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Review Essay

Changes and Challenges in the Middle East

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Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, *Things Fall Apart: Containing the Spillover from an Iraqi Civil War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), xiv + 239 pp., \$39.95, ISBN 9780815713791

Beverley Milton-Edwards, *Contemporary Politics in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006, 2nd edn), xiii + 311 pp., £16.99, ISBN 0745635946

Marsha Pripstein Posusney and Michele Penner Angrist (eds), *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Regimes and Resistance* (Boulder, CO; London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005), x + 276 pp., US\$23.50, ISBN 1588263428

Gareth Stansfield, *Iraq: People, History, Politics* (London: Polity Press, 2007), xv + 262 pp., US\$22.95, ISBN 9780745632278

There has long been an underlying interest in, and importance attached to, the Middle East and its stability, not least of all because of its vast reserves of oil and gas. However, interest in the region has been heightened by the spectacular events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent US-led conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. The books under review here are all very different in their specific goals and approaches – two are general works on Middle Eastern politics, and two focus on Iraq – but all share the similarity of being accessible and interesting works. The more general works are useful texts on political dynamics in the region, whereas the two others shed light on the fascinating and complex situation in and around Iraq.

Approaches to Middle East Politics

Milton-Edwards' *Contemporary Politics in the Middle East* and Posusney and Angrist's *Authoritarianism in the Middle East* are both broad texts, but they will each suit particular interests. Both introduce and handle their material well, and in very different ways make solid contributions to Middle Eastern studies. The Milton-Edwards book is an introductory text, most suitable for – and clearly aimed at – first or second year undergraduate students undertaking an introductory course on Middle East politics. The book is welcome, as there is

not a large corpus of such texts available on the market; some of the better ones such as Bill and Springborg (1999) are becoming dated, although there remain some good texts to compete with Milton-Edwards, such as Andersen, Seibert and Wagner (2008). In some ways it is unfortunate that academics do not receive more credit for writing textbooks; there is the assumption that such works do not constitute 'new' research, which although usually literally true, nonetheless ignores the fact that such works can contain new approaches. Moreover, textbooks are not easy to produce, given the challenge of producing a short, sharp and accessible narrative with clear explanations and without succumbing to generalisations. Milton-Edwards has done a good job of producing a text that is comprehensive (or at least as comprehensive as could be expected of a single-volume textbook) and avoids many of the problems that bedevil other such books.

Milton-Edwards does not have a unique theoretical approach laying behind the book but, rather, in presenting factual material she introduces the reader to the range and complexity of the debate surrounding particular events and dynamics. She also uses case studies deftly, which sharpen the picture she creates for those new to the subject matter. Laudably, she has only a short introduction, which highlights for the reader a few themes and pitfalls in approaching the Middle East. She then dives into nine solid chapters. These cover much of what would be expected, and include chapters on the impact of colonialism, Middle Eastern nationalisms, regional conflict, political Islam, and the role of the United States in the region. It is noteworthy that she has also devoted entire chapters to the question of gender in the region and to ethnicity and minorities in the region, respectively; many textbooks give these topics only cursory attention. Importantly, she includes a chapter on democratization; this has become a key topic of debate among scholars and, as she notes, is too often framed around reductionist material and 'culturalist arguments that lead to a concept of exceptionalism' (p. 160). As with other contested issues in the book, she handles the democracy debate with deftness and élan. She also includes a chapter on political economy, which is commendable given the importance of this topic (again, something many textbooks only skim over).

