

The "Modern" State in the Middle East: The Need for a Human Face

The Harry Crowe Memorial Lecture

YCISS Occasional Paper Number 16

**Gabriel Ben-Dor
University of Haifa
Haifa, Israel
and
York University
North York, Ontario, Canada**

This is the text of the Harry Crowe Memorial Lecture delivered at the
Centre for International and Strategic Studies, York University, 3 March 1993

Ten years ago I published a book called *State and Conflict in the Middle East*.¹ This was an ambitious theoretical attempt to describe and analyze the relationship between the complex regional conflict systems on the one hand, and the evolution of the given Middle Eastern state on the other. The book argued that the Middle Eastern state was slow to develop and fledgling at best at the time of writing, due to the political sociology of the Middle East that has traditionally emphasized the allegiance to larger units such as pan-Islamic community or to smaller units such as tribe, region or ethnic group. Yet in the wake of the colonial experience and the impact of the West the overwhelming potency of the structural artifact called state was discovered and adopted by local elites, without, however, accepting and integrating the concomitant logic of state for which purpose I recycled the term *raison d'état* (I felt that Machiavelli would forgive me, and I have had no indication otherwise...)

I argued in the book that only such a logic, which I then went on to label "stateness", would help bring about a peaceful relationship among the main protagonists in the various regional conflict systems, and in particular, the troublesome Arab-Israeli conflict, maybe the longest running show on earth, at least in its own class. I also argued that in the long run the emerging stateness of the Middle East would contain successfully the threat of Islamic fundamentalism as in the case of the Islamic republic of Iran, and that in general the strong states in the region such as Syria and Iraq would overcome the ethnic and other centrifugal tensions and be able to maintain their capacity to function as powerful regional actors notwithstanding their debilitating social weaknesses. I ended the book with a prediction that the survival of the state is assured, but the question is "will the state in the Middle East be one with a human face?".

I would now like to explore this question in some depth and detail, and it is appropriate that I should do so at a Canadian university, and on an occasion dedicated to the memory of Harry Crowe. The original book was written while I was on sabbatical at Carleton University in Ottawa, during which time I had the good fortune to meet the late Harry Crowe a number of times, and to benefit from his insight, experience and wisdom. It is only fitting that a revisit to the original thesis should be paid while the author is again in Canada, and it is unfortunate that we no longer have the opportunity to benefit from Harry's wisdom. But his memory is still with us, and I am sure that if he had a choice in the matter, he would really enjoy having a good, sound argument over the question whether there is a human face to the emerging state in the Middle East.

In my original formulation, I warned against two salient dangers to the state in the region. On the one hand, I felt that a state captivated by a particularistic social force and harnessed to its own radical purposes would be inhuman in pursuing the goals of that force, be it an ethnic group, a tribe, or a religion. The fact that an ethnic group disguises itself in colourful ideological mumbo-jumbo (as is the case of the *Baath* "party" in Iraq and Syria) does not make matters any better, but only obfuscates the issues. On the other hand, I also felt that if a state attempted to operate in a vacuum, devoid of all social content, it would end up with the deification of the state for its own sake, which I consider a classic case of fascism. In neither case would we have a state structure that is sensitive to the human needs of the population: It would not look after the proper interests of the inhabitants, namely peace, prosperity, security and a sense of dignity and well-being. Indeed, these commodities have been in a short supply in the Middle East, and I am afraid that the Middle Eastern state has not served well the cause of promoting human values. It is this issue that I now would like to explore.

State and Conflict in the Middle East has had a fair impact in the field (I am not sure authors are supposed to say such things in public...), although it missed an opportunity to do even better due to poor editing and

¹ New York: Praeger, 1983.

downright pitiful marketing (that much is probably permissible even to the author...). In the beginning, there was a lively debate about the state in the Middle East, and quite a few experts doubted the primacy of the state in the region. Yet as time went by this debate progressively ceased. The primacy of state became so obvious as to be beyond argument, and an increasingly voluminous literature proliferated on this subject. I suppose that by now the kernel of truth contained in this is commonplace, but of course we need to go beyond the objective evaluation of the strength of the state. Certainly in an age that has witnessed the disintegration of the Soviet Empire, due at least in part to its inability to respond to the basic human needs of its citizens, it is more than legitimate to ask whether the state in the Middle East is becoming any more or less responsive to the legitimate necessities associated with its own people.

