state and system interaction**

Foreign policy behaviour can only be adequately explained as the product of an interaction between the state’s domestic needs and the states system in which it operates. Thus, while state formation determines what a state wishes to do, it is, as realism observes, the system level that determines what it can do. Each state’s behaviour is, thus, differentially shaped by its specific position in its systemic environments, notably by varying levels of dependency on the international system and by varying power positions in the regional system. Over the long run, a state’s systemic position tends to reinforce or divert its foreign policies from the original direction built in by its formation; yet a state’s power position, far from being static, is, itself, a product of its level of state formation.

Given this complex interaction, foreign policy makers, in trying to maximise their autonomy and security, must omni-balance (David 1991) between conflicting determinants at three different levels: 1) geopolitical threats and opportunities concentrated in the regional environment; 2) the need to maintain domestic legitimacy (by representing identity and protecting autonomy); and 3) the need to acquire international resources and protection, for which states may well become dependent on the core. In attempting to balance these pressures, elites face potential contradictions: most notably, responsiveness to domestic demands for autonomy of the West clashes with states’ dependency on core powers.

**The decision-making process**

According to David (1991), foreign policy decisions are a product of rational choice, for example, elites’ assessments of whether the main threat to regime security lies in domestic opposition or external
threats: thus, if it is stronger at home they may appease external powers to get the protection and resources needed to cope with the greater internal threat. However there are always likely to be several possible rational choices in any given situation and elites’ perceptions of rationality are shaped by the identity embodied in a state’s foreign policy role (Holsti 1970). To the extent elites are socialised into such roles, they give foreign policy some consistency over time. Moreover, where elites disagree over policy, choices will be determined by the power distribution among them and their various constituencies as structured by the state’s governing institutions. The interests and differential weight carried in the policy process by such constituencies as public opinion, business, the military, and the diplomatic corps will bias the direction of choices. The rationality of choices will also be shaped by the degree to which the structure of decision-making allows a balance between elite autonomy and cohesion, on the one hand, and openness to input and accountability, on the other. Finally, the personality, values and perceptions of the top leaders are an immediate determinant of choices while the skills and policy instruments at their disposal help determine the outcomes of policy implementation.

The regional system: conflict and order

The character of the regional order is the product of its original external imposition and the collective interactions and conflicts of the states that contest or defend it over time. That order, in turn, shapes the character and behaviour of its parts, the states.

Roots of conflict

Conflict was literally built into the Middle East regional system, but not simply because of the anarchy of a states system, as neo-realism holds. Rather, it was the external imposition of a very flawed system that generated at least four durable sources of conflict: the struggle against imperialist control, the frustration of identity by the arbitrary imposition of borders, the struggle over Palestine and the struggle over control of the region’s oil. The irredentism and revisionism fostered by these conflicts became pervasive in Middle Eastern societies and when the power machineries of different states were captured by social forces or identity groups on opposing sides of these issues, conflict was institutionalised at the inter-state level.
This took exacerbated forms in the cases of settler states, with their built-in expansionary impulses (Israel); artificial states, with their built-in frustration (Iraq); and revolutionary states with their built-in ambition to export their revolutions (Nasserist Egypt, Khomeini’s Iran). Once, as a result, war became a recurring feature of the regional system and states were entangled in the security dilemma, wherein the attempt of each to protect itself only made it a greater threat to its neighbours, a Hobbesian-like system was, indeed, ‘constructed’. Such a system (its insecurity, power imbalances) arguably becomes, itself, a source of war. Today, there is not a single state that has not come to feel a military threat from one or more of its neighbours.

*The problem of order building*

Order in states systems may be built on shared identity and norms where an ‘international society’ is emerging (Bull 1995), or, that lacking, by a contractual ‘international regime’ if there is sufficient interdependence of interests (Krasner 1983). Constructivists have charted the Middle East’s first indigenous attempt to create a regional order, the Pan-Arab ‘regime’. Rooted in the Arab world’s common identity, this ‘regime’ enjoined co-operation, enforced by Egyptian hegemony, against shared threats and external domination while limiting inter-Arab conflict to ideological rivalry (Barnett 1998; Sela 1998). Pan-Arabism helped establish a relatively autonomous regional system, but had no mechanism for bridging the Arab-non-Arab gap. Moreover, because Egyptian hegemony threatened other states, it induced anti-hegemonic balancing which undermined Pan-Arab solidarity and encouraged nationalist outbidding; this led, inadvertently, to war, the deconstruction of Arabism, much increased insecurity, and states’ increasing resort to sovereign self-help. The nascent Arab ‘international regime/society’ started to unravel.

