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The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers: Political “Backwardness” in Historical Perspective

Ian S. Lustick

Propelled by the oil boom of the mid-1970s the Middle East emerged as the world's fastest growing region.¹ Hopes and expectations were high for Arab political consolidation, economic advancement, and cultural efflorescence. With falling oil prices and a devastating war between Iran and Iraq, these hopes had dimmed somewhat by the early 1980s. In 1985, however, the spectacular image of an Arab great power was still tantalizing. A Pan-Arab state, wrote two experts on the region, would include a total area of 13.7 million square kilometers,

second only to the Soviet Union and considerably larger than Europe, Canada, China, or the United States. . . . By 2000 it would have more people than either of the two superpowers. This state would contain almost two-thirds of the world's proven oil reserves. It would also have enough capital to finance its own economic and social development. Conceivably, it could feed itself. . . . Access to a huge market could stimulate rapid industrial growth. Present regional inequalities could ultimately be lessened and the mismatch between labor-surplus and labor-short areas corrected. The aggregate military strength and political influence of this strategically located state would be formidable. . . . It is easy to comprehend why this dream has long intoxicated Arab nationalists.²

Within ten years, however, this assessment sounded more like a fairy tale than a scenario. Indeed the last two decades have been dispiriting for Arab nationalists, not only measured against the prospect of a great national state, but compared to levels of

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1. El Mallakh 1978, 195.

2. Drysdale and Blake 1985, 225. For similar expectations and scenarios of Arab unity, prosperity, and power, see Kerr 1982, 2; and El Mallakh 1978, 186–89. On the potential for a great Arab state, see, for example, Waterbury 1978, 53–55, 100; Luciani and Salamé 1988, 13; Salamé 1988a, 264, 278; and Sirageldin 1988, 204.

cooperation and interstate integration in Europe, Asia, and the Americas, where highly developed countries are joining with rapidly expanding emergent economies in regionally based communities of wealth and growth. In the Middle East, on the other hand, all integration schemes have failed. Intraregional trade remains very low, with estimates ranging between 2 and 8 percent over the last fifteen years.³ Most Middle Eastern states are experiencing either economic stagnation or absolute decline. From 1980 to 1991 the Middle East (including Israel and Iran, but not Turkey) and North Africa registered almost a 3 percent decrease in annual income growth compared to a 1 percent decrease in Sub-Saharan Africa and a 1 percent increase for all the developing world.⁴ The region suffered a decline of almost 2 percent in gross domestic product (GDP) per capita between 1980 and 1993.⁵ Unemployment in 1993 was twice as high (15 percent) as that in any other region of the world.⁶

Many explanations have been offered for disunity, economic stagnation, and the failure of any Muslim or Arab state to emerge as or to build a Middle Eastern great power. Despite the rhetoric and sentiment of Arab nationalism and Arab unity and, more recently, Islamic unity, contemporary Middle Eastern history is riddled with parochial hostilities, meaningless schemes for mergers and federations, and a raft of regimes strong enough to suppress dissidents but too weak and insecure to risk intimate forms of cooperation with their neighbors. With “artificial” colonial borders virtually intact, energy and capital surpluses are mostly separated from demographic bulk and centers of military and administrative capacity and political appeal. These conditions, it is often pointed out, have prevented Middle Easterners from building large internal markets and from exploiting their homogeneity, resources, and administrative-political capacity for dynamic, long-term economic growth.⁷

Most analysts who have confronted what Fouad Ajami dubbed the “Arab predicament” have implicitly or explicitly used the processes and successes of European integration after World War II to identify the requisites of success in the Middle East and the reasons for failure.⁸ Those who have thought the prospects were not all bad for Arab integration have stressed what they deemed the growing self-confidence, pragmatism, and flexibility of states whose separate sovereignty was increasingly recognized and accepted as permanent by their neighbors. Using Western Europe as a point of reference, these observers expected Arab governments would thereby be able to leave aside old feuds and cooperate without worrying about political dissolu-

3. See Miller 1993, 8; Shafik 1995, 17.

4. Shafik 1995, 15.

5. *Ibid.*, 65. Annual growth in GDP in the region also decreased, from a peak of 6 percent in the mid-1970s to less than 1 percent in the late 1980s. See *ibid.*, 4.

6. Diwan 1995, 3.

7. For a useful list of failed Arab integration initiatives, see Azzam 1993, 227–28.

8. Despite the recent emphasis on Islam as a unifying political identity in the Middle East, no framework has been or is more promising as a basis for achieving substantial political and economic integration than Arab nationalism. Therefore, I focus my analysis on the failure of Arab integration or Arab state building, while acknowledging that Arabism has never been completely divorced from Islamic motifs and suggesting at the end of the article that the argument works equally well for Muslim schemes for political integration. For a sample of the “obituaries” written for Arab national unity, see Brown 1984, 27–43; Ajami 1992; and Tibi 1990, 24–25.

tion or subversion.⁹ Some analysts have stressed the functional necessity of close economic cooperation and political integration, arguing from necessity to inevitability or likelihood.¹⁰ Others trace the large-scale movement of labor and remittances across Arab state boundaries, recalling, in their anticipation that such interdependencies were binding the Arab world into an economic whole, theories associated with Karl Deutsch and Ernst Haas to the effect that increasing transactions across borders and the unintended spillover of functionally important requirements for cooperation would lead Europe toward both political and economic integration.¹¹ More pessimistic analysts have used the European experience to explain why the Arab world has not integrated successfully. Citing regime heterogeneity in the Middle East, the absence of strong democratic institutions, the skewed distribution of wealth, and the weakness and insecurity of governments—these observers blame the failure of regional integration on how different the Middle East is in these respects from Western Europe.¹²

My argument begins by suggesting that, whether optimistic or pessimistic, these analyses are based on a misplaced analogy of post-World War II European states with post-World War II Arab or, more broadly, Islamic or Middle Eastern states. A much more fundamental appreciation of the political and economic quandaries faced by the peoples of the Middle East is possible if the dozens of states in the region are compared to the scores and even hundreds of European states and principalities that, in gradually decreasing number, comprised Europe (and the lands bordering the North Atlantic) from the 1200s through the late nineteenth century. The question then becomes: How is it that powerful states, such as Great Britain, France, Russia, Germany, Italy, and the United States, could arise in these regions—states that not only combined the natural resources, cultural affinities, demographic bulk, military capacity, administrative integrity, and economic wealth necessary for activity on the world stage as great powers, but could also serve either as hegemonic leaders in the construction of regional blocs (especially the European Community) or as dependable, confident partners in such endeavors? This recasts the essential question to be asked about the contemporary Middle East in a more appropriate historical context. Why have there been no Middle Eastern great powers?

Westphalia and Versailles: War and State Building in Europe and the Middle East

“The Ottoman Turks,” wrote Albert Hourani, in one of his last essays, “may be called the Romans of the Muslim world.”¹³ From a long-cycle perspective, focusing

9. See Noble 1991, 52, 78–93; and Taylor 1982, 108–20.

10. See Sirageldin 1988, 185–207; Kanovsky 1968, 350–76; Bani Hani 1984, 184; and Drysdale and Blake 1985, 225.

11. Ibrahim 1982, 17–70.

12. See Nonneman 1993; Miller 1993, 3–6. Regarding civil society, see Barakat 1993; and Luciani and Salamé 1988, 16–21.

13. Hourani 1991, 130.

on the evolution of states and the cultural, military, and political frameworks that incubate them, the analogy between the Ottomans and the Romans is founded on the gradual attenuation and eventual disappearance of an imperial center. Both the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East and the Holy Roman Empire in medieval and early modern Europe advanced and upheld (sometimes in reality, sometimes as legal fictions) claims of authority over heterogeneous populations, complex arrays of monarchs, satraps, vassals, and enormous land masses divided into gradually stabilizing but never fixed administrative segments. For the emirs, sheikhs, and walis of the Arab world, the gradual decline and final disappearance of the Ottoman Empire was equivalent to the gradual decline and eventual disappearance of the Holy Roman Empire for the lords, dukes, kings, and princes of Europe. In both cases enforcement of claims to authority over wide cultural and geographic areas (Muslim Middle East and Christian Europe) was abandoned and replaced with parochial but locally potent claims to sovereignty over small pieces of the region by local elites.

In Europe the Westphalian treaties of 1648 gave formal acknowledgment to the validity of these claims (insofar as they could be upheld in the arena of international political and military competition) and to replacement of the universal sovereignty of the emperor with a host of separate sovereigns whose autonomous existence had long since acted as the mainspring of European politics. In the Middle East, on the other hand, most local elites ready to advance their own claims to rule territories no longer incorporated within the Ottoman Empire were, for the most part, cast aside or submerged beneath the superordinate power and imperial ambitions of European states. This process began long before World War I, but it was the Treaty of Versailles that formally acknowledged replacement of the Ottoman Empire's universal sovereignty with rule by different European "mandatory" powers under the auspices of the League of Nations. In this context, the League of Nations stood for nothing more than the European state system, which had, in any case, long since emerged as the decisive force in Middle Eastern political affairs.

