"How can historical analysis contribute to our understanding of the Middle East? An introduction to the Ottoman legacy"

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How can historical analysis contribute to our understanding of the Middle East? An introduction to the Ottoman legacy

To say that the Middle East is a difficult region to grasp for students of international relations (IR), is an understatement. Indeed, both the interstate and intrastate relations of many Middle Eastern countries are in turmoil – a characteristic that, many would argue, has come to define the region since the end of the First World War. Attempts to explain why cycles of instability seemingly repeat themselves in this part of the world are plentiful and pluralistic.

This paper argues that IR theory alone is not sufficient to explain the past century's state of affairs in the Middle East. Instead, it humbly calls for an understanding of Middle Eastern states that is more rooted in historical analysis, in order to shed light on regional patterns of state organisation and identity formation. It is by no means argued that history alone allows us to grasp the unique character of the present-day Middle East; the case is made, however, that a recognition of the region's historicity is lacking in major IR theories, and that this plays a role in their inability to provide a meaningful explanation of developments in the Middle East.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, in a discussion of three main IR theories – realism, liberalism, constructivism – it is illustrated how a lack of historical analysis contributes to their limitations in explaining the Middle East. Second, a modest start is made at filling a gap in the literature when it comes to the history of the Middle East; namely, through an assessment of the ongoing legacy of the Ottoman Empire in the region. The case of the Ottoman Empire serves to illustrate that important internal elements of the region are overlooked or misrepresented when centuries of history are swept away in our theoretical analysis.

I. Where's the history in IR theory?

Associated with noteworthy scholars such as Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz[1], realism is based on the premise that the international system is inherently anarchic, and consists of rational states who will act in pursuit of a maximisation of their self-interest – that is, their survival and a guarantee of their territorial sovereignty. Its key concept is 'power politics'. When applied to the Middle East, it may seem at first sight that realism's emphasis on recurrent patterns of rivalry and conflict is rather accurate (Halliday 2005: 25). However, this reasoning is flawed in at least one important way, as the focus on state *power* fails to acknowledge that state *weakness* and fragmentation can also have major destabilising effects (Miller 2006: 664). In addition, the presupposition of universal and timeless state structures does not account for ways in which states are in fact shaped by their international relations, both past and present. In particular, in the case of the Middle East, realism ignores the region's long-term subordination to global structures and to foreign interference, and the ways in which these might have contributed to state formation processes and ensuing volatility. In order to account for these processes, one would need to understand their history.

A similar critique can be made against liberalism, which also adopts a state-centric approach, but leaves power politics behind. Positing that it can be in states' self-interest to cooperate as this can reduce mistrust and therefore potential threats, liberal institutions are seen as the cornerstone of a stable international system. In the case of the Middle East, then, it is argued that a lack of solid liberal institutions is at the heart of repeated turmoil. However, as with realism, this view takes an empirical observation as a given, rather than questioning how it may have come into being. An absence of strong institutions in the Middle East is not a timeless characteristic; there are historical reasons for

[1] These authors cannot, of course, be considered to hold identical views. Morgenthau is more accurately associated with classical (offensive) realism, while Waltz was a pioneer of neorealism. However, it is not within the scope of this essay to discuss the differences in detail; this should be rather unproblematic, as the two strands of realism do share many core assumptions.

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this absence, and these need to be taken into account if we wish to gain a more complete understanding of the region.

Of the numerous IR theories that challenge the state-centrism of realism and liberalism, constructivism is arguably the most widespread. It goes some way in addressing the critiques made above, in that it acknowledges that structures of international relations such as identities and interests are not a given, but rather the product of social practice (Wendt 1999: 1). Social practice, in turn, is shaped by a set of shared ideas, norms and experiences that prevail at a given time. This ideational approach can be helpful for explanations of the Middle East as it provides space for the role of ideology, but the emphasis on a shared 'acceptance' of certain ideas and practices among states does still raise an important difficulty. Constructivist logic requires an analysis of state behaviour and interests in terms of their *meaning* for state actors, but overlooks the fact that prevailing norms and ideas may themselves contain distortions of history (Halliday 2005: 32). Therefore, without a fair historical analysis, constructivist theory also risks misrepresenting the current Middle East.

It goes without saying that realism, liberalism and constructivism do not nearly represent the full range of IR theory. Neither are the theories' limitations presented above exhaustive. However, these theories' neglect of history is applicable to many other IR theories as well. For example, even post-colonialism, which has a historical approach by definition, overlooks significant historical legacies in its specific focus on colonial history over other eras.

Whenever history *is* taken into account in explanations of the present-day Middle East, it tends to be approached from a narrowly western understanding of history. In historical analyses of the Middle East, the role of the European powers in the interwar period receives ample attention. While the crucial importance of developments in this period is not denied by any means, it is telling that the influence of the Ottoman Empire, at the time of its existence already dismissed as the "sick man of Europe", is seemingly considered less relevant for analysis. It thus becomes clear that much IR theory has been constructed for and with regards to the Westphalian state system of Europe, and that this has not been greatly beneficial for our attempts to understand states in the Middle East.

II. The overlooked legacy of the Ottoman Empire

States in the Middle East are seen to exhibit a form of exceptionalism that is hard to account for. According to some, "[they] are neither failed states, nor are they fully democratic. Middle Eastern states are both strong in the area of security and coercion and weak in the area of democratic representation and legitimacy, and hence fill a middle ground" (Schwarz & de Corral 2011: 209). Admittedly, the European mandates and the Sykes-Picot agreement that preceded it absolutely need to be understood if we are to make sense of the evolution (or lack thereof) of Middle Eastern states in the past century – but it is argued here that an overemphasis on the interwar period is not sufficient.