There are weaknesses in her approach, although these perhaps are somewhat predictable and excusable given the complexities of producing a textbook of both breadth and depth. Nonetheless, two are worth noting. First, in introducing as many contending explanations to an issue as possible, her writing style can be convoluted and yet a little thin; it may have been more rewarding, if less balanced, for her to have given prominence to a particular approach. Second, the book is focused heavily on the Arab states of the Middle East. Turkey is barely mentioned at all in the book – one of its few serious failings. There is discussion of Israel, most notably when she enters the Arab–Israeli debate, and mentions Iran in several contexts, including that of political Islam, but more details on non-Arab states would have been useful. There is, for example, a powerful Iranian nationalism that warrants more discussion than the fleeting reference she gives it. Equally, Israeli nationalism is unique in the region, but gets only a brief mention (e.g. around pp. 104–05), although, to be fair, she handles related questions of Israeli state-building, nation-building and democracy competently in a short space (pp. 178–81).

Milton-Edwards' book will be of particular value to undergraduate students and lay readers interested in a balanced, comprehensive overview of the region. It is delivered clearly and, overall, engagingly. It will be of less value to those with some knowledge of the region, among whom Posusney and Angrist's *Authoritarianism in the Middle East* ought to be well-received. The persistence of weak yet ruthless states in the Middle East continues to confound many scholars, especially those who once held out hopes of generational change or of civil society transforming the region's politics. The implications of brutal and brutish states for democratisation, economic liberalisation, and a nascent civil society occupy many scholars and have provided a large corpus of literature in recent times.

The book draws on a range of contributors for its chapters. Posusney and Angrist are experts on Middle Eastern political change and political processes, and have done a solid job of bringing together an interesting set of papers on the 'democracy deficit' and the endurance of authoritarianism in the Middle East. Contributors such as Eva Bellin, Michael Herb and Ellen Lust-Okar will be familiar to scholars with an interest in the Middle East because of their previous work on Middle Eastern politics (Bellin 2002; Herb 1999; Lust-Okar 2005). Overall, the book's chapters (which originally appeared in a special issue of the journal *Comparative Politics*¹) are excellent.

The book takes up the challenge of explaining 'why authoritarian regimes in the Middle East have endured for so long while formerly authoritarian governments in many other countries have given way to democracy in the past several decades' (p. ix). The first chapter, by Posusney, in effect acts as its introduction and lays out the problem at hand and the weaknesses of conventional explanations for a lack of democracy, demolishing political culture arguments (pp. 4–5) – although Hudson (1995) has made a convincing argument for guardedly retaining a political culture approach to some aspects of Middle Eastern studies – and outlining how a honing of political economy arguments, specifically those based on rentier state theory, can provide some answers, especially when combined with a study of political institutions (pp. 5–12) and some characteristics of agency in the region. In various ways, these arguments are then taken up by the other authors.

The book is divided into two main parts. In the first, thematic part, Eva Bellin provides an excellent starting point by arguing that the resistance to democratic impulses in the region can be best accounted for by the ferocity of political institutions. The strength of these institutions, she argues, lies in rentier income, external patronage, patrimonialism – *neo*-patrimonialism might have been a more accurate term, I think – and the problems faced by societal forces in mounting mass movements to promote political liberalisation. This is followed by a chapter by Jason Brownlee that examines Iraq, Libya, Syria and Tunisia in comparative perspective, and then by a chapter by Arang Keshavarzian on elite consolidation in Iran. Brownless arrives at a conclusion not dissimilar to Bellin in arguing that rulers 'use tightly managed repressive organizations and can be tenacious when challenged' (p. 61), although his analysis brings into the equation the role of foreign patrons in tacitly allowing

¹Specifically Vol. 36, No. 2, published in January 2004.

or ignoring repression by the regimes he examines. Keshavarzian argues that elite fragmentation underwrites regime maintenance in Iran because it fosters pluralism while yet undermining democratic imperatives.

The second part of the book consists of five chapters that address specific case studies. Two chapters look at party and electoral politics: one by Posusney looks at electoral experiments in the region and how, with careful regime management of the processes and 'rules', oppositions are forced into working within the status quo and from weakened positions. No surprises, by this account, that electoral politics has not delivered genuine democratic transformation. The next chapter, by Angrist, looks at the case of Turkey, arguing that it is the most democratically competitive state in the region by virtue of the breadth, variance and capacities of its political parties (p. 120). Turkish democracy, as Angrist notes (p. 130), also emerged at a specific time and in unique circumstances.

