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Revolution, Terrorism, and Governance in the Middle East

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Introduction

Twentieth-century governance and public administration in the Middle East has been significantly impacted by the creation of most Middle Eastern nation-states by colonial powers after World War I, most notably France and Great Britain (Sorenson 2013). The inorganic nature of this creation provided an environment for injustice to be institutionalized and for marginalization and alienation of the public to become the norm. Although similar processes occurred in other parts of the world, including in Africa and Asia, in the Middle East its consequences have been particularly severe. Some observers suggest that some of the origins of the region’s current failed states are a result of the nature of their birth (Lynch 2013).

Three movements emerged immediately after the creation of the modern Middle East, each attempting to deal with problems inherited from the inorganic nature of the region’s creation: nationalism, socialism, and Political Islam. Nationalism arose from a new class whose leaders were educated abroad or exposed to national ideologies of the Western bourgeoisie. This class, later, also came to include members of the military from poorer classes that seized political power via military coups (Dawoody 2014).

Overall, the nationalist movement formed political organizations espousing patriarchal nationalistic ideologies and policies of economic protectionism. Puritanism became the hallmark of this movement in many nations, institutionalized as the cult of “Great Leader”. Dictatorships with initial considerable popular support eventually became unpopular because of their inability to resolve social problems through civic institutions, competent public administration, and sound economic development.

A second movement grew parallel with nationalism, espousing socialist ideology and challenging the first movement for control of public policy and political power. Although the Cold War gave some momentum to the movement, the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in its demise. Today this movement is nothing but nostalgia and the recital of outdated political dogma.

The third movement arose largely from Political Islam, which developed during the aftermath of the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate in the early years of the twentieth century. The objective of the movement was a return to, or adoption of, the Islamic Caliphate and
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Sharia-based governance as a model for a modern state. The third movement — partly because it was opposed, sometimes violently, by the other two movements — involved considerable grassroots development. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 that resulted in the overthrow of a nationalist “great leader” is the most enduring example. In some cases, the movement’s violent manifestations took precedence, resulting in groups and organizations that vary only in their range of tactical application of violence (Lewis 2004).

Ironically, parts of the region that we call the Middle East were some 3,500 years ago the places where the art and science of administration were developed, specifically by the scribes of Mesopotamia. Public administration became a viable tool for the foundation of the first state in history, known as Akkad. Administration was also the main element responsible for the creation of writing, an instrument that early Mesopotamian scribes needed in order to record offerings to the temples (Van De Mieroop 1999).

The powerful empires of the ancient Middle East, such as the Persian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Umayyad, and Abbasid powers, had sophisticated administrations, universities, libraries, hospitals, cities, irrigation systems, and militaries. Although their governance was marred by socio-political conflicts and often manipulated for the benefits of the ruling oligarchies at the expense of vast sectors of the population, their public policies and administrations were responsible for transforming the region into a center of achievements in philosophy, science, music, poetry, and the arts for many centuries (Leick 2003).

After the sack of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 and the destruction of most of the administrative systems of the Abbasid state, the Middle East entered a period of turmoil that to some extent continues to the present (Kennedy 2006). For example, hydrocarbon resources (oil and gas) have produced massive wealth for a few in the past 70 years, while also creating a poor and heavily dependent, non-productive swathe of the population that lacks basic needs (Ross 2013).

Governance in the Middle East today, with the exception of very few nations, is a mix of authoritarian and pseudo-democratic systems. The ruling oligarchies’ decades-old practice of manipulating governmental apparatus in order to siphon public resources and tighten their grip on power has led to high levels of corruption and nepotism, a lack of transparency and accountability, and censorship, as well as an extensive and oppressive police state (Dawoody 2013).

Causes of upheaval in the Middle East

The chapter now turns to the unique challenges to reforming governance structures in the Middle East. In particular, four factors are analyzed: (1) the role of political elites and opposition groups; (2) the role of foreign involvement, especially that of the United States; (3) the rise of failed states; and (4) the role of tribalism and religious schisms.

