Sacral Suicides, Unpunishable Killings, Rites of Power

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Studies of violence relating to the Middle East have sometimes done more harm than they have explained. Like the intended effects of the U.S. military's doctrine of "rapid dominance," compared by its proponents to "tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes ... famine and disease," violence in the Middle East would appear to be "incomprehensible," though less to "the people at large" who are affected by it than to its prolific theoreticians.[1] Over the past two decades, much of the literature on the region as a "cauldron of war"—generating five times its share (by population size) of total global conflict since the mid-20th century[2]—has tended to update and propagate well-known mythologies of primitivism, authoritarian personalities, and ancient hatreds.[3] The significance of such mythopoeia has been its capacity to realize, at least in part, the conditions of its own truthfulness by shaping perception and policy, framing and enabling the infliction of a new wave of warfare on the region. Much contemporary writing on post–Cold War global crisis, the geopolitics of instability, regional conflict, and the future of warfare[4] has not only signally failed to understand the dynamics of the Middle East but has actively contributed to the spread of violence in the region.

As a result, anthropologists and historians (myself included) of the region have sometimes shied away from engaging directly with the study of violence, lest we inadvertently reinforce the stereotypes we wish to counter. This trap can, of course, be escaped, especially through comparativism. Much comparative work in political science provides broader perspectives on, for example, the structural preconditions of civil conflict,[5] the politico-territorial and institutional factors making for different types or degrees of state violence,[6] and the correlations between political attitudes toward social hierarchy and support for intergroup violence in (for example) the United States and Lebanon.[7] Work in clinical psychology on "appetitive aggression" among German World War II veterans or demobilized combatants in the Democratic Republic of Congo is suggestive of avenues that might eventually be explored in Lebanon, Israel, or Algeria.[8]

From a more qualitative perspective, though, it might also turn out that in the Middle East, as elsewhere, violence is inescapable for a deeper reason. Far from marking the region's exceptionalism—its standing outside of "Enlightenment" modernity, which has to civilize it or at least inflict order on it to keep its "coming anarchy" in check—violence of certain kinds, expressed and experienced in certain ways, might be understood as constitutive of its very integration within our shared modern condition. Recent interventions in social theory and political philosophy, from figures as otherwise divergent as Paul Virilio, Slavoj Žižek, and Giorgio Agamben, offer ways of approaching the practices and experiences of violence in this sense.[9] Such approaches might enable new analyses of both the atrocities to which much of the Middle East has so often, in its modern history, been exposed, and on an individual, subjective level, the meanings with which such violence has been infused, the "awe" in which "shock" has been not passively beheld but actively encoded.

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If making sense of "shock" has often involved the mechanisms of "awe," this is not because overwhelming force renders people insensible and incapable of understanding what has hit them, nor because Middle Eastern peoples are peculiarly prone to an atavistic "sacred horror" and respect for force alone. One of the most difficult challenges for historical as for anthropological accounting for extreme physical (and the attendant symbolic, emotional, and epistemic) violence in the contemporary Middle East must be the "minefield"[10] of interpreting practices and experiences of violence that, however difficult to grasp, clearly touch on the relations between social groups, local idioms of power, assertions of state sovereignty, and the sphere of the sacred. The meanings of martyrdom, secularized in the 1960s and 1970s, have subsequently been returned to an imaginary of specifically sacred (and ethical, if not always, as for al-Qaʿida, apocalyptic) struggle "in the cause of God."[11] The figures of the perpetrator of a suicide bombing, in its nationalist (Palestinian) or ultrasectarian (Iraqi) variants, and of the victims of violence in 1990s Algeria, suggest, in their absolute dehumanization (the reduction of the perpetrator, on the one hand, and of the victims, on the other hand, to body parts) something more than a mere instrumentality of violence aimed at achieving political goals.

