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Response to Sivan

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Response

Alberto Moya Monge

When Antonio Gramsci wrote his prison notebooks between 1929 and 1935, he defined intellectuals as “organizers of masses of men; organizers of the ‘confidence’ of investors in their business; of the customers of their product.”¹ Gramsci must have envisioned intellectuals such as Benedict Anderson and Edward Said. More than sixty years after those prison notebooks were written, and one year after Dr. Said articulated for us the duties of the intellectuals,² we gather again at the Macalester International Roundtable to deal with the ideas presented in this session by Dr. Emmanuel Sivan.

Let me begin by thanking Dr. Sivan for giving us a useful examination of competing and contemporary forces in the Middle East. Much of what I have to say about this subject is the result of my engagement during the past three years in a variety of discussions with professors and students from many parts of the world. It is also the product of years of images fed to me by newspapers, television newscasts, and magazine articles. The task at hand, then, is highly challenging, particularly for someone from another part of the world—Central America.

To respond to Dr. Sivan, I will first outline several key contributions of the essay. Second, I will discuss three notable topics that are conspicuous by their absence from the essay. I will conclude by providing my views on the issues addressed in this forum and, while doing so, take a brief look at the questions of identity and globalization raised by this year’s Roundtable.

I. Highlights

A. Dispelling Myths of Pan-Arab Nationalism

Pan-Arab nationalism, Dr. Sivan contends, finds itself at a difficult crossroads in the wake of the end of the Cold War. It takes only a couple of notable reminders such as the Gulf War to realize the magnitude of the events that have shaken up this particular nationalist movement. Dr. Sivan’s analysis of these points is

best illustrated by systematically dispelling the three pillars, or “myths,” of pan-Arab nationalism.

The first is the “Arab Piedmont and Prussia” — an ethnic and cultural nationalist movement designed to unify and create a collective Arab consciousness transcending political boundaries.³ Egypt’s Nasser, Libya’s Qaddafi, and, ultimately, Iraq’s Saddam Hussein all failed to use their respective opportunities to seize potential Arab leadership. Second is the notion of “artificial borders” — a result of imperialism following its dictum of “divide and conquer.” In its quest for unity, pan-Arab nationalism seeks to erase the political and geographic boundaries created by such “artificial borders.” However, the principles behind a “nation-state” have created a new consciousness for entities such as Kuwait, resisting Iraq’s invasion and subsequent annexation between 1990 and 1991.⁴ The third and final myth is that of “common (Arab) interests” — in other words, the pursuit of a common (Arab) goal or achievement — easily dispelled when Saudi, Egyptian, and Syrian forces confronted Iraq and its Arab allies during the Gulf War.

The collapse of these three myths is of great importance because it leads us toward the questions of identity that the Middle East was at first reluctant to face, but later took up rather enthusiastically. Middle Eastern nations, now more than ever, are facing questions of patriotism and nationalism, concerns that are in constant redefinition and reformulation in terms of ethnic identities, loyalties, and territorial demarcations. Scholars on the Middle East such as Bernard Lewis complement Dr. Sivan’s perspectives on the “vacuum” created by the eminent loss of pan-Arab hegemony and the surge toward the formation of new nation-states. As Lewis writes,

We have traced the rise and fall of liberal patriotism, the rise and spread of ethnic nationalism. It remains to glance briefly at the most recent phase: the return, at first tentative and uncertain and then increasingly vigorous to a new patriotism based on new nation-states that are at least beginning to take root in the consciousness and loyalties of their peoples.⁵

Patriotism and nationalism, in turn, help develop and form the new “consciousness” and “loyalties” and are constantly fluc-

tuating as a result of internal struggles of personal and collective identity. This is best illustrated by Nizzar Qabbani's poem "Top Secret Memorandum."⁶ This poem embodies the numerous difficulties of defining Arab or Middle Eastern identity—including dealing with violence, democracy, fear, and extremism. Such questions remain at hand, and answers still seem difficult to come by.

B. The Emergence of the Nation-State in the Middle East

A second contribution made by Dr. Sivan's essay is the analysis of the emergence of the nation-state in the Middle East. As pan-Arabism declines in force, Dr. Sivan believes, the nation-state plays a more defining political and social role. He explains how the rise of the nation-state complements Radical Islam and Middle Easternism. According to Dr. Sivan, both assume "that the nation-states are the sole effective collective entities in the region and that they enjoy a substantial measure of legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens/subjects."⁷