Elites and opposition

The modern Middle East and the new countries that were brought to existence in the aftermath of the Sykes–Picot Agreement of 1916 (Fromkin 2009) have usually been governed by isolated oligarchies, military juntas, and tribal chieftains that cared primarily about solidifying their position in power and enriching their lot (Khoury and Kostiner 1991). The governmental apparatus acted as a tool of oppression creating massive, dysfunctional bureaucracies feeding on corruption, a police state, censorship, and nepotism, rather than serving the public interest. In such an atmosphere all forms of opposition were silenced and freedom of expression, gathering
and organization were met with political torture, imprisonment, and summary executions (Lesch and Haas 2012).

Internal and external enemies were created in order to justify the continuous imposition of laws suspending individual rights and prolonging the tenure of political leaders and parties by decree, in the complete absence of participatory processes. Ideological indoctrination was imposed in each aspect of daily life in order to normalize this abnormal trend. In many nations, the central ideology gradually shifted from nationalism to socialism to Political Islam (Dawoody 2014). To enforce obedience, the state and religion became interchangeable, persuading citizens that an opposition to the status quo was an opposition to religious teachings and thus God’s will.

The relative absence of political debates in the Middle East and the domination of repetitive, mundane and unthinking forms of schooling (perpetuated by the Madrasa system) reinforced by governmental propaganda machines have produced a class of citizens who are disfranchised but have few alternatives to express their grievances. This is compounded by the migration of highly educated individuals and families from the Middle East to the West for economic, social, personal, and political reasons.

The absence of a viable political opposition that can lead public movements and demand political reforms has created a vacuum that in some cases has been filled by Political Islam and its extremist wings. Mosques are employed as a connective nexus to support an anti-establishment movement logistically, ideologically, and politically (Bokhari and Senzai 2013). This role of mosques has been long-standing through centuries of political oppression and tyrannical forms of governance.

After the Arab Spring of 2013 and the collapse of reactionary and tyrannical regimes in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen, the environment was right for the emergence of democratic and representative governments. However, due to the absence of viable civic institutions, democratic opposition movements, and democratic traditions, these countries fell prey to Political Islam (Bradley 2012). Within a short time, these leaders were ejected from power and governance once again either returned to the rule by the old guard (as in Tunisia), the military (as in Egypt), or descended into chaos (as in Libya and Yemen). Terrorist groups saw in Libya and Yemen a perfect swamp for growth, engaging the old guard that returned to power in Egypt and Tunisia in almost a daily confrontation (mostly in Egypt, since the Muslim Brotherhood has the support of many poor and disenfranchised citizens).

In Syria, however, the Arab Spring took a different turn from the paths that had emerged in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. Although the popular uprising against the Assad regime remained peaceful for the first six months, the movement lacked international backing, as was the case elsewhere (Hokayem 2013). When offenses by the Assad regime escalated, including the use of chemical weapons against civilian population, the peaceful movement turned to armed struggle by defected Syrian soldiers calling themselves the “Free Syrian Army” (US Government 2014). Jihadist groups seized the vacuum created by the West’s reluctance to support the Free Syrian Army in order to pour into Syria and utilize the situation for their advantage (Erlich and Chomsky 2014).

With Iran, Iraq, Russia, and Hezbollah of Lebanon backing Assad both militarily and financially, the rich Arab oil countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait backed those fighting against Assad (Hokayem 2013). As the violence escalated and nearly 120,000 Syrians were killed and another two million became refugees, Syria became a no-man’s land. The capital city of Damascus and a narrow strip around it remained under Assad’s regime while the rest of the country was divided by fighting Jihadists. Groups such as Al Nusra, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and others emerged, espousing the most reactionary and violent doctrines (US Government 2014).
In 2014 the Syrian civil war spilled into Iraq, capitalizing on the weakness of the Iraqi army and the despised sectarian policies of its corrupt and incompetent government (Cockburn 2015). Supported by the local Sunni population, who had suffered since 2003 under the Shiite-dominated government in Iraq, the Jihadist groups in Syria (namely ISIS) were able to build alliances with Saddam’s former military officers and easily capture the provinces of Mosul, Salahuddin, and Anbar (Weiss and Hassan 2015). Soon after, ISIS announced the rebirth of the Islamic Caliphate and began its terror campaign against the Iraqi Yazidis and Christians, destroying their homes, cities, and villages, killing men and raping women. It was only when ISIS fighters turned their attention to the Kurdish region that the West, headed by the United States, decided to intervene through an air campaign in order to stop ISIS’s advances (Cockburn 2015).

