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CRITICAL ISSUES FACING THE MIDDLE EAST

SECURITY, POLITICS, AND ECONOMICS

Edited by **JAMES A. RUSSELL**

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Security, Politics, and Economics

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James A. Russell

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1

Introduction

James A. Russell

Most scholarly written work examining the generic topic of "security" understandably deals first and foremost with military and strategic issues in the context of global interstate relations. The study of international relations in political science has developed a variety of elaborate theoretical constructs to explain a state's quest for security. Indeed, various prominent scholars have put forth the proposition that this quest for security constitutes a defining feature of interstate relationships in the wider international system.[1] The so-called realist and neorealist schools of thought believe that interstate competition and friction, manifesting itself in armed conflict, is an immutable feature of the international system. As states pursue security through armaments and supporting interstate and/or alliance frameworks devoted to achieving security, other states seek to counter these actions through acquisition of armaments and a balancing set of political relationships. According to this theory, an important and underlying foundation of the international system is the never-ending quest by states for security, which forms a perpetual and indelible cycle that drives the wider international system.[2] A supporting associated body of impressive scholarly work surrounds the interactions between states that involve the threat and actual use of force as bargaining instruments in a coercive framework as part of their quest for security.[3]

A competing set of arguments to the realist and neorealist paradigm called "neoliberalism" emerged during the 1970s. This theory focused on the growing importance of non-state actors and the increasing and complex interdependence between different levels of actors throughout the international system.[4] This argument rejected the realist arguments about the primacy of the state in the international system, suggesting a more complicated systems-level approach to explaining the configuration of the international environment. According to this view, the motivations and actions of states are much more complicated and more difficult to explain than the realist focus on the never-ending quest for security. This view of the world saw the quest for rules-based international regimes as a logical extension of the search by states to help manage complex interdependence.

Theoretical literature in the field of comparative politics in political science likewise treats the concept of security in a variety of different ways. For example, specialists in comparative politics commonly address the concept of security within the context of the structure of the state itself—as a tool of internal control and governance that can change on a case-by-case basis depending on a variety of internal and external variables.[5] A variation on this theme is suggested by the idea of "omnibalancing," which attempts to address the contradictions ruling elites face in balancing the requirements of external security while simultaneously pursing their most important objective: maintaining their hold on power.[6] The idea of omnibalancing seems particularly applicable to the Middle East, in which states such as Libya, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Iran, and the Gulf States are dominated by a relatively small circle of defined elites—all of whom face complicated internal and external factors playing into their respective regimes' pursuit of security.[7]

Whereas each of these theoretical approaches suggests interesting and analytically useful lines of inquiry, political scientists have yet to formulate an all-inclusive theory of their discipline that unifies structural characteristics of the international system, whether those characteristics are focused on the state, non-state actors, international regimes, or the environment. The search for a unified theory or set of theories is going on in other disciplines. In physics, for example, interesting explorations surrounding something called string theory suggest the potential for a unified theory of the universe that reconciles the internal forces of the atom with the external forces created in the universe after the big bang.[8] The process of paradigmatic examination, change and evolution now being openly debated in scientific circles is indeed a heartening and healthy phenomenon. A similar effort aimed at paradigmatic evolution and change is long overdue in political science to bridge the divide between the views in each of its subfields. This could lead to the development of an integrated definition of "security" that includes internal and external variables and transnational phenomenon associated with globalization. One leading scholar recently noted that structural changes in the international system brought about by globalization mean that "the definition of what is a 'security' issue is also becoming more and more fluid and fungible—including the dislocations of economic development; the destabilizing effect of transitions to democracy; the undermining of traditional cultures, beliefs, and loyalties; threats to the public environmental and public health; and the like."[9]

Consistent with such a formulation, popular definitions of the term "security" in fact suggest a multifaceted concept that encompasses a variety of internal and external variables. For example, *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* defines the term security as "the quality or state of being secure as: a: freedom from danger; b: freedom from fear or anxiety; c: freedom from want or deprivation."[10] The *Webster's* definition, not surprisingly, suggests that the concept of security consists of internal and external factors—freedom from external threats and freedom from internal threats that can provoke a sense of insecurity in both the state and the individual. But despite the

Webster's definitional link, with a few exceptions as noted above, security studies writ large as a field within political science and international relations tends not to attempt to link these factors in any kind of systematic or theoretical models. Attempting to bridge this divide by suggesting a unified but variegated concept of security is the objective of the collection of essays in this volume. The authors address sources of insecurity in the Middle East from the perspective of the fields of economics, politics, history, international relations, and religion.

Twentieth-Century Security in the Middle East

The intellectual and paradigmatic divide between external and internal views of security is reflected in the approach that governments traditionally take toward protecting themselves from external threats and using their national instruments of power to secure their interests around the world. The Middle East is no exception to this generalization. Outside powers in the twentieth century seeking to exert influence and protect their interests in the Middle East uniformly considered the pursuit of security a military and geostrategic problem. In the period between World Wars I and II, for example, a weakened British empire relied largely on the Royal Air Force deployed in a series of dispersed air bases throughout the Middle East and Persian Gulf to coordinate communications, movements of forces, and, when necessary, would use machine guns on the locals to maintain some semblance of order.[11] In hindsight, the British pursuit of regional security appears extraordinarily economical in terms of monetary cost and manpower compared to the billions of dollars lavished by U.S. taxpayers on the region during the last 15 years.

