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1
The Middle East and Conceptions of 'International Society'

Fred Halliday

Introduction: IR theory and regional analysis

Of all the areas of the third world, the Middle East is the one that has the longest history of interaction, military, political and economic, with the 'West' and, in particular, with the European state system, this latter understood as the set of institutions and norms that have together shaped modern, that is post-1500, and in particular post-1945, international relations. China, remote and unsubjugated, and the Americas, subjugated but unassimilated, have for sure provided alternative points of reference, not least with regard to arguments as to the universality of human character and customs, but for all their importance, real and symbolic, they have been markedly less important than the Ottomans, the Arab world, 'Islam' and Persia. At the same time, engagement with this region, and the conceptual, normative and policy debates this has occasioned, has done more than any other to stimulate and challenge European and more generally 'Western' thinking on international relations. In recent years this engagement has taken particularly acute and vivid form, in debates on the 'Clash of Civilisations', the incidence of terrorism, the failures of democratisation, and broader discussions of cultural and normative difference between the Muslim and Western systems.

However, such challenges long predate the contemporary, post-Cold War period: we need only think of the nineteenth-century discussions of how to relate to the Ottoman Empire; of eighteenth-century musings on the issue of 'Asiatic' or 'Oriental' despotism; of the seventeenth-century discussion of Islam, or 'the Turk', as a spur to the greater integration and co-ordination of European states' foreign policies. At the same time, the implications for contemporary academic discussion are many: the

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argument as to Islam as an enemy, or 'Other', and as a substitute for the communist foe lost in 1991, broaches deep issues within International Relations while in broader discussions of the relative universality and particularity of values the Middle East, and 'Islam', often play a significant, if contrapuntal role, as in the work of Michael Walzer, on 'thick' and 'thin' values, or in the role played within the later work of John Rawls (1999) by a mythical, but clearly Islamic, illiberal state, 'Kazanistan'.

All analytic and theoretical engagement with a particular history, state or region, involves a two-way, double, challenge: it is not just a matter of seeing if a particular theory can explain and conceptually order the politics, and international relations, of a specific country or region, but also of seeing how far this specific case, be it a state, event or region, itself challenges the theory.[1] All major historical events, be they wars, revolutions or economic transformations, pose such a double challenge, and the same is true of regions. The list of those theories that have, in recent decades, encountered and been challenged by the Middle East is long: modernisation theory, dependency theory, Orientalism (however defined), constructivism, democratic peace theory not to mention many varieties of conceptualisation based on nationalist myth, conspiracy theory, Cold War paranoia, or overzealous imposition of military and security considerations. There has, indeed, been no shortage of words and general theories in analysis of the Middle East. The exploration of how the English school could engage with the region is, therefore, both a creative and a welcome one, and invites precisely that kind of dual interaction, of theory and region, that has stimulated discussion within other conceptual frameworks. In what follows, exploring some of the reflections I have earlier expressed on the English school approach in general, and some of my own findings and intuitions on the international relations of the Middle East in particular, I shall attempt to sketch out precisely such a dual, exploratory and critical engagement.

1 The English school: achievements

The original tenets of the English school are well known to students of IR, and are clearly expounded in other chapters of this book.[2] In summary form, the classical variant of the English school (for example Bull, 1977; Wight, 1977; Bull and Watson, 1984; Mayall, 1990) posits a theoretical, and historical, framework that combines elements of classical realism, such as the emphasis on military power and competition, the primacy of the state, the role of great powers, and the interstate function of wars, with themes normally associated with a 'liberal' or 'Grotian' approach

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to international relations. These latter posit that interstate competition and the incidence of war are mitigated, in some instances at least, by the acceptance of shared values, of a formal, legal, and informal, 'institutional' character, where institutional refers not to what are normally regarded as established organisations, but rather regular, normative, legal and shared principles: hence the use of the concept 'international society', as opposed to the more competitive 'international system' of conventional realism. The essential message of the English school is contained in the famous oxymoron which Hedley Bull proclaimed in his classic exposition of this approach, *The Anarchical Society*: the international system is, on the one hand devoid of a central authority, hence in the technical and original Greek sense without (*an*) rule (*archi*). The English school also has, in common with Marxism and liberalism, and in contrast to orthodox realism, a view of history and of historical change, especially as regards the development and global diffusion of its model of 'society'. This historical perspective is subsumed in the concept 'expansion of international society', this seen as a process, coinciding more or less with the spread of European diplomatic, political and legal norms across the world through modern times, and culminating, to a certain degree itself, in global acceptance of such norms.

The English school has several strengths as a broad framework for understanding the workings, and history, of the international system. It combines recognition of the self-interest and structurally intrinsic competitiveness, which is present in the international system, with an insistence on the other factors, be they customary, legal or ideological, which mitigate and to some degree shape such relations. Its advocacy of a theory of change and its vision of the emergence and spread of the interstate system marks it off as superior to the ahistorical, axiomatic and thereby often banal analysis of conventional realism, while its emphasis on the political, and military, factors that influence international relations gives it an advantage over those theories, be they classical Marxism, or, more recently, dependency theory or world systems theory, which place all of their emphasis on the evolution, itself often mechanically conceived, of the international, capitalist, economy.