**Foreign involvement**

Post World War II, with the discovery of oil and the withdrawal of old colonial powers, the United States became the major power broker in the Middle East and sought to advance its economic and political interests, especially in the oil-rich areas of the region.

Security and order became the mantra of the US and its client states in the region, at the expense of democratization and individual freedoms (Migdal 2014). The result was that the US supported tyrannical and reactionary regimes in the Middle East and on occasions directly interfered, either militarily or through covert intelligence operations, to support these regimes. The most obvious examples of this include the orchestration of the 1953 coup in Iran against a democratically elected government, as well as US military intervention to support the oil sheikhs of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and providing financial resources for the dictatorships of Egypt.

The priority of the US to protect oil supplies meant that Saddam Hussein and his Ba’ath regime in Iraq enjoyed unwavering US military, financial, and political support when his actions were beneficial to US interests, especially during the Iran–Iraq War of 1980–1988 (Hahn 2005).

When Hussein gassed Kurdish minorities in 1988, killing more than 5,000 civilians with mustard gas, the US treated his actions as an internal matter. Only later, when Hussein occupied Kuwait’s oil fields and thus threatened US economic interests, did the Kurdish massacre suddenly surface in American politics, and he was denounced for committing genocide and harboring weapons of mass destruction (Charountaki 2010).

The two Gulf Wars, led by the US against the Ba’ath regime in Iraq in 1991 and 2003, and the devastating United Nations-imposed sanctions on Iraq from 1991 to 2003, resulted in more than three million deaths in Iraq, the destruction of the infrastructure, and high levels of malnutrition, poverty, unemployment, and institutionalized sectarian violence (Ismael and Ismael 2015). Today Iraq is a model for a failed state ridden with terrorist bombs, kidnapping, beheading, corruption, and a dysfunctional governmental system (Al-Ali 2014). Components of Iraq’s ethnic and religious communities are fighting one another for control of power and resources: Sunnis against Shites, Muslims against Christians, and Arabs against Kurds (Rayburn 2014). When governance is incapacitated to such an extent as it is in Iraq, the environment becomes ripe for terrorist groups such as ISIS to capitalize on and manipulate the situation to its advantage.
Failed states

Poor governance, sometimes further compounded by foreign intervention, creates ineffective policies that result in political crisis, stagnation, and some forms of lawlessness and disorder. For the most part, these crises are manageable and can be placed under control through repressive and undemocratic measures, such as military dictatorships. However, the Middle East is saturated with failed states that in some cases aided the growth and spread of terrorism. Examples of these failed states are Libya, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Yemen, Lebanon, and Afghanistan.

In Libya, after four decades of Qaddafi’s tyrannical regime, NATO’s military intervention in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in 2013, and then its quick withdrawal without helping Libyans build a strong government, left the nation without internal peace and order (Engelbrekt and Mohlin 2013). Today, the government in Libya is nothing but a few individuals who are hiding in hotels while the country is torn between Jihadist terrorist groups. The latter are supported by Qatar and Turkey, who use them to force their own Islamist-driven political agenda on the entire region.

In Iraq, the occupation of the country by the US in 2003 resulted in the dismantling of the state and its administrative apparatus, the institutionalization of quotas and sectarianism in the new Iraqi Constitution, and as a result the alienation of the country’s Sunni community. The disempowered Sunnis saw in Islamist terrorist groups a perfect vehicle to force their demands and return to power. Iraq today is torn between ethnic and sectarian violence, with a third of its land controlled by terrorist organizations (Ismael and Ismael 2015). The central government is powerless, decapitated by corruption, political opportunism, incompetence, and non-government militia (Al-Ali 2014). Ordinary Iraqi citizens are trapped between a government that represents the narrow views of Shiite militia and terrorist groups that want to use terror to return Iraq to the seventh century.

