CONFLICTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST SINCE 1945

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BEVERLEY MILTON-EDWARDS
and PETER HINCHCLIFFE

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Introduction

One fundamental question should be asked of many contemporary accounts of the history and politics of the Middle East in the latter half of the twentieth century. Why does so much analysis of the region take as read that the Middle East, unlike most other regions of the globe, is characterized by a Hobbesian state of nature where war and conflicts are inevitable and endemic? This book sets out to address this perception through examining a series of examples by way of a variety of factors and conditions which have given rise to war and conflicts.

Rather than comparing the region with others with a similar history of conflict, such as Africa and Latin America, we have kept our focus on the Middle East. Suffice it to say that conflict-ridden though this area has been since the Second World War, its history of confrontation and instability is arguably little different from that of war-torn western and central Africa or the former Yugoslavia. It is also worth recalling that much of the genesis of conflicts in the region has arisen from the same factors, such as the legacy of colonialism and superpower rivalry, as in other parts of the globe. Nevertheless, the dominant perception in a West fed by prejudicial images of bloodthirsty Arabs pitted against their enemies or fighting among themselves demands an explanation. We have sought to find one in this book without, from the outset, accepting Hobbesian assumptions but seeking instead to find a less 'Orientalist' and more rational explanation for the presence of conflicts within the region.[1]

The Arab–Israeli dispute has been the most dominant and enduring feature of the post-war Middle East. But it is only one of a number of conflicts that this book will address. Conflict in the region is and has been multifaceted. As we shall explain, it is not just about state-to-state war, the traditional combat between sovereign nation-states in dispute, but also other kinds of tension. These have led to internal, inter-state and regional conflagration sometimes lasting many decades. Although such conflicts are said to characterize the region and be indicative of its war-mongering peoples, they have, in many

cases, roots in the history of persistent intervention by outside powers pursuing strategic interests, including access to the area's economic riches – particularly oil.

Indeed, we would contend that since 1945 the peoples of the region have often been subjected to some of the most aggressive and predatory policies of outside powers. This is partly, but only partly, explained by superpower rivalry and compounded in the case of the United States by domestic pressures, which have seemingly prevented it exercising its power and influence in an even-handed manner in accordance with generally accepted international norms when dealing with much of the conflict bedevilling the region. On first reading, such an assertion may appear unduly hard, but in the following chapters we will present evidence to support our contention.

We will show how conflict in the Middle East is made manifest in many ways, including actual warfare, political violence, low-intensity conflict, perceived failure of diplomacy, virulent propaganda, political and economic boycotts, disputes over land and water, resistance to occupation and deeply ingrained cultures of antagonism. By the same token we believe the majority of these conflicts have taken three principal forms. First, long-standing regional disputes; second, short-lived military hostilities; finally, localized disputes. Inter-state conflict has included Arab against Iranian, Israeli against Arab, and Arab versus Arab. Regional conflict has been primarily in the context of the Arab–Israeli dispute, while conflict between regional players and outside actors is typified by the Suez crisis of 1956. In the same category, the Kuwait crisis uniquely brought together an alliance between local and outside powers confronting an Arab aggressor. Internal state conflict and sectarian violence is epitomized by our case study on the Lebanon, devastated by fifteen years of civil war from 1975 to 1990. We have also looked at the tragic case of the Kurds – a people scattered throughout several countries in the region who have failed to achieve any acceptable degree of self-determination and whose struggle for the recognition of their legitimate political rights seems almost hopeless.

Previous treatments of conflicts in the region have examined such factors as traditional state-to-state rivalries and competition for control of natural resources, such as oil and water. It was only in the 1990s, in the wake of the Cold War and following the end of superpower rivalry, that historical accounts of conflict in the region addressed new issues. These included ethno-national rivalry and the impact of continued foreign interference in the region in supporting a variety of corrupt and authoritarian regimes. In addition, debates in the 1990s began to focus increasingly on the issue of regime legitimacy and a linkage to continuing conflicts. In some cases, like that of Iraq, people questioned the morality of allowing authoritarian leaders like Saddam Hussein to 'engineer' national crises through provoking conflict

in order to entrench their autocratic systems of rule. The validity of the arguments put forward by both the former Soviet Union and the United States in defence of their roles in the region has also been questioned in an era where the latter's foothold in much of the area has largely been the target of popular resentment; in contrast with the less critical attitude of those regimes dependent on Washington for support and protection.

