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Review Paper

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*“Somebody Else’s Civil War”*

By Michael Scott Doran

Foreign Affairs, Jan/Feb2002, Vol. 81, pp 22-42

*“The Roots of Muslim Rage”*

By Bernard Lewis

The Atlantic, September 1990

*“The Politics of Chaos in the Middle East”*

By Olivier Roy

Columbia University Press, 2008

The State and War in the Middle East

The Middle East is widely seen as a region in which conflict exists in many forms, whether it is political, social, historical or economic. The region’s nations, as we see them today, were formed throughout the 20th Century. Before then the region was split up among colonial powers so, as nations, they are relatively young. However, the culture of the Middle East is rooted deeply in both religious and social structures that have persisted for thousands of years. The focus of this essay is the cause of conflict in the Middle East and how it relates to the Middle East’s rejection of the West and the United States.

American policy in the Middle East has recently been one of intervention, the goals of which are often unclear. Many political scientists debate American policy in the Middle East and its effects on the regional chaos. However, the origins of the conflict may come from a vast amount of other sources that are not necessarily related to external intervention. That being said, the United States is all but welcome in the Middle East for many reasons. As the world’s hegemon of the time, the United States may exert its power for both benevolent and selfish reasons. Despite the policies that American politicians label as efforts to quell the chaos, the Middle East maintains its chaotic state. Although 9/11 is a recent marking point of the Middle Eastern resentment, prior to the plane hijackings in 2001 there was still a general rejection and resentment of the West and America. Why is this region so politically discontent and what has caused the Middle East to harbor feelings of Western hatred?

This essay will critically examine what role the United States plays in the internal conflicts that exist in the Middle East and how their role affects the Middle Eastern view of America and the West. Furthermore, it will examine how the policies in Washington should change to better the situation in the Middle East. To answer these questions, the essay will critically analyze three academic pieces.

Many theorists have developed ideas about the origins of resentment and political disorder in the Middle East. Many also speculate about how the United States should deal with the region. One such theorist is Bernard Lewis. In his article *“The Roots of Muslim Rage”*, Lewis pegs Islamic culture and history as the main actors in the resentment of the West. His piece is useful because it is written well prior to 9/11 and it poses counterarguments to some commonly believed explanations for “Muslim rage”. Michael Doran’s *“Somebody Else’s Civil War”* also theorizes about the conflict in the Middle East. Doran uses the example of 9/11 and Bin Laden to target politics as a major actor in Middle East conflicts. The last theorist that will be discussed is Olivier Roy. In his book “*The Politics of Chaos in the Middle East”*, Roy addresses the many intricate conflicts within Middle Eastern states. He identifies the State as the main actor in his article. As a Frenchman, Roy’s outside perspective of American-Middle Eastern relations opens our eyes to some of the more internal and complex problems in the region.

There are far more actors that contribute to the overall chaos than these three pieces highlight. However, each theorist identifies a major actor that fuels Western resentment and political chaos. All three pieces recognize the fact that there are indeed many internal problems within the Middle East. Additionally, there is a consensus that external intervention and American policy play a large role in the future of the Middle East. Washington seems to be somewhat blind to the complexities behind internal conflicts and each author attempts to explain what American policymakers are missing.

*“The Roots of Muslim Rage”* begins with the concept of secularism. Right away Lewis marks religion as a major actor in the Middle East. He explains how the separation of church and state fits with Christian ideals and does not go against Christian doctrine. Contrastingly, this separation does not translate to Islam. A fundamental law of Islam is that the Qur’an must be interpreted literally in all aspects of life. Already Islam is at a disadvantage, according to Lewis, because they cannot form governments that follow both their religion and a social desire for a State that is not swayed by religion. Lewis disregards the State as an actor because he believes that beneath the State is the overarching power of Islam.

After the birth of Islam, the religion went through many prosperous years, but now the Islamic heyday is over. According to Lewis, the source of regional insecurity in the Middle East is Muslim humiliation. Islam was historically powerful and thriving, and now it has been left destitute. This humiliation translates into hatred, says Lewis, and who better to hate than the nation that has the power now. Lewis discounts some popular ideas about why the Muslim world resents the West. The French and German idea that the United States has no culture and is a corruptive force is not wide spread enough. The American support for Israel does not necessarily resonate negatively with majority of public opinion in the Middle East. Imperialism, racism and support for immoral regimes are other popular ideas that Lewis dismisses.

Lewis ultimately concludes that it is too risky for the United States to force change in the Middle East. In this piece, he says that the costs of intervention would outweigh the benefits. The Muslim world rejects both secularism and modernism. If the Western world pushes too hard to secure secularism and modernism in the Middle East, “the Muslim” will try harder to push back. Ironically, after 9/11 Lewis advocates American intervention in the Middle East. He maintains the same ideas that he poses in this article, but he says that after 9/11 the war in the Middle East came to the United States and it drew us in.