Syria is now geographically partitioned into several distinct regions. The capital city of Damascus and the Alawites strip near the Mediterranean Sea are under the Assad regime control. Dara and most of southern Syria is under Free Syrian Army control. Most of the western region is under Al-Qaeda and Al-Nusra control. Aleppo, northern Syria, Ar-Raqqah, and part of the eastern region are under ISIS control. Northeastern Syria is under Kurdish control (mainly PPK fighters who identify Turkey as their arch enemy). With nearly 120,000 Syrian civilians killed, two million refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey, and nearly 20,000 foreign Jihadists making their way to Syria through Turkish borders, often with the knowledge and permission of the Turkish authorities, Syria today is a failed state and considered the most dangerous place on earth. It is a hub that breeds terrorism and a magnet to continually attract future recruits.

Somalia has been a failed state since the collapse of Mohammad Siad Barre’s government in 1991, due to tribal and military conflicts and the agony of civil war that lasted until 2006. It was during this civil war that the world became aware of the famine caused by drought that was devastating the Somalian population. Warlords were hijacking international aid packages in order to solidify their power and control over the population (Fergusson 2013). The US military attempt to guard these relief efforts resulted in the disastrous downing of a Black Hawk helicopter in 1993, and the killing and parading of the bodies of its pilots in the capital city Mogadishu (Clarke and Herbst 1997). In 2012, a weak government was formed to restate the state’s control and authority over a land that disintegrated into three states, Somalia, Somali Land, and Putland, and a population terrorized by pirates known as Al-Shabab (Hansen 2013), an offshoot of Al-Qaeda which recently affirmed its allegiance to ISIS.

Yemen, long ruled by its strong military man Ali Abdullah Salih, was forcibly united in 1990 after eight years of civil war between its northern and southern parts (Brehony 2013) and
became the fourth country in the Middle East to witness the Arab Spring in 2011 after Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya (Lynch 2013). Demonstrations continued to be peaceful despite a military crackdown by Salih’s regime. Eventually, after mediation by Saudi Arabia, Salih agreed to step down in 2012 and hand power to his Vice President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi (Rabi 2015). The government of Hadi, however, collapsed under pressure from a Shiite tribal group known as Al-Houthies (Salmoni and Loidolt 2010). Today, Yemen is one of the strongholds of Al-Qaeda, and with the Al-Houthy tribe in power, the failed state has paved the way for organized terrorist groups (namely Al-Qaeda, since Yemen was the birthplace of its founder, Osama bin Laden) to wreak havoc on regional and world security, including maritime travel in the straits of Aden in the Red Sea.

Although better functioning than other failed states in the region, Lebanon nevertheless is a failed state and a hub for the largest legitimized terrorist organization in the Middle East: Hezbollah. Not only does Hezbollah paralyze the Lebanese state, it is the Lebanese state (Worrall and Clubb 2015). No one is elected and placed in power, including the country’s ceremonial Christian President, the Sunni Prime Minister, or the Shiite head of Parliament, without Hezbollah approval. Hezbollah has its own military, institutions, members of cabinet, and members of Parliament and it dictates the country’s domestic and foreign policy. Because of such paralysis, Lebanon is a de facto failed state (Levitt 2013). Lebanon’s proximity to Syria had always made it a target for Syria’s state-sponsored terrorism, including the assassination of its leaders, such as the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005 by Syrian intelligence and Hezbollah operatives. Today, Hezbollah is fully engaged (including sending armed men) in defending the Assad regime in Syria, making Lebanon and Lebanese–Syrian borders an open arena for conflicts and violence.

In the case of Afghanistan, the US used the Soviet invasion in 1979 as a recruiting ground for Islamist Jihadists to fight the Soviets in the name of God and freedom. Once defeated, the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, along with the US, leaving the Jihadists to fight among themselves for control of the country (Coll 2004). The civil war continued until 1996, when an Afghan terrorist group named the Taliban, trained and armed by Pakistan, took power and established one of the most reactionary, misogynist, and repressive regimes in modern history (Tanner 2009). The Taliban hosted Osama Bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda network. After September 11, 2001 and when they refused to surrender Osama Bin Laden to the United States, the Taliban were driven out of power by the US military and Afghanistan came under US military control (Tucker-Jones 2014).