In several respects, the perspective of the English school is pertinent to contemporary international discussion, especially with regard to reform or transformation of the system. First, in regard to discussion of the role of war, and of the great powers, in international relations it, rightly, insists that these are inexorable, if regrettable, features of interstate relations and that any alternative model of politics and diplomacy that ignores them will be doomed to failure. This is, in the first instance,

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true of war as a force of historical formation: the very map of states, arbitrarily and accidentally arrived at as it is, is to a considerable degree the result of wars, of battles and of the impositions of the victorious. The character of states, and, not least, their constitutional form, owe much to wars – the history of democratisation in Europe during the twentieth century would be incomprehensible without taking war into account. The same applies to the role of war as an instrument of conquest, and of just change, within international relations. The ideal of humanitarian intervention as it emerged out of the end of the Cold War and the Kuwait crisis of 1990–91 has been massively, when not fatally, tarnished by the Anglo-US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its consequences. However, for those within the liberal and, to a considerable extent, left communities who called for international action over Bosnia and Kosovo, and who later called for such action in Darfur, the reality remained that military operations could be mounted in such situations only with the support, if not active participation, of the US and of the UK. At the same time, the insistence of Hedley Bull and others on the legitimacy, under specific conditions, of war as an instrument of just change, and the very and increasingly open-minded discussion by Bull of the necessary tension between order and justice in international relations, allow for a reassertion of a central feature of international political theory, that of the right to revolt and of just rebellion, something all the more necessary in the context of the conflict between Islamism and the West since 2001. While al Qaeda, their imitators and followers propound a theory, and morality, of non-state violence and revolt that lacks any moral or normative basis, the US and its allies have sought, in their indiscriminate and often self-defeating promotion of a 'War on Terrorism', to deny any possible legitimacy to armed resistance, or to groups that, in situations of great national, cultural or political oppression, have no alternative, political, mechanisms with which to articulate their demands.

The realism, one could even just say 'good sense', of the English school, and its insistence on the enduring primacy, if not monopoly, of states also serves as an essential, if often overridden, corrective to some of the recent literature on global civil society, NGOs and the spread, within globalisation, of non-state networks and linkages. That such processes exist and are, in some ways, increasing within the context of globalisation is true, but the extent of this 'global civil society' is often overstated, in an airy invocation of local, networking and anti-systemic groups, as is the degree to which many of the organisations taking advantage of the next international context and the lessening of state controls are in no way candidates for the, implicitly liberal if not emancipatory, gathering

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of global civil society: conservative religious groups, the mafia, drug traffickers, to name but some are as much, if not more, influential actors on the world scene than are Amnesty International, Greenpeace and the variegated elements of the Porto Alegre anti-globalisation movement.

The realism, and very sobriety, of the English school are also of much relevance to the often high-flying and, in the bad sense, utopian debate on the reform of global institutions and governance, starting with the UN. In its historic formation, the English school was, to a considerable degree, engaged in debate with proponents of world government and of the two major bodies that, in part, embodied this ideal, the League of Nations and the United Nations. While not denying to these bodies some purpose and efficacy, in the realms of diplomacy and of establishing norms and laws, the English school tended to downplay the importance of these world bodies, and to stress that within them, in good times (the 1920s, the 1990s) as in bad (the 1930s, Cold War, the 2000s), it was state interest, and in particular the interest of great powers, which prevailed, be it within the organisation or in defiance of it. So much of the literature on this topic, be it in terms of cosmopolitanism, global governance, reform of international institutions or in recurrent appeals for a world government, in the post-1991 period as much as in the 1920s, is simply unrealistic, redolent of liberal, and at times irresponsible, speculation and of little pertinence to how these institutions, old and new, actually function. If, as I fondly hope, and have tried to propose in my own work on the subject, we can recentre the debate on cosmopolitanism and global governance in a manner that takes due note both of idealism and utopianism and of the realities of power and of states, then such a discussion will need the good sense and discipline of the English school, or something like it, to have effect and to carry conviction.

Needless to say, the English school framework is far superior to some of the other general theories of the international system that have, in recent times, gained unwarranted currency, notably the Clash of Civilisations, or Post-Modernism. Over and above all of this, as is evident in the IR literature of the past two to three decades, and is equally clear in other contributions to this volume, the English school meets the most important criterion of any academic theory, that of generating a stimulating, in an open and undogmatic way, research agenda. Out of the English school have emerged a wealth of studies, ranging from long-range histories of the interstate system to studies of modern European politics, the foreign policy of individual states, the role of human rights in international affairs, and a sustained engagement with the realities and possibilities of humanitarian intervention (classically Vincent, 1986). In comparison to

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most other major paradigms within IR, which are either hobbled by their vacuous, and ahistorical, axioms and structural recurrences, or are based on theoretically unstable and empirically dispersed analytic systems, the English school has shown both continued theoretical and historical vitality, but also a capacity flexibly, soberly and with normative import to engage with the post-Cold War world. Few other paradigms can claim as much.

2 The English school and the Middle East

Against this background, it is possible to identify a number of areas in which the analysis provided by the English school, as resumed in Tim Dunne (1998), can serve to illuminate and explain the international relations of the Middle East. In the first place, the modern Middle East as it has emerged since 1918 is a creation in considerable part of external, great power, politics: this goes for the delimitation of the regional map as it emerged from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the very names given to the new territorial creations ('Iraq', 'Syria', 'Palestine', 'Lebanon', 'Jordan') and for the character of the states, first and foremost the ruling elites and armed forces, installed, when not imposed, in these countries. Colonial power as exercised in the newly formed states only served to replicate that already installed in the former Ottoman or peripheral territories seized before the First World War: North Africa, Cyprus, Egypt, Aden, Oman and the smaller Gulf states. Equally great power encroachment before and after the First World War in effect severed the new Turkey, and indeed the Middle East as we have hitherto known it, from areas formerly part of the Muslim and Ottoman lands, the Balkans in south-west Europe, and Transcaucasia between the Caspian and Black Seas. The very visible colonial partition and delimitation of the Arab east after 1918, which was finally recognised in the Lausanne (1923) and Mosul (1926) treaties, had their counterpart in the definitive amputation from the politics of the region of the two hitherto integrated Balkan and Transcaucasian areas (Fromkin, 1989; Yapp, 1996).