The remaining three chapters look at specific dynamics in particular countries. One by Lust-Okar looks at regime co-optation of opposition, arguing that this explains why – contrary to the belief of many political scientists – economic crisis need not lead to democratic transition or greater pluralism. This argument is well made in the cases of Jordan and Morocco, although one wonders if recent electoral reforms in the Gulf might make it less compelling. The chapter of the book by Michael Herb that does look at the Gulf is concerned not with the political economy of authoritarianism as much as the patterns of royal patronage and the ways in which legislatures and other potential oppositional elite are kept weak by monarchies. Finally, a chapter by Vickie Langohr looks at Egypt and the problems of assuming too much from civil society as a force for political change: non-governmental actors are, she argues, too interwoven with political parties as a source for their financing to play the intermediary role that many envisage of or expect from them.

Together, the chapters in *Authoritarianism in the Middle East* form a solid and sobering text on the durability of the repressive Middle Eastern states and the region's 'democracy deficit'. Both the breadth and sophistication of the book are pleasing. Only a couple of criticisms can be made. One is that some interesting potential case studies are missing: Yemen would have made a fascinating case study chapter, for example, given its experience with democratisation in the 1990s followed by a reversion back to greater authoritarianism after the Saleh regime was consolidated after the 1994 civil war and as it developed an oil rentier structure after the mid-1990s. Arguably, a chapter on Algeria may have been useful too, given the lessons afforded by the democratic experiment there and its link to the civil war of the 1990s. A second criticism is that a much stronger conclusion would have been helpful; Chapter 10 ('The outlook for authoritarians') reiterates the book's key findings, and includes a few pages on 'What is to be done?', which is principally a set of policy recommendations. It is here, for example, that the lessons for democratisation of the 1990s Algerian civil war are mentioned cursorily (p. 231). Many of the ideas raised – the widespread conception that democracy delivers Islamist governments, the functions of international financial bodies in transitions, the past and potential roles of the US in democratic transitions – could have been investigated in more depth in this chapter, and in some cases previous ones. That said, these criticisms do not fundamentally spoil the book, which is

recommended to those interested in Middle Eastern democratisation and state-society relations.

The Mess that is Iraq

The two books on Iraq under review, Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack's *Things Fall Apart* and Gareth Stansfield's *Iraq: People, History, Politics* are both, for different reasons, useful additions to the growing literature on Iraq. The number of books on Iraq has – no surprise at all – swelled greatly since the US-led invasion of the country in 2003. There are several older works of great note on Iraqi politics, including Khadduri (1969) and Batatu (1978) – both classics of modern Middle Eastern studies – but the amount of material grew greatly after the 1990–91 Gulf War and during the 1990s (see, among many others, Bengio 1998; CARDRI 1990; Cockburn and Cockburn 1999; Tripp 2000). The 2003 Iraq War led to further material on the initial military conflict (Keegan 2004) and its causes and impacts (Fawn and Hinnebusch 2006), followed by various books on the chaos and incompetence of the US-led reconstruction (Diamond 2005; Phillips 2005), the tragedy of the civil conflict (Dodge 2005), and some mostly self-justifying memoirs (Bremer 2007). Some of these works are far better than others in elucidating the dynamics of the contemporary Iraqi polity and the factors that account for the current mess in Iraq; for example, Keegan's book, which was clearly rushed out, is a military historian of renown, and Diamond and Dodge are well versed in Iraq's history and in issues related to Middle Eastern democratisation and development.