Although the United States allowed elections to be held for president and an independent government to be formed, the US-protected Afghani government lacks any real existence outside the capital city of Kabul. Hence, the President of Afghanistan is best called the mayor of Kabul. Most of the countryside is back under Taliban control. This situation makes Afghanistan yet another failed state and a safe haven for terrorist groups such as Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

Tribalism and religious schisms

A final feature of governance in the Middle East is the continuous domination of tribalism and religious schisms (Kamrava 1998). When individualism is crushed or undermined and decisions are made by tribal chieftains, group interests become more important than individual rights. If the state cannot broker the interests of different tribes – when government, for example, is dominated by other tribes and thus has to respond to the dominant tribes’ interests – the disaffected parties invite terrorist groups to advance their objectives. For example, this is what
is taking place in parts of Iraq today. When the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad systematically excluded Sunni tribes from sharing power, these tribes invited terrorists such as ISIS to force its demands. Only when these tribes realize that such an alliance with these terrorist groups may limit their autonomy do they then turn against their allies and expel them.

Tribalism reinforces sectarian divides in the Middle East, especially among Sunnis and Shiites. The division between the Sunnis and Shiites in Islam is not recent but rather dates back to the early years of Islam, particularity after the Prophet Muhammad’s death when the Caliphate passed to his friend and father-in-law instead of his cousin, Ali. For the bulk of history, Muslims largely restricted the division to religious rituals (Hazleton, 2010). Recently, however, terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, as well as Shiite militia, have been using this divide for political reasons in order to gain complete power at the expense of others.

Conclusion

Today in the Middle East, two major paths have emerged in efforts to make governance more representative, transparent, accountable, and effective. The first is led by civic society groups advocating a change in governance to make it more democratic and better engaged in building a prosperous civil society. This group is largely unorganized and spontaneous, exemplified by events labelled by the Western media as the Arab Spring. Unfortunately, due to the newness and disorganized nature of the movement, it is easily manipulated by traditional power brokers and entrenched groups. The second path is followed by groups that yearn for a change in governance that returns to, or builds on, the sixth-century Islamic Caliphate and the constitutionalization of Sharia Law. Some groups advocating such a foundation of governance sometimes resort to terrorist acts.

When analyzing changes in governance in the Middle East, it is imperative to differentiate between revolution and terrorism. Although both may share some causality (such as a rejection of the existing order), they differ in regard to legitimacy. Revolution signifies the demand by large segments of the population for sound governance, better lives, and a better future. In the absence of democratic channels and viable opposition political movements, revolutions in the form of mass protests, demonstrations, labor strikes, and peaceful gatherings such as the Arab Spring are both necessary and required in order to ensure legitimate governance. If tyrannical governmental apparatus responds to these mass protests with violence, as was the case in Syria in 2011, then citizens have the right to fight oppression and defend their homes and families and pursue their demands. This is emphasized, for example, by the US Constitution, which legitimizes arming a popular militia when government no longer democratically represents the will of the public.

In the case of terrorism, however, there is less justification for violence. The main reason for this is that terrorism does not represent the free will of the people but rather uses violence to impose a narrow ideology on the majority. Terrorism ends the legitimacy of the state and replaces it with a savage Hobbesian lawless society where only the strong survive at the expense of security, freedom, and rights.

The region’s recent experiments with democracy, whether top-down like the one imported by outsiders into Iraq or Afghanistan, or through internal strife like the Arab Spring, have largely failed to bring sustained change to governance structures. This chapter points to four barriers to sustained reform.

First, the absence of civic institutions at grassroots levels and the powerful conservative elite groups seek to maintain the status quo. Second, foreign involvement, especially the role of the US, supports governance structures that meet its objectives. Third, the existence of failed states,
which require extraordinary efforts to establish robust governance systems, spread terrorism in the Middle East, particularly terrorism associated with Political Islam. Lastly, longstanding tribal and political schisms impose limits on the governance structures of modern states, along with tribal and cultural traditions that emphasize collectivism at the expense of individualism.

References