Second, the international relations of the Middle East since 1918 have been marked, and in the early part of the twentieth century largely determined, by successive interventions of the external powers. Recognition of this should, however, serve to set this issue in a context of accuracy and proportion, to separate myth from plausible realism: one of the most prominent features of the political culture of the region is the overstatement, sometimes to the point of parody or conspiracy theory, of the role

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which external powers have played and are supposed still to play in the region. Thus many Iranians asserted during the 1978–79 revolution that Ayatollah Khomeini was a British agent, and that if you lifted his beard it would say 'Made in England' on his chin. Much of the polemical analysis of foreign policy in the region involves the assertion of one or other state being, or having been, a 'stooge' or 'agent' of some power, be it in the colonial or Cold War period. Thus a recognition of the role of external powers, accurately and proportionately analysed, can provide the basis for a more measured account of the modern international relations of the region, including, where evidence supports the claim, recognition of the autonomy of regional states.[3]

The role of the external powers in the post-1918 period is, however, indisputable: Britain in its colonial domains, in the suppression of the 1920 and 1941 revolts in Iraq, France in Syria in 1920 and again in Algeria in the independence war of 1954–62, and both in the catastrophic Suez attack, with Israel, in 1956. The US and USSR were to come, in any significant way, rather later to the scene: the US played a diplomatic and covert role in the region during the Cold War, sustaining its allies and intermittently organising coups d'état (Syria 1949, Iran 1953), from the 1960s backing Israel and, less overtly, its other key allies Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the Iran of the shah and Egypt. As the USSR lost influence in the Arab world in the early 1970s, the US, deemed by then Egyptian President Sadat to have '99 per cent of the cards', came to play the leading role in Arab–Israeli negotiations, culminating in the 1979 Camp David agreement. During the Cold War the US sent military missions to a number of countries, and in 1958 its troops landed in Beirut to counter Arab nationalist influence, but it was only after the demise of the Cold War, in Kuwait in 1991, and then in Iraq in 2003, that the US engaged in direct combat, as it had earlier done in Latin America and in East Asia.

The influence of the great powers was therefore an important, and recurrent, factor in the modern political and military history of the Middle East and in some cases, as in pleas from Palestinian, Kurdish or Sudanese opposition leaders, the call was for more, not less, US involvement. This influence also extended beyond the confines of international politics to include the structure of states and armies, and, indeed, the aspirations and organisation of the elites. It most certainly included, in one vital respect, the economic development of many of these states: where oil was produced, the character of this industry, its rate of development, output, and the reinvestment of revenues and taxes from oil were all used to strengthen and reform the regional states. The oil industry did little, in itself, to change the economies and societies within

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which it was located: rather as a rent-generating enterprise it injected cash into a political and social system that then used this funding for its own, system-maintenance, purposes.

In several other respects, the insights of the English school serve the analysis of the Middle East well. One is the insistence on the central role of the state and a robust scepticism about claims for the reality, or desirability, of a reduced state role. Much of modern Middle Eastern history, particularly that of the Arab world, has been taken up with calls for the promotion of greater unity, on a pan-Arab and, intermittently, a pan-Islamic basis. Institutions embodying this aspiration have periodically been established, notably the Arab League (1945) and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) (1969). The aim of Arab, and also Islamic, unity has repeatedly been invoked by states, and, also, against states, by transnational opposition groups, political and military. Yet an informed look at the history of the region in the past decades, and more, as well as a comparative perspective which took into account the very similar experiences of Africa and Latin America would yield a less optative conclusion. First, the formal institutions that are supposed to embody and aggregate the interests of the Arab and Islamic world are ineffectual bodies, little more than talking shops and pretexts for the occasional grandiose conference: neither the Arab League nor the OIC are influential bodies. When it suits the interests of powerful members, such as Egypt in its peace agreement with Israel in 1979 or Iraq when it invaded Kuwait in 1990, they simply ignore the Arab League. Second, as even the most benign realist will immediately recognise, calls for 'unity' and the promotion of greater coherence of states, economies and societies serve individual state interests: at different times Egypt, Syria and Iraq have promoted Arab unity, but this has been to strengthen their own influence and advance their competition with each other. Saudi Arabia has promoted Arab, but more forcefully Islamic, unity, again to protect itself from rival states and opposition currents and to enhance its interests. At the other end of the power spectrum, weaker and poorer Arab states (Yemen, Jordan, the Comoro Islands) and some states that claim to be Arab even though they are not (Somalia, Djibouti) support schemes for Arab unity and economic cooperation because they think they can secure access to more money through such an association.

Third, all attempts at Arab and Islamic unity have failed because, as a result of the formation of separate states in the modern period, separate institutions, interests and identities, as well as separate elites, have emerged. For all the talk of Arab or Islamic commonality, and of artificial

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imperialist partition, the Middle East since 1918 has developed more or less as has Africa and, since the Napoleonic wars, Latin America. From an English school perspective, hopefully enriched with a dose of elementary historical sociological common sense, there should be nothing surprising about this. No one in the Middle East may admit it, but the legal principle applied by the Organisation of African Unity in 1960, *uti possidetis*, that is states should maintain control over the territory they have at the moment of independence, also applies in the Arab world. Even subregional bodies have been determined by state interests: some, such as the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC) embodying Iraq, Jordan, Egypt and Yemen, broke up when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990; the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) of Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco amounts to almost nothing; the union of Syria and Egypt in 1958 broke apart after a Syrian revolt in 1961; the union of the two Yemens in 1990 was at first artificial and only made real by the conquest of the formerly socialist South by the military dictatorship of the North in a 70-day civil war in 1974. The only, partial, success story is that of the six Gulf monarchies which formed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981: these oil-producing and conservative states are held together by the fear of their two unstable and larger neighbours, Iran and Iraq, and maintain formal and, in internal security matters, real collaboration. But on other matters, such as a common currency, or a shared military force, they have continued to diverge.