Herein we can find some of the best examples of the growing relationship between the creation of identities and their linkages with historical roots. Dr. Sivan's simple but keenly representational examples of tracing collective consciousness through bank notes, stamps, and holidays illustrate the numerous symbols that connect the self with families, neighbors, *citizens* of a particular country. In addition, here cultural and historical identities serve as complements to an overall national consciousness by passing the legacies of traditions and customs from generation to generation. But such principles are not new. For years, Islam has played, and still performs, a key role in the legitimization of a national identity. Sylvia Haim writes,

If this bond [Islam] could be strengthened, if it were to become the spring of [Muslims'] lives and the focus of their loyalty, then prodigious forces of solidarity would be engendered to make possible the creation and maintenance of a strong and stable state.⁸

Dr. Sivan points out that there is a price tag attached to the existence of nation-states in the Middle East: a glorification of

the nation-state can be a major impediment to a vision of a regional system—a growing imperative in a global order where transnational life is flourishing on multiple levels or interactions.

C. Radical Islam

Finally, Dr. Sivan spends a great deal of his work examining what he considers to be the two key participants that will fill the void left by the collapse of pan-Arab nationalism: Radical Islam and Middle Easternism. The first seems to capture most of his attention. Consequently, in an extensive look at Radical Islam, he displays his acute knowledge of this phenomenon, “the most dynamic political social force upon the Muslim scene.”⁹ In a nutshell, Dr. Sivan argues that Radical Islam plays a key role in the contemporary Middle East because it combines skillful communication techniques with political language embedded in deep historical roots, passed on through modern media.

The use of an elaborate cultural and religious apparatus allows Islamic radicals to effectively propagate their ideas against “West-toxication” (materialism, modernism, and secularism). The elements of this syndrome include moral degeneracy, unemployment, poor housing, and crime. Radical Islam, Dr. Sivan argues, has come to the fore in the search for a redefinition of the boundaries between the religious and the secular.

II. Shortcomings and Notable Absences

A. Defining the “Middle East”

As I prepared my response, I examined numerous volumes on this particular region’s historical background. In trying to determine what countries the Middle East comprised, I noticed that different maps included different countries. Surprisingly, Dr. Sivan’s essay presented me with a similar problem, for he never truly defines what he refers to as the “Middle East.” Is it a geographical region? If it is, are its boundaries political, economic, religious, ethnic, an amalgam of all, or none of the above?

In 1902, American naval historian Alfred Thayer Mahan first coined the term *Middle East*, which encompassed the area between Arabia and India and, appropriately for a naval strategist, placed the center in the Persian Gulf. But this crude and pragmatic definition is only two-dimensional because it does not address the multiple concerns of politics, society, religion, and economics. We cannot be limited to such a method. It is imperative that we revisit the idea of the Middle East and then present a framework that could allow our ideas and contentions to interact.

Is the Middle East, then, defined by ethnicity? If not, is it determined by differences of language and/or religion, or simple territorial demarcation? These questions can certainly produce conflicting answers: people from “within” the Middle East very possibly see themselves quite differently than do those who see them from the “outside.”

B. Israel and the Middle East

In the same way that various historical accounts have included and excluded geographical sections of the region, rather surprisingly, Dr. Sivan has chosen to omit and/or overlook the participation of Israel as a key player in his “Middle East.” Earlier this year, when I was invited to participate in this discussion, I kept a close eye on newspaper articles, television news, and anything related to the subject. From then on, I was bombarded with news item after news item: Saddam Hussein’s reincursion into the United Nations’ established no-fly zone, fluctuating oil prices, images of “extremists” celebrating the burning of Western icons on the street, and the precarious conditions of the Palestinians. I was captivated by the images emanating from Israel — the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin, terrorist bombing after terrorist bombing, Yasser Arafat exchanging words with Shimon Peres, radical groups such as Hamas proudly claiming responsibility for the deaths of many in the *jihād*, or “holy war,” and Israeli force in encounters with Palestinians.

The struggle for land, legitimacy, and life among Palestinians, other Arabs, and Israelis is certainly not a new one. For nearly fifty years, the world has seen countless visions of bloodbaths,

gunshots, and bombings that seem almost never-ending. Now more than ever, these images seem to be escalating to new levels of despair and terror. NBC News correspondent Martin Fletcher expressed in one of his reports in September 1996 the frustration and hopelessness that many of us feel day after day. "Two weeks ago," Fletcher said, "Palestinian forces and Israeli troops were patrolling the zone together . . . today, they were killing each other."

After reading Dr. Sivan's essay, I came away feeling disappointed that none of these images or their huge symbolic importance was invoked. Rather, it seems to me that Dr. Sivan took the task of examining cultures, politics, nationalities, religions, and identities other than his own with an omniscient perspective, strangely alienating himself from the complex and interwoven mechanisms that shape and influence life in the Middle East, including Israel. It is difficult to understand how Dr. Sivan can seemingly remove himself completely from the historical context that he is so much a part of. "Know thyself" is a current running through this year's Roundtable; I am surprised that Dr. Sivan has overlooked this suggestion.