Where a system of states shares little more than mutual security vulnerability, the default mechanism for sustaining order is the balance of power, a built-in equilibrium mechanism, in neo-realist thinking, that tends to preserve the system, even in the absence of shared norms. As Rustow (1984: 598) argues, ‘while many Middle Eastern countries individually nurse expansionist or hegemonic ambitions, all of them collectively, by their preference for the weaker side and their readiness to shift alignments regardless of ideology, offer strong support for the status quo’. This supposedly self-balancing
mechanism in fact depends on state actors adhering to the reason of state deemed rational in the realist tradition: by adopting ‘realistic’ goals (subordinating ideology to the realities of the power balance) and by increasing capabilities or striking alliances to counter threats. Crucially, however, realism argues that systemic insecurity tends to shape state behaviour, in part because regimes that play by realist rules are successful and imitated and regimes which violate them tend to suffer disaster and are replaced. Indeed, all these tendencies became operative in the Middle East as insecurity-inducing wars became regular occurrences, stimulating the rise of national security states and the replacement of ideology by reason of state in foreign policy formulation. Alliance formation and power balancing blunted the ambitions of hegemonic powers and, while this often failed to keep the peace, it did preserve the states system. The system, thus, shaped its parts for survival in a dangerous environment and they, in seeking to preserve themselves, became agents of system maintenance, much as neo-realism anticipates (Waltz 1979: 74–7). This dynamic pushed the region toward a classic ‘Westphalian’ system in which power overshadowed shared (Arab) norms as the main determinant of state behaviour and regional order.

In pluralist thinking, order results from the taming of the power struggle through complex interdependence, perhaps facilitated by a benign hegemon (Keohane and Nye 1977). Interdependence is fostered by trans-state economic ties and interests; is associated with the rise of internationalist coalitions inside states, which see peace as essential to joining world markets (Solingen 1998); and may be reinforced by democratisation which deters war through increased ideological homogeneity, internal constraints on leadership, and the trans-state interactions of open societies (Doyle 1995). In these conditions, international regimes are more readily constructed and adhered to. In the Middle East, however, realist solutions to the problem of order remain more relevant than elsewhere because, as Yaniv (1987) argues, transnational norms restraining inter-state conduct are the least institutionalised there. This, in turn, is arguably because the conditions which pluralists expect to generate power-taming norms – democratic cultures and economic interdependence – are absent or weak in the region and its few democratic states are no more pacific than their authoritarian counterparts. To be sure, economic liberalisation has increased the influence of internationalist-minded infitah (economic opening) bourgeoisies in
several states. However, as realism argues, only when threat declines does the pursuit of economic gain displace security atop state agendas. As long as the region’s high-profile conflicts continue to generate insecurity, no spread of the ‘zone of peace’ will soon rewrite the now-dominant realist rules of Middle East international politics.

Notes

1 Realism is the traditionally dominant school of International Relations theory. States are seen as unitary rational actors advancing their national interests amidst the insecurity of the anarchic international arena. International politics is a struggle for power; war is an ever-present possibility and order depends on a balance of power. Decision-maker rationality means careful ‘realistic’ matching of goals and resources – what might be called ‘reason of state’. In its neo-realist version, the anarchy-induced insecurity of states systems is seen as the main determinant of the behaviour of the state units. The classic application of realism to the region is Walt (1987).

2 Structuralism, as used here, refers to the broad view, inspired by Marxism, that the hierarchical structure of the international capitalist system determines state options. Specifically, in the international economic division of labour the ‘core’ (developed) states subordinate and exploit the Less Developed Countries (LDCs) or ‘periphery’, whose function is to supply the former with primary products (and cheap labour). The system is maintained by trans-state alliances between dominant classes in the core and the periphery and by the economic dependency of LDCs. Dependency theory and World Systems theory are seen here as varieties of structuralism. Important works that apply structuralism to the Middle East include Alnasrawi (1991), Amin (1978), Bromley (1990 and 1994), Ismael (1993) and Keyder (1987).

3 Constructivism argues that a states system entails an inter-subjective (cultural, not material) set of norms and expectations created by the interactions of states. The system, in turn, shapes (constitutes) the identities of states and this, not simply power considerations, explains their behaviour. The classic application of constructivism to the Middle East is Barnett (1998).

4 Pluralism acknowledges a plurality of forces shaping international relations besides states. Indeed, seeing states as less than unitary actors, it focuses on the role of sub-state domestic actors, such as competing
bureaucracies, interest groups, and public opinion, as determinants of a state’s behaviour. It also stresses the role of leadership beliefs and images, including the irrationality caused by misperceptions. And, it acknowledges the impact of supra-state (the EU) and trans-state (transnational corporations) actors, as well as the role of ‘international regimes’ and complex interdependence in constraining states, especially in deterring warlike behaviour. See Korany, Noble and Brynen (1993) for approaches which ‘unpack’ the Middle East state.