As far as reality is concerned, a robust English school scepticism could also well be applied to much of the discussion recently published about the role of 'non-state' actors. Some of the classical candidates for such a role, such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO, established in 1964) or the Kurdish guerrilla PKK (1984), are indeed organisations independent of states: but they operate in an environment in which they need, and seek, the support of states and in which they themselves aspire to statehood, if and when it becomes possible. The same applied in earlier times, that is from the 1890s to 1948 to the Zionist movement. In more recent times there has been much talk of the democratisation of the Middle East, the increased role of civil society and NGOs and the emergence of a new, transnational, Islamic media and/or militant community. There have been some significant changes in the region in recent years, facilitated by the IT revolution and external pressure: but many of what are presented as 'non-state' actors, be they local NGOs or press and media outlets, are in fact financed and controlled by the government or one part of the ruling family of the state concerned. The example is often given of the TV station al Jazeera: but

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al Jazeera is the TV station of a rich man, the Amir of Qatar, and follows the policies and observes the silences of that state. Its primary goal is to annoy another Arab state, Saudi Arabia. No Arab TV station, and no newspaper, whether published in the region or in London, is free of state control and financing. It is certainly true that young Muslims in the region, as in the West, have shown new interest in what in earlier times were called 'pan-Islamic' ideas and a minority have come to engage in a form of radical politics that lacks almost completely any territorial anchor. Yet such transnational and radical aspirations do not necessarily obliterate location in a particular national political context, or a sense of identity that also includes nation and, within the national, locality or region.

3 Coercive diffusion

Of greater import, arguably, is the English school emphasis on the forging of an international society through the dissemination of what are, broadly, 'European values'. There will be some critical comment below on how far this diffusionist image of modern international history can hold, but the initial tenet, that the rest of the world came, in the past two or three centuries, more and more to adopt and use, albeit for their own ends, European norms and values, is indisputably true, as much in politics, diplomacy and international relations as in technology, sport, medicine or economics. In this regard the often repeated accusation that historians or IR specialists are 'Eurocentric' usually confuses two things: an illegitimate focus in discussions of international relations only on the interests and narratives of the hegemonic/imperialist West, and a perfectly legitimate historical account of how, over recent centuries, the world was indeed shaped, be it by 'expansion' or not, by Europe and its North American associates.

On many aspects of this 'Eurocentric' account there is little dispute: no one claims that European economic systems, European technology, let alone sport, have not come to dominate the world. In medicine there is a welcome diversity of paradigms, but conventional Western practices prevail. In culture it is the English language, film, TV, music that to date prevail. The same applies, but with a major revision, to the realm of values and political principles: the history of political change in the Middle East over the past 200 years has involved the adoption, if also reformulation, of the core Western principles: sovereignty, economic development, national self-determination. Far too much is made of the supposedly distinct cultural and religious values of Middle Eastern and

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Muslim countries, as if a formally distinct image of, say, banking, human rights, economic redistribution or state forms really yields anything very different. In politics, be it in the statements and practices of conservative monarchies, such as Jordan, Morocco or Saudi Arabia, or in the Islamic military dictatorships of Pakistan or Libya, or in the countries where radical Islam has come to power, be it Iran, Sudan or, intermittently, Afghanistan, the main themes of political discourse and state policy are those of comparable third world states elsewhere. Islam provides a medium and a set of symbols, as well as some retrospective historical legitimation, for the values of these states and of their opponents, but this does not mean that a fundamentally different value system prevails in these countries. All conduct their policies according to a robust realist interpretation of state interest. In no supposedly different cultural or religious context are such universal principles as the right of nations to self-determination or the sovereignty of states formally or even implicitly rejected.

This last conclusion may come as some surprise, since the starting point for much recent discussion of the Middle East, in the region and in the West, has been indeed that there are different cultural values involved in political life and interstate relations and that, whether we promote conflict through a Clash of Civilisations or seek common ground through Dialogue of Civilisations, the starting point has to be one of recognising fundamentally different, and separate, value and religious systems. Some scholars, critical of the European and 'Western' monopoly over IR debates have come to seek for 'Non-Western Voices' in international relations (Gruffydd Jones, 2006).[4] A closer, and more scholarly, examination of Middle Eastern political discourses over recent decades and, indeed, over the past two centuries, going back to the time of the French revolution, will show that, for all the apparent differences of principle and proposal, political discussion in the Middle East has been heavily influenced by debates in the wider world, just as it has been focused on dealing with what are very much universal and contemporary issues, to do with the organisation and legitimacy of the state, the development of the economy, the treatment of minorities and different social groups and so forth. The intellectual content, as distinct from political import, of any history of Arab nationalism will show how all the ideas used by such movements derived from European sources. Similarly, a study of women's mobilisations in twentieth-century Iran demonstrates how it was a variety of imported and, in the case of revolutionary Islamism, confected ideologies that shaped women's participation in politics (Paidar, 1995). Even the more apparently remote

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and Islamic discourses, such as those of Ayatollah Khomeini or Osama bin Laden, are, on closer examination, not replications of the Qur'an or of any Islamic tradition, but rather modern discourses using tradition and the past for contemporary, to a large extent nationalist, purposes (Abrahamian, 1993).

A judicious combination of the English school's historical and global perspective, with detailed sociological and textual analyses of Islamist writings and statements, will show that Western values, and concerns, diverse and contradictory as they are, have indeed 'spread' to the Middle East and elsewhere. The key point to acknowledge here is that there is, in terms of values and norms, no one 'Western' system or legacy, but rather, as a result of the very contradictory history of Europe in modern times, a whole gamut of values, from the most hierarchical and authoritarian, to the most revolutionary, that are available to, and which serve to inspire, political actors in other parts of the world. Just as the spread of European states has served to stimulate, in practical terms, nationalist revolt, so the ideological and normative diffusion of European values, from the time of the French revolution, has itself been contradictory. There are great and often conflictual differences of discourse and argument involved in discussions within the Middle East and in those between the region and the West, but these are not formed around cultural differences, so much as differences of interest. On the one side, Arab and other Middle Eastern and Islamic rulers would have no difficulty recognising themselves, their patrons and their rivals in the pages of *The Anarchical Society*. On the other, those who oppose these rulers, and who also oppose Western influence, shape their arguments in terms of the critical, rebellious and revolutionary values that also emanate from the West: the most influential of all Marxist ideas has been the economic theory of imperialism, the argument that the West is exploiting the third world, and this idea is widespread within nationalist and Islamic discourses in the region. If one examines the texts of guerrilla groups, in Palestine, Lebanon, Turkey or elsewhere, as well as the statements of al Qaeda, it will become clear that much of what they are saying is part of the shared, populist and anti-imperialist, rhetoric of the modern third world, not some restatement of earlier, Muslim, ideas. As for the Walzerian distinction between 'thick' domestic and 'thin' international values, the reality is that this too ignores the close, and now highly internalised, use of global ideas of rights, legitimacy, territory and struggle within specific national and regional contexts. Once it comes to, say, the demand of the Palestinians for their own state, of Iranians for nuclear weapons, of Iraqis to drive foreign troops out of their country,

