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# Review Essay

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## **The Middle East: The Question Is Not Why We Care but Rather Should We?**

**NORVELL B. DEATKINE**

Over the past 30 years I have lived among, worked with, and studied Middle Easterners, both here and in their own lands. In that time I have come to admire much about them as people. They are extraordinarily talented; they are vibrant, sensitive, highly intelligent, and possess an outlook and understanding of the world about them that makes our culture and society, particularly at the elite level, appear ignorant and culturally dysfunctional. They are self-reliant, industrious, well-read, interested, and interesting people.

The question then becomes, why is the vast majority of the middle eastern region an intellectual and political wasteland? How can such an immensely talented people inhabit a region of the world that some of the more astute observers are describing as increasingly irrelevant? Other than oil and talented people, they produce carpets and pistachio nuts. Their overall economy (minus oil and Israel) equals that of Finland, and with Israel added in it equals that of Belgium. As one longtime US foreign service officer encapsulated the situation, there was a time when one could go to the middle eastern equivalent of a True Value hardware store and buy tools that were all locally made. Today they originate everywhere but the Middle East. From my observations, that situation extends to almost all commodities of life. Other than in making weapons and ammunition most of the countries are less self-supporting than 25 years ago. But even among the world's top ten arms importers, seven are Arab nations. In terms of being able to feed their own populations, there has been an increasing reliance on outside food imports--a result of doubling populations and misguided government socialist policies in the last 30 years.

While Asia has surged ahead in economic power and Latin America has moved to democracy, nothing similar has occurred in the Middle East. To repeat, why, with its talented people, has the Middle East fallen further behind? Is this relative backwardness a function of Western imperialism? Is it attributable to the region's politics, culture, and religions? Or is it simply a by-product of the ebb and flow of world history and geostrategic determinism?

Fouad Ajami, one of the more readable contemporary writers on the middle eastern world, chronicles the bright prospects of a post-World War II secularized Arab intellectual elite, anti-Western in resisting its political and economic control, but Western-educated and animated by the ideas of nationalism, socialism, and democracy. It was the Arab intellectuals' dream that their world could arise from the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire and colonialism to create a secular, democratic, and modern state. Ajami, through the lives of several Arab intellectuals, traces their inevitable disillusionment. I was particularly interested in his depiction of the great Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfuz, who epitomized the post-World War II enlightened Arab thinker. He acknowledged his debt to such great Western literary figures as Shakespeare, James Joyce, and Tolstoy, which in itself is a repudiation of today's Islamist luddites who control the public discourse in the Middle East. In one of his short stories, "Miramar," he captures the disillusionment of the intellectuals as they watched the Nasser regime, which came to power in the "revolution," become increasingly repressive. The revolution turned out to be a simple replacement of one elitist group by another, whose members were even more rapacious. The story, though written in 1967, is just as valid today. One character in the story portrays the Nasserist revolution as the only alternative to communism or the Muslim Brotherhood. The notion of a democratic republic was not an option then, nor is it now.

As he did in his earlier book, *The Arab Predicament*, and more gently in his latest book, *The Dream Palace of the Arabs*, Ajami ascribes much of the lack of progress to an Arab predilection for building a heaven on earth based on fantasies and adulation of would-be Salah-ad-Dins who promise everything and wind up delivering nothing more than

suffering and depleted treasuries. On the other hand, Edward Said, a Columbia University professor of literature, has long expounded the premise that middle eastern ills are a result of Western imperialism, bound together with "orientalism," which is, in his view, "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." He claims that "the Arab world today is an intellectual, political, and cultural satellite of the United States." Thus from consumerism to academic studies the Arab world suffers the lingering effects of colonialism and imperialism, both politically and economically. Said's earlier classic *Orientalism* has been supplemented by his newer book *Culture and Imperialism*, which makes the case that the literary ascendancy of the West has created a self-validating picture of an incurably inferior Near East. In Said's latest articles he has modified his thesis somewhat to link the now-admitted inferiority of the Arab world to a malaise, a "sense of powerlessness," marked by the tendency to substitute words for action. This is a trait of Arab culture depicted by Raphael Patai in his much-maligned classic *The Arab Mind*, still far and above the best exposition of Arab culture.