Here is revealed the most important difference in the developmental trajectories of state systems in Europe and the Middle East. European states developed, expanded, made war, gained victories, and consolidated—or suffered defeats, shrunk, failed to consolidate, and disappeared—in an international context of moderated but violent disorder. By one reckoning, in 1900 "there were around 20 times fewer independent polities in Europe than there had been in 1500. They did not disappear peacefully or decay as the national state developed; they were the losers in a protracted war of all against all."¹⁴ As Charles Tilly noted, early modern Europe was anarchic, but, "largely as a result of the previous unification under the Roman Empire," it was, in broad cultural terms, fairly homogeneous.¹⁵ This setting required prudent rulers of states to be ambitious and encouraged them to consider absorption (rather than destruction) of neighboring populations and wealthy districts as a route to increased power. Even more importantly, rulers operating within this system did so free from the actual or

14. Cohen, Brown, and Organski 1981, 902.

15. Tilly 1975, 77.

potential interference of outside powers whose military, economic, and administrative capacities, by dwarfing those of the young European states, could have prevented the system from operating. Nor were these rulers constrained by international norms against acquiring new territory as a result of victory in war or threat of war.¹⁶ In the Middle East, on the other hand, and in the Arab Middle East in particular, rulers of territories, or candidates for rulership, found themselves not only overwhelmed by the tremendous power of individual European or North American states (especially Britain, France, Italy, and the United States) but subjected to an elaborate array of international institutions and norms (represented by the system of Concerts and Congresses of the nineteenth century and the League of Nations and the United Nations in the twentieth century). In sharp contrast to the war-lubricated Westphalian system—whose units expanded into great powers, sunk to middle or small power status, or disappeared altogether, as a result of wars waged at the highest levels of force available at the time—the system of colonial subordination and externally enforced norms to which the nineteenth and twentieth century Middle East was subjected did not allow cross-border warfare by local rulers to effect substantial change in the number, size, or internal regimes of states.

My claim is that *these historical sequence-linked differences in the geopolitical context of European and Middle Eastern state system development constitute not the only but the single most important explanation for the contemporary absence of a Middle Eastern great power*. In part this contention is inspired by Alexander Gerschenkron's famous argument more than forty years ago. Gerschenkron pointed out that because of competition from states whose economies had already industrialized, Russia and other latecomers to industrialization could not achieve industrialization through free market capitalism (as had early comers such as Britain and France).¹⁷ I argue that this kind of historical perspective can explain political as well as economic "backwardness."¹⁸ In this Gerschenkronian sense, the route available for the achievement of great power status in Europe and North America, which included large-scale state-building wars, has not been available to those who sought and still seek to enter the great power club after its establishment.

Prevailing theories of the conditions under which large centralized monarchical and national states crystallized in Western Europe emphasize competition among a plethora of potential core territories, each possessing economic resources, administrative capacities, cultural solidity, geographical advantages, and/or military capabilities.¹⁹ These "conquering cores" or "conquest centers," were motivated to expand

16. Finer 1974, 97.

17. Gerschenkron 1962.

18. The quotes here are of particular importance since by invoking Gerschenkron's argument I mean to draw attention *only* to the latecomer logic of the argument as explaining failure of a particular kind—political failure by all Middle Eastern states to join the ranks of the great powers. I do *not* mean to imply a breakdown in the process of modernization, any sort of intrinsic cultural or economic backwardness, or a backwardness in the form of the polity that emerged in the Middle East compared to Europe and North America.

19. For a widely cited survey tracing contemporary European states to their original "core-areas," see Pounds and Ball 1964, 24–40.

and consolidate their protostate apparatuses by aspirations to establish larger “empires” (that is, sovereign states) of their own for the greater glory of the ruling house, by a variety of aggrandizing impulses, and by strategic worries about threats from competitors who might otherwise absorb march lands or weaker neighbors. In Britain the wars of Alfred the Great and of the Plantagenet and Tudor monarchs forged the heptarchy into England and the British Isles into the United Kingdom. In France, wars conducted by Capetian and Valois kings from the Ile de France produced, over centuries, the great state we know as France. In Russia the czars fought wars of expansion and repression to join Slavic territories west of the Urals and vast expanses of Asia east of the Urals to the domain ruled from Muscovy. Using Prussia as a base, Bismarckian diplomacy and a series of wars against Austria, France, and others produced Germany. In Italy, Piedmont fought wars against Austria, sponsored Garibaldi’s landing in Sicily, and marched its army down the Italian peninsula to destroy the old Bourbon monarchy, thereby eliminating the jealous rivalries among separate principalities and city-states that had for so long divided Italians.²⁰ The bloody struggle between North and South in North America transformed what could have been a loose confederation of states, or a continent divided into three or four states, into a continental state dominated by a coherent political, economic, and cultural elite.²¹ The long histories of Japan and China reflect the same hard truth—that no great state in today’s world has arisen peacefully or legally.²²

The argument is not one of design or destiny, but of evolution and at least partially unintended consequences. “No dynasty set out to build a nation-state,” argued V. G. Kiernan,

each aimed at unlimited extension . . . and the more it prospered the more the outcome was a multifarious empire instead of a nation. The nation was the empire *manqué*. It had to be large enough to survive and to sharpen its claws on its neighbors, but small enough to be organized from one centre and to feel itself as an entity.²³

20. Prussia and Piedmont fought fiercer, more purposeful, and temporally more concentrated wars of national unification precisely because, in the European context, Germany and Italy were late developers as national states. In other words, consistent with my argument about the obstacles to achieving great power status faced by political latecomers outside of Europe, these European latecomers themselves faced higher barriers to entry to the great power club than did their predecessors—barriers they surmounted through determined leadership, strategic planning, large-scale military exertions, and fortuitous tactical alliances with existing great powers (Piedmont and France versus Austria; Prussia and Italy versus Austria and France). The contours of Italy were in particular constrained by what Tilly referred to as the “filling-in of the state system.” See Tilly 1975, 46. See also Finer 1974, 84, 95.

21. Deudney 1995, 191–228.

22. Japan’s reemergence as a great power after World War II, along with that of Germany and China, owes a great deal not only to the implementation of disciplined developmentalist and neomercantilist policies, but to the prior creation of unified, territorially expansive, and demographically weighty states through wars of survival, conquest, and expansion among contending subunits (wars of German unification in the nineteenth century and the warring states periods of Chinese and Japanese history) as well as to the evolution of strong states and powerful economies linked to participation in wars with other great powers, from the Sino–Japanese War of the 1890s and the Russo–Japanese War of the early twentieth century to the two world wars.

23. Kiernan 1965, 35.

In 1902 Otto Hintze offered a more general version of this theory for the evolution of large, strong territorial states in Europe:

It was the situation of the European state system that made the formation of greater states historically necessary. France was forced into this direction by her struggle with the Habsburgs; and once France had set the example, it became a necessity for the other European states to follow her example if they wished to preserve their independence. The development of military and political power and constant military preparedness were possible only on the basis of a larger, centrally ruled and administrative territory. The militarist system, with all that it entailed in political terms, proceeded from the power struggles and rivalries of the Continental states after the close of the Middle Ages.²⁴

Of all of Hintze's disciples, Tilly has offered the best and most influential formulation of the argument—that “war made the state, and the state made war.”²⁵ At least, and this is my point, this is how it worked in Europe and North America, and this is the *only* way we know that a “great power” can be constructed in the modern world.

The institutional mechanisms that provided this link between successful prosecution of external wars and the expansion (territorial and otherwise) of states were political, administrative, and fiscal. Politically, it became necessary for absolutist monarchs to extend rights of representation in government to those capable of paying the taxes necessary to finance wars they wished to fight or felt compelled to be able to fight.²⁶ Development of the “national” idea and the extension of political rights to the gentry, the bourgeoisie, and later the working class thereby became associated with states whose relative legitimacy permitted them to raise more taxes, build larger military capabilities, and fight more wars to victorious conclusions or at least prevent their destruction at the hands of other expanded states.²⁷ The much larger and technologically sophisticated armies and navies sponsored by these states also required more developed and effective administrative structures to extract resources (conscripts and taxes), direct their growth, and create broader indigenous (or colonially supervised) industrial and agricultural bases to assure logistical support.²⁸ The use of these enhanced capabilities to prosecute successful wars then led to even greater administrative and political capacities to tax and extract other resources.²⁹ While new military bureaucracies served as models for more powerful and ambitious forms of state control over civil affairs, investments in military-related industrial and agricul-

24. Hintze 1975, 174.

25. See Tilly 1975, 42; and Tilly 1985. Explaining Germany's rise to great power status, Dehio wrote of “dynamic diversity” and “fertile friction” among the Hellenic city-states, the principalities of Renaissance Italy, and in Europe as a whole. These were the key factors, he argued, reflected in “the perpetual motion of its struggles,” that in a culturally unified but politically divided Europe “gave rise to an immense heightening of all vital energies” and produced the modern great powers. See Dehio 1962, 21–23. See also Finer 1974, 79–126; and Zolberg 1980.