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then the supposedly external 'thin' can become very cogent, very 'thick', indeed.

Here it may be objected that, surely, there is a distinctive 'cultural' dimension to the politics of the Middle East and of the Arab world, in the form of that very powerful, if diffuse, sense of pan-Arab solidarity, with an aspiration to unity, that has been present in the region since the 1950s. This informs as much the actions, and rhetoric, of states, as it does the aspirations, ever thwarted, of peoples (for example Ajami, 1981; Dawisha, 2003). That this is, and remains, a powerful sentiment in the region is evident, and, despite the political setbacks of past decades, it has in some degree been reanimated by satellite TV, and by the explosion of the Palestine issue since the late 1980s. Arab nationalism has been proclaimed, prematurely, dead on many occasions. Yet this is not an argument for a distinctive cultural character of regional politics: the aspiration to national unity is a widespread, and modern, idea, one imported to the Arab world under the aspiration of nineteenth-century Germany and Italy, and its actual impact on the politics of the region has been determined not by the strength, or 'thickness', of any regional specificity, but by the interests of states, which have used unity, or opposition to it (as in Syria in 1961), to further their own interests.

4 Challenges of the sub-global: the Middle East as a 'region'

The implication of the argument so far is that in regard to what is often seen as the most distinctive feature of the Middle East, namely its distinct political history and its 'non-Western' value system, there is little to separate the states system of the region from that of other parts of the world. In terms of interstate relations, regional organisations, the uses of ideology and value and the conduct of conflict, inter- and intra-state, the Middle East, rhetoric and ideological covering apart, poses no new challenges to the student of international relations. It could, indeed, be argued that what is wrong with much of the purely regional analysis is its very methodological regionalism, or nationalism: few who muse on the fate and failure of Arab nationalism ever compare the Arabs to Africans or Latin Americans; students of oil-producing states avoid comparison with Venezuela, Nigeria and Indonesia; those seeking to understand the Islamic Republic of Iran often delve far back into history and culture, but fail to make the comparison that modern history puts squarely on the analytic table, namely that of the relation between revolutionary states and foreign policy.

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As far as the category 'region' or 'sub-global' is concerned, the Middle East poses no difficulty for the English school. For all the mystified and often exaggerated discussion that emanates from the Middle East about its peculiarity as a region, it is evident that, over recent decades, a relatively distinct subsystem has emerged. Indeed one of the abiding failures of much of the earlier, colonial, post-colonial and Cold War literature on the IR of the region is that it overstated the impact of the external powers and understated how far, from the 1950s at least, regional states had considerable and growing autonomy in their foreign, ideological and domestic politics. No state in the modern Middle East went to war because some external state told them to do so.

The term 'Middle East' has had relevance and validity as a region, that is a partially integrated political and military space, for over a century, even as the definition of the countries comprising it has varied over time. The term was first coined in 1902 by the US admiral Alfred Mahan in a debate in a London journal with the then LSE lecturer and geopolitician, and later LSE Director, Halford Mackinder (Adelson, 1994). Mackinder, as befitted his approach to IR (for such it was), placed emphasis on the great land masses of the world, in particular on the Central Asian 'heartland'. Mahan, by analogy with the Far East and with a concern for maritime power, strategy and space, used the term 'Middle East' to define the maritime and adjacent land area between Europe and British India. At that time, and until the end of the First World War, the region encompassed the Balkans, part of the Ottoman Empire till 1913 and also Afghanistan. In the immediate aftermath of the First World War the 'region' also included Transcaucasia. But the consolidation of the Afghan monarchy under King Amanullah after the Third Anglo-Afghan War of 1919 and his recognition by the USSR (the King of Afghanistan was the first head of state in the world to recognise the Bolshevik state) excluded this country from regional processes until, abruptly, it returned to play an important role after the 1978 communist coup in Kabul. Transcaucasia, comprising Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan, was very much part of the region during and after the First World War, but the sealing of the frontier by the USSR after 1921, and the shared interest of Lenin and Atatürk in containing the Armenians, ended this linkage. Even after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 this has to a large extent continued and Turkey has exercised the same restraint as it has over its former dominions in the Balkans. A similar process, of intermittent incorporation and separation, has applied to other adjacent areas: Cyprus, the Horn of Africa and the complex of Western Sahara and Mauritania.

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Beyond geographic nomenclature and regional political discourse, however, it can be argued that the term 'region', at least as applied to the Middle East, does have a legitimate historical and analytic usage, and this for three evident reasons. First, states themselves conduct their foreign policies, and manage domestic politics, at least partly in terms of relations with other states in the region, to whom they are linked by issues of security, trade, population movement and ideological legitimation. No state can afford to ignore its neighbours, nor ignore the appeal or more which neighbouring states exercise over its own population. Moreover, events in one country, and prompted by one specific concern, may have regional consequences: the Iranian nuclear programme is, above all, a response to the Pakistani acquisition of nuclear weapons in 1998, but has sparked great alarm in Israel and is stimulating nuclear initiatives in Turkey and some Arab countries. Second, opposition movements, whether explicitly transnational or not, also see the region as a unified space, operating from those states that are favourable to them, building regional support and recruitment networks, and taking inspiration from the action of fellow militants and rebels elsewhere: the regional impact, over the years, of the Palestinian resistance, of Hizbullah in Lebanon, of the Iranian revolution and more recently of the rise of al Qaeda are all examples of this regionalisation of cause and impact. Finally, as the Mahan–Mackinder debate illustrated, external powers treat the region as a unit, seeking to build regional alliances, formal and informal, supporting regional allies, and aspiring to impose their own regional models, most recently in the disastrous US attempt to promote Arab democracy via the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Beyond geographical proximity, and historical and cultural commonality, therefore, the Middle East as a 'region' functions at all three of these levels.

