

Crises of the middle east: 1914, 1967, 2003

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In *Variations on Day and Night* - the first volume of his great historical trilogy of the modern Arab world - the late Saudi writer Abdelrahman Munif [1] describes the impact on the region of the first world war and the collapse of the Ottoman empire:

"The world, the whole world, in that quaking era, so full of anticipation and possibilities, looked around, as slow as a tortoise, as swift as a bolt of lightning, to question, to listen carefully for distant thunder, watching with dread for the for the approaching morrow. Then, everything was open to reevaluation, to reapportionment: ideas, regions, countries, even kings, sultans and little princes. New states rose suddenly, and others vanished."

This is a good time to recall such words. Amid all the retrospective analysis, after forty years, of the Arab-Israeli war of June 1967 [2] it is necessary to set this event in some perspective and context. It was arguably one of the most important moments in the modern history of the middle east, on a par with the Iranian revolution of 1978-79 and the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 - but it was not the most important. That honour belongs to the early part of the 20th century, the moment in relation to which the region of today, and all Israeli-Arab wars - past and future - have to be seen.

An end and a beginning

The first world war more than any other since the rise the Ottoman empire [3] in the 15th century, defined the modern middle east. It was this war that created the system of states - twenty or so Arab and three non-Arab - that characterise the region today. It was also this event that drew the boxes within which, like some great historical colouring scheme, modernity created the modern nations of the region out of a motley collection of pre-existing peoples, geographical terms and myths (even as, like those everywhere else in the world, they proceeded to claim ancient affiliation). In larger measure, indeed, the map of the region has remained the same since Winston Churchill and his associates drew it [4] around 1920: this was the founding moment.

The "great war" of 1914-18 finished a process [5] that had begun long before its outbreak. In the 19th century, colonial Europe had implanted itself on the other peripheries of the Ottoman empire: the French and Italians in north Africa, the British in Egypt, Cyprus, Aden and the smaller Gulf states. The formerly Ottoman Balkans [6] had already been carved up by Russia and Austria, with bit parts for the Greeks, Bulgars, Albanians and Romanians in their wake. But it was after the defeat of the Ottomans in the great war, in a war they unwisely and unnecessarily chose to enter, that the French and British delimited and indeed invented (by transforming hitherto loose names into specific territorial boxes) what became Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and - not to be forgotten for it did not exist before - Palestine.

In the territories that remained outside colonial control, new authoritarian and nationalist military regimes arose - modernising, secular and nationalist in Iran and Turkey, conservative and tribal in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. In Palestine, Zionism - the movement that aimed to create a Jewish state in the territories once inhabited for a few centuries by the modern Jews' remote ancestors - received a green light from the British in the form of the Balfour declaration of November 1917. The losers were those peoples who, trusting in the promises of British diplomats and of American President Wilson, had sought recognition and support from the western states: the Kurds who, despite a vague promise of consultation in the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres [7], got nothing; the Armenians, who emerged from genocide with a rump state around the hitherto provincial town of Yerevan that immediately fell under Soviet control; and the Arabs, who found themselves fragmented and dominated.

Thus did the global conflict shape the territorial map and state character of the middle east. No subsequent conflict - not the second world war, the decolonisation that followed it, or the cold war - had any comparable effect. In the eight decades since the 1920 settlement, all attempts at Arab unity have failed, with the exception of the fusion of the two Yemens [8] in 1990; the consensual unity of Egypt and Syria broke apart in 1961, Saddam's "unity of tanks" failed in 1990 with regard to Kuwait.

With regard to the Turks, it was one of the great achievements of Kemal Atatürk [9] that, after he completed his "liberation war" in 1923, he got his people to accept the much reduced boundaries that eventuated from the great war (even if his successors have eroded this: episodically in regard to northern Iraq, more enduringly in northern Cyprus).

The Iranians on their side have not used force to pose any serious territorial demands on anyone in the past century and half: in today's tense times, it is worth remembering that the last occasion Iran invaded a foreign country was when Shah Nader Shah [10] occupied Delhi in 1736 - a non-aggression record of nearly three centuries which no other significant state in the world, even including Scandinavia, can claim.

The same is true, despite all the changes of frontier and speculations about settlement and withdrawal, of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In summary terms, a civil war has continued with sporadic intensity between the two communities, Israeli and Palestinian, who have been formed in Palestine (neither a Jewish "Israeli" nor an Arab "Palestinian" nation existed before); yet the actual borders [11] within which this conflict has been fought out are that of 1920.

The first Arab-Israeli war of 1948-49 [12] did repartition the area of Palestine, between Israel and the Arab states (Jordan on the West Bank, Egypt in Gaza) but this redrawing of the map proved to be temporary: 1967 brought all into one box again. This is all the clearer since 2000, when the collapse of the Yasser Arafat-Ehud Barak talks at Camp David [13] and the outbreak of the second intifada [14] marked the end of any realistic prospect of a two-state solution. The point about Hamas [15]- reinforced by its combative campaign against Fatah in Gaza in these days of internecine conflict - is that it is not interested in what may be termed "the agenda of 1967", i.e. some kind of compromise or repartition. Nor, as is evident, is the majority of Israeli public opinion.