26. See *Ibid.*, 694, 708, 712; Tilly 1975, 23, 35; Finer 1974, 104–106; and Tilly 1990, 96–126.

27. See Ardat 1975, 196–99; Braun 1975; and Tilly 1990, 183.

28. See Tilly 1975, 73–74; Tilly 1990, 67–95; Finer 1974, 98; and Giddens 1985, 111–16.

29. See Finer 1974, 98; Tilly 1990, 189–90.

tural goods contributed to accelerated growth of demand and production in the economy as a whole.³⁰

As states became stronger, their neighbors had to become stronger—politically, fiscally, militarily, demographically, and territorially. For the states that became great powers, all these dimensions of power went together.³¹ Weaker states either disappeared in the struggles among more substantial powers (for example, Burgundy, Brittany, Scotland, Schleswig-Holstein, Hanover, Venice, the American Confederacy, Sicily, Lombardy, and Bavaria) or secured their independence (for example, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Poland) in a web of alliances and neutrality agreements with great powers unwilling, at least for substantial periods of time, to risk war over their future.

A broader but weaker version of my argument is that states, anywhere in the world, that could not by the end of the nineteenth century credibly contend at the highest strategic level and project power beyond their own geographical regions were much less likely to gain the capability to do so subsequently. A stronger but narrower version of the argument, and that is what I am advancing here, is that this factor—latecomer status—is the most important element explaining the failure of great powers, or a single great power, to emerge in the Middle East. In either case, I attribute this differential likelihood to the potential for existing great powers to interrupt the dynamic interaction of war and state building that had helped bring them into existence as such and to the new, dense, and increasingly constraining network of antibelligerency norms in the international arena.³²

The argument is hardly new that the predicament of weak third world states is a function of their late arrival in an international system already dominated by and reflecting the interests of established large powers. In the economic realm, world systems theory and dependency theory are both based on this sequential logic. But these theories were advanced to explain enduring patterns of economic underdevelopment or underperformance. Strong critiques of this cluster of theories, by emphasizing the record of East Asian and Latin American newly industrializing countries (NICs), highlight the fact that the debate over the causes of “underdevelopment” and the range of opportunities third world states have to improve their lot within the international economy has been severely and instructively restricted. Even those economists and other analysts associated with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), who have trumpeted the potential of “structural adjustment” as an escape route from poverty and underdevelopment, set their sights for these

30. See Giddens 1985, 128–35; and Zolberg 1980, 696.

31. *Ibid.*, 691, 693.

32. China, India, and Brazil are examples of very large countries that may now, or soon, be legitimately considered “great powers” but which did not have this status at the end of the nineteenth century. These countries can be considered exceptions that prove the rule. China was constructed as a unified state as a result of many wars among Chinese states—wars that occurred well before any European or North American great power was in a position to intervene, and the country was simply too vast to be occupied by the imperial powers even during the period of the Open Door. India and Brazil, on the other hand, were sheltered from extraregional interventions by British and Portuguese (and then U.S.) imperialism.

societies no higher than bringing economic performance into line with population growth, employment requirements, and moderately increasing standards of living.³³

Insofar as theorists working along these lines have sought to explain the absence of large-scale state frameworks for economic development, they have simply referred to the consequences of European imperialism and the “artificial” fragmentation enforced by post-colonial boundaries. This approach, however, implies that such fragmentation did not have to be overcome in Europe and thereby ignores the crucial role that war played in producing the kind of states that could build large internal markets, secure necessary trading and investment advantages abroad, and sustain industrial development.³⁴ Neither dependency–world system theorists nor their critics imagine any form of political expansion for states not already established as great powers apart from peaceful regional cooperation or integration. Implicitly, but most categorically, they rule out state strategies of forcible expansion that could, intendedly or not, result in imperial or national economies and international military and political capabilities sufficient to rival those of the established great powers. When such scenarios are described, as they often are by American and European analysts in regard to the possibility of a large Arab or fundamentalist Islamic state, they are presented as wholly illegitimate and dangerous.³⁵

One school of thought that makes a clear connection between the character of third world states and the consequences of historical sequence that gives them that appellation is the cluster of studies produced by Carl Rosberg, Robert Jackson, and Jeffrey Herbst.³⁶ These scholars have developed the view that the survival of so many weak states in the third world is due to the support of an international political order that upholds existing boundaries and existing regimes against *internal* threats and challenges. They have contrasted the actual weakness and political incapacity of these “quasi-states” to the strength and political capacity of the authentically sovereign states that arose in Europe and North America before this century. These “empirical” or “real” states, in Jackson’s terminology, earned their status by exercising effective control, without external assistance, over the territories and peoples within their designated boundaries.

My contention is that these writers have failed to recognize an equally consequential effect of extraregional powers and international norms on third world political development. In the Middle East, perhaps more than in Africa (where the Jackson-Rosberg-Herbst line of analysis has been most thoroughly applied) the effect of great

33. With regard to the Middle East, see, for example, Diwan and Squire 1993, 37.

34. Stein Rokkan argued strongly that “the European sequence simply cannot be repeated in the newest nations. The new nation-builders have to start out from fundamentally different conditions; they face an entirely different world.” He went on to suggest that these new states could learn from his analysis of the “many facets” of European state building but never considered the implications of an environment—present in European history and largely absent in the modern Middle East—tolerant of successful, predatory war. See Rokkan 1973, 94. See also Rokkan 1981.

35. For a rare exception, see Stephen Van Evera’s mention of future wars among Arab states as comparable to the wars of Italian and German unification in the nineteenth century. See Van Evera 1994, 11n.

36. See Jackson and Rosberg 1982; Jackson 1987; Herbst 1989. For application of these ideas to the Arab Middle East, see Hudson 1988, 32–36.

power intervention and enforcement of international norms has been not only to prop up otherwise vulnerable regimes against internal challenges, but to prevent potential regional hegemony from exercising their relative capacities by conquering or otherwise coercively integrating their neighbors.³⁷ To the extent that one accepts the argument that political violence on a grand scale is how all developing great powers have welded large populations and extensive valuable territories within a single administrative domain and a single market, one must expect that international norms and great power policies have been responsible for blocking the emergence of a great power in the Middle East by deterring or preventing state-building wars from being fought to successful conclusions across existing Middle Eastern boundaries.³⁸

The importance of this analysis for explaining political weakness in the third world is evident from the crucial but unnoticed relationship between two observations made by Jackson in the course of his argument. Jackson claims that if left to themselves,

most existing third world states would crumble into far smaller particularisms. These entities might be more coherent domestically than existing quasi-states, and there probably would be fewer civil conflicts. However, they would fragment existing international society into a far greater number of jurisdictions than exist now. *Instead of fifty states, Africa would contain more than ten or twenty times as many . . . an unmanageable number and would expose the continent to far greater risks of external control than it faces at present.*³⁹

Note here how the prospect of a third world fragmented into hundreds of small statelets is considered retrograde, “unmanageable,” and apt to expose the smaller units to even “greater risks of external control” (meaning, presumably, from outside the third world). Yet some pages later, as Jackson is describing European conditions in the seventeenth century under which “real” states developed, he mentions that there were “three hundred-odd independent sovereignties in Germany alone.” Among these hundreds of states and principalities,

proximity and power meant there was always a strong possibility of war: the classical problem of a states-system. Deterrence, alliance, and the balance of power are responses to it. But competition was also a spur to state-building and one of the main reasons for the eventual global hegemony of Europe.⁴⁰

37. In a 1990 article Herbst does identify interstate war as a key element in European state expansion and focuses on the absence of interstate war as a hindrance to state building in Africa. However, he attributes peace in Africa to the vested interests and policies of African elites who do not wish to risk their hold on power by destabilizing the prevailing distribution of territory among states. Instructively, and in sharp contrast to his emphasis elsewhere on international system responsibility for preventing successful *internal* challenges to African governments, Herbst does not mention the international system as a constraint on successful aggrandizing wars in Africa or the third world. See Herbst 1990.

38. For an argument that, however briefly, does join the general point I am making to consideration of Africa, see Ali Mazrui's comments about European “disimperialization” of potentially large African states. See Mazrui 1984, 307. For more typical treatments of the third world as having suffered from “permissive” great power norms with respect to interstate violence and that emphasize the domestic locus of security threats in the third world without reference to the international system's prevention of successful aggrandizing wars, see Ayoob 1991; and David 1991.

39. Jackson 1990, 42 (emphasis added).

40. *Ibid.*, 51.

In other words, a circumstance that Jackson identifies as the beginning of a process leading to real states and great powers in Europe (hundreds of small states) is treated as an insuperable obstacle when located in the third world. Thus Jackson acknowledges that a key element in the production of bigger and stronger European states was a prolonged period of aggrandizing and balancing wars among a large number of small states. However, his focus on the support granted to third world regimes against internal threats leads him to miss the extent to which “external control” also prevents the kind of rough-and-tumble interstate violence through which some of those small states could become the third world equivalents of Muscovy, Piedmont, Prussia, Wessex, or the Ile de France.