The main criticism of Lewis’ piece is that it creates the monolith of “the Muslim”. Lewis is considered to be an Orientalist by critics because his article makes large generalizations about the Muslim religion and the Middle East region. Lewis also does not account for the other religions in the region that harbor negative feelings towards the United States. Furthermore, he does not explain why some Islamic regimes and governments have allied with the United States. Because he ignores politics and the States as major actors in the Middle Eastern conflict he limits his argument. Both Doran and Roy give more consideration to politics in their pieces.

“*Somebody Else’s Civil War”* discusses and uses Bin Laden and terrorism to explain Muslim rage in a post 9/11 world. In many ways Doran’s piece is a continuation of Lewis’, adjusted to fit the times and circumstances. His piece develops specific cases and examples to justify his theory. Doran gives a concrete example of the rise of Islamic militants and terrorism in the Middle East. He says that terrorists, specifically Bin Laden, label the United States as “hubal”, or idolatrous pagans that are the disease of Islam. He addresses the fact that according to Islamic scripture, there are two kinds of people; the umma and the infidels. He delves into different Islamic factions, but does not completely get rid of “the Muslim” monolith that Lewis created. He specifically highlights the Salafi, who can be seen as Islamic fundamentalists.

Doran explains how the Salafi believe that they must emulate their forefathers and must recapture the polluted world in the name of Islam. Doran points out that these groups are social movements and do not really have concrete political platforms or agendas. Their goal is to spread Islam and to use it against the infidels. Terrorist attacks are carried out to illicit negative (“shock and awe”) responses. In the United States, 9/11 instigated such a response. Terrorists want to then use this response to gain support and followers.

Lewis and Doran both assert how the conflict in the Middle East is largely internal. The most interesting point of Doran’s piece is that both secularists and Islamists in the Middle East share a disdain for the United States. Unlike Lewis, Doran recognizes politics as a major actor in the Middle East. He explains how religion and politics are intertwined and that they are mutually dependent on one another. He takes a more in-depth look at Sharia law and how it cannot coexist with secularism. None the less both secularists *and* Islamists resent the West because this resentment unifies them.

Doran tenaciously assumes that democratization and American involvement in the Middle East will help them. Like Lewis, he acknowledges a problem in U.S. policy in the Middle East, but neither of the two theorists gets to the basis of the problem. They are still not able to see how understanding the complex situation in the Middle East is not just based on Islam, history, and a simple comprehension of politics. Roy discusses this problem in his book.

Contrary to both Lewis and Doran, Roy addresses politics as the main actor in the chaos and conflict in the Middle East. His piece agrees that the conflict is internal but also gives more regard to the effects of American policy in the Middle East. *“Political Chaos in the Middle East”* was written post 9/11 and during the ongoing War in Iraq. Roy’s book has two parts; the first delves into the internal conflicts and the second explains how American policy disregarded the true internal conflicts and worsened the situation. This exacerbation *seems* to have brought out a rage in the Muslim community. However, Roy asserts that this “Muslim anger” is just the appearance of the international conflict and that the actual conflict is much deeper than that.

He says that there is no collective “Muslim community” that hates the West. Instead there are different factions within the Middle East that, for different *political* reasons, ally with Western nations or make enemies of them. Furthermore, the different Muslim factions are also fighting with each other. In this way, Roy discounts Lewis’ theory of “the Muslim”.

In contrast to Doran, Roy explains how Sharia law is applied differently depending on who is interpreting it. It can be applied narrowly to the family and in the personal sphere of morality or it can be selectively applied in the political sphere to maintain power. All the political factions and groups that exist in the Middle East attempt to be geostrategical but stay local. Roy asserts that if socio-cultural actors are the main actors in the Middle East than the neoconservative agenda would have worked. On the contrary, it failed because there is no legitimacy or sincerity in democracy according the Middle Eastern people. From their perspective democratic institutions are unreliable and unaccountable because that is what they see from the American occupation in Iraq. Roy denies the neoconservatives any redemption. He exposes the ideas of promoting democracy as a false impression as well.

Unfortunately, Roy only emphasizes the problems that the neoconservatives in the Bush Administration have made worse and does not give any possible solutions. The Bush Administration, he says, miscalculate and misinterpreted the true conflicts in the Middle East and exacerbated what was already a volatile region.

If American policy reflected a better understanding of the Middle Eastern situation, perhaps the United States would be able to ease the regional conflicts. The three authors that were described in this essay all saw that there was a disconnection between the Middle East and American foreign policy. To solve this problem the American government would need to sponsor hands-on, in-depth research in the Middle East. This research would have to be in many fields including history, political science, economics, and even anthropology. Then they would have to take this research into consideration before making policy.

In terms of development, perhaps American intervention is hindering internal progress. This progress may not look like development in the eyes of America, but it would probably take into consideration the political and cultural atmosphere of the Middle East, thus saving a lot of lives and unnecessary conflict. Politicians in Washington are so concerned with spreading democracy (or pretend that they are very concerned with it) that they do not consider the effects it may have on the standing political atmosphere in the region. Peace in the Middle East is almost unfathomable, but it cannot be helped by ignorant policymakers in Washington.