September 11 in Historical Perspective

Oct 21, 2001

In-Depth Reports

I would like to begin by explaining a profoundly important difference between Middle Eastern and American culture. In the United States, the phrase "that's ancient history" is commonly used to dismiss something as no longer important, relevant, or worthy of serious concern. Young Americans tend to have a truncated view of history, with events such as the Vietnam War regarded as medieval history, the Korean War as ancient history, and World War II as something like archaeology. Middle Easterners have a very different attitude toward history. For them, history is still very much alive and part of their everyday life and identity.

One example of this difference can be found in the rhetoric surrounding the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. At the time, the Economist described the conflict as a "squalid war between two barely distinguishable four-letter countries." This is a stark contrast to the grandiose propaganda produced by these two Middle Eastern countries during the war, which contained frequent allusions to Yazid, Hussein, Qadisiyya, and Karbala -- that is, to personalities and events of the seventh century. These allusions were not lengthy descriptions of the particular personalities and events, but simple, rapid, incomplete references that were made with the certain knowledge that they would be understood by their target audience, a fair proportion of whom were illiterate. Can you imagine American or Western European politicians attempting to drive their points home by referring to the seventh-century Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy? Of course not. But Middle Eastern societies are surrounded with living history, and the memory of past events is renewed daily, absorbed from schools, from mosques, from entertainment, from conversations. This history may not always be accurate or unbiased, but it is profoundly felt.

Another example of this phenomenon is Osama bin Laden, who frequently refers to history in his public statements. In one recent statement, he alluded to an event that happened over eighty years ago, without going into detail, knowing that his audience would understand. In other statements, he has alluded to medieval and early Islamic history in a similarly casual fashion.

One way of understanding these differing perceptions of history is to look at cultural identity. Westerners are accustomed to history that is divided by country: the history of France, the history of England, the history of the United States, and so on. In Middle Eastern countries, such histories are a very recent phenomenon, still imperfectly absorbed. This should come as no surprise; although most of these countries are in one sense the most ancient in the world, in another sense they are new, rather artificial creations. This fact is reflected in their names, many of which are either borrowed from elsewhere (e.g., Syria, Palestine, and Libya come from the administrative geography of the Roman Empire) or invented (e.g., the name Pakistan, or "land of the pure," was created only a few years before the country itself).

Moreover, while Westerners think of their nations as subdivided into religions, Middle Easterners think of their religion as subdivided into nations. In European historiography, for example, the long invasions of Europe by Arabs and by Turks are always described as just that: wars with "the Arabs" (or "Moors" or "Saracens") and "the Turks." In the immensely rich and varied pre-modern Arabic and Turkish historiography of those wars, however, I have yet to come across a single instance in which they defined their side as "the Arabs" or "the Turks." Their side was always

Islam -- "the armies of Islam," "the rulers of Islam," "the soldiers of Islam" -- and the Europeans, while sometimes designated by ethnic or territorial titles, were more often simply "the infidels." To them, all of these wars were part of the same conflict: the true believers versus the unbelievers. I am not saying that this view is common today, although obviously it still holds for some. It does remain the traditional approach to such conflicts, however, one that is deeply rooted in the historiographical literature. Islam is still a primary source of identity in the Middle East, even among those who are not particularly rigid in their religious beliefs. In this sense, a Muslim might identify more with a fellow Muslim who lives in another country than with his Christian or Jewish next-door neighbor.

The decisive changes that took place in the nature and scope of terrorism can be traced to 1990, when Osama bin Laden became active and formed al-Qaeda. Bin Laden himself has been very helpful in explaining the historical roots of these changes. He writes with remarkable clarity and frankness. We may accuse him of being many things, but rarely a liar or a hypocrite; he says what he means, often powerfully and effectively. In his early fatwa against the United States, he describes the jihad against Americans as a defensive one. In his view, Islam is under attack by infidels, as evidenced by the "occupation," as he sees it, of part of Arabia by American troops, or "Crusaders." For Muslims, the "Holy Land" is the country where the prophet Muhammad was born, brought his message, and died: that is, northern Arabia. Thus, the American presence in part of this holy land is profoundly shocking to bin Laden and others like him.

When the original Crusaders captured their own holy city of Jerusalem, the immediate reaction of the Islamic world was minimal. Arabs in Jerusalem appealed to neighboring Arab rulers for help, but there was virtually no response. Even the great Saladin, who eventually led the anti-Crusade, was willing to make a deal with the Crusader king of Jerusalem. The anti-Crusade did not begin until a Crusader chieftain based in what is now Jordan raided Arabia, attacking the Hijaz, pilgrim caravans, and shipping in the Red Sea -- a raid not on the Christian or Jewish holy land, but on the Muslim holy land.

Even the British Empire, at its height of power, was careful not to infringe on this territory. The British nibbled at the edges -- Kuwait, Oman, Aden -- but they always stopped shy of entering the Hijaz, which contained Mecca and Medina. American troops were the first since the Crusaders to enter the Arabian mainland, with rather similar results.