I now turn to a brief account of three attempts by Middle Eastern state builders to use aggrandizing wars and subversion to expand their states—accounts that highlight the importance of extraregional interventions and firmly established international norms as obstacles to the successful construction of a new great power. The importance of these cases is not in the failure of Egyptian and Iraqi elites to weld the entire Arab Muslim Middle East into a single state. After all, despite German, Austrian, Spanish, and French attempts to unite all of Europe under one political sovereignty, that never occurred. Rather, the importance of these three cases is that they reveal how, through relatively small exertions of their tremendous power, the existing (European and North American) great powers repeatedly and decisively intervened to prevent successfully fought wars from being used by Middle Eastern state builders as a means of doing what their European and North American predecessors had done. Although a creative anarchy could work in the European and North Atlantic state systems to produce great powers, the Middle Eastern state system—whose leading members were in absolute terms at least as well organized, as populous, and as militarily potent as early modern England or France—was not allowed to operate by the same rules as had the European system.⁴¹

The Frustration of Potential Middle Eastern State Builders: Three Examples⁴²

Muhammad Ali

The most significant effort by a nineteenth century Middle Eastern ruler to transform his territorial base into the military, political, and economic core of a great power was

41. Another way to express this argument is that barriers to entry into the ranks of the great powers were much lower for post-Holy Roman Empire European states than for post-Ottoman Middle Eastern states. Fundamentally, however, it was because an array of great powers already existed in the latter period and not in the former that these barriers to entry were so substantial.

42. I will discuss what I consider the three most instructive examples, representing three of the most ambitious and dramatic attempts to build an Arab great power. Evidence supporting my argument could be drawn from a host of smaller-scale ventures where external intervention or the external enforcement of international norms on behalf of recognized sovereign states or the principle of natural self-determination blocked or blunted state expansion by potential regional or subregional hegemon. These ventures include Syria under Assad regarding Jordan in 1970 and Lebanon since 1975; Israel in Sinai in 1948, 1956, and 1975–1981, in Lebanon in 1982–1984, and in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967–present; Libya regarding Chad; Somalia regarding the Ogaaden; Morocco regarding the Western Sahara; Iraq regarding Kuwait in 1963; and various Iranian initiatives in the 1970s and 1980s. Concerning the peculiar but fundamentally consistent case of Israel, see Lustick 1987, 152–54.

that of Muhammad Ali. Muhammad Ali was governor (wali) of Egypt under the sovereignty of the Ottoman sultan. This somewhat uneasy relationship of powerful vassal to sovereign lord, when the vassal commanded more military and economic wherewithal than the lord, is more than a little reminiscent of the relationship between powerful medieval kings, such as Henry the II of England, and their nominal sovereign, the Holy Roman Emperor. Despite the fact that Henry's military power and political position were more secure and more dependable than those of the emperor, Henry publicly acknowledged the emperor's sovereign authority, even as he proceeded to consolidate his kingdom as the kind of "empire manqué" (the Angevin Empire) that Kiernan (quoted earlier) characterized as the European route to nation-statehood. Consider the greetings to the Emperor Frederick contained in a twelfth century letter to him from Henry II:

To the friend dearest to his heart, Frederick, by the grace of God the most invincible emperor of the Romans, Henry, king of England, duke of Normandy and Aquitaine and count of Anjou, greeting and the harmony of true peace and love. . . .

We lay before you our kingdom and whatever is anywhere subject to our sway, and entrust it to your power, that all things may be administered in accordance with your nod and that in all respects your imperial will be done . . . to you, who excels us in worth, may fall the right to command, while we shall not lack the will to obey.⁴³

Similar language would have been used in official correspondence from Muhammad Ali to the Sublime Porte, even as Ottoman sultans were begging Ali for help putting down revolts in Arabia, Crete, and Greece. Indeed, as Afaf Lutfi Al-Sayyid Marsot has described in vivid detail, the wars fought by Ali and his sons, particularly Ibrahim, while formally at the behest of the sultan, were actually waged as part of a systematic effort to expand their control of eastern Mediterranean trade routes and annex Syria. Territorial aggrandizement through predatory war was the cornerstone of a policy designed to win European recognition as a great power for the state being built by the Albanian dynasty around an Egyptian demographic, military, administrative, and economic core. These wars began in 1812 when the sultan asked his "vassal" in Egypt to send troops to Arabia to crush Wahhabi power there and occupy Mecca and Medina. A second war, initiated by Muhammad Ali, was an invasion of Sudan in 1820, listed by Marsot as the "second of the wars of Egyptian expansion."⁴⁴ The purpose of this expedition was, according to Ali himself, "to provide

43. Folz 1969, 196–97.

44. Marsot 1984, 205. Marsot's treatment is taken here as authoritative. Fred Lawson's recent study (1992) argues that Muhammad Ali's expansionism was designed to alleviate internal strains in the coalition of social groups that governed Egypt rather than a coherent exercise in realpolitik. I am unpersuaded by Lawson's work, though I do not consider his main contentions to contradict the argument advanced here.

large numbers of slaves, to bring the territory under Egyptian dominion, and to search for and discover gold mines and other mineral resources."⁴⁵

With both sides of the Red Sea now under Muhammad Ali's control, Egyptian power was directed elsewhere. Having earlier supported Greek rebels against the sultan, Muhammad Ali now entertained pleas from the Porte to put down the rebellion. Using the sultan's distress to gain his approval for Egypt's annexation of Crete, Ali occupied that island in 1824 and used it as a platform for landing Egyptian forces in Greece in 1825. A string of Egyptian victories against the Greeks prompted the Concert of Europe to take note of "a new Puissance Barbaresque in Europe."⁴⁶ Metternich himself warned the European powers of Ali's quest to join their ranks.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, Muhammad Ali, acutely aware of European military power and fearful of a British invasion of Egypt, yet anxious to be accepted as an equal, wrote to an Austrian diplomat to describe his ambitions in as soothing a manner as possible:

I want nothing but Egypt. My wishes go no further. Egypt is a small country, but so productive that, without this war, it would have been a pearl. Ten years of peace and I will draw from it forty million talaris [riyals]. If they leave me to work, this country will be so transformed that *beside the four great world powers, England, Russia, Austria, and France, Egypt by its money will be the fifth.*⁴⁸

The existing great powers, however, were clearly unwilling to allow Egypt to join their ranks, at least not through successful military campaigns in proximate areas. Accusing Muhammad Ali of fostering piracy in the Adriatic, France, Austria, and Britain combined to attack and sink the Egyptian fleet at Navarino in October 1828. As far as British motives were concerned in this incident, Marsot comments that

an independent African, or rather Mediterranean, authority was exactly what Muhammad Ali wished Egypt to become, and what England wished to deny him. Such a state in control over the trade and commerce of the eastern Mediterranean would pose a threat to British expansionist commercial aims, in terms of trade, and would turn the sea into an Egyptian enclave over half its area.⁴⁹

Ali's Greek expedition was over but not his ambitions for constructing an independent Middle Eastern great power based in Egypt. He immediately set about building a new fleet and preparing another army for the conquest of Syria. In November 1831, an Egyptian army under Ibrahim Pasha, Muhammad Ali's son, invaded Palestine, and captured Acre in May 1832 and Damascus in June. No longer willing to accept Ali's protestations of fealty, Sultan Mahmud declared him an enemy of the empire, but two Ottoman armies sent against the Egyptians were defeated. Fearing Ibrahim would next march on Constantinople itself, the sultan appealed to the European powers for help. When Russia responded by sending warships into the Bosphorus, Britain and France took notice. Pressured by Britain and France, wary of Russia's intrusion,

45. Marsot 1984.

46. *Ibid.*, 208.

47. *Ibid.*, 213.

48. *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

49. *Ibid.*

and short of supplies, Ibrahim concluded an agreement with the sultan that recognized Egyptian rule of Syria (including Palestine).

Syria had always been the centerpiece of Muhammad Ali's ambition to establish Egypt as a great power. Although he did not imagine himself as a leader of the Arabs, his son Ibrahim spoke Arabic, identified himself as an Arab, and used political rhetoric challenging rule by emperors or monarchs "on behalf of the consensus (*ijma*) of the umma" that could easily be interpreted in quasi-nationalist terms.⁵⁰ In any case, in 1838 Muhammad Ali announced his intention of seceding from the empire and incorporating Syria into his hereditary domain. This prompted another Ottoman effort in 1839 to dislodge the Egyptians from Syria, resulting in yet another Ottoman defeat and Egypt's capture of the Ottoman fleet. On the death of Sultan Mahmud, the new sultan, Abdul Mejid, came to terms with Muhammad Ali in an agreement that would have recognized Egypt's permanent acquisition of Syria.

The great powers would not tolerate this arrangement. Muhammad Ali, said Palmerston, must be compelled "to withdraw into his original shell of Egypt."⁵¹ In July 1840 Russia, Prussia, Austria, and England announced an agreement with the Porte "for the pacification of the Levant." The main thrust of this convention was an ultimatum to Muhammad Ali to retract his bid for independence and permanent rule of Syria. When France backed away from supporting Egypt against Britain and the other powers, the stage was set for ending Muhammad Ali's great power ambitions. "Coercion of Mehemet Ali by England if war broke out might appear partial and unjust," wrote Palmerston, "but we are partial; and the great interests of Europe require that we should be so."⁵² British and Austrian ships cut Egypt's sea links to Syria; a contingent of British marines defeated Ibrahim's forces, and both Beirut and Sidon were taken. When a British fleet then appeared in Alexandria itself, Muhammad Ali agreed to the terms of the Treaty of London, including evacuation of Syria, Arabia, and Crete, return of the Turkish fleet, and sharp reduction in the size of his army.

