

THE HISTORY OF THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE POST-COLONIAL PERIOD

Roger E. Owen*

Personal Introduction

I first visited the Near East when posted to Cyprus in September 1955 as part of my two year National Military Service. It did not take me long to discover how quick and easy it was to fly from Nicosia Airport to Beirut, Cairo and Tel Aviv, using my Christmas leave to spend time in Israel/Palestine and then getting myself locally demobilized from the army in May 1956 in order to visit Cairo and Beirut. All this left a lasting impression for many different sets of reasons. One was certainly the politics of the immediate post-war period with Israel emerging out of the 1948 war and Egypt moving from qualified independence via the 1952 Revolution to the final departure of British troops in the summer of 1956. All events so much more exciting than the rather dull English politics of the late Winston Churchill/Antony Eden period. With everything becoming more intense as a result of President Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal in July 1956 and the misguided Anglo-French attack of October/November just after I had arrived in Oxford for my three years of undergraduate studies.

Then too I found the scenery exciting and the people warm and welcoming even to someone from the late-Imperial Britain. I remember in particular a magical evening on the roof restaurant of the old Semiramis Hotel with the Nile gliding slowly by under a canopy of stars and the warm air filled with a cacophony of gentle sounds. And, finally, there were young Egyptians and Palestinians and Jordanians to talk to about planning, industrialization and development and all the rest of the package designed to allow the so-called 'under-developed' East catch up with the 'developed' west.

* A.J. Meyer Professor of Middle East History, Harvard University.

So it was that when I moved on to write a doctoral thesis at St. Antony's College in Oxford I decided to work on the concept of export-sector led growth and, more specifically, on the role of cotton in Egypt's 19th and early twentieth century modernization. This took me to live in Egypt itself for a year and then New York the following one, 1963-4, discussing my ideas with Charles Issawi, then one of the few trained economists with an interest in Middle Eastern economic history. And finally back to Oxford where I obtained a post teaching economic history via lecture courses that were then amplified to include some political history and political economy as well.

This was an exciting time with the Cold War raging and large amounts of British and American government and foundation money being poured into the study of the post-colonial world in newly created multi-disciplinary 'Centers' headed by men like my mentor, Albert Hourani, who had usually moved from World War II intelligence gathering – often in Cairo – to university posts in Middle East History. Scholarships could easily be obtained for study and research in the libraries, archives and universities of the region – mine took me to Egypt and then, three year's later, to Lebanon – and many new posts created, not just in Middle Eastern but also in the associated fields of African, Latin American, Russian, Sub-continental, Chinese and East Asian Studies.

One thing that was conspicuously lacking in my field, however, was the possibility of structured cooperation with the academic institutions in the region we studied, as the small colonial-period universities in Cairo, Alexandria, Damascus and elsewhere were opened up to tens of thousands of new students leading just to a sharp fall in quality but also in the money needed for conferences, maintaining the quality of libraries and, in many cases, the study of western languages as well. True, it was possible to make friendships with individual students and academics interested in subjects of common interest like empire, anti-imperialism, colonial nationalism, etc. True too that some Middle Eastern students were sent to universities in Britain to obtain post-graduate training in anthropology, economics and so on. But, as I was to come to recognize, none of this added up to a system of permanent structures fed by constant exchange as well as either sufficiently well-funded or sufficiently predictable to allow outsiders like myself to study the peoples and politics of the Middle East in terms of an equal partnership. Nor, for all the improvements in recent years, would it be possible to believe that the prospects for such a partnership are much better. For, whether we like it or not, large areas of mutual suspicion remain, fed, as might be expected, by events like the 9/11 attacks on New York, the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the emergence both of Middle Eastern religious parties and of an increasing Western anti-Islamism.

The Political History of the Middle East

For the purpose of more formal analysis I will now divide the modern political history into four periods:

1) 1948-1967 – the establishment of independent sovereign political entities usually under strong authoritarian leaders.

2) 1967- 1990 - the restructuring of Arab regimes after total defeat in the 1967 Middle East war and the subsequent turn to the West.

3) 1990-2011 – the sale of state assets to the so-called crony-capitalist associates of strong presidents for life and its political consequences.

4) 2011 to the present – a second period of political adjustment as a result of the 2011 uprisings, with the dictatorial presidents either at bay (Sudan, Syria) or overthrown to be replaced by experiments in electoral democracy and the incorporation of popular religious parties (Egypt, Libya).