Perhaps an even better question is whether the state in the Middle East is even trying to respond to the human needs of its citizens. One wonders. The main reason for this scepticism is that the philosophy upon which the state is founded in the Middle East is so very collectivistic. In the past, the modern notion of the territorially based nation state was missing altogether, and instead there was a concept of the Islamic community, the *Umma*, which was to have supplied the universal political framework for achieving the good life, which in turn was defined as fulfilling the commandments of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad and then legitimately interpreted by those in authority. While this was not an individualistic interpretation of politics, it did have a concept of the good life for entities other than the state. Admittedly, the style of politics practiced was of the absolutist type, dominated by what the pundits call the "ruling institution", but at least this institution (which consisted of the court and its associated secular as well as religious officials) had a concept of justice, however instrumental. The religious judge (*qadi*) Ibn Jama'a of Damascus (1241-1333) expressed it thus:

The world is a garden, the fence of which is the dynasty. The dynasty is authority supported by the army. The army are soldiers who are assembled by money. Money is sustenance brought together by the subjects. The subjects are servants who are reared by justice.²

It is this philosophy that gave rise to the paradigm that Marx and others called "Oriental Despotism". An eloquent variation of this is expressed by Elie Kedourie:

Marx's view of the relation between economic and political power here is diametrically reversed. In oriental despotism, it is not the ownership of the means of production that determines who will rule; rather, possession of military and political power determines who will enjoy the fruits of labour. In oriental despotism, then, economic power, properly speaking, is non-existent, riches are precarious, and property has no security...No interest in society can resist the demands of the ruling institution or withstand its power. It is in this sense that in oriental despotism the state is stronger than society.³

This is a classic case of the state overwhelming society, disrupting and upsetting the balance that I consider essential for maintaining a political system that has some consideration for human needs and rights.

Yet it would be false to consider the ancient Middle Eastern state a totalitarian creature. In fact, the state showed a surprising tolerance for a high degree of autonomy for the existence and functioning of various social segments, be they Christian or Jewish minorities, urban guilds, various territorially based tribal fiefdoms and the like. In practice, this presented a severe set of limitations on the ability of the rulers to mobilize the population for collective goals as defined by the ruling institution. Of course, the low level of technology available for communications and transportation over a very large territory would have made totalitarian control an impossibility from the logistical point of view as well. But the key to the limits over the power of the state was in the limited range of scope of issues that were defined as political, or as falling in the proper domain of the state. This is again brilliantly explored by Elie Kedourie:

² Quoted in Elie Kedourie, *Politics in the Middle East* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p.13.

³ Ibid., pp. 13-14

Traditional Middle Eastern rulers simply took no interest in a vast range of issues in which modern governments of all colours assume it their right and duty to intervene. Middle Eastern governments, for instance, did not feel obliged to make provision for the education or the welfare of their subjects. Again, it did not occur to them that they could mobilize their subjects, and canalize their energies in support of their aims and policies...Also, just as non-Muslims were left a large measure of freedom in their communal affairs, so the ruler took it for granted that certain affairs relating to the *Umma* were the subject of divine prescription with which no one could tamper and were to be regulated by *qadis*, or religious judges, according to the *shari'a*. All these, then, were built-in limitations on the activities of government under oriental despotism. These limitations left a great deal of elbow-room - no doubt politically insignificant - to the subject, and meant that there was a boundary, implicitly recognized on all sides, which divided the public realm from the private, which latter comprised a large variety of social activities.⁴

All in all, it turns out that from the sheer human point of view, the old-style oriental despotism was better than the new-style, modern (?) "occidental despotism". I am using this self-manufactured term to describe the mixing of logics. The contemporary successors of oriental despotism have imported the potent technology of the Western state with all of its instruments and paraphernalia: the army, the secret police, the state-controlled radio and television network, the state-run educational system, the national airline, the seat in the United Nations, the ability to wheel and deal with the Americans and the Russians on arms, oil, war and peace. But they failed to import either the constitutional restraints that have accompanied the Western state in the vast majority of the cases, or the intrusion of society into the realm of the state that Marx so brilliantly observed in the West. So the result was an amalgamation of the power of the new instrument with the abrogation of all limitations, be they the product of the old system or the new philosophy of the West.