Gareth Stansfield is another writer who is quickly gaining a reputation as a leading expert on Iraq. A professor at the University of Exeter and an Associate Fellow in the Middle East Programme at Chatham House in London, he gained on-the-ground experience in Iraq in the 1990s working for the UK government's development body; such practical experience is rare among experts on Iraq, although Diamond had worked with the US government in Iraq. Since moving into academia, Stansfield has written extensively on Iraq (see, for example, Stansfield (2003) and Anderson and Stansfield (2004)). He became especially well known with his Chatham House paper *Accepting Realities in Iraq*, which was published in mid-2007 and widely debated, including in the public realm, given its argument that Iraq was fragmented and violent beyond any immediate or simple repair. Despite the optimism that some have attached to the 2007–08 US troop 'surge', in time he will probably be proven right.²

Stansfield's latest book *Iraq: People, History, Politics* is an excellent modern history of this complex country. Although seeming to be a sweeping overview, it contains some ideas of interest to those who follow events in Iraq more closely.

²It is not the place of this essay to enter the debate about the 'surge' but, briefly: the surge has helped security in Iraq but is only one temporary and unsustainable source of the reduction in violence in Iraq. There is an appearance of greater security primarily because of a fragile ceasefire by Muqtada al-Sadr and his *Jaysh al-Mahdi* (Mahdi Army) and because of the Sunni tribal 'Awakening' in western Iraq, which is probably planting false hopes of long-term Sunni power in Iraq while, according to some reports, arming Sunni tribes in the process. When the 'surge' ends, as it must in 2008, any collapse or failure of the al-Sadr ceasefire or the Sunni Awakening movement will likely see Iraq revert to levels of violence seen in 2006, if not worse.

It is an accessible narrative focused on Iraqi history, especially since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In this sense, it will find appeal among people looking for an introductory text on modern Iraqi history, with the country's political evolution and international relations placed into historical context and with solid factual detail supporting its arguments.

For those with some understanding of Iraq, the more important benefit of the book is its thematic approach. It enters four key debates about the nature of the Iraqi state and society. Stansfield first enters the debate about whether Iraq is an artificial construct, in a chapter on pre-independence state formation, to which his reply is that most modern states have an element of artificiality, but that the impacts of war, sanctions, and regime change likely mean that the Iraqi state's nature will probably be renegotiated or altered in the future. The second theme is on the 'identity' debate and what constitutes Iraqiness and how this relates to religion, sect, and other shapers of social distinctiveness. This is, arguably, not the best-handled part of the book, as it does not contain much that is new for those who follow Iraq. Nonetheless, Stansfield does a solid job of elucidating both national identity and sectarianism for the non-specialist reader. The third theme is the 'dictator' debate: what is really examined here is how civil–military relations have fashioned and reinforced authoritarianism. Stansfield makes a good distinction between authoritarianism and totalitarianism (pp. 78–9) – a distinction that less competent observers of Iraq have often blurred, as he notes (p. 75) – and draws upon both political economy and modern historical dynamics of the Iraqi military to make the argument that 'the *predisposition* [emphasis original] of Iraq to succumb to authoritarian methods of government is a product of the bringing together of disparate communities following the downfall of the Ottoman empire and the empowerment of one group over all the others' (p. 77). The Sunni Arab population gained dominance due to their elite status during British control of the country (in effect, from World War I to 1958). This argument is on solid ground, as is the political economy argument he makes about the financial impacts of the 1980–88 Iran–Iraq War pushing Saddam into an invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 as what, to him, would have seemed like a matter of regime survival (pp. 124–8). Stansfield also provides the reader a reminder, oft forgotten of late, that Kuwait was far from guiltless or vigilant in its dealings with Iraq in the prelude to Saddam's invasion (pp. 123–4). As a final theme, and perhaps of most interest to many readers, is the 'democratisation debate'. Stansfield handles this most contentious and complex of debates well, linking the question of Iraqi democratisation to state-building; namely, will regime change in a case such as post-2003 Iraq help consolidate a multi-ethnic state or lead to its fragmentation or demolition (p. 160)? Stansfield's sobering (if not entirely unexpected) prediction seems to be the latter, given that he sees an end to Iraqi single-state nationalism (p. 197) and given his damning assessment of both sanctions and authoritarianism on Iraq's political economy and society (eg. pp. 138–140, 156–8, 198).