1) 1948-1967

It is safe to say that the Arab States of the Near East had a particularly troubled passage into post-colonial independence due to the emergence of the new state of Israel in May 1948, followed by the flight or expulsion of many of its Palestinian Arab inhabitants and then the humiliating losses suffered by the armies of Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and Saudi Arabia when they tried to destroy the new Zionist entity. A search for scapegoats began almost at once leading to the first of a series of military coups in Syria in 1949, Egypt in 1952 and Iraq in 1958, replacing the parliamentary systems controlled by a landed and banking elite with a single party-led authoritarian regime in the former and a military-led one in the latter. One enormously significant result was the almost total discredit of democracy and democratic practice, attacked by President Nasser and others as divisive - when what was demanded was unity, as corrupt and as still far too much under foreign colonial influence. Another result was the diminution of the old private sector at the hands of an increasingly large public one via programs of planning and, often, outright nationalization of private concerns.

What replaced it was a form of government in which a strong leader, usually at the head a single party, used its monopoly of political power to shape the economy and society in a collectivist fashion topped by a large public sector which, Soviet-style, provided most of the jobs. Movement of people, money and goods in and out of the country was strictly monitored and controlled. While history books were rewritten, newspapers and broadcasting stations forced to put out a single message of strength and progress and members of the old propertied elite harassed as enemies of the new order.

Only a few countries like Jordan, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia escaped this particular fate, often seeking a protective alliance with Britain and the United States rather than the Soviet Union, and relying on them for military and, in some case, economic aid. But even here there were many scares and alarms. King Hussein of Jordan, for example, was subject to a long series of assassination attempts, some at least masterminded from Egypt. While the ruling house in Saudi Arabia was led to force its ineffectual King, Saud to yield much of his authority to his much more reform-minded brother. As for Lebanon, its traditional balance of political and economic power between the leaders of the Maronite Christian and Sunni and Shiite Muslim communities was subject to such strains from the rising militancy of their poorer elements as to only narrowly escape full-scale civil war in 1958.

The price paid for the toxic combination of over-confidence and incompetence demonstrated by the post-independence Arab regimes was total defeat in the June war of 1967 when within a few days the armed forces of Egypt, Syria and Jordan were overwhelmed and parts of all these countries, including the Jordanian controlled portions of old Palestine, the so-called 'West Bank, seized by Israel. Significant changes in the style of government and then political and economic policy had to follow.

2) 1967-1990

The first charge on the post-1967 Arab governments was to prepare for a second war with Israel. This meant getting rid of the officers responsible for the fiasco, obtaining new shipments of arms, mostly from the Soviet Union, and setting the date for the limited war of 1973 when all this was ready. In the case of Egypt this was probably much helped by the replacement of President Nasser who died in 1970 by his Senior Vice-President, Anwar Sadat. It was Sadat who not only engineered better relations with the United States but also masterminded the successful attack on the Israel troops on the eastern side of the Suez Canal before persuading the American to negotiate a truce just when it looks as though the tide of battle had turned. And it was Sadat who used the prestige thus obtained to launch a new policy known as '*Infitah*' – sometimes translated as 'opening up', sometimes as liberalism – designed to encourage both foreign (and largely Arab) investment in the Egyptian economy accompanied a limited political pluralism in which the government party was opposed by smaller parties to its right and left.

Similar policies were followed by Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak, after his assassination at a military parade in 1981, leading to relatively free parliamentary elections in 1984 and 1987. Elsewhere, in Jordan, King Hussein promoted elections in 1989, the first in his Kingdom since 1964. While in Syria, the rise to power of the Air-force commander, Hafiz al-Asad, in the 1970s was accompanied by a number of less comprehensive reforms under the title of the 'Corrective Movement'.

One of the important contributors to this process was the dramatic fall in the price of oil in 1985/6, an event which not only deprived the producers themselves of funds but also those in the non-oil states which they had come to support. Suddenly, at one fell swoop, it was impossible to sustain the high levels of subsidies previously used to placate the poverty-stricken populations in the country-side and the large towns. The funds needed to make up the shortfall were looked for in various types of ways.

Some sectors of the economy – notably the tourism - were opened up to partnerships with foreign capital, others were preserved as monopolies headed in Egypt by well-to-do businessmen, in Syria by powerful military members of the President's minority Alawite community in association with entrepreneurs from the Sunni urban business community. The result was the emergence of what is best described as a form of 'crony capitalism', a system for turning public into private wealth, with each country's heavy industry and basic utilities controlled by a single family closely associated with ruler.