The primary reason for this tendency was, and I suspect still is, a one-dimensional, one might say, obsessive interpretation of modernization. The ruling institution and its intellectual allies among the clergy as well as the secular analysts reached the conclusion that the main reason for the string of military defeats that faced the Middle Eastern empires since at least the eighteenth century had been the lack of modernity in the structures of the military, the administrative and above all, the state systems. Hence all resources had to be mobilized in order to overcome this gap and bring the state to the point where it could successfully cope with military threats from the outside, be they from an increasingly aggressive and expansionist Europe or from other states in the region itself. The disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of a direct European presence in the Middle East in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries accelerated the process of this perverted modernization immensely. Already in the nineteenth century one could witness the prototype of the emerging militarized territorial (which is not to say necessarily "national") state in the Middle East, for instance in Egypt under Muhammad Ali, the Albanian adventurer turned king in the first half of the nineteenth century. Egypt under him adopted a "modern" administrative state system which made it an important regional actor, but which impoverished the individual Egyptian peasant (*Fellah*) and brought him totally under the control of the organs of the state, be it for taxation or conscription. This established a pattern for decades to come: for a while, the state prospered, but the citizens were oppressed and impoverished. Who can wonder that "modernization" gained a bad reputation?

This perverted understanding of the meaning of modernization has continued ever since. The idea that the essence of progress is to make the state stronger against its enemies has come to dominate the minds of political elites to the point of obsession. Eventually when in the West the modern state came to be called the welfare state, analysts of the Middle East began to speak of the "military state", or worse, of the "*Mukhabarat* state", the *Mukhabarat* being the security services widely feared all over the countries of the region. It is as if the Middle East has adopted an entirely different agenda, and one that is substantially different from that

⁴ *Politics in the Middle East*, pp.2-21.

of the countries where the idea of the modern state originated. Indeed, there are vast philosophical differences between the two and the understanding of the two philosophies is a prerequisite for the comprehension of the essence of the state in the contemporary Middle East.

There are many different theories of the state, but in general they agree that the state enjoys a legitimate monopoly over coercive power in a given territory, as the classic formulation of Max Weber has it. The basic relationship is between a central political apparatus on the one hand, and the individuals inhabiting the territory that this apparatus controls on the other. Theoreticians such as Reinhardt Bendix have described the transition from subjects to citizens in order to demonstrate the change of conception as to the rights and the duties of the "inhabitants", but the main point remains that they were individuals who made up the basic unit of analysis for the state, so to speak. Of course, it would be extremely *naive* to pretend that groups were not involved, because quite obviously they were. Religious groups, social classes, ethnic minorities and regional-cultural entities have been very much part and parcel of the political process characteristic of the modern state. Indeed, in some cases they have managed to disrupt the "normal" politics of the modern state precisely because the basis for their legitimate claims has been one of a group that in some way challenges the unique status of the state as a focus of legitimacy and loyalty. Yet by and large such claims have been contained within the political boundaries of the modern state, because its conception of individual citizens allows for a measure of vitality when these individuals combine on the basis of class, gender or ethnicity. In other words, the state can endure because it is not overwhelmed by any other entity. And it is not overwhelmed because it consists of autonomous individuals rather than merely members of groups that are potential rivals and competitors to the state itself.