The roots of the bin Laden phenomenon can also be found in the modern history of the Middle East, which most historians, including Middle Easterners, agree began in 1798. In that year, a young French general named Napoleon Bonaparte arrived in Egypt with a small expeditionary force, quickly conquering the country and ruling it for several years thereafter. This was a terrible shock for Muslims, who had, even at that late stage, tended to think of the Islamic world as inviolate. Napoleon demonstrated that even a small European army could invade, occupy, and rule part of the heartland of the Islamic world -- Egypt, so near to the holy land -- with impunity.

The second shock came a few years later with Napoleon's departure. The eviction of the French from Egypt was accomplished not by the Egyptians, nor by their suzerains at that time, the Ottoman Turks; it was accomplished by a small squadron of the British Royal Navy, commanded by a young admiral named Horatio Nelson. So not only could a European power invade and occupy the Middle Eastern heartland at will, but it would seem that only another European power could oust those armies.

This was the beginning of some 200 years of history during which the Middle East, even while still nominally independent, was at the mercy of outside powers. Initially, when the greatest powers in the world were the Christian powers of Europe, it was the play of their rivalries and wars that determined the course of events in the Middle East. Middle Easterners learned how to play these powers against one another rather quickly, of course. During the next two centuries, this scenario changed very little, though the players sometimes switched roles: England against France; England and France against Russia; England, France, and Russia against Germany; and so on. In the last

chapter of this drama, the rivals were the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, facing each other in much the same way that Bonaparte and Nelson had, but with much better weapons and on a much larger scale.

Then, something extraordinary happened; the modern history of the Middle East, inaugurated by Bonaparte and Nelson, was terminated by Bush and Gorbachev. Both rival powers checked out of the game -- the Russians because they could not play it any longer and the Americans because they would not. Suddenly, the Middle Eastern peoples, and more particularly their governments, had the very disconcerting experience of finding themselves in a totally unfamiliar situation; all of the rules had changed, and they did not know what to do. During the period of Western dominance, particularly the last half of the twentieth century, their strategy had been clear; operating under the principle "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," Middle Easterners had turned to the enemies of Britain, France, and the United States. Between 1933 and 1945, they sought comfort and hope from the Third Reich, and some of their leaders developed very close relationships with the Nazis. After the collapse of the Third Reich, they found that Stalin was a suitable substitute for Hitler. Those who were resisting what they saw as Western exploitation turned very naturally to the new principal enemy of the West, the Soviet Union.

One often hears complaints today about American imperialism in the Middle East. Yet, a closer look at these complaints shows that few are arguing that America is acting imperially. Rather, most critics complain that the post -- Cold War United States is failing to live up to its imperial responsibilities, such as settling disputes between Middle Eastern parties. One common accusation is that the United States uses a double standard in the region. But that is most unfair. Why should America be limited to two standards? (Laughter.) A superpower in a world of sovereign powers needs multiple standards for dealing with different situations and entities. Evenhandedness is a desirable and necessary quality for judges, juries, police forces, and other agencies of law enforcement. It would be equally desirable and necessary for an imperial suzerain dealing with various protÃ©gÃ©s and tributary princes. Yet, as applied to a sovereign power in a world of sovereign powers, the "double standard" charge is utterly meaningless, stemming from a failure to internalize the fact that the old rules no longer apply. The United States is not an imperial power with responsibilities to the Middle East, and it therefore has no particular obligation to be evenhanded.

Osama bin Laden and his followers recognized the new rules. No longer could they play rival powers against each other; if they wanted to continue the struggle against the West, they had to take it into their own hands. This realization was part of the founding logic behind al-Qaeda and its recourse to strategies and weapons that had not been used in the past. Their line of thinking is perhaps best illustrated by a famous line from medieval Islamic poetry -- that a lone assassin can defeat a mighty king and all his armies.

But the U.S. experience in Somalia showed that some Middle Eastern perceptions are still mired in the past. As most Americans saw it, U.S. involvement was an act of kindness and charity toward a benighted country going through great difficulties. When the intended beneficiaries proved murderously ungrateful, the natural response was, "To hell with you, we're getting out. We don't need this." Yet, Osama bin Laden perceived the situation differently. In a 1998 interview with ABC News*, he expressed the not-uncommon interpretation that the United States went to Somalia with predatory, imperialistic intentions. Why anyone in his right mind would think that the United States wanted to extend its domain -- and hence, responsibilities -- to a place like Somalia baffles the imagination; apparently not the Middle Eastern imagination, though.

The end of the Somalia fiasco illustrates another common perception in the region: that the American invaders were driven out by force and fled in terror. This perception has contributed to the disrespect, as Martin Kramer has pointed out, that many in the Middle East felt toward the United States when it refrained from taking forceful action against terrorism. The 1979 hostage crisis in Iran further illustrates this phenomenon. Articles written by the hostage takers and published in the Iranian press in years subsequent to the crisis revealed that when they seized the embassy hostages, they intended to hold them for only a few days and then let them go. When they saw the

response from Washington, however, they decided that they were on to a good thing -- at least until Ronald Reagan came along. Reagan's election convinced them that further protraction of the crisis could be dangerous. As one of them said at the time, "This man is like a cowboy who will come out with his six-shooters." So they released the hostages before Reagan even took office.