1920 and after

Analysis of 1920 also serves another, much needed, function in regard to discussion of the middle east: namely to discount, if not entirely eliminate, all claims about legitimacy, national identity or cultural continuity that predate this event. In a world where so many analysts, in the region and outside, fall back on explanations in terms of ancient history, holy texts, deep structures, climatic determination or perverse national character (not to mention "Islam", "clash

of civilisations" or "oriental despotism"), my challenge to all those who fall back on historical explanation is for them to show how *anything* that happened before 1920 is relevant to explaining the middle east of today.

My one, and virtually only, instinct about the current civil and internationalised war in Iraq is that, whenever it ends, and it could be some years away, the territorial entity, the box created in 1920, will endure. Equally, and for all the rhetoric and hype now surrounding talk of a new pan-Islamic [15] *Sunni* community or *umma*, one that transcends existing "western-imposed" states, this is very much a minority current - even if, in the form of al-Qaida and the various militant *Sunni* militias which have arisen in the Palestinian camps in Lebanon, this minority is, as the British foreign office likes to say of itself, punching above its weight.

The reverberations of 1967

1967 served, therefore, to pull the region back into the box created in 1920, even if it took another three decades for the chimera of partition and of a two-state solution, undoubtedly the best solution, to be cast aside. It had, however, other important consequences, which echo the dramatic words of Abdelrahman Munif [16] about the first world war: kings did indeed fall. Just as after the Suez crisis of 1956 the monarchy fell in Iraq in 1958, and with consequences that continue to be felt, the 1967 war led to a widespread change in the Arab world.

The first manifestation of this was in Aden, the longest-lasting British colony, where the weakening of Egypt in the war with Israel had the paradoxical consequence of unleashing a far-left guerrilla movement that took power in the wake of the British withdrawal in November 1967 and established the People's Republic of South Yemen [17], later the only case of an Arab communist state; the second was in Iraq in July 1968, when the Ba'ath Party [18] definitively took power, leading to the thirty-five year rule of Saddam Hussein and his associates; the third was in Libya in September 1969, where the radical military around Muammar al-Gaddafi overthrew King Idris.

The reverberations [22] of 1967 were also felt much nearer home: the Nasserist experiment in "Arab socialism", already under criticism within Egypt for its corruption and inefficiency, and for the creation of a "new class" of military bureaucrats and entrepreneurs, began its move to the right which Gamal Abdel Nasser's [23] successor Anwar Sadat [24] was to promote when he took over in September 1970. In Jordan, the Palestinian guerrillas emerged as an independent force, breaking the controls which the Arab military regimes had imposed on them before June 1967: it was to take King Hussein's military repression of September 1970, and the long agony of the first phase of the Lebanese civil war (1975-82), before the Arab states were able to bring the Palestinian armed movement under control again.

Three processes - the discrediting of Egypt and Syria in the war in 1967, the rise of the Palestinian *fedayeen* in Jordan (with calls for the conversion of Jordan into the "North Vietnam" of the Palestinian revolution), and the triumph of the radical National Liberation Front in South Yemen - led some commentators on the left within the Arab world to foresee a new, more radical, phase in the region, what was at the time termed "the crisis of

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the petty-bourgeois regimes". The fall of Ahmed Ben Bella in Algeria [25] in 1966 was, for a time, seen as part of the same process.

But, in the longer run, the "crisis of the petty-bourgeois regimes" led not to the rise of the workers, peasants and progressive fishermen, nomads and intellectuals, but to something very different: the rise of the conservative Arab oil states. These, especially after the ensuing Arab-Israeli war of October 1973 and the associated Opec rise in oil prices, were able to use their oil revenues to turn the middle east significantly to the right - towards Islamist conservatism, and, in the context of Afghanistan in the 1980s, to active support for and incitement of the tribal and *jihadi* counterrevolution in Afghanistan.

An epochal effect

This brings the story to 2003. For all the dangers of speculating on the long-run significance of recent events, it is at least plausible to say that the United States invasion of Iraq in that year, with all its consequences within Iraq and the region, may prove to be as important an event as 1967 and, in some respects, on a par with the reordering of the region after 1918. It has already set in train six major processes, which will take years to work themselves through:

- the wholesale discrediting of the US, its allies, particularly Britain, and any campaign for the promotion of democracy in the Arab world
- the unleashing across the middle east, and more broadly within the Muslim world, of a revitalised militant Islamism, inspired if not organised by al-Qaida, which has used the Iraq war greatly to strengthen and internationalise its appeal
- the shattering of the power and authority of the Iraqi state, built by the British and later hardened by the Ba'athists and the fragmentation of Iraq into separate, antagonistic, ethnic and religious zones
- the explosion, for the first time in modern history, of internecine war between *Sunni* and *Shi'a* in Iraq, a trend that reverberates in other states of mixed confessional composition
- the alienation of all sectors of Turkish politics from the west and the stimulation of an authoritarian nationalism there of a kind not seen since the 1920s
- the fomenting, albeit in slow motion and with some constraints, of a new regional rivalry, between two groupings: Iran and its allies (including Syria, Hizbollah and Hamas), versus Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan - a rivalry made all the more ominous and contagious by Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons.

This is, in Abdelrahman Munif's words, very much a quaking era. People, within the region and without, are alert to the distant thunder; they do most certainly await the morrow with dread. As should all of us. "Mission accomplished" indeed.

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