The "modern state" in the Middle East, on the other hand, is still dominated by the idea of group membership, loyalty and belonging rather than that of individual citizenship. The state considers itself a nation-state and speaks the rhetoric and logic of nationalism although in most cases the basis for this does not exist in history, culture or society. History knows no Jordanian entity, there is no Jordanian culture or language, and Jordanian society is an uneasy confederation of Palestinians and Bedouins who have little in common. So this is a territorial state that was born in response to the vagaries of colonialism rather than as a result of organic developments of an authentic political community, and much the same can be said of Lebanon and most other states in the Middle East (with some notable and major exceptions). Yet the myth persists (even among enlightened pundits) that we are dealing here with "nation-states". The *regimes* in power find this myth all too convenient, because it allows them to perpetuate their power and ambitions behind the easy mask of nationalism, national liberation and self-determination, all liked in their relevant constituencies, but the truth is that within the territory that they control there are several possible nations, and in some cases, none at all. In practically no case does the state and the nation really correspond.

On the other hand, the ruling elites like to think of the people under their control as belonging to one nation or another. If they belong to the one that the regime likes and appreciates, so much the better. If they belong to a nation that seems to endanger the domination of the elite over the territory they are all too happy to engage in the hideous type of persecution that at times may border on genocide, all on their own "citizens". There is no feeling of responsibility for them as citizens or human beings, they are fair game to the vagaries and whims of the regime, and when outsiders take an interest in their fate, this is presented as unwarranted interference on the part of the imperialists, colonialists, Zionists, bleeding-heart liberals or whoever appears to fit the bill best at the moment as "public enemy number one." None of the inconsistencies or hypocrisies involved are even noticed, let alone coped with.

Thus, the Kurds in Iraq are regarded as an afterthought, a bothersome, awkward fact of life that does not fit the makeup of the "nation" of the Gospel according to Saddam Hussein and his radical Arab nationalist predecessors. They are prevented from developing a normal communal life, let alone a national existence, and none of the nationalists who so enthusiastically support Palestinian national self-determination can explain why the Kurds are less of a nation, although they number many more millions and have at least as good a claim as the Palestinians, let alone the Jordanians or the Lebanese. The Iraqis have attacked villages (notably Khalabja) with poisoned gas and perpetrated virtual genocide on their own citizens, while the entire region looked on. Respecting the territorial integrity of those committing genocide with the most modern technological means available has been seen as the ultimate sign of modernity, *not* the human values associated with the culture of those who are supposedly the source of imitation in things and concepts modern.

But the Iraqis are not alone. The Turks have no problem with Kurdish autonomy as long as it is in Iraq, but they do not permit even the use of the term "Kurd" in their own territory, although that is clearly the primary focus of identification for many millions of their own citizens, as is also the case in Iran and Syria. Non-Muslims in the southern part of the Sudan have been persecuted for decades and their national or civic rights have been trampled in the dust. Lebanon regards pluralism as a curse rather than a blessing. Even the most democratic state in the region, Israel, finds it difficult to come to terms with the existence of hundreds of thousands of citizens that do not belong to the majority, and hence often these are regarded as an embarrassing piece of luggage rather than human beings and citizens entitled to be taken seriously and with dignity. Of course, Israelis (and others) will argue that this is the norm (in fact, that the norm is much worse) all over the Middle East, and regrettably they are right. They are right because the states deal with nations and ethnic groups, but they do not deal with citizens and human beings as autonomous individuals in their own right.

This tendency to conceive of politics in a paradigm of collective reinforces the tendency towards political fanaticism in a region where fanaticism scarcely needs reinforcement. In 1981, the President of Syria gave orders to raze to the ground an entire neighbourhood in the city of Hama, including several mosques, killing at least 10,000 people just because they were Sunni Muslims supporting Islamic fundamentalist activity against the *regime*. In retaliation Islamic fundamentalist attacked the military academy in Northern Syria and killed dozens of cadets who happened to be Alawis, the minority group dominating the *regime*. The Iraqis on more than one occasion wiped out entire villages just because they happened to be populated by Kurds. Christians, Druzes and Muslims have engaged in collective punishment and killing in Lebanon for decades. Palestinians (who define themselves as freedom fighters!) have killed, on numerous occasions, Israeli schoolchildren and recently they abducted and killed, with hands bound behind the back, an Israeli Jewish border policeman. In retaliation, predictably enough, Israeli extremists started attacking Arab shopkeepers and chanting "death to the Arabs," as if all Arabs were to blame for one or more regrettable incidents. Unfortunately, examples of this kind abound in the Middle East, and it would not be difficult to catalogue thousands of them. Of course, each party in a given conflict would then love to quote the examples that embarrass the adversary, and explain away with some nationalist slogan the examples that embarrass his or her own side.