For three centuries prior, the Ottoman Empire kept Arab lands out of European hands (Brown 1996: 14). Particularly in the nineteenth century, the Arab provinces grew in importance for the Ottoman Empire, as it lost numerous European holdings to independence movements (Raymond 1996: 115). Although not all ideas and institutions survive from one era to the next, the legacy of the Ottoman Empire should be assessed before we can determine whether it bears relevance today. Here, the assessment focuses on two elements: state organisation and state identity.

Centralisation and assertion of state power.

In the late eighteenth century, territorial losses pushed the Ottoman elites toward military reform – and this, it was reasoned, could only be achieved by strengthening the state. Efforts to centralise and reassert state power ensued (Findley 1996: 159). It is true that there were differences of opinion about where power should be concentrated (the Palace or the Sublime Porte), but there was

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no doubt regarding the desirability of maximising state power. Centralised, highly bureaucratic states are prevalent across the Arab successor states to the Ottoman Empire. This can be understood with reference to history: having inherited the foundations for a centralised state, demands on state institutions only increased in the post-colonial era as the number of sovereign states multiplied (*Ibid*).

Indeed, figures related to institutional expansion support this claim. In its creation of a "big government", the number of (scribal then) civil servants in the Ottoman Empire increased from 2,000 at the end of the eighteenth century to 35,000 by 1908 (Findley 1996: 168). Following independence, Nasser's Egypt counted 1.3 million civil servants; the Turkish civil service is estimated to have 3 million officials today (*Ibid* & NYT 2016, respectively).

One of the most important characteristics of the centralised Ottoman-then-Arab state is the degree of autonomy (Özbudun 1996: 133). State autonomy is defined as a state's freedom from societal pressures to make policy decisions. Autonomy was an integral part of the Ottoman state tradition for reasons related to the state's political economy. Contrary to Europe, economic power did not lead to political power, as there was no powerful merchant class. The policy of ethnic labour division meant that trade was dominated by non-Muslims, but "such economic power could not be converted into a significant political role because of the Islamic nature of the state" (*Ibid*: 136). Instead, political power gave access to material wealth; as a consequence, however, any accumulated wealth could – in theory and practice – be confiscated by the state. Thus, the power of state elites was not seriously threatened, and no social group powerful enough to influence policy emerged. Naturally, this had consequences for any form of civil society, which remained weak. This rings true today for numerous Middle Eastern states. Egypt, with its centralised efforts to close the space for civil society, comes to mind – but so do Jordan, Morocco and the Gulf states, where the space given to civil society has relatively clear boundaries. In all cases, this is reinforced by a continued concentration of power in the hands of the state.

The search for a state identity.

The millet system – the Ottoman Empire's "administration of its subject peoples as semi-autonomous confessional entities" (Akturk 2009: 893) – is a central component of Ottoman legacy. Much can be said about the millet system, both favourably and otherwise, but important to note here is that the non-territorial character of religious autonomy in the Ottoman Empire meant that there was no real social contract underlying the foundation of state sovereignty in post-Ottoman states (see, for example, Büyüksaraç 2015 for an example on the case of Iraq). The absence of a true nation-state tradition in the Arab successor states was at odds with the constitutional reforms introduced by foreign powers following the fall of the Ottoman Empire. This has left regimes in the Middle East struggling to define a state identity that can coherently guide policy decisions.

The reassertion of Ottoman state power outlined above shifted the relative standing of the three divisions in the Ottoman ruling class – the military, civil and religious services. The political role of the military can be understood with reference to this historical development. The military was especially brought into Ottoman politics by the Young Turks in the later phases of the empire. This culminated in Atatürk attaining the Turkish presidency, but echoes through other parts of the Middle East as well – a clear recent example would be the rise of General Sissi in Egypt.

In the inter-elite competition that occurred during the process of state reassertion, religious scholars (*ulama*) were the first to lose. Indeed, members of the Ottoman ruling class that became influential in the successor states were mostly drawn from the military and civil service – few came from the *ulama* ranks (Ochsenwald 1996: 281). Findley (1996: 166) goes so far as to argue that perhaps a successful Islamic revolution comparable to Iran (which was never an Ottoman province) did not happen elsewhere because the new Arab states followed the Ottoman example in limiting *ulama* autonomy. This would be an explanation for developments we currently see in the conflict

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areas of the region, where one could argue that militant activism is challenging the successful limitation of religious influence on the state. As once stated by Fromkin (2003, cited in Yilmaz & Yosmaoglu 2008: 681), perhaps sectarian strife in the Middle East really is, at least in part, a "ghost of the Ottoman Empire".

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has sought to make the case that a lack of historical analysis may be an important reason for the inability of IR theory to accurately explain the character and international relations of Middle Eastern states. It has been attempted through the case of the Ottoman Empire to illustrate that certain persistent characteristics of Middle Eastern states over the past century can, at least partly, be understood with reference to the past. Examples are the centralisation of state power and associated civil society vacuum, as well as the search for a state identity, including for the place of religion in the state. However, it is clear that there is much more to say on the topic – for instance, a case study on the Ottoman legacy for Turkey as compared to the Arab successor states would be an important area for further research. The scope of this paper did not allow for detailed assessment, but it has argued that if we intend to explain the present conditions of Middle Eastern states, history should not be taken lightly or selectively.

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