This book does not include a chapter specifically about the military and its role in the Middle East. But the predominance of the armed forces in much of the politics of the region, their role in the nature and process of state formation and nation building, needs to be understood in the context of the wider debate about conflict. Since 1945 there have been major wars between Israel and the Arabs, as well as the Iran–Iraq war and the Gulf crisis of 1990 to 1991. In addition there have been civil conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Algeria, Jordan, Oman, Yemen and Lebanon in which the armed forces of these states have played a major role. Such wars have been described by Bromley as 'the main source of conflict in the Middle East', and are 'concerned with the internal pacification and repression of domestic populations'.[2]

A further reflection of the ill-defined nature of the state in the region has been the numerous border disputes which have erupted over the years. They have included conflicts between Egypt and Libya, Morocco and Mauritania, Jordan and Syria, Israel and Lebanon, Iraq and Kuwait, Iran and Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and Bahrain and Qatar. Much of this conflict is the legacy of colonial-inspired or -crafted state formation from the turn of the twentieth century to the 1970s. The carve-up of much of the Middle East was determined by the strategic objectives of the former colonial powers – principally Britain and France – who created highly artificial states, many of whose borders remain subject to dispute. Such strategic objectives were largely pursued with no consideration for the interests or wishes of the indigenous peoples of the region; the same people who were obliged to live within the boundaries of new, highly artificial states which they themselves had taken no part in shaping. In many contemporary accounts of the origins of war in the region such factors are often forgotten. But the terrible (if unforeseen) consequences of colonial ambitions are not forgotten by many in the region who still perceive Arthur Balfour and the British as the architects of problems which continue to the present day.[3]

The arms race in the region has also played its part in perpetuating conflict. Arab states, Iran and Israel all spent decades building up significant arsenals, including conventional weaponry, chemical weapons and, certainly in Israel's case, nuclear capability – thus the real fear, particularly in the 1970s, of a nuclear Armageddon in the area. Iran's nuclear capacity has come to dominate US policy in the region under the Bush administration, reaching a tipping point not just of international censure but actual confrontation.

Western (and previously Soviet) support for the arms race has been ill disguised and used to further vital economic and/or strategic interests within the region. National spending on arms and the military in the region is higher than in other developing regions of the world: while in the Middle East spending on arms and the military is on average 15 per cent of national income, it is only 5 per cent in the rest of the developing world.[4] In Syria, for example, defence expenditure is as high as 18 per cent, and the army constitutes 3.9 per cent of the total workforce, compared to 0.8 per cent in the United States.[5]

In such an arena of conflict awash with arms, the role of the military in the political systems of the area can scarcely be exaggerated. Military coups and revolutions have been significant features of the Middle East and military-based regimes characteristic of states such as Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt. As part of this phenomenon, or because of it, the emergence of the soldier-politician linked to the militaristic nature of the state in the region has a direct cause-and-effect relationship on the political processes of countries like Syria, Turkey, Libya and Iraq. This is the case even in democratic Israel, where the military records of its soldier-politicians, including Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak, are promoted (and admired) as positive attributes of a national leader.

The domination of military rule over national political systems, however, is not of course unique to the Middle East and remains a feature of many Third World regimes all over the globe. Indeed, in the 1960s, the role of the military in the politics of the region was perceived as a positive development heralding progress, technological advancement, modernization, and the promotion and safeguarding of an appropriate nationalist agenda. A dramatic volte-face in popular attitudes occurred two decades later. The true nature of conflict and the military in society had convinced many that the negative effects of this feature of politics in the region was unacceptable:

> The pervasive nature of factionalism and internal strife within the officer class, the lack of economic development, economic crises, widespread corruption, coercion and lack of democracy convinced many that . . . whatever degree of order and discipline the military have been able to provide, it has been outweighed by the blocking of the assumption of responsibility on the part of ordinary citizens for their economic and political affairs.[6]

In addition, the closing decades of the twentieth century witnessed a steady transition from military to civil rule elsewhere in the world. But despite this sea change in popular sentiment, this did not happen in the Middle East, where, as Halliday comments, ‘relations between states are dominated

by suspicion, a stance reinforced by popular attitudes on all sides where memories of recent war remain strong'.[7]

While the role of the military and conflict has been debated extensively in many texts on the subject, other explanations of conflict also need to be highlighted. Conflicting ideologies, ethnic and religious differences, superpower rivalry and the development of state nationalism are all factors that have been cited to one degree or another in explanation of conflict in the region. All these factors are examined in the case studies we have selected for treatment in this volume. There are obvious omissions, such as the troubles of Sudan and Morocco, hostilities in the Horn of Africa, Britain's withdrawal from South Yemen and subsequent confrontation with Marxist rebel forces in Oman, plus other bloody colonial disengagements such as by the French in North Africa. In such a short volume we have had to leave some of the regional conflicts to one side, but we hope that the themes we highlight in discussing some will go some way in shedding light on most of the others.