C. Globalization and the Middle East

Dr. Sivan's depiction of the forces at play in the shaping of political, economic, cultural, and religious life are clearly seen as "internal" or "regional" in character. This approach neglects a fundamental question presented to each scholar: What is to become of national belonging and nationalism in a time of both ascending ethnicity and the onset of globalization?

Dr. Sivan believes that in the midst of the emerging redefinition of nation-states, Radical Islam will succumb as long as it denies the validity of human rights and rejects democracy. In addition, in order for Middle Easternism to have validity, it must be given clearer purpose. Such an effort will involve a combination of economic elements such as the Middle Eastern Common Market as well as the application of the politics of resolution embedded in the principles of the New World Order—both strong counterparts to Radical Islam.

But what about the numerous external forces participating in the creation and disintegration of transnational life? How are

technological developments such as the transactions of digital information helping to propagate alternative perspectives other than Radical Islam and Middle Easternism? Considerations of this kind seem to be essential in the shaping of a “collective imagination” that transcends territorial boundaries.

Scholars are no longer asking if globalization is taking place. Rather, they are now focusing on delineating its complexities as well as exploring effective responses. Although he does not directly address the question of globalization, Dr. Sivan does provide some hints. For example, he warns us about the “Dialogue of Actions”—internal contradictions of hegemonic ideologies that can lead to their own demise. The forces of globalization will no doubt make the “dialogue” even more complex if not more conflictive.¹⁰

III. Personal Remarks

The questions of identity and ethnicity are not, of course, limited to the region of the Middle East. For instance, Latin America has its own struggles over identity. Here, one can pick from a handful of ethnic groups that are seeking recognition and legitimacy through redress of deep grievances. The most recent and vivid example is the present uprising in Chiapas, Mexico. In Africa, communal tensions have, more than once, exploded into “ethnic cleansing.” And Europe—the ostensible cradle of “civility,” great thinkers, and Western “Enlightenment”—watched the former Republic of Yugoslavia crumble and give way to a savagery reminiscent of violent and brutal times past.

Globalization is not limited to the potential openings of common markets or the sharing of capital and information across political boundaries. It also includes the globalization of problems and a nascent challenge to privileges solely based on racial, cultural, or religious categories. If we abide by the principles embodied in emerging transnational life, then the peoples of every region will have to learn about and deal with the concerns of the rest. In this regard, the post-Cold War era presents tough issues that defy easy solutions. But, in the context of the Middle East, it may be the anxieties of the Muslim countries that are most disconcerting. Ali Muzrui writes,

In addition to the black-white divide in the world, Muslim countries, in particular[,] may have reason to worry in the era after the Cold War. Will Islam replace communism as the West's perceived adversary? Did the West exploit the Gulf War of 1991 to put Islam and its holiest places under the umbrella of Pax Americana?¹¹

Finally, Dr. Sivan's essay is one more reminder of the acute need for scholars to expand their horizons and seek alternative perspectives of analysis. Arjun Appadurai recently called for the use of different dimensions, or "scapes," for exploring cultural flow.¹² It seems that Dr. Sivan's essay compels us to approach the Middle East in a transdisciplinary fashion in which Radical Islam is seen as a conduit of material concerns, not just a dynamic cultural movement, and Middle Easternism becomes a philosophy responding to years of terror and counterterror. Like every other region of the world, then, the people of the Middle East face a combination of old difficulties and novel problems. To mount a successful response will require a monumental regional effort that links the best of local (e.g., ethnic, religious, national) solidarity to an inclusive regional communion. A good beginning into this long journey can be taken by the articulation of cosmopolitan perspectives by the area's intellectuals.

Notes

1. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1992), 5.
2. Edward W. Said, "The Limits of the Artistic Imagination, and the Secular Intellectual" in *Macalester International* 3 (Spring 1996): 3–34.
3. Emmanuel Sivan, "Contending Arab Visions" in *Macalester International* 4 (Spring 1997): 59.
4. *Ibid.*, 61.
5. Bernard Lewis, *The Shaping of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 92.
6. Sivan, "Contending Arab Visions," 62–63.
7. *Ibid.*, 64.
8. Sylvia G. Haim, *Arab Nationalism: An Anthology* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), 9.
9. Sivan, "Contending Arab Visions," 69.
10. *Ibid.*, 80.

11. Ali A. Mazrui, "Race and Religion in the New World Order," in *The Gulf War and the New World Order: International Relations in the Middle East*, ed. Tareq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 521.
12. Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" in *Public Culture* 2 (1990): 1–24.