In addition to surrendering territories, military assets, and sovereign claims, Muhammad Ali was also compelled to accept capitulation treaties that proscribed the state monopolies he had established to strengthen Egypt's infant industries. The treaties doomed Egypt to a subordinate role in the world economy. As Marsot explains,

The grand design of an empire and of hegemony over the Mediterranean evaporated. . . . Without embargoes, a captive market, and a large army to use up much of the manufactured goods, Egyptian industrialization slowed down, and most of the war-related industries were dismantled. The Egyptian economic effort from henceforth became geared to turning the country into an export market for agricultural products . . . to export[ing] her raw materials to Europe, where they were to be manufactured and sold back to Egypt as finished products.⁵³

50. *Ibid.*, 226. See also Dodwell 1931, 257–58.

51. Marriott 1917, 240.

52. Marsot 1984, 240.

53. *Ibid.*, 246–47. See also Ralston 1990, 90, 95.

“The Egyptian question,” as Marriot put it, from his European perspective, “was now settled.”⁵⁴

Gamal Abdel Nasser

“Settled” as it may have been in the early nineteenth century, the Egyptian question reappeared in the 1950s and 1960s. This time another ambitious military leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, sought to establish a great Arab state, with Egypt as its military, cultural, and political core. He wrote that a world historic role existed for Egypt—a role as leader of the Muslim, Arab, and African worlds. The African side of Nasser’s policy, however, was virtually nonexistent, and after his brutal crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood at home, his project took on a distinctly Pan-Arab cast. Evocations of a great, united Arab state, from the Atlantic to the Gulf, were a constant refrain in the popular *Sawt el-Arab (Voice of the Arabs)* transmissions from Cairo’s powerful new radio station. Nasser’s quest for Egyptian hegemony in the Arab world was aided by thousands of Egyptian teachers, journalists, and other professionals working throughout the Arab Middle East. Egyptian vernacular, Nasserist thinking, Nasser’s cadences, his visage, his alliance with the Soviet Union, his proud and successful defiance of the Israeli-French-British invasion of 1956, and his support of the revolt against France in Algeria established Egypt in the late 1950s and early 1960s as a potent candidate for leadership of the Arab world and as a possible vehicle for its consolidation into a new great power.

As Muhammad Ali had always been wary of British intervention to block his state-building and state-expanding ambitions, so was Nasser anxious to remain in the good graces of the United States—the new leader of the great power club. When Nasser’s Free Officers overthrew the Farouk monarchy in 1952, the United States was not surprised. Friendly contacts had been established in the months before the revolution between Nasser and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). In 1954 the CIA channel to Nasser was used to deliver funds and explore a possible U.S.–Egyptian alliance.⁵⁵

But as Palmerston and Metternich could not abide a powerful and independent Egypt, neither could Dulles, Eden, Mollet, or, for that matter, Khrushchev abide the idea of a truly independent, powerful, and united Arab state. In both periods the overweening superiority of the great powers against any nascent Middle Eastern power allowed policies toward the Middle East to be guided by mundane, often casual, and usually marginal jealousies, inclinations, and preferences. The British-sponsored “League of Arab States” and the American-sponsored Baghdad Pact were two schemes for the political organization of Middle Eastern states that reflected both the great powers’ enormous margin of superiority and the way in which great power policies of major importance for Middle Eastern states could be fashioned rather cavalierly by great power diplomats and intelligence officers.

54. Marriot 1917, 244.

55. Eveland 1980, 96–105.

In the immediate postwar period Great Britain had helped found the League of Arab States as an institution that could at once preserve existing boundaries within the Arab world and enlist the separate governments in cooperative ventures under British auspices. Such limited notions of Arab unity were already suspect in the eyes of the young military leaders and Nasserist and Baathist activists who were taking political power or gaining influence in Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq. Western support for Israel and schemes such as the Middle East Defense Organization and the Baghdad Pact reinforced suspicions that the great powers of the West were interested only in organizing a divided Arab world against the Soviet Union.⁵⁶ The American–Egyptian relationship soon soured as well. The United States first promised, then withdrew offers of arms and aid for construction of the Aswan Dam after Nasser demonstrated too much independence in his foreign policy.

With Arab–Israeli tensions heating up in 1955, Nasser turned to the Soviet Union for arms and moved to nationalize the Suez Canal. Egyptian propaganda against the Baghdad Pact intensified, and waves of Arab nationalist agitation swept through the Arab East. Pro-Nasser, anti-Western riots erupted in Jordan in January 1956, prompting young King Hussein to order his British military and political advisers out of the country. When antimonarchist Nasserists won elections in Jordan in October 1956, the new prime minister immediately placed Jordan’s military under an Egyptian general. Mass support for Nasser’s leadership of a united Arab world rose to unprecedented levels after the failure of the British–French–Israeli attack on Egypt in November 1956. Faced with a torrent of popular outrage, Jordan canceled its treaty with Britain and terminated the British subsidy. But when Jordan announced its rejection of proposals for the emergent Egyptian–Syrian union, pro-Nasser army officers, backed by Arab nationalist Palestinians, plotted to overthrow the monarchy. In Syria a Baathist (radical Pan-Arab) regime was faced with communist subversion from within and American-supported military threats from Turkey, Iraq, and Jordan. In February 1958 it dissolved itself and merged Syria into the Egyptian-dominated United Arab Republic (UAR). Nasser immediately invited all other Arab countries to become part of the single great Arab state he was constructing.

Nasser well appreciated that he could not achieve the Pan-Arab unity he promised by political appeals and inspiring rhetoric alone. Nasser had already provided political and diplomatic support to the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) in its violent struggle to end French rule of Algeria. In Lebanon in 1958 a full-scale Arab nationalist revolt, animated by fervent support for Nasser among Lebanon’s Muslim population and drawing military support from Syria (now part of the UAR), seriously threatened the Maronite-dominated government. Meanwhile in Iraq, Nasser’s propaganda and Egyptians in that country were agitating for the overthrow of the monarchy. In July 1958 a Nasserite coup, led by General Abd al-Karim Kassem, did overthrow the

56. In a 1952 lecture at the Arab University in Beirut, George Habbash argued “that during the First and Second World Wars the Arabs had adopted a policy of cooperation with the Allies. He asked what this policy brought other than occupation, partition, and disaster upon disaster. Besides, the pacts were clearly designed to perpetuate the condition of semi-sovereignty and to inhibit the Arabs from changing their internal status quo.” See Conrad 1989, 231.

explicitly pro-Western Hashemite regime. When the new Iraqi ruler had a falling out with his erstwhile hero, mass demonstrations occurred in Cairo and Damascus in support of a March 1959 revolt against the Kassem regime. The following year Jordan accused Egypt of responsibility for the assassination of the Jordanian prime minister. In the early 1960s, with Syria's abrupt secession from the UAR, Nasser's focus turned toward Yemen, where Arab nationalist army officers had ousted the Imamate and invited Egypt to send support. By 1965 seventy thousand Egyptian troops were in Yemen helping the regime against royalist tribesmen supported by Saudi Arabia.

The Western great powers responded to what appeared to be developing into a Pan-Arab nationalist juggernaut. Beginning in 1956 the United States and Britain sponsored several clandestine operations designed to overturn the Syrian and Egyptian governments through coups or assassinations (similar to the operation that had deposed Mossadegh and reinstalled the shah of Iran in 1953).⁵⁷ Early in 1957 Washington promulgated the Eisenhower Doctrine under which American military and economic resources could be committed to the Middle East to aid any government threatened by forces determined to be associated with "international communism." Bolstered by clandestine financing from the United States and the dispatch of the Sixth Fleet to the Eastern Mediterranean, King Hussein, in April 1957, used Bedouin troops against his opponents, dissolved Parliament, and imposed martial law. Following the arrival of a contingent of Egyptian troops in Aleppo later that year, King Hussein complained of another Nasserist plot against him. The United States responded with an airlift of tanks and artillery.⁵⁸ In July 1958, fourteen thousand American soldiers landed in Lebanon to protect the government there against a Nasserist rebellion that at one point controlled 75 percent of the country. At the same time, with logistical support and air cover provided by the United States, two thousand British paratroopers landed in Jordan to forestall a Nasserist coup there. In language remarkably similar to that used by the European powers in support of the Ottoman Empire against Muhammad Ali 120 years earlier, Britain and the United States both warned of "the grave consequences of any conflict between their forces and those under the control of Egypt and Syria."⁵⁹

Despite their explicit focus on what they perceived as the threat of Soviet expansionism, the United States, Britain, and France each pursued policies that treated any independent Arab unity scheme going beyond the kind of cooperation among exist-

57. See Eveland 1980; and Copeland 1969. For a more recent treatment of extensive American and British covert operations in this period, see Rathmell 1995.