We have laid out the book as follows. In the first two chapters we examine two important dimensions of the Arab–Israeli conflict. We disentangle the narrower Palestinian–Israeli dimension from wider disputes between the state of Israel and the Arab states of the region. Some might argue that to treat the conflict in this way does a disservice to the much-vaunted principle of solidarity and unity sought by the Arab people in its confrontation with Israel. We, however, are not arguing that separate treatment necessitates a separation of the unifying principles at the heart of such struggles. Rather, we take a pragmatic approach to assist the first-time reader in understanding the roots of such conflicts while reflecting, as we do in both chapters, on the linkages within the dispute.

In Chapter 3 we examine the impact of the Soviet Union and the United States in the region, as well as superpower rivalry and its influence on the course of conflict and peacemaking from the 1950s onwards. No account of conflict in the region since 1945 can afford to dismiss the role played by such actors and the impact the Cold War had on both hindering the resolution of conflict and actively promoting it to satisfy superpower strategic objectives. In Chapter 4 we address the dominant perception in the West that in the latter decades of the twentieth century Islam has been a primary catalyst for conflict and a major threat emanating from the region. We aim to debunk much of the reductive rhetoric associated with this perception and put so-called 'Holy Terror' in its proper perspective.

In Chapter 5 we look at manifestations of the religious nature of conflict in the region through an examination of the causes of the civil war in Lebanon and how it fitted into the larger jigsaw puzzle of the Arab–Israeli dispute and superpower politics. Further ethnic dimensions of conflict are explored in the

following chapter on the Kurds, where we chart the rise of ethno-nationalism in the context of uniting ideologies of nationalism and the challenges presented by minority groups agitating for their rights, including that of self-determination.

A clash of ideologies of sorts is explained in Chapter 7, where we discuss the nature of the war between Iran and Iraq, which dominated the Gulf throughout the 1980s. Described by one writer as a 'meaningless' conflict with uncountable costs, we examine the political motives that brought these neighbouring states into major confrontation and the destabilizing impact this had throughout the Gulf region. The battle for local hegemony and a desperate scramble for resources, also in the Gulf, are identified in Chapter 8 as the main factors in explaining Saddam Hussein's disastrous invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and his subsequent defeat at the hands of the Desert Storm coalition.

In Chapter 9 we describe how the nature of conflict in the region was changed by a variety of concerted attempts in the 1990s to bring them to an end. In Lebanon, for example, where significant civil conflict had gripped the country since 1975, an Arab-sponsored deal brought the conflict to a halt and allowed the country to begin a return to parliamentary politics. While the root causes of the conflict in Lebanon remain unresolved, there is hope that appropriate scenarios can be designed to satisfy the more pressing demands of the various factions in this state. Elsewhere in the region, other Arab attempts at conflict resolution have been marginalized, and it has only been the influence of outside agencies, especially the United States, that has brought formerly intractable enemies to the negotiating table. These recent developments have the potential to alter the political landscape of the region significantly, but comprehensive peace remains elusive.

Our last chapter outlines the inexorable rise of new conflicts in the region as the fallout from 9/11 and the American-led war against Iraq continues to affect the whole Middle East. As described in the Preface, the earlier event cast a shadow on the then virtually stalled Middle East Peace Process (MEPP), led to regime change in Afghanistan and, as part of President Bush's wider war on terrorism, started the countdown to the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Iraq having been categorized by Bush as the primary target within the 'axis of evil'. Its ramifications will clearly be with us for many years, as the quick coalition victory 'liberating' Iraq (or at least putting the Saddam regime to flight) seems to have been the easy bit. Nation rebuilding in this traumatized and divided country has proved to be a major headache for the international community and, more immediately, for the coalition partners cast as much in the role of occupiers as of liberators.

We also look at the Middle East Peace Process in the light of the launch of the 2003 'Roadmap' – a blueprint for a lasting and comprehensive solution

to (nearly) sixty years of war. Even cautious optimism was premature, despite President Bush's apparent determination to emulate his predecessor's personal engagement, as the process got off to an uncertain start amid a new welter of bloodshed. As in Iraq, the international community faces an uphill task if it truly seeks to forge an end to conflicts in the Middle East.