Following the British withdrawal from the Gulf region in 1972, the United States slowly but inexorably reinserted itself into the role that had been played by the British for the previous century. Like the British, the United States developed a series of military facilities that over time has grown into a sophisticated network of operational military hubs stretching from the Gulf into Central Asia.[12] Reflecting the region's growing importance, from the 1980s onward, regional military and operational contingencies became a primary assumption driving defense planning and budgeting in the Defense Department. Gulf Wars I and II only confirmed to many the efficacy of the approach taken by the United States to defense planning and budgeting to ensure regional security and stability, which was centered on defense cooperation agreements, forward deployed forces, pre-positioned military equipment, foreign military sales, and training and military exercises.

It is thus no accident that the United States came to regard security in the Middle East as primarily a military problem. In fact, most scholars and policy professionals understandably regard the Middle East as one of the world's ideal laboratories to study the impact of armaments and the use of force on

interstate relationships and the regional environment. Throughout most of the twentieth century, the region has been beset by armed intra- and interstate conflict, ranging from the insurgencies associated with the postcolonial wars of national liberation to the Arab–Israeli wars to the Iran–Iraq War and Gulf Wars I and II. In short, the study of security in the Middle East has justifiably focused on the threat and actual use of force. Seen against a backdrop spanning the last century, the insurgency in Iraq simply represents the latest iteration in this long-running saga.

Although focusing on purely military aspects of security is understandable and a fruitful line of inquiry for scholars, it seems equally clear that the concept of security needs to be broadened and deepened—particularly as it applies to the Middle East. It is abundantly clear that the sources of "insecurity" in the Middle East are vast and varied, demanding a more complicated framework than the usual focuses on interstate rivalries, military capabilities, and armaments.[13] Expanding the consideration of the sources of insecurity is of vital importance if regional and international actors are to devise effective security strategies to manage this troubled environment. Moreover, if the concept of security is to be broadened and deepened, it suggests that instruments of state power developed to manage the security environment must be similarly altered. It is apparent that in today's Middle East various threats to security stem from underlying structural problems that transcend the particular characteristics of certain states. The problems of authoritarian governments, Islamic extremism, structural unemployment, terrorism, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and organized crime are transnational problems and region-wide phenomena not confined to geographic units defined by states' borders.

In short, security must be viewed as a multidimensional construct that demands multilevel and interdisciplinary levels of analysis. Development of a different paradigm to consider differentiated elements of security also suggests a parallel effort to bring instruments of state power and its organizations into some kind of alignment with this new marketplace of security. In his book *The Pentagon's New Map*, Tom Barnett suggests that for the United States the global environment represents a kind of new marketplace for security. According to Barnett, the United States needs to think of using force in the context of "exporting security" along the global fault lines separating those states participating in globalization and those that are not.[14] It seems clear, for example, that the United States now lies suspended in a state of paradigmatic, institutional, and intellectual disconnect as it seeks to apply its traditional instruments of state power that are wholly unsuited to today's security environment in an approach inadequately described by the meaningless phrase "global war on terrorism."[15] Fleshing out the sources of the disconnect is important not just for the United States but for the international community.

Structural Sources of Insecurity

Today's regional security environment in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf remains highly unstable, an instability that due to its intensity and duration

suggests deep-rooted structural problems that go beyond the interstate disputes associated with the Arab–Israeli Wars and intraregional rivalries that have also resulted in the Iran–Iraq War and Gulf Wars I and II. Various forces have been identified by the National Intelligence Council as providing the environment for the "perfect storm" that will almost certainly result in pervasive future instability.[16] The security environment is only a manifestation of the region's deep systemic problems, including those that follow.

Governments and Governance

As documented by the three successive Arab Human Development Reports, the region faces a basic and overriding crisis in governance. The terms and conditions of citizenship and the development of basic elements of civic society are being addressed as the region navigates its way toward developing new societies.[17] Today, the region confronts the wreckage of the failed secular Arab nationalist movement, Arab socialism, and Pan-Arabism, as well as leftover anachronistic forms of governments essentially run as businesses by familial elites. The era of these governmental forms is drawing to a close, and it remains unclear what forms of governance will emerge to take their places. The process of transition to new governmental structures may be violent and result in region-wide instability, and the types of governments that emerge may be revolutionary in nature. Whereas the postcolonial secular elites successfully repressed political Islam and the Islamists throughout much of the twentieth century, Islamists remain a powerful domestic political constituency in most Middle Eastern societies.

The era of political Islam is arriving in the Middle East, a result of generational change and the inevitable, gradual collapse of the postcolonial secular order in countries such as Syria, Egypt, Libya, and Iraq. It remains unclear whether Islamists across the Diaspora will adopt the intellectual and ideological radicalism articulated by Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri or some other more moderate frames.[18] Iran's discredited model of Islamic governance presents another possibility.

Other competitors for the space of governance are appearing in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, where Hamas has emerged as viable contender to the Palestinian authority's attempt to introduce some semblance of democracy to the Palestinians. In the Gulf, various familial elites are attempting to forestall the development of Islamism by encouraging political reforms that create circumscribed forums for more widespread political participation.[19] In Iraq, it appears that the Shi'ites and the clerical order headed by Ayatollah Sistani will have a chance to test their hand at heading some form of federated governance, which could provide yet another model for regional governments.

There is common intellectual and spiritual ground between the Islamists and bin Laden; however, it seems clear that there is not yet a broadly based social movement embracing bin Laden's idea of a unification of the Ummah and a return to the days of the Caliphate. Characterized by some as the struggle