58. Eveland 1980, 262.

59. *The Middle East and North Africa 1969–70*, 1969, 794. Although the Soviet Union had supplied arms to Nasser before the 1956 war and had helped halt the Suez operation, Khrushchev subsequently turned against Nasser when Egyptian rule of Syria resulted in persecution of Syrian communists. To the extent that Israel's very existence, depriving Egypt of access by land to either Jordan or Syria, interfered with Nasser's ability to project his power and consolidate Egyptian domination of those countries—to prevent, at least, Syria's secession—the argument made by many, that Israel (and Zionism) have acted as a tool of Western imperialism to keep the Arab world divided and weak, takes on a clear, perhaps decisive aspect. For variations of this argument, see Shlaim 1988, 232–55; Nonneman 1993, 38–39; Safran 1969, 83–87; and Gause 1992, 441–69.

ing states (as exemplified by the Arab League) as contrary to Western interests. These policies were reflected in the British and French measures already mentioned as well as French hostility toward Nasser for his inspiration and support of rebels in North Africa. The United States was concerned, not so much about any one country, such as Lebanon, Jordan, or Yemen, but about the prospect of a large united Arab state under vigorous “revolutionary” leadership. From the American perspective, in Miles Copeland’s words, “Yemen was only a foothold”; Nasser’s real interest was in “the whole Arabian Peninsula.”⁶⁰ Dulles warned that a passive U.S. response to Egyptian–Syrian unity would result in an expanding power that “would shortly take in Jordan and the Lebanon and ultimately Saudi Arabia and Iraq leaving us with a single Arab State ostensibly under Nasser but ultimately under Soviet control.”⁶¹ In fact, U.S. opposition to an Arab great power extended beyond concerns some did have of Soviet influence over such a state. As Dulles told the National Security Council (NSC) in early 1958: “If the policy on the supply of oil from the Arab states to Western Europe were made uniform as a result of the unification of the Arab states, [censored] the threat to the vital oil supply of Western Europe from the Near East would become critical.”⁶²

In the 1960s the United States responded to Nasser’s extension of Egyptian power into Yemen with clumsy attempts to manipulate food aid and more effective military efforts, including stationing U.S. Air Force units in Saudi Arabia. Overall, U.S. policy toward Egypt in the years prior to the Six-Day War was designed to convince Nasser and his lieutenants to call off “the Big Show.”⁶³ Egypt was to be instructed that it could benefit economically and politically from relations with the United States but only by abandoning efforts to bring about Arab unity in the only way (as everyone acknowledged) it could be achieved, through aggressive campaigns of propaganda, subversion, and military pressure. As had been Muhammad Ali, Nasser was to be kept within “his original shell of Egypt.”

Saddam Husayn

From the perspective of political geographers such as Norman J. G. Pounds and Sue Simons Ball or historians of European state formation such as V. G. Kiernan, two areas in the Arab world can be seen to closely meet the economic, demographic, geographic, administrative, and cultural requirements of “conquering cores” or “conquest centers” around which great national states could successfully be constructed. One area is Lower Egypt, surrounding the Nile Delta and the Nile River Valley. The other is Mesopotamia (now Iraq) centered around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

60. Copeland 1969, 266. See also John Waterbury’s comment that “Both Saudi Arabia and the United States came to believe that the Egyptian presence in the southwest corner of the Arabian peninsula was but the prelude to a subversive effort on the part of Egypt to topple the Saudi regime and somehow ‘grab’ the peninsula’s oil. For their part, radical Arab regimes saw the United States (and, by extension, Israel) as the principal impediment to a rational utilization of Arab resources.” See Waterbury 1978, 79.

61. From a memo summarizing a February 1958 NSC meeting; cited by Mufti 1996, 100.

62. From a memo summarizing a January 1958 NSC meeting; cited by Mufti 1996, 102.

63. Copeland 1969, 256–57, 267–73.

Syria as well has often emerged as an important force in its own right but more commonly as a focus of competition between these Nilotic and Mesopotamian states.⁶⁴

Under the Ottomans both Iraq and Syria receded into backwater provinces of a non-Arab, Muslim empire. During the colonial and immediate postcolonial period, neither Hashemite Iraq nor Baathist Syria managed to establish itself as a powerful player. Egypt, on the other hand, in the early nineteenth century and in the mid-twentieth, emerged as a real contender for leadership of the Arab Middle East. After Nasser's passing, however, Anwar Sadat moved Egypt away from Pan-Arabism toward an Egypt-first foreign policy based on alliance with the United States and peace with Israel. When Sadat signed the Camp David Accords in 1978 without securing the support of any other significant Arab country, he opened the door to Iraq and its young and ambitious leader, Saddam Husayn, to advance that country's claim to the role of an Arab Prussia or Piedmont to Saddam's Bismarck or Cavour.

Before its overthrow in July 1958, the British-installed Hashemite monarchy in Iraq had failed in various efforts to consolidate the country as the core, along with the other British-installed Hashemite monarchy in Jordan, of a large united Arab state. Furthermore, neither the British nor the Americans—through the Baghdad Pact and the short-lived Iraqi–Jordanian “Arab Union”—had succeeded in using Iraq as a dependable anchor for their anti-Nasserist and anticommunist policies. By the late 1970s, however, Iraq began to come into its own.⁶⁵ Following the jump in oil prices in 1973, Iraq's enormous oil reserves gave the state a solid revenue base. Saddam's system of government, though brutally authoritarian at the top, was also based on offers of cultural autonomy to the Kurds and an extensive welfare state. Centrally sponsored development policies were effective enough to raise living standards throughout the country—especially in the rural areas and among the Shia Arab plurality in the south. Partly for this reason, Iraq seemed less vulnerable to the kind of sectarian strife that afflicted Lebanon and threatened Syria and Jordan.

Saddam's cultural policies celebrated his revival of the country's world historic importance under the Sumerians, Assyrians, and Babylonians in ancient times and the Abbassids during Islam's golden age. Saddam fostered images of a renascent Iraq ready to exploit its political stability, economic resources, substantial population, and close ties with the Soviet bloc for the benefit of the Arab world as a whole.⁶⁶ Oil, Iraqi officials argued, was more valuable for the Iraqi and Arab nation if as much as possible could be left in the ground for future use in petrochemical industries. Meanwhile petrodollars, it was promised, would not be invested outside the Arab area. Thanks in part to a slight but meaningful moderation in its position toward Israel, Saddam's government managed to position itself in the center of non-Egyptian Arab attitudes toward Israel and establish Iraq, at the time of the Iranian Revolution, as the

64. Concerning the usually unnoticed success of a Moroccan state builder in the early sixteenth century, see Cornell 1990.

65. Concerning Iraq's ascendancy in the late 1970s, see Wright 1979–80; Taylor 1982, 73–88; Salamé 1988b, 323–24; and Dawisha 1988, 272–74.

66. Regarding Saddam's cultural policies, see Davis and Gavrielides 1991, 116–48; Freitag 1994, 31; and Baram 1983, 1984.

political core of the Arab world. In November 1978 an Arab summit convened in Baghdad united virtually the entire Arab world, including Saudi Arabia, against the Camp David Accords and against Sadat. Egypt was isolated and expelled from the Arab League. Gulf subsidies to Cairo were ended. In 1979 Saddam met with Asad of Syria. The two once and future enemies agreed to an elaborate (albeit unimplemented) federation scheme between their two nominally Baathist regimes. Closer ties between Iraq and Jordan and Saudi Arabia soon followed.

Since the disappearance of the Hashemite Monarchy in 1958, the United States had come to depend largely on the Pahlavi regime in Iran as an anchor for its political and military position in the Gulf. With the shah's overthrow in 1979 the United States turned to Saudi Arabia; but as vital as that country's oil deposits were, and as helpful as the Saudi family could be in funding U.S. military, political, and intelligence activities, Saudi Arabia was too small demographically and too weak militarily to replace Iran. Egypt was a possibility, but its isolation after Camp David made it almost as difficult to use as a political or strategic asset as Israel. This is the context of a hesitant but real American tilt toward Iraq at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. The new policy was reflected in substantial American and Western aid to Iraq during the long, Iraq-initiated, war against Iran.⁶⁷ This war, far bloodier and far more disruptive than Iraq's subsequent invasion of Kuwait, was not considered by the West as a threat to civilization or to Western interests. Indeed, it was regularly observed by Western diplomats and pundits that the longer the war went on, without a decisive winner, the better—hence aid to Iraq was enough to prevent defeat, but not enough to produce a decisive victory.

When the Iran–Iraq war ended in 1988 Iraq was economically exhausted—having paid all its petrodollars for Western and Soviet arms—but militarily potent and politically cohesive. The states whose interests were most directly protected by Iraq's military machine—Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf oil monarchies—now appeared to Baghdad as tempting targets and even as its rightful inheritance. Ultimatums issued against Kuwait in early 1990, the invasion of August 1990, and the subsequent barrage of propaganda challenging the legitimacy of all these states as obstacles to the welfare and destiny of the Arab nation were a full-fledged bid for Iraqi hegemony in the Arab world. As had Nasser, now Saddam Husayn was raising the Arab banner against the legacy of European imperialism and the objectives of Western neocolonialism—an Arab nation “divided in order to be mutilated, fragmented, and weakened.”⁶⁸ Although the governments of the region (aside from Yemen and Jordan) joined the anti-Saddam coalition to protect their own interests, popular opinion—from Beirut to Nablus, Amman, Sana, and Algiers—if unimpressed with Saddam as a leader, was inspired by the political ambition of his move and the cogency of his message.

67. See Hiro 1991, 119–21; and Miller and Mylroie 1990, 143–48.

68. Speech to the Fourth Conference of the Arab Popular Forces, Baghdad, 1 June 1995, Baghdad Iraq Television, transcribed by the Foreign Broadcast and Information Service, *Daily Report: Near East and South Asia*. 6 June 1995. 1.