This is not because violence in the Middle East is rooted in "religious extremism." Rather, Agamben's much-discussed notion of *homo sacer* as the originary figure of the inclusion of "bare life" under sovereign power—and as representing the potential status of every individual under the conditions of biopolitical modernity, as the man outside of civil law, who can be killed with impunity, and outside of divine law, who may not be ritually sacrificed—is perhaps pertinent here.[12] Forms of violence have proliferated in the modern Middle East, as results of, and aggravating factors in, the syndrome of geopolitical, regional, economic, and state-society crises well known to all students of the region (and intimately familiar to the people who live there). In different ways, each has expressed the stark nakedness of life before the organized violence of politics. The region has been a privileged space for the exercise of European, then American, advances in the technology of power-projection: in the past, industrial-capitalist heavy bombardment; today, violence as clinical hypermodernism—cell-phone-operated car bombs, satellite-controlled drones, the Stuxnet virus—expressing rites of power, whose killings are unpunishable (however extra-legal), stemming as they do from the absolute, unaccountable sovereign decision of "democracy's empire." Simultaneously, and at the opposite extreme, imperial violence meted out in the region and retailed back home manifests itself as crude, visual-fetish pulp-porn pop culture: the Abu Ghraib photos; the orange jumpsuits of Guantánamo; the marines filmed defiling Afghan corpses. This is appetitive aggression, mediated into ocularcentric "enjoyment." And somewhere between these two extremes, within the region violence strikes back "from below," similarly ritualized though only in a grim parody of ritual proper, starkly brutal in its direct physicality, cutting to the quick of "bare life." Suicide bombings in Israel, "al-Qaʿida-style" videoed beheadings in Iraq and the Sahara, mass killings and mutilations *à l'arme blanche* in Algeria: these are sacral suicides and sacral killings, neither religious "sacrifice" nor judicial "execution," neither atavistic, culturally determined primitivisms nor the merely rational pursuit of policy by other means. They are assertions of the subjection of human life in its "nudity" to the exigencies of some claim to sovereignty, one increasingly, perhaps, imagined as apocalyptic rather than temporal.

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Against, once again, the persistent claim that the Middle East lies outside of or in opposition to modernity, it is in these contemporary expressions of the reduction of life to its "naked" state—whose routinized, unpunishable violation constitutes the "state of exception" that demarcates other spaces' "normality"—that we might be obliged to recognize one crucial constitutive element of the Middle East's fundamental modernity. This will not be because "their" modernity, due to the ravages of colonialism or some innate cultural predisposition, is a pathological one—deviant from "ours," generating cyclical spasms of violence[13]—but, more alarmingly, because there is no other kind.

NOTES

[1]Cf. Harlan Ullman et al., *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 1996), 110.

[2]Etel Solingen, "Pax Asiatica versus Bella Levantina: The Foundations of War and Peace in East Asia and the Middle East," *American Political Science Review* 101 (2007): 758.

[3]Robert L. Ivie, "Savagery in Democracy's Empire," *Third World Quarterly* 26 (2005): 55–65; Dag Tuastad, "Neo-Orientalism and the New Barbarism Thesis: Aspects of Symbolic Violence in the Middle East Conflict(s)," *Third World Quarterly* 24 (2003): 591–99.

[4]Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996); Robert D. Kaplan, *The Coming Anarchy* (New York: Vintage, 2001); Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

[5]James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97 (2003): 75–90.

[6]James Ron, "Varying Methods of State Violence," *International Organization* 51 (1997): 275–300; idem, *Frontiers and Ghettos: State Violence in Serbia and Israel* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003).

[7]P. J. Henry et al., "Social Dominance Orientation, Authoritarianism, and Support for Intergroup Violence between the Middle East and America," *Political Psychology* 26 (2005): 569–83.

[8]See the publications of Thomas Elbert, Roland Weierstall et al., research group in clinical psychology at the University of Konstanz, http://www.psychologie.uni-konstanz.de/en/research/clinicalpsychology/projects/psychobiology-of-human-diposition-to-violate-and-murder/#c122160 (accessed 1 July 2013).

[9]See esp. Virilio, *Open Sky* (London: Verso, 1997)*, Desert Screen: War at the Speed of Light* (London: Continuum, 2002), and *Ground Zero* (London: Verso, 2002); Žižek, "Are We in a War? Do We Have an Enemy?," *London Review of Books* 24, no. 10 (2002), and, more generally, his work on ideology; Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998) and *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[10]"Terrains minés en ethnologie," special issue of *Ethnologie française* 31 (1st semester, 2001).

[11]Nels Johnson, *Islam and the Politics of Meaning in Palestinian Nationalism* (London: Kegan Paul, 1983); Laleh Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (London: Hurst, 2005).

[12]Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, part 2.

[13]*Contra* Abdelmajid Hannoum, *Violent Modernity: France in Algeria* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), for whom colonialism generated the violence of the 1990s.

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