Of course there is a case for Said's demonizing of the West. The very interesting and newly published *Fighting World War Three from the Middle East*, by Michael Cohen, should be required reading for all DOD, JCS, and CENTCOM planners. It highlights the duplicity, arrogance, and cynicism of the Allies following World War II, as well as the blatant aggression of the Russians. The resources and geography were important; the people were not. This theme was examined in detail in an earlier book, *Sunrise at Abadan* by Richard Stewart, which demonstrated the Great Power considerations that precipitated the Soviet/British invasion of Iran in 1941. The necessity for the British move to counter the German threat was of small comfort to the Iranians.

Bassam Tibi, in his book *Arab Nationalism: Between Islam and the Nation State*, makes a clear argument that the current politically inspired Islamic convulsions will not lead to a new order but rather to "chaos and disorder." He depicts the Arab world as one devoid of freedom of thought, controlled by state security services, and held together not by nationalism, but by fear of these coercive institutions. Arab nationalism and the secular values it represented offered the best chance for the Arab world to enter the modern world, but that nationalism became infected with demagoguery, and its hollowness was exposed by the 1967 defeat by Israel and reiterated by the Gulf War. This and other factors have led to the rise of political Islam, yet another chimera promising heaven on earth while more likely to deliver destruction.

This point is also made by Milton Viorst in a *Washington Quarterly* article in which he describes, among other factors, the rote learning in school and the declining tolerance for diversity of thought as evidence of a civilization in decline. The inability or unwillingness on the part of the Ulama (religious intelligentsia) to blend modernity with modernization has resulted in what Hilal Khashan portrays as acceptance of Western technology but not the system of knowledge that produced it. Behind this schizoid outlook, according to Tibi, is a firm belief that realization of a universal *umma* (Islamic community) is impeded by Western conspiracies. Tibi also makes the point that while the West is demonized as the inhibitor of the *umma*, the actual factor leading to division is rising ethnocentricity. He points to examples in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Arab-Iranian clash in the Gulf. The Kurds and the Shia of Iraq are other prime examples.

The best laboratory of ethno-religious strife is the case of Lebanon. William Harris, in *Faces of Lebanon*, has written the best detailed study of the Lebanese war to date. His conclusions point to a new Lebanon not unlike the rest of the Arab world. In other words it is more repressive, more corrupt, and even more ethnically and religiously divided. It has become, to quote the author, "uninhabitable for decent people." Perhaps the optimism that greeted the inauguration of President Lahoud is simply a validation of the reality of Lebanon, which is that tranquillity and a modicum of security have been purchased at the price of Syrian hegemony, repression, and pervasive official corruption.

Another recent book that explores the ethnicity question is an anthology of Central Asia, *Central Asia Meets the Middle East*, in which the issue revolves around competing identities--Western, ethnic, Central Asian, Islamic, and tribal. The contributors look at Turkish, Iranian, Western, and indigenous models for Central Asians to follow. Happily, it seems that the Central Asians, while undergoing a re-Islamization at a grass-roots level, have not bought any model, and despite the dire predictions of some experts that the Middle East and attendant problems would move into Central Asia, that has not happened and appears to be unlikely. Islam will be resurgent but probably will not push Central Asia into a closer political alliance with the Muslim Middle East. Tribal and ethnic identity seems to be the major determinant in Central Asia's path of development, while sectarianism is ascendant over Islam.

In another part of Central Asia, the power of ethnicity has forced recalculations on the part of the Iranian government. In a talk at the Middle East Institute in the spring of 1998, Olivier Roy discussed the chagrin of the Iranian government on discovering the ascendancy of ethnic differences over Muslim pretensions of solidarity, in this case the chasm between Shia and Sunni Muslims, in Iran's confrontation with the Pushtun Sunni Taliban of Afghanistan. After years of conflict in Afghanistan, the ethnic nature of the war has convinced the Iranian government that the so called "Islamic revival" has taken on a Sunni identity and poses a danger to the Iranian Shia as well as to the existing political order in the area.