An enormous amount has been written about Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait in 1990 and the massive American and allied intervention in 1990 and 1991—Desert Shield and Desert Storm—that expelled Iraqi forces from Kuwait, destroyed a substantial proportion of Iraq's infrastructure and industrial capacity, imposed crippling economic sanctions on the Baghdad regime, and severely limited its sovereign control over a substantial portion of northern (Kurdish) Iraq. The overwhelming majority of this material casts Saddam as an international outlaw and a brutal dictator whose ruthless use of military force against his neighbors was an outrage against international law and an intolerable threat to international security. Arguments advanced by the Baghdad government or by its many supporters in the Arab world during the heady (for Pan-Arab nationalists) days of late 1990—about the paralyzing artificiality of boundaries imposed by European imperialists, about the plutocratic regimes whose control of Arabian peninsula oil wealth was an insuperable obstacle to the balanced development of the Arab world as a whole, about double standards used by the United Nations when dealing with belligerent occupation of territory by Israel as opposed to Iraq—are ignored in this literature or dismissed as clever propaganda devices that deflect attention from the real facts of the matter.

As an example of plausible and historically valid Iraqi analysis, heard in the West as florid rhetoric and empty propaganda, consider the resolutions of the Arab Popular Forces Conference in Amman on 17 September 1990. These resolutions characterized “the U.S. colonial invasion of a part of our homeland” as “a link in the chain of the historical conflict between our Arab nation and the colonial West” and compared it directly to the West's “defeat of the Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha experience which sought to bring about unity and progress.” The larger motives for the intervention are identified directly with a refusal to allow the kind of political and economic unity achieved by Japan and the West to be achieved by Arabs. The resolutions included the following description of the motives that lay behind Operation Desert Shield:

This invasion was prompted by efforts to seize control of Arab oil and preclude its use as a weapon in the hands of the Arab nation to secure its development and modernization, to defend its sovereignty and sanctities, and to realize the slogan “Arab oil is for Arabs, for the whole Arab nation.” Likewise, this invasion was also prompted by a desire to control the future of mankind, particularly considering that we are on the threshold of the 21st century, that Germany is going to be reunited, that Japan is achieving an unprecedented renaissance, and that Europe will become a united entity. Moreover, this invasion was driven by an attempt to thwart the Arab cultural and unionist plan initiated by Iraq strongly and capably after the end of the Gulf War.⁶⁹

In Western discussions of the Gulf War and its aftermath a very different master narrative determined what claims were “the facts of the matter” and what claims

69. *Al-Ra'ay*, Amman, 18 September 1990. Translated by the Foreign Broadcast and Information Service, *Daily Report: Near East and South Asia*, 18 September 1990, 16. For a brief, clear, and convenient version of the invasion as a liberation of Kuwait and of Saddam as a possible savior of the Arab nation from the imposed fragmentation of colonial borders, see Kuttub 1990.

were “distracting propaganda.” A central element in this discursive framework was the territorial integrity of existing states, at least those who were members of the United Nations. Within the Western master narrative, this was a sacrosanct principle, a well-institutionalized norm, that had been violated in an obvious, outrageous, and intolerable manner.⁷⁰ Not since Hitler, it was repeatedly said, had such a blatant threat to civilized norms and to the rights of small nations presented itself. In this case, loyalty to these doctrines was strong enough, American leadership deft enough, and available military capabilities overwhelming enough that the theory of collective security on which the United Nations is putatively based was successfully put into practice.

Without condoning Saddam Husayn’s adventure, the argument in this article provides a different context for understanding Iraq’s seizure of Kuwait and the Allied response. Not surprisingly, the alternative narrative presented here does partially overlap with Baghdad’s propaganda claims. More importantly, it focuses attention on the “normality” (from a late medieval and early modern European perspective) of Iraq’s behavior as an administrative, military, and economic “conquest center” exploiting its particular advantages to achieve a wider hegemonic role in the construction of a great national state. Nor does Saddam’s well-documented brutality, including the horrors of his torture chambers and the genocidal campaigns he has carried out against the Kurds and others, set him apart, in any qualitative sense, from the “heroes” of those European and North American struggles that we now celebrate as the “state-building” work that created great countries. I am thinking here of Sherman’s march through Georgia and the extermination of Native Americans, the Albigensian Crusade and the slaughter of the Catharis that helped Catholic France add Provence to its territory, the aggrandizing wars of Edward I (in Scotland and Wales); or Elizabeth I or Cromwell in Ireland.⁷¹

The context presented here for interpreting the Gulf War also casts the Allied response in a radically different light from that in which these events are bathed by the official version, which portrays Desert Shield and Desert Storm as a farsighted, heroic, and creative effort to secure a post-Cold War world safe from barbaric dictators. Through the lens of late medieval and early modern Europe and America, the great powers’ aggressive self-interestedness comes into focus. Their enforcement of norms of peace and security among sovereign states, norms whose direct effect was to deny Arabs entry into the great power club by the only route ever taken into that club, is visible as a “vital interest” in preserving petrodollar monarchies and sheikdoms in the Gulf whose very survival requires the most favorable and intimate of relationships with the Western powers. On this view, just as the acquisition of wealthy but militarily weak principalities, such as Burgundy, Venice, or Alsace, by major

70. Concerning the role of master narratives in the framing of news items and episodes to produce apolitically convenient accounts, including decision rules for the separation of “facts” from “irrelevancies,” see Herman and Chomsky 1988.

71. For a contemporary portrait of Henry VIII describing his “state-building” policies in terms no less horrific than those used to describe Saddam’s treatment of his political opponents in Kuwait and elsewhere, see Fitzpatrick 1922, 299.

powers in Europe was to be expected as a desiderata of the dozens of wars the small states of that continent fought with one another on the way to becoming larger states, so should one expect that Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia would rather quickly succumb to the predatory ambitions of demographically and militarily powerful Arab or Muslim neighbors who could put the economic resources of these statelets to more efficient political and military use. From this perspective, it is the survival of these countries, in the same neighborhood as Iraq (and Iran), that is the anomaly, not the Iraqi walkover into Kuwait.

Conclusion

In historical perspective it is not Saddam's ferociousness, his use of a war-strengthened state to seize valuable territories, or his willingness to use force to challenge or destroy the independence of neighboring states that is so distinctive. It is his failure. The most important factor explaining Saddam's failure is the same thing that explains the failure of Muhammad Ali and Gamal Abdel Nasser—they failed not because of the political, national, economic, geopolitical, or cultural inadequacy of Arabs or Arab lands (a view often put forward by orientalists wondering why the Arabs have not regained the world stature they achieved in the eighth and ninth centuries or economic functionalists wondering why no Arab common market has succeeded), but because of a fundamental fact of sequence. When the ferocious men and women who built Britain, the United States, Germany, Italy, France, and Russia used advantages over their neighbors for territorial aggrandizement and the construction of great national states, there was no external club of preexisting great powers able to penetrate their continents and enforce a paralyzingly fragmented status quo on behalf of "civilized" norms of interstate behavior. When the Ottoman Empire crumbled, however, and autonomous or semiautonomous Arab power centers began to emerge in the Middle East, an external club of preexisting great powers *was* fully prepared to do exactly that, conveniently seeing their interest in a divided Middle East as corresponding to a more fundamental necessity for the "rule of law."

Political "backwardness" in the Middle East, reflected in the absence of an Arab great power for which all other ingredients have been present, is thus explained, but only from a much longer historical perspective than prevailing interpretations of contemporary Middle East politics permit.⁷² Such an explanation turns on a recategorization of the object of explanation—a reframing of the problem of the stability of post-Ottoman boundaries in the Arab Middle East that understands consolidation of

72. Many are the analysts who have compared Muhammad Ali, Nasser, or Saddam Husayn to Bismarck and Egypt or Iraq to Prussia. Their comparisons almost always focus on properties of the Middle Eastern leaders and countries that, in some crucial way, do not measure up to the skills of the great German state builder or the resources at his disposal. See, for example, Kimche 1970, 233; and Kerr 1971, 154–55. Analyses that emphasize outside interference and pressures from the international system as responsible for the failure of Arab unity attempts do not put these attempts in the same category as European and North American state building. Nor do they discuss the decisiveness of lateness in these attempts to join the great power club. See Gause 1992.

state power in Europe and North America and expansion in the size of states in those regions to have been, in large measure (though certainly not only), a consequence of wartime exertions and victories. To be sure, it is not uncommon for Western observers, especially polemically inclined observers, to make direct comparisons between aspiring Middle Eastern hegemonies and European precedents. But these comparisons use Hitler and Mussolini, not Bismarck and Cavour, as referents; thus, Nasser was a “tin-horn Hitler,” a “Mussolini by the Nile.” Similar things were said of Saddam by President George Bush.⁷³

In general, Western observers make three kinds of category mistakes when contemplating prospects for Middle Eastern political and economic performance or Arab or Islamic integration. First, few consider failure of a Middle Eastern great power to crystallize as a puzzle to be explained. Instead of Italy, Germany, France, Britain, the United States, and Russia, the reference group used by most World Bank, Agency for International Development, and IMF “development” experts to measure Middle Eastern state performance is composed of South Korea, Taiwan, Chile, Singapore, and other NICs. From this perspective, Arab and Islamic states have failed because they have adopted economically sloppy and politically undisciplined responses to the international market. This line of analysis clearly identifies the international system as a key constraint on ambitious governments in the Middle East, but why individual Middle Eastern states did not respond to those constraints as the Asian Tigers did, by adopting and successfully implementing export-led, state-dominated, labor-controlling strategies, though interesting in its own right, is a fundamentally different question from why no great power emerged in the Middle East. The more instructive question is why have these analysts found the Asian Tigers and not the large European and North American states to be the appropriate measure of success? Why do they insist on Egypt, Iraq, and Algeria as the appropriate scale for comparison and evaluation, measuring them against Chile, Taiwan, and South Korea? Why do they treat as unworthy of consideration the economic and political potential of a consolidated Arab or Muslim Middle Eastern power, a state that would be measured against the European, North American, and Asian great powers?