3) 1990-2011

The leaders of the Arab states received further funds from the United States, Britain and France as a reward for their participation in the recovery of Kuwait after its occupation by Saddam Hussein's Iraqi army in the crisis of 1990/1. They also came under pressure to take further steps both to limit the size of state sector in order to make room for enlarged private activity and to open up their systems to more public participation. But things did not work out as their Western allies hoped they should. More public utility monopolies were sold at knock-down prices to the cronies in Egypt, while elections were managed and manipulated to ensure that members of this same small group were well-represented in the country's parliament, the People's Assembly. Assemblies in Syria and Jordan were also filled with men both loyal to the regime and dependent on it for contracts and licenses. And, whether presidential republic or monarchy it was the ruling family that obtained the highest commissions from military and other contracts, the asking rate ascending quickly from something like two or three percent to figures many, many times this size.

4) 2011-2014

Revolutionary uprisings are generally not caused by any one thing and the Arab uprisings of 2011 were no exceptions with commentators pointing to whole list of reasons from the political and ideological to the economic and the material. But one thing that seems common to those in the vanguard of revolutionary youth in Egypt and Yemen was the desire to get rid of the paternalist unjust dictatorships of very old men who showed every wish to pass on their power to their sons. In some cases the dictator was removed very quickly. In others, like Syria and Sudan, the ruler chose to stand and fight.

What followed was then dictated largely by structures and processes particular to each country: the size of the army, the efficiency of the policy, the presence or absence of civil society institutions such as Trade Unions and soon.

One central demand in most countries of the Near East was a new constitution, the only exception being Syria. This set in train a process by which elections to a Constituent Assembly were won by a religious party like Egypt's Muslim Brothers which then dominated the Assembly itself as well as winning the first free elections to become the first post-revolutionary government, a task for which it was singularly ill-prepared. Not only this: the uncertainty which political Islam seemed to generate with respect to its real intentions encouraged a growing opposition which found its expression in support for the anti-Muslim Brother military coup of June 2013. In Syria, where, for its own historic reasons political Islam was highly suspect, there was little popular demand for more than a few changes to the existing constitution, the main concern being the completion of certain reforms intended to reduce the power of the over-mighty state.

Looking into the Future with a Few Questions

There seems a general consensus among political analysts of the Middle East that the processes set in train by the uprisings of 2011 have still a long way to go. There can, it is widely believed, be no going back given the hopes and expectations which these uprisings aroused. Nor, with the possible exception of Tunisia in North Africa, has a new, and more legitimate political order come into being. And, to make everything even more fluid, the economic situation of almost all the countries of the Arab East is sufficiently bad as to daunt even the most powerful actors like Egypt's Military leader and candidate for president, Field Marshall Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi. Unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, is rife everywhere, made worse by the uprisings themselves which have acted to reduce tourism and foreign investment. There are also huge infrastructural short-comings to do with education, housing, mass transport and so on, as well as equally pressing environmental concerns from desertification to the lack of drainage and potable water.

And last but not least, democracy itself is a very difficult form of government to bring into being over-night, consisting, as it does of a double set of restraints, among the people and between the people and the state that take time to develop. It is this, I think, that causes many Middle Easterners to place so much value in a new constitution to provide the guidelines – such as the alternation of power between the leading parties – which don't exist in the winner- takes-all political culture to be found in so many parts of the world outside North America and Western Europe. Beyond that, those seeking to promote democracy in the Near East should certainly look at ways of strengthening the independence of each country's legal system - especially its highest constitutional court – and of its civil society institutions, perhaps in

association with the Europe Union under the Barcelona Treaty arrangements for Euro-Mediterranean co-operation.

I will conclude with a list of other, equally large, questions, which, to my mind, need serious attention. One is the role of self-proclaimed 'religious' parties and whether they should remain movements outside the political process serving as the conscious of the nation, as was the original program of Egypt's Muslim Brothers, or actively engaged in legislation, as they would now appear to be in Tunisia.

Second, and thinking once again of the Tunisia, thought should be given once again to a range of possible electoral systems ranging from those aimed at producing a working majority, as in Britain or Mohamed Morsi's Egypt, or those whose goal is a coalition government consisting of several parties which, though more difficult to manage, is obviously more socially inclusive.

Third, there is the question of how to assure the greatest political accountability via a free press and the encouragement of civil society institutions specifically designed to act as a watch-dog both on politicians and on the activities of the bureaucracy.

Fourth, and to return to the basic problems posed by a republican form of government, citizens should be encouraged to view political talk of the 'wishes' of the people, and representing the 'wishes' of the people, with a large grain of salt. True this is part and parcel of the political language widely used in democracies like the United States, but in the mouth of despots or would-be despots like Egypt's General Sisi, it has the more sinister ring of someone seeking to manipulate and lead rather than listen and encourage open debate.