The ethnicity issue also extends to Israel. In a penetrating study of the Israeli defense establishment, the authors of *Knives, Tanks, and Missiles* trace the changing defense philosophy of Israel and the reasons for it. They see a shift away from universal military service, a reduction in force structure, a rebalancing of the force resulting in less dependence on armor, a ground force relying more on organic fire support and less on the air force, an expanded officer development program, and a revised strategic doctrine. This doctrine will include more emphasis on defense in lieu of de rigueur preemptive offensive action, assemblage of regional coalitions against mutual enemies, and stress on destruction of enemy forces rather than seizing terrain--the latter having proved to be a mixed blessing. As the authors put it, the Israeli army of the future will no longer be the "heroic" army covering itself with glory on the conventional battlefield, but rather an army required to do the "dirty work" of security, counterterrorism, and counterinsurgency. The reasons for this are varied, including economic factors, the changing political landscape in the Middle East, technological developments, concern about continued US support, and societal changes--particularly the ethnic and religious conflicts within Israeli society. The authors use the descriptive term "torn country," coined by Samuel Huntington, to describe Israel. It is torn because of increasing conflict between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, immigrants and native-born, and especially between religious and secular Jews--with the latter described as seeking to create "a kind of Hebrew-speaking California."

Assessing the direction of another middle eastern state, Saudi Arabia, around which the United States has thrown a protective cordon, two books of recent vintage have shed some light on a country generally free of ethnic problems. *The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, by David Long, and *Politics in an Arabian Oasis*, by Madawi Al Rasheed, bring out in different ways the strengths and weaknesses of the Saudi tribal system. Long's book is one of the most balanced and insightful books written on Saudi Arabia in many years. His political assessment of the history, people, culture, and religion straightforwardly concludes that Saudi Arabia is not in a pre-revolutionary stage (something I have been reading since 1967), and that "even among the most modernized, Western-educated technocrats in the Kingdom, there is virtually no desire to forsake Islamic political theory as the basis of the Saudi constitutional system." Madawi, on the other hand, traces the sad demise of the once powerful Rashidi family of the formidable Shammar tribal confederation of northeastern Saudi Arabia. The Rashidi conqueror, Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, effected political marriages to the Rashidis and other powerful families to disarm opposition (the present crown prince, Abdullah, has a Shammar mother). Madawi illustrates that in the modern era the Saudis have continued to co-opt potential dissidence by undermining tribal clout while centralizing Saud power. The Saudis have accomplished this using the modern apparatus of state coercive power and vast amounts of oil money to intimidate or buy off dissident tribal leaders. The power of patronage and coercion have brought many of the Rashidi clan into the elitist mainstream of the Kingdom.

Of course, the two rogue states of the Persian Gulf, Iran and Iraq, continue to evoke vast numbers of articles and assessments. The December 1998 US-British air and missile attacks on Iraq, Operation Desert Fox, provoked some sharp criticism concerning the overall objectives, results, and future policies. In a monograph written before the December attacks, *Iraq Strategy Review: Options for US Policy*, Patrick Clawson presented five options: military invasion; supporting the Iraqi opposition; containment defined broadly to mean maintaining the pre-Desert Fox policies; containment defined more narrowly, recognizing that our present policies are untenable and focusing on restraining Iraq's military capabilities; and finally deterrence in the form of preventing Iraqi use of force. Because of the military requirements and geopolitical considerations, invasion is no longer an option, according to an excellent article by Michael Eisenstadt, "US Military Capabilities in the Post-Cold War Era: Implications for Middle East Allies."

Maintaining the present containment policy is also no longer tenable in that one of the pillars, the UN inspection team process, is dead. Moreover, few Middle East observers put much stock in the efficacy of the Iraqi opposition, although this solution resonates well in Congress. That leaves a US policy of providing a sort of safety net against renewed

Iraqi aggression as the only credible option. With the European powers going their own way, friendly governments in the region playing to an Arab Muslim public that is often viscerally anti-American, and our Gulf bankers--the Saudis--facing another large cash flow deficit, continued US presence will require a huge investment in both military capability and money.

In another pre-Desert Fox monograph, this one by the Israeli scholar Amatzia Baram and aptly titled *Building Toward Crisis: Saddam Hussein's Strategy for Survival*, the author sees Hussein as firmly in control, having restored the pride of the Republican Guards, maintaining his arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, and sitting in a more favorable position in the Arab, Muslim, and international world at large. In a policy briefing at the Middle East Institute, two scholars of note were highly critical of the Desert Fox attacks on Iraq. Andrew Parasiliti saw the attacks resulting in the loss of the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM), an undermining of the UN, a fresh wave of sympathy for Iraq in the Muslim and world communities, and a complication in our efforts to create a viable opposition to Hussein within Iraq. Michael Dunn, looking through the regional prism, saw a turnabout in the short-lived Palestinian satisfaction with President Clinton's visit to Gaza, returning to the more normal flag-burnings and threats. The Gulf countries stayed silent and are now more concerned that the strikes served only to make Hussein more determined without doing any lasting damage. There is also a weariness with the repetitive scenario, and with no diminution in the threat posed by Hussein. As the year came to a close, Dunn observed that "the US position in the Arab world is at a low ebb."