5 The low salience of sovereignty

If much of the argument of this essay is that the Middle East as a region is not unique or different, beyond the obvious differences that all nations and states, like people, have with each other, there is one area in which a distinctive regional norm operates. This is not, as is conventionally asserted, in the realm of culture or values, but in the realm of foreign policy, and in particular in the predisposition of Middle Eastern states, more than in any other part of the world, to intervene in each other's internal affairs. This tendency, what I have termed 'the low salience of sovereignty', is indeed a remarkable and distinct feature of regional international relations, even if by no means unique to it. A brief look at

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the history of inter-Arab relations over the past half-century will show that all the major Arab states have so intervened: Egypt in Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Syria; Syria in Lebanon and Jordan; Iraq in Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait and Iran; Saudi Arabia in Yemen, Kuwait and, via its Islamist networks, in Egypt and much of North Africa; Libya in Sudan and Tunisia; Algeria and Morocco in the Western Sahara. Even non-state actors like the PLO or, in media terms, Qatar's al Jazeera have sought significantly to influence the regimes and domestic politics of other states. When we broaden the picture out to include non-Arab states, and relations between them and the Arab world, then further examples follow. Israel on one side, and Egypt, Syria and Jordan on the other, have all fought and coercively intervened in each other. Iran has promoted rebellion in Iraq, under both shah and imam; the shah sent troops to fight the Dhofar rebellion in Oman in 1973; and, after 1979, the Islamic Republic has promoted radical, and armed, movements in Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine, as well as calling for Islamist militancy across the region. For its part, Turkey, which renounced its former territories in the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923, and which has been restrained over post-communist conflicts in parts of the Transcaucasus and the Balkans (that is, not significantly assisting the Chechens and other North Caucasian peoples, or the Bosnians and Kosovars), has nonetheless intervened in regard to three neighbouring states: intermittently in northern Iraq, to pursue the PKK and pressure the local Kurdish groups; massively, and in effect annexing 40 per cent of the island, in the invasion of Cyprus in 1974; and, via support for Baku and imposing a trade embargo on Armenia, in the Azeri–Armenian conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Such a level of sustained intervention and interference, ranging from hostile radio transmissions, bribery and support for opposition political groups, through to promotion of armed rebellion and, in several cases, invasion and annexation, is on a scale unseen anywhere else in the world. For sure, all states to some degree influence their neighbours and others in the region. Interference, at all levels, is a recurrent feature of international relations, and is practised by conservative and even more so by radical and revolutionary states. Recent conflicts in Indochina (1970s), Central America (1980s) and Central Africa (Sudan, Congo, Great Lakes, 1990s and 2000s) all exhibit this tendency. This 'low salience of sovereignty' is, however, nothing to do with culture, religion or tradition. Nor is it primarily caused, or related to, the two issues that critics of colonialism often invoke, namely the 'artificiality' of states and of frontiers. It is rather a function of the disputed character of the political and social regimes within each state and the uses made of this, and

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the dangers believed to be posed to them, by neighbouring states. To understand this, undoubtedly distinctive, regional norm, dare one say 'institution', does not require any voyage into culture, Qur'an or history. It requires an understanding of interstate conflict, of a kind that Messrs Wight, Northedge, Vincent, Bull and others would have immediately understood.

6 The limits of 'international society'

Discussion so far has concentrated on how an analysis based on the approach of the English school can help to elucidate the international relations of the Middle East. At the same time, and bearing in mind the need, outlined at the beginning of this essay, for a dual and critical interaction of IR theory with regional analysis, any assessment of the English school must recognise the limits, theoretical, historical and normative, of this approach, ones that have been identified in recent decades in a range of writing and which must seriously question the application of this perspective to the study of International Relations. Some of these are well known from the writings of earlier critics and need no lengthy rehearsal here: the lack of any interest in, or understanding of, economics, in the foreign policy of states, or in structuring the international system; the failure to take account of rival histories, and rival associated values, of interstate relations beyond the European–North American arena; the unduly accepting, when not complacent, attitude to the continued domination of world politics by a handful of Second World War victors; the very inaccuracy of terming this approach 'English' when few of its major thinkers and exponents themselves are from that country. In some measure too, while orthodox North American realists chide them for positing an international system that is far more benign and rule-governed than is in fact the case, the English school remains too trapped within the realism that it has sought to modify, above all in its inability to incorporate the analysis of domestic politics, and internal change more generally, within its narrative and in the neglect of the role of ideological and belief factors in international relations. Here, however, I would want to take up some of the other criticisms made of the 'international society' approach and to link this assessment of the English school to the analysis of the IR of the Middle East. In particular, I will examine three dimensions of the English school where theoretical and historical re-examination in general, and the particular challenges of the Middle East in particular, require a rethinking of the approach as a whole. First, I will criticise the concept expansion of international society. Second,

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I will question the historical perspective of the English school, arguing that it posits a misleading continuity in the development of the international system. Third, I will examine the sociological categories used, often without adequate definition, by the English school.