Stansfield covers such breadth of complicated and disputed material that it seems almost unfair to criticise him for small problems such as the occasional narrow discussion or for not placing as much emphasis on some issues as others. Given the narrative and thematic span of the book, it is the best of its kind about modern Iraq to appear thus far since the fall of Saddam; it will be

useful to a variety of readers with varying knowledge of Iraq and thus is recommended enthusiastically. The other book under review, Byman and Pollack's *Things Fall Apart*, is also recommended, although to a readership with more particular interests. Byman and Pollack enter the debate about the conflict and instability in post-Saddam Iraq, and particularly seek to provide readers with a set of worst-case regional impacts from the conflict and unrest in Iraq. Their view is that Iraq is in a state of civil war already (p. 17) and that, with all the consequences and implications of that, the US will not be able to ignore the conflict without a 'spillover' of the conflict into the region. The consequences of spillover, and how to avoid or minimise it, are the emphases of the book.

Although *Things Fall Apart*, coming from a Washington (DC) 'think tank', is heavily policy-oriented – something that will please some readers as much as it will disappoint others – it handles with sophistication and panache an important and under-considered aspect of the current turmoil in Iraq. The first part of the book sets forth the case for being concerned about spillover; the authors detail refugee and humanitarian crises, greater terrorism risk, mass radicalisation, secession impetuses, regional interventionism and economic negatives as all being possible outcomes of civil war spillover. They then spend a chapter on policy recommendations for containing spillover. Among their recommendations are to not pick winners – something that should make sense to many observers but which Washington sometimes has difficulty in doing – and to pull back from urban centres and involve Iraq's neighbours in decision making and financial and other support related to the conflict. Byman and Pollack are probably right in arguing that the issue must not be tossed at the United Nations as an easy solution for the US, although I imagine this proposition will not find universal approval. Various other suggestions are more tactical in nature: dissuading interventionism from the region, managing Iran's conduct, regularly talking about Iraq with the region, and counter-terrorism tactics for the US forces that remain in and near the Iraqi theatre.

The second part of the book, and the bulk of its content, consists of a set of case studies of other civil wars and the lessons learnt for handling spillover from Iraq. Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Lebanon, Somalia, and Yugoslavia are each addressed in separate chapters. Mostly, this material is interesting and well handled; for readers without an understanding of these conflicts, the material is accessible and interesting and, moreover, maintains its relevance and cohesion by being linked specifically to the question of spillover from Iraq. There are a few errors of fact in the book – Israel withdrew from Lebanon in May not October (p. 163) of 2000 – and some questionable arguments, including underplaying Lebanon's fragility prior to the outbreak of civil war in 1975. These noted, they do not detract from the readability, interest and uniqueness of the book. It is an accessible work that successfully places the conflict in Iraq, specifically its regional implications, into a comparative framework, while providing policy ideas that will interest both officials and scholars alike who are grappling with the question of Iraq's impacts.

The great book on the 2003 Iraq War and its consequences have not yet been written; indeed, it cannot yet be written, as it will come only years after the end of whatever type of turmoil still awaits that unfortunate country and its people.

Any book appearing now does so when even the question of how to describe the status of the conflict in Iraq – is it a civil war or just a form of instability? Is it getting better or worse? – is being fiercely debated. Arguably, scholars need a dose of either audacity or imprudence to venture further in a prediction of Iraq's future than simply to suspect out loud that it will, at best, be unpleasant and tortuous. Yet Stansfield's and Byman and Pollack's books are neither audacious nor imprudent; they are judicious and timely. Stansfield's trawls through Iraq's history for insights into its future, while Byman and Pollack's remind us that, in terms of regional impact, things in Iraq can and may be worse.

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