73. Gilbert Burck’s influential article about Nasser’s hegemonic ambitions in the Middle East is an excellent example of this genre. Describing Nasser’s “divine frenzy to make Egypt great again,” Burck demonstrates how naturally he and his audience are accustomed to categorizing ambitious Arab leaders with the demons of European history rather than with its state-founding heroes. He does this by distinguishing Nasser and his partners from Hitler and his cronies, but only in the most marginal and temporary of ways or in ways that cast Nasser as actually more potent or threatening than Hitler:

Unlike Hitler, who was able to conquer the emotions of only his own countrymen, Nasser has conquered the emotions of a great area outside his own country. He has done it by exploiting Arab neuroses and frustrations. . . . Even as Göring used to cow Germany’s neighbors with displays of the Luftwaffe, Nasser amazes and heartens his Arab brothers by showing off the economic progress Egypt has made. . . .

Civil liberties are in the hands of the secret police, run by Zakaria Mohieddin, Minister of the Interior. Although Mohieddin is as yet no Himmler, he is doing very well at wire tapping, at encouraging Jews to leave the country, and at keeping minute dossiers on suspected enemies of the state.

See Burck 1958, 109–11.

From the standpoint of this article, the explanation for the limited focus of these analysts lies in the categorical effectiveness of constraints within the contemporary international system that prevent the use of war as one key ingredient in the recipe for attaining great power status used by all of those states that have enjoyed it. In other words, establishing South Korea or Chile as models of success, rather than Britain or Germany, reflects just how impossible it has seemed to contemporary analysts that, absent the possibility and threat of successful aggrandizing wars, geographical and cultural regions (such as the Middle East) now divided by political boundaries could be constructed into great powers.

A second category error is made by most of those who ask whether the Arab and/or Islamic Middle East could move toward the kind of economic regionalism currently underway in Europe, East Asia, and the Americas. These observers search for Middle Eastern Monnets and the interdependencies, spillovers, and patterns of transaction flows that their theories of "regional integration" among sovereign states tell them will be critical. This approach ignores the distinction made by Deutsch in his analysis of the history of political integration in the North Atlantic region. The large states whose destinies were being joined in a pluralist North Atlantic economic and security community were structures that had achieved strength, self-confidence, and effectiveness through long historical processes of "amalgamation"—processes determined especially by the actions and effect of "strong core areas." Thus, noted Deutsch, had England, Germany, France, Italy, and the United States emerged over centuries from congeries of smaller, often hostile groups of statelets. Those who measure integration efforts among twentieth century Middle Eastern countries according to standards Deutsch associated with integration among large "amalgamated" states should expect to be disappointed.⁷⁴

A third category error is made by those who ask whether the Arab and/or Islamic Middle East will ever be able to fulfill the dreams of union and great power status that fired the imaginations of Jamal e-din el-Afghani, Michel Aflaq, Gamal Abdel Nasser, or Saddam Husayn, *without* subversion, coercion, and war or the threat of war. These observers search for Middle Eastern leaders who can accomplish such spectacular political feats, ignoring the fact that such leaders never existed in Europe or the Americas and that no theory of political amalgamation exists that could justify such an expectation.

Since Nasser's demise, prospects have dimmed for Pan-Arab nationalism to realize the political potential associated in the modern world with the kind of large, territorially concentrated, linguistically unified, historically established, economically blessed, and culturally endowed imagined community represented by the Arabs. Although Saddam's adventure in Kuwait did show that Arab nationalist embers still glow, at least at the mass level and among many disaffected Arab intellectuals, Islamist formulas for legitimizing a united political order in the Middle East are now

74. Deutsch et al. 1957. For a systematic treatment of the process of growth in the power of European states in terms of the relationship between increasing size and an increasing disposition toward and participation in war, see Choucri and North 1974.

substantially more promising as the basis for a large-scale reorganization of political space in that area. Although I have not attended specifically to this alternative, the argument I have made—identifying historical sequence and externally enforced international political culture as crucial in preventing state-building wars and maintaining the concomitant political fragmentation of the region—would be as applicable to efforts by ambitious Islamist leaders as it has been for explaining secular failures.

My argument is *not* that in the world such as it is the routes to great power status that were open to the progenitors of France, Britain, Germany, Russia, Italy, and the United States must now be made available to Middle Eastern versions of Henry VIII, Bismarck, Lincoln, or Cavour. The technologies of war have changed, and the world is a different place. It makes little sense to insist that powerful countries with vital interests avoid pursuing those interests out of a Rawlsian attachment to the law of the jungle that, among other things, produced them as great powers. Nonetheless, awareness of the crucial role of war and coercion in the production of great states, and appreciating the implications of this fact for latecoming national state builders who seek to utilize those instruments, can go far toward reducing the self-righteousness of public discourse with respect to contemporary wars in the Middle East and in other regions where the contradictions between internationally recognized legal arrangements and actual matrices of belief, interest, and power are sharpest. It can also help prepare us for a post-Cold War world in which states capable of projecting power globally have such little interest in doing so that aspiring hegemonies in some regions find themselves almost as free as their European predecessors were to use force to build and expand their states.⁷⁵

Additionally, the argument presented here can help qualify or correct a host of casual misattributions that flow from the category errors I have identified. These are claims that find, in the failure of efforts to move toward Arab unity, something instructive about Arab national character, the pedigree of Arab nationalism, the unnaturalness of a large Arab state, the absence of visionary leadership, the decisiveness of economic jealousies in preventing Arab unity or the eventual decisiveness of economic functionality in achieving it, and the need for stability if aid flows from rich Arab states to poor ones are to increase.⁷⁶ Other authors, attributing the political organization of the contemporary Middle East to the inexorable logic of capitalism in a world economy and/or to differences in the dialectic of particular imperialist legacies in different countries, end up crediting these factors with considerably more than they can explain. In particular they fail to note the role of war in the construction of

75. Compare Bernard Lewis' representative comment in 1989 that the boundaries of Middle Eastern states, however fluid they may have been earlier in this century, are now permanent, with Barry Buzan's suggestion that not only specific third world boundaries, but the very norm of post-colonial boundary integrity, "particularly in Africa and the Middle East," is likely to come under increasing pressure. See Lewis 1989; and Buzan 1991, 440–41.

76. For examples of such misattributions, see Ajami 1992; Kramer 1993; Haim 1964; Kanovsky 1968, 350–76; Sirageldin 1988; and Rubinstein 1991, 62. Nonneman provides a list of thirteen factors explaining the failure of Arab unity schemes, without even mentioning the unavailability of war as a technique for political amalgamation or the active extraregional enforcement of norms against predatory war. See Nonneman 1993, 37–40; and Miller 1993.

large national states in Europe and the political and military relevance of sequence and external enforcement of norms against successfully prosecuted state-building wars in the Middle East.⁷⁷

Of course, many analysts of the Arab world do recognize that the existence of a large territorially concentrated ethnic or national solidarity is itself not enough to produce a corresponding state. Some also emphasize the role of “political will” in the construction of large national states. They nonetheless have seemed reluctant to take cognizance of the crucial role coercion must be expected to play as part of this “political will” and the decisiveness of barriers to its use erected by the contemporary international system.⁷⁸ Ghassan Salamé, for example, offers an explanation of the failure of Arab nationalism by describing Arabs as torn between separate states seeking to maintain their individual integrity and an Arab national project seeking to dissolve those separate identities into a united whole. Citing Italy in the nineteenth century, he asks how that state could ever have come into being if it had been divided in similar fashion between

some Italians . . . struggling for the re-unification of Italy as a single state [and] others . . . looking for integration within a European framework. The two projects would have hampered each other and an impasse would have been the likely outcome. This dilemma is still real in the Arab world.⁷⁹

Salamé neglects to mention two crucial elements that are the basis of my argument here—Piedmont’s forcible unification of the separate entities that previously comprised Italy, Sicily, and Sardinia and the *absence*, in nineteenth-century Europe, of an externally enforced set of norms against successful state-building wars. The impasse in Italy, in other words, was overcome, neither by national sentiment nor economic rationality, but by war as an instrument of political will applied within a permissive international environment. The impasse in the Middle East, of which Salamé speaks, is unlikely to be overcome in any other way—neither by Arabs nor by Muslims.

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77. See Anderson 1986, 17–24; and Owen 1981.

78. See Luciani and Salamé 1988, 3; and Khalidi 1988, 62–63.

79. Salamé 1988a, 279.

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