Alternative histories: 'expansion' or subjugation

The founding myth of the English school, as represented by the work of Martin Wight, Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, is its account of the origins and spread of the international system. First, as much recent scholarship has shown, the exaltation, when not fetishisation, of the 'Westphalian' system is historically inaccurate, as much as to what happened in 1648 as to how this system spread. Second, the tendency of the original English school, exemplified by Watson and Bull, to offer a diffusionist model, of 'expansion', ignores the violence, treachery, subjugation, expropriation and mass murder that accompanied the spread of the European system. This distortion is significant not just in terms of any political or moral balance sheet of European colonial history, but also in terms of explaining the world in which we live today. The European 'state system' did indeed spread across the world, but in large measure by defeating, subjugating, forming and deforming the societies and polities with which it came into contact. The difficulties the modern world has with the non-European world are, therefore, not the result of an incomplete spread of Westphalian values, or the resistance of undemocratic, or Islamic, or Asiatic societies and polities to democratic values, but to the very character, and violence, of that spread itself.

The briefest of glances at modern Middle Eastern history will illustrate this. Those states that did establish themselves as independent entities after 1918 all did so in military competition with the West and neighbouring powers. The remaining states were not only created and named by the colonial powers, but formed as security apparatuses, designed to control the populations and territories denominated as theirs. In many cases the history of their armed forces, ones created and trained by colonial powers, later by the US and the USSR, amounts to a significant part of the history of the country. When it comes to revolt and resistance, the whole epic saga of Middle Eastern revolution and revolt is one of opposition to the states and regional arrangements created or, in the case of Israel, facilitated by the West. From Palestine since the 1960s and Lebanon since the 1980s, to Iraq after 2003, it has been revolt against the imposition of external powers which has fuelled rebel movements. In other conflicts, most evidently the Iran–Iraq War of 1980 to 1988, the root cause lies in the collision of two revolutions, that of Iraq in 1958

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and that of Iran in 1979, against the regimes and state system imposed in colonial and Cold War times. In this context, there is an obvious example of how analysis of one region, in this case the Middle East, can challenge the broader theory, in that it comes up against one of the enduring limitations of the English school. The history of the subjugation of the region, as of Africa, Asia and Latin America, involves not just political, military and normative issues, the chosen terrain of the English school, but also economics: indeed the whole study of imperialism has been determined in large measure by a debate between those who give primacy to the strategic, and those who focus on economic factors in the expansion and functioning of the system.[5]

Divergent historical perspectives

The second constitutive error within the English school approach to international relations, and to history as a whole, lies in its acceptance of a continuous historical narrative of international and interstate relations going back centuries and millennia. Influenced, when not besotted, by classical Greece and Rome, as well as by the history of medieval and modern Europe, and, more recently, expanding its horizons to encompass India and China, the writers of the English school tend to ignore the fundamental lesson of social science and of history informed by it, namely the radical difference, and rupture, that divides the modern, roughly post-1800 world from that which precedes it. At the same time, the ahistorical continuism of the English school and the failure to take account of the discontinuities and ruptures in politics and international relations serves to reinforce the separate, essentialist and Orientalist, premise that the politics of the Middle East in particular can be explained by values, religious and state forms of earlier times. By contrast, the insistence of writers such as Karl Polanyi in economic history, of Ernest Gellner in sociology and of Eric Hobsbawm in history on the great divide that separates the pre-modern and modern worlds entails that we cannot write of political and social categories, be they market, state, family, economy or war, in abstract, or treat superficially similar instances of any one of these from different centuries and epochs as meaningfully similar. At the same time, this insistence on the modernity of social and political phenomena undercuts the methodological premise of much of the literature on the Middle East that resorts to history and a timeless concept of culture, above all to some abstracted 'Islam' to explain contemporary politics and ideas. In contrast to such culturalist explanations, which are at least as rife in the region as they are in the West, it entails that the latter must always be seen first in their contemporary context and not explained

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by reference to events, values or texts that predate the modern era. Part of modernity is, of course, to invoke tradition, and the past, and, very much in recent times, to explain social and political behaviour by reference to other areas (the Qur'an, the Christian legacy of Europe, Asiatic despotism), but this invocation is itself a modern reflex, a deployment of elements from the past for present purposes.

When we turn to the Middle East the implications of these two alternative historical visions become at once evident. The continuist approach favoured by the English school would, in the first place, tend to explain the behaviour of Middle Eastern states in terms of patterns of interstate relations going back centuries, if not millennia, and, in so doing, also reinforce the separate but often associated tendency, variously termed essentialist or Orientalist, that explains the behaviour of Middle Eastern and Muslim states in terms of their religious, cultural and dynastic pasts. By contrast, a modernist and ruptural account of the Middle Eastern state system would see it as, above all, a creation of modern history, of, first, the impact of European colonialism in its military and economic forms on the Ottoman and Persian Empires in the one or two centuries leading up to the First World War, and then, most importantly, of the delineation, in effect founding, of the modern state system in the aftermath of the First World War. Thus, while, of the 25 or so states of the modern Middle East, the majority were in the post-1918 period colonial states, ruled and shaped by their European masters (UK, France, Italy), the remaining four were also products of this modern and competitive interstate system and of the post-1918 international conjuncture that shaped it. Thus in Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, the only four states in the region that were not under colonial rule in the 1920s, new states emerged, with militarised systems and seeking to sustain their independence as states within a new regional context.