The point is that all the people in the Middle East should be embarrassed by what the states in the region (and not only states, as the example of the Palestinians demonstrates) do to their own people. The Palestinians do not yet have a state, but already they have killed many more of their own people than Israelis have. When states kill their own people with such ease and impunity, how can we expect a more human approach to interstate conflict in which the rules are even less well established and notoriously difficult to enforce? I find it

particularly bothersome that many so-called intellectuals find it so very easy to live with the many inhumanities and find easy excuses for them in the name of the numerous "isms" that we all like to quote when arguing about ideology. In the case of some Western intellectuals, including quite a few I have met in this country, this takes the form of cultural relativism. People here explain that human rights, freedom, dignity and so on are "Western concepts" that have been imposed on colonized peoples, and that they should be allowed to practice their own kind of politics, as if committing genocide against the Kurds, the Armenians or anyone else for that matter were a matter of local values somehow divorced from the universal respect for life and dignity of all human beings. To add insult to injury, many such intellectuals then gloat with self-admiration for being so sophisticated and tolerant. Yes, they **are** very tolerant of the perversions and excesses of the ruling tyrants, but what about the millions of people who are oppressed and persecuted? Such a paternalistic attitude, it seems to me, is in itself a classic case of colonial ideology, because it really argues that lofty values are only good for the West, whereas the locals and natives should be allowed quietly to murder each other, as if they were somehow immune to values that prevail elsewhere.

As to the local intellectual elites in the Middle East, in some cases they have given in to the twin pressures of oppression and bribery and have become the virtual handmaidens of the "modern" state that no longer tolerates the non-state sectors of society in education, welfare and religion that even the ancient Oriental despots had no trouble to live with. The modern contemporary state wishes to mobilize all available resources in the state for its official objectives, and so it tries to penetrate the traditionally more autonomous segments of society as well. The technology of the state has been imported wholesale, but that part of the logic of state that advocates tolerance, coexistence, bargaining and compromise has not. Yet many intellectuals like to be mobilized for state objectives, for which they are also handsomely rewarded. Above all, they are given a dignified podium to echo the goals of the political elites which have a stranglehold on the state. Intellectuals find it easy to get mesmerized by nationalist and other extreme ideological slogans, and fuse them with shallow slogans from Western political folklore. The cumbersome ideals of tolerance, pluralism and limits on state power do not, as a rule, appeal to them very much. I believe that if Julien Benda, the author of the classic *Treason of the Intellectuals* were alive today he would find this a case in point, and one not an iota less convincing than the initial one of World War I which was the subject of his original book.

To add yet another insult to injury, in many cases the fanatical ideas of intolerant and militant state power are couched in religious language which is the ultimate tool of political communications in the Middle East, above all, but not exclusively, in its huge Islamic component. Religion is mobilized for nationalism and ethnic conflict, yet it is rarely mentioned by intellectuals (religious or secular) that perhaps the most fundamental idea of the great monotheistic religions (ironically, all three of which were born and bred initially in the Middle East) is that man and woman were created in the image of God, and from this it follows that they have certain God-given, and hence inalienable rights that should never be violated by other human beings. Instead, in the vast majority of the cases religion is used to reinforce the divisive tendencies of ethnic and national cleavages, even though the example of the late President Sadat, himself a practicing Muslim, eventually gunned down by other practicing Muslims, has demonstrated that Islam can be mobilized for peace as readily as it is mobilized for war - that is, if the mobilizers are really interested in peace in the first place.