The Iranian issue was third only to Iraq and the Arab-Israeli impasse in terms of scholarly and media coverage. Most seemed to agree with Olivier Roy, "The only people who do not realize the Islamic revolution is over are some in Washington and those in power in Iran." However, many saw a definite shift toward a more open political system. Most claimed that despite some overheated rhetoric from the hardliners, Iran was experiencing a trend toward a more liberal society. Mahmood Monshipouri wrote of a new pragmatism in Iran and the futility and counterproductivity of economic sanctions, which build competitors rather than clients. Unaffected by this seeming shift in the political environment in Iran, American-Iranian relations have progressed very little. Graham Fuller lays the blame for Washington's shortsighted policies on "inflamed rhetoric and intense pro-Israeli lobbying against Tehran in Congress." Despite the moderate words from President Khatemi and an apparent opening to the West, opposition leaders are still being killed and Iranian links to terrorist--or "freedom fighter"--organizations and activities elsewhere continue to appear in the Arab and Iranian press. As former Iranian Foreign Minister Ebrahim Yazdi stated it, the popular and seemingly more liberal Khatemi is moving toward political liberalization, but he has "limited power."

The Islamic threat or lack thereof was the subject of a convocation of Western scholars hosted by the United States Institute of Peace between 1994 and 1996 and summarized in the monograph *Islamic Activism and U.S. Foreign Policy*. There was little agreement among the experts, with the usual split on whether or not Islamic activism can or should be accommodated or must be confronted. One group advocated a policy of separating moderates from extremists, while the latter group saw little difference between the two, believing that an Islamic state by its nature will be authoritarian and repressive. Those who contend that democracy and fundamentalist Islam are compatible have only theory to support their claims--so far the corroborative evidence is not there.

Taking up the important subject of middle eastern media coverage, Gadi Wolfsfeld, in her book *Media as Political Conflict*, describes case studies of press manipulation such as those involving the *intifadah* in Palestine and the Gulf War with Iraq. Purporting to examine the ways in which the media interact with the political contenders for advantage, she constructs a political contest model from which she concludes that the media in the Gulf War were "faithful servant[s] dutifully providing services to their Allied masters." On the other hand, she saw the role of the media as supporting the Palestinians as the underdog in their coverage of the *intifadah*.

As interesting as it may be to construct paradigms and test them, from my experience the real problem with the American media coverage of middle eastern political-military events is not manipulation or bias, although to be sure there is some of both, but rather a pervasive ignorance of the area and all things related to military or security issues. This is not exactly a novel assessment, but it was first made evident to me in the Jordanian-Palestinian civil war of 1970. US reporting of the war bore little resemblance to the events I observed on the ground. That perception was reinforced as a result of my association some nine years ago at Ft. Bragg with ex-Sergeant Ali Mohamed, linked by newspaper accounts to Osama Bin Laden. The various reporters who called on or interviewed me concerning this case

evinced a total lack of background study or preparation for the task at hand. There was no evidence of their having seriously delved into Islam or terrorism--not to mention the fundamentals of military structure, terms, or organization--before reporting on the subject. All were polite and intelligent people, but regarding the subject at hand they were clueless. The CNN coverage converted an extremely interesting and complicated story into a 15-minute segment of disconnected sound bites.

In the end, the irony is that as major regional conflicts loom elsewhere, the United States has become increasingly trapped in the Middle East: first with a tar baby of our own making, the Wye River Accord, in which the United States is directly involved in carrying out 13 aspects of the agreement with the CIA acting as a referee; and second, in the Gulf, where we are on the receiving end of a whip held by Saddam Hussein.

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Reviewer's note: Other than the periodicals mentioned above, two periodicals of great value in keeping abreast of the Middle East scene are *The Estimate*, published in Washington, and *The Middle East International*, published in London. The only two web sites needed are the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies in Tel Aviv at <http://www.biu.ac.il/soc/besa/> and the *MSANEWS LaunchPad* at <http://msanews.mynet.net/Launchpad/>. The links at these two sites get you wherever you need to go.

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