Sociological foreclosure

The third major difficulty with the English school is the use it makes of sociological categories, and the issues, historical and analytic, which it forecloses by such usage. In an earlier text (Halliday, 1987) and in my study of the role of social upheaval in international relations I have sought to show how, by deploying the categories of international and historical sociology, but respecting some of the major insights of the English school, it may be possible to elaborate a more cogent explanation of international relations, and also, this itself being one of the aspirations of the English school, establish an analytic space within which normative issues can more effectively be discussed. In my overview of the IR of

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the Middle East I have tried to apply this broad, historical sociological, approach to the Middle East (Halliday, 2005a).[6]

To summarise: three of the central concepts of the English school derive their definition and authority from sociological literature: state, society and norms. So too does the concept of 'socialisation', often used to explain the spread, and acceptance, of the Westphalian system. The concept of the state is however limited to a territorial and juridical abstraction, and does not allow for examination of how the state, in terms of the institution of military and administrative control, is established, develops and functions. Among other problems, this monolithic and abstracted concept of the state precludes an analysis of how domestic factors, and the internal structure of the state, affect foreign policy. The concept of society is also fatally flawed, since it assumes shared values between a set of formally distinct actors: but society can also be seen, and it can be argued more accurately seen, as a site of conflict between different interests, above all between the more and less powerful, and the spread of values as an attempt by one party, usually those with power, to impose their values on those who have less. Here socialisation is not the voluntary and gradual acceptance of norms, Westphalian or other, but the means by which a ruling class or dominant state imposes its values on the subordinated classes and seeks to present these values as the only available ones, as natural, eternal and immutable. Norms themselves are not simply diffused, in some consensual and cooperative manner: rather, in the case of the values of the rulers, they are imposed, even as, through appropriation of the usually contradictory character of the value system, other, more radical, ideas are diffused. In this way those who are so dominated use counter-hegemonic ideas, such as nationalism, revolution or rights or another reading of the hegemonic values themselves, to articulate opposition and resistance, and to proclaim their own entitlement: when the Egyptian leader Sa'ad Zaghlul, the Kurdish delegates, Ho Chi Minh and others came to Versailles in 1919 to demand independence for their countries they were using the very elements of resistance contained within Western discourse to demand justice. Herein lies the success, and the paradoxical outcome, of what I have termed above 'coercive diffusion'.

7 Conclusion: the English school and the Middle East, two major revisions

Enough has been written above to show how, once the core sociological categories of the English school are reassessed, it becomes possible

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to offer a different, and not entirely incompatible, account of the international system. As far as the Middle East is concerned, this involves two major revisions of contemporary IR accounts of the regional. First, on the matter of norms and values it is no longer a question of counter-posing 'Western', 'Westphalian' or other values to those of the Middle East, but rather of seeing how, over the past two centuries, a regional discourse incorporating elements of Western discourse, statist and anti-statist alike, into regional politics and rearticulating them in terms of the national entities, state interests, local languages and discourses, and movements of resistance and revolution, present in the region. A rethinking of the sociology of the international system, combined with an informed, as opposed to voyeuristic, study of national and religious discourses in the Middle East, permits us to escape from many of the misleading contemporary debates on this question.

The second major revision involves placing at the centre of IR in general, and of the Middle East in particular, the role of social movements, and, more generally, the historical impact of revolt and revolution.[7] To stress the latter is not to glorify or simplify what such processes involve, or to suggest that those who initiate such processes control or anticipate the outcome: it is, however, in the Middle East as elsewhere to recognise something that IR in general, and the English school in particular, have long denied, which is the central, formative, role of revolution in the shaping of the modern international system: globally, we need only think of the impact of France in 1789, Russia in 1917, China in 1949, Cuba in 1959; regionally, the history of the Middle East over the past century has involved the intersection of three major, recurrent and contradictory, processes – the impact of the external, 'great', powers; the autonomous and competitive actions of regional states; and the incidence of social and political rebellion, from the upheavals in Persia and Turkey in the 1900s, through the Egyptian, Iraqi, Algerian, Yemeni and Libyan revolutions of the 1950s and 1960s, to the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, to the impact of both the Afghan communist and Islamist *jihad* movements in Afghanistan from 1978 onwards. The whole modern history of the region, and the very issues at play in the ongoing conflicts in Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Palestine, Turkey and Sudan, involve a recognition of all three of these formative dimensions, with, in regard to the last category, as yet uncertain outcomes. What such analysis requires, however, is analysis that uses historical sociological and regional study, amplifying, but in some important respects remaining true to, the core insights of the English school. Thus may the original concern of this essay, the interaction of general theory with the study of specific

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regions, 'the double challenge', be fruitfully explored, and to the benefit of both.

Notes

1. For an elaboration of this 'double challenge' see Halliday, 2005a: Chapters 1 and 2.
2. In what follows I focus my argument on what I refer to as the 'classical' variant of the English school, in no way gainsaying the development that on some issues, such as colonialism, and the role of global economic structures, later writers such as Buzan and Little (2000), Keene (2002) and Buzan (2004) have taken the English school further.
3. On the increasing autonomy of the regional states, especially as the Cold War progressed, see Halliday, 2005a: Chapter 5, and a range of other works that converge in overall analysis, by eliciting the room for manoeuvre and relative independence of regional states, among them Tibi (1998); Gerges (1994); Yapp (1996); Fawcett (2005).
4. The problem with this literature is that it often treats at face value as 'non-Western' what are, in fact, in provenance Western, but at the same time radical and anti-systemic, views and forms of resistance. The cover of this book is an example, showing a third world protest meeting but with slogans, written in Portuguese, denouncing, in roundly universalist radical terms, imperialism. This slogan, far from being specific to any particular country or culture, could be deployed in any of 180 countries in the world.
5. To their credit some later English school writers have sought to remedy the English school's blindness on the issue of colonialism and military conflict: Buzan and Little (2000); Keene (2002); Keal (2003); Buzan (2004). How far this revision is agglutinative, and not such as to undermine the whole historical, social and moral fabric of the English school, is, however, debatable. My own earlier critiques of the English school would suggest that if the triad of core categories – state, society, norms – is recast to take account of the *systematic* violence and subjugation accompanying the spread of the European model then the intellectual system as a whole, beset by these, in Kuhnian terms, 'anomalies', will come crashing down. On the role of violence in constituting and underpinning the modern international system see Wallerstein (1983); Cocker (1998).
6. Parallel attempts to write the modern history of the region in terms of political sociology include Bromley (1994); Kamrava (2005); Pappe (2005). For an excellent historical narrative of the region see Yapp (1996).
7. This I have tried to do, to little evident effect!, within IR as a whole, in Halliday (1999).

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