This is particularly galling because I think that the basic problem is conceptual, and if there is a solution, even a partial one, it has to be above all an educational effort. People (and their actual or potential leaders) must be persuaded to adopt a different paradigm of politics, one that does **not** depict politics as primarily a titanic clash of right and wrong, of one state against another, as one nation infusing a state or a group of states with holiness against one or more of the others, but one that comprehends the state as an artifact, albeit a devastatingly potent artifact. The state is a structure engineered by human beings for human purposes, and

when these purposes are no longer served, it is perfectly legitimate to take action against it. Loyalty to states may or may not be important, but loyalty to people has to be. In order to make sure that this point is driven home, it is necessary to infuse the cultural and educational system with the idea that the primary (one might say ontological) unit of analysis in politics is not necessarily the state or the nation, but people - themselves, their needs, their rights and their well-being.

The idea of a people-based political system and even the idea of a people-based political "science" may sound *naive* in the Middle East, and not only there. Indeed, much of what we study and learn about nation and state in the West is still plagued by the idea that these are somehow organic and sacred entities in their own right, and hence that outcomes of political conflict, for instance, should be assessed in terms of how they affect the future fortunes of the given state or nation. Yet we know full well that behind the abstractions of state and nation there live and die millions of concrete human beings, and that **their** fate, in turn, is determined to a large extent by what the political leaders of the state and the nation do. At least in the West it is increasingly realized that the traditional assessment of politics and political conflict is somewhat outmoded, and that, for example, the classic conception of "security" is no longer adequate. Yet these new trends of thought arise at a time when the political elites have already relaxed their stranglehold over the political system anyhow, and there is a tendency to move away from violent conflict on the interstate scene, and away from violent oppression on the domestic scene.

In the Middle East, unfortunately, violence and oppression are still very much the order of the day. A perverted and obsessively force-oriented interpretation of modernity has contributed mightily to the survival of the "modern" state apparatus with its enormous oppressive power. Hence a "people-based" approach to politics in the Middle East is truly a revolutionary force, at least potentially. It follows that many of the ruling elites will be less than enthusiastic about its possible emergence. Yet I think that the future will see its emergence all the same. The prevailing definition of modernity has been so one-sided, and so harmful to the interests of the people of the region that it will have to be abandoned in favour of a truer, more sophisticated redefinition. When this emerges on the centre of the political stage, a mighty new struggle will start between the existing order, a veritable case of a prerevolutionary *ancient regime* on the one hand, and the proponents of the new ideas on the other. The old order has been supported by the military, the police, the salaried middle class employed by the state and the coopted intellectuals (to borrow a phrase from the Turkish sociologist Sherif Mardin one might call them "*lumpenintellectuals*"). I do not know who will be the main agent of change in bringing about a new, more human form of the modern state. I do hope that true intellectuals will be among them, and that they will no longer continue to worship at the altar of state power. I think Harry Crowe would have shared this concern with the indifference of intellectuals in the face of the growing attrition of human values.

A decade ago, my analysis was concerned with the question whether the state in the Middle East would survive in the face of mounting particularistic challenges. I hypothesized that it would, but that the question was whether it would have a human face, and I expressed a heavy apprehension that it might not. The decade that has passed since has supported both of these general points. I think that by now the survival of the state is no longer in question. The human face of the state is. The challenge of the next decade is to make sure that people in the Middle East are given a chance to look forward to a state with a human face. Our concern has to be not with the well-being of the state only, but with the well-being of the people who live in the territory controlled by the state, and for whose welfare the state is responsible. However, first of all we must call the spade a spade. If there is a proper political role for intellectuals, it is precisely that of calling the spade a spade. Why wait for the children to scream that the emperor is naked?

Is this a *naive* expectation? No, because many of the truly outstanding creative minds in the Middle East are doing just this, among them such outstanding personalities as Egypt's Nobel Prize winning writer Naguib Mahfuz who ever since the end of the 1973 war has been asking incisive questions about how grand political developments will affect the people of his country (as well as others). If we had been present at this lecture series just a few years ago and spoken of the imminent breakup of Communism and the emergence of an Eastern European state with a human face, that would have been considered probably **very naive**. When I first visited Toronto in 1976 I spoke about the prospects of peace between Israel and Egypt and **this** was considered *naive* in the extreme. So I think we should end on the note that the *naive* are those who are unable to accept the fact that things all over the world are changing. Yes, even in the Middle East things change, and sometimes they even change for the better....