Another lesson from the hostage crisis is that it occurred not because relations between the new government of Iran and the United States were deteriorating, but rather because they were improving. Days before the crisis, a meeting took place in Algiers between the relatively moderate Iranian prime minister Mehdi Bazargan and the U.S. national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. A photograph of the two men shaking hands was highlighted by media across the world, including the Iranian press. For the less moderate forces in Iran, this was a real danger sign. They needed the United States as an enemy, so they provoked the assault on the embassy. After all, having the United States as an enemy gives one dignity and stature.

Undoubtedly, there is much hatred in the Middle East for the United States; it has been growing for a long time and for a variety of reasons. Yet, the real danger lies in the fact that this hatred is no longer tempered by respect or constrained by fear. Still, it is important to ask why this hatred exists. One answer lies in the long list of specific grievances issuing from various parts of the Muslim world. Conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims are ongoing in several areas of the globe -- Chechnya, Bosnia, Mindanao, Kashmir, and so on. The most prominent and frequently cited of these conflicts is that which exists between the Arabs and Israelis. Of course, this is a serious conflict; however, its prominence is due largely to the fact that among the many grievances felt by citizens of Arab countries, it is the only one that can be freely and safely aired. Thus, the conflict serves as an invaluable safety valve for other, much more dangerous problems. This is not to underrate the importance of specific Arab grievances against the West. Nevertheless, the underlying problems within Arab countries are greater than these grievances, and I doubt that remedying any specific grievance would bring significant change.

Perhaps the most important grievance among Middle Easterners -- not so much against the United States as against the West in general and against history -- is that their civilization has failed in every one of its efforts to keep up with the West. They have tried modernization and reform of various kinds without success. Not surprisingly, it has been difficult for them to stomach the fact that what had for many centuries been the most advanced, creative, and enlightened civilization in the world suddenly found itself outpaced and outperformed in almost every significant field of human endeavor by the upstart, barbarian infidels of the Western world.

Middle Easterners have tried to find various explanations and remedies for this fact. The most obvious remedy was to discover the secret of Western power in order to adopt it. They started with the military, adopting Western weapons, uniforms, organizations, and so forth. Yet, this military Westernization simply led them to defeat after defeat on virtually every battlefield.

Then, they turned their attention to the Western economic system -- industry in particular. They tried to modernize their economies, but succeeded only in producing a collection of derelict, bankrupt, impoverished societies.

Finally, they looked to Western systems of government. The trappings of democracy -- constitutions, elected assemblies, and so forth -- were all very strange to them, and therefore more likely to be the secret talisman of Western success. Yet, when they tried to adopt these trappings, the result was a series of shabby tyrannies and tame assemblies. Over the last fifty years or so, the two dominant political ideologies in the Middle East -- nationalism and socialism -- have been Western imports as well. Both commanded enthusiastic support in the region, but both have been utterly discredited: socialism by its failure, and nationalism by its success. The Arab world followed various types of socialism, sometimes calling it "scientific socialism," other times "Arab socialism"; they finally decided that socialism is neither scientific nor Arab, particularly since the socialist economies in the region were, for the most part, derelict. The success of nationalism in the region was predicated on a sort of confusion between two different,

though related, terms: freedom and independence. For a long time, it was assumed that these two words meant the same thing. Yet, when Middle Easterners achieved independence for their countries, they usually found that they had lost what little personal freedom they already had.

Given these circumstances, it should come as no surprise that many Middle Easterners listen attentively to those who blame the problems in the region on its aping of the West. The alternative that they offer is a return to their roots: to the authentic, God-given message of their faith, and so on. Two serious solutions have become manifest in the Islamic world, embodied in two states. The Islamic solution is ongoing in Iran, where the state is officially grounded on the principle of restoring the holy law as the law of the land. The other solution is one of taking what is best from the West (e.g., free institutions, respect for human rights, responsible government, genuinely free elections) and marrying it with Islamic traditions. This solution is being tried in Turkey, which is experiencing many difficulties, reverses, and upheavals, but is nevertheless making progress.

The Iranian solution has its followers in Turkey, as does the Turkish solution in Iran. In free Turkish elections, Islamist opinions constitute roughly 20 percent of the electorate. We do not know what percentage of the electorate in Iran would prefer a secular democracy, since the expression of that preference is not permitted in an Islamic theocracy. One gets the impression that 20 percent would be a bare minimum, however, and that the real number would probably be much larger.

These, it seems to me, are the two most likely paths that Middle Eastern countries will take in the near future. Which will they choose? Let me conclude by paraphrasing one of Winston Churchill's more famous aphorisms: you can be sure that people will do the right thing after they have exhausted all other possibilities.

The full proceedings of the 2001 Weinberg Founders Conference were published as a **monograph. (templateC04.php?CID=141)** ❖

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