The Middle East

by
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For political scientists studying the Middle East, the invitation to discuss the possible relevance of their work to comparative politics in general is a welcome and rare opportunity. There is, one senses, a gap between the Middle East political science community and the mainstream disciplinary generalists. To the extent that they even care about being part of the field, some Middle East political scientists feel ghettoized—their region and their work are ignored. Some feel as well that mainstream comparative politics theorizing has not offered much toward better understanding of Middle East politics. Such concerns motivated the establishment of the Conference Group on the Middle East, which organizes sessions in conjunction with, yet separate from, the main program at the APSA Annual Meeting. It is noteworthy that some of the most imaginative recent work on Middle East politics draws from anthropology, political economy, social history, and critical cultural and literary theory. "The Middle East political science community" is not populated exclusively by political scientists.

Indeed, comparative politics generalists seem to ignore the Middle East as a region, feeling perhaps that Middle East political science is atheoretical, a charge that carries considerable truth (see the critical reviews of the field by Zartman, in Binder 1976, and L. Anderson in Sharabi 1990). *APSR* rarely carries articles dealing with Middle East politics; and only belatedly has the general work on democratization dealt (albeit rather thinly) with this region. (Incidentally, the website of the Area Studies Liaison Group includes among its founding members representatives for most regions of the world except the Middle East.) The debate over "Middle East exceptionalism" extends well beyond the discipline of political science: Edward Said's landmark study, *Orientalism* (1978), portrayed a far larger stereotypical perception of "the Orient" in Western thought (see also *Arab Studies Journal*, summer 1988, "Contending with Middle East Exceptionalism").

These matters deserve further discussion and they are now beginning to receive it. However, they are secondary to the question at hand. Without pretending to be exhaustive, one may identify several themes that the Middle East political science community has been studying that coincide with general problematics in comparative politics. At the minimum, these themes provide empirical information that might be relevant for cross-national or transregional theory building; and in some of this work there may be theoretical or methodological contributions of interest to scholars outside the region. These themes include the state; civil society and democratization; religious "fundamentalism"; the political economy of oil-rentier economies and labor migration; identity, community, and ethnosectarian political culture cleavages; gender; and informal and local politics.

The State

The Middle East offers ample opportunity for the study of authoritarianism. The "rediscovery" of the state in comparative politics in the 1980s resonated among students of Middle East (and especially Arab) politics, where the concept of "the *mukhabarat* state" (the national security, or intelligence, state) has enjoyed fairly wide usage. As in the larger field, Middle East political scientists have engaged in their own debates about "state-ness" (Anderson 1986; Ben-Dor 1983; Luciani 1990; Migdal 1988). The late Nazih Ayubi's magisterial *Over-Stating the Arab State* (1995) marks an important effort to deconstruct the Arab state and rethink its power and legitimacy in terms of Gramscian political economy. Unlike many American analysts, he draws upon important Arab thinkers as well as Western social theory. Postmodern approaches to the state and power are exemplified by Mitchell's *APSR* paper (1991) on the limits of the state. Contemporary legal practices are drawing increasing attention (Brown 1997) as political scientists explore the public sphere in terms of state-society relationships.

Civil Society and Democratization

Although they have largely been ignored in the democratization literature in comparative politics, Middle East political scientists have vigorously debated the nature of civil society and the possibilities for liberalization and—perhaps—democratization in the generally authoritarian terrain of Middle East politics. This debate has also involved

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social historians, students of Islam, literary critics, and social scientists. Theoretical inspiration has come from bureaucratic-authoritarianism (O'Donnell 1979), corporatism (Ayubi 1995; Cantori 1999; Stepan 1978), and patrimonialism (Sharabi 1990). Some have turned to rational choice approaches and "new institutionalism" (Przeworski 1997; Waterbury in Salamé 1994) in an effort to explore the possibilities (if any) for "democracy without democrats," i.e., democratic practices as the least-bad option for political actors without a commitment to democracy in principle. Norton and his collaborators (1995, 1996) and "the Montreal School" (Brynen, Noble, Korany 1998) have mounted two ambitious comparative projects. As home to most of the surviving ruling monarchies, as well as highly authoritarian presidential republics, the Middle East constitutes an institutional testing ground for modalities of transition (if any) from authoritarianism. The work of political scientists in Egypt (notably Saad Eddin Ibrahim 1995 and Mustafa Kamil Al-Sayyid 1991) and Turkey (notably Ergun Ozbudun 2000) has been particularly significant.

Religious "Fundamentalism"

After the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington, political Islam has emerged as a question of far more than academic interest. Middle East political scientists have a great deal to offer toward a better understanding of this phenomenon. The surge of radical and violent Islamist protest movements in the 1970s stimulated a great deal of work on political Islam, with contributions from political scientists. James Piscatori (1991) has made a particular effort to relate Islamic to other kinds of "fundamentalism" (even though that term remains contested in Middle East and, no doubt, other circles). An anthropologist, Dale Eickelman, and Piscatori (1996) have tried to delineate a specifically Muslim political culture. Moussalli (1992, and in Norton 1995) has taken on the relationship between political Islam and democracy. Esposito (1992), has emphasized the pluralistic elements in Islamic politics. Political scientists or sociologists who have thrown light on the Islamic revolution in Iran include Arjomand (1988), Skocpol (1982), and Abrahamian (1993). One should not ignore the important contributions of Saad Eddin Ibrahim (1980), Keppel (1985), Ayubi (1991), AbuKhalil (1994), and Kramer (1995).

Political Economy

The two books sharing top honors in the Middle East Studies Association's Albert Hourani Book Prize competition for the best book on the Middle East in 1998 were studies in political economy: Kiren Chaudhry's *The Price of Wealth: Economics and Institutions in the Middle East* (1997), an analysis of the influence of oil rents and labor flows in Saudi Arabia and Yemen; and Marcia Pripstein Posusney's study of the Egyptian labor movement, *Labor and the State in Egypt: Workers, Unions, and Economic Restructuring* (1997). Chaudhry's critique of international political economy and institutional approaches suggests that mainstream literature has not taken into sufficient account the peculiar political effects of these factors, and Posusney's account is a fine-grained study of the tensions between an authoritarian regime and a sector of potential societal resistance. Powerful studies (mainly on Egypt) by Springborg (1989), Sadowski (1991), Vitalis (1995), Bianchi (1989), and Waterbury (1983) deserve wider consideration. And the idea of the oil-fueled rentier state, articulated by Beblawi (1990), Luciani (1990), and Crystal (1990) among others, ranks as a major theoretical contribution in comparative politics, transcending any geographic region.

Identity, Community, and Ethnosectarian Political Culture

Perhaps in no other region have national and communal identities been more complex and contested. Ibn Khaldun's discussion of *'asabiyya* (or "group feeling") is an appropriate starting place for an enormous literature on national projects—Arab, Zionist, Turkish, and Iranian—that covers political thought (e.g., Hourani 1962) and institutions (Al-Azmeh 1995; Tibi 1981). Israeli and Lebanese scholars (e.g., El Khazen 2000; Harik 1972; Smooha 1978) have been particularly interested in the "mosaic" society of the Middle East and the salience of minority identities. Some work has been done on control and power-sharing arrangements and pacts (Brumberg 1995; Dekmejian 1978; Hudson 1988; Lustick 1980). Under the influence of newer critical theory approaches to identity (the work of Benedict Anderson and Edward Said comes to mind), a newer group of scholars is rethinking some of the traditional formulations as explicated, for example, in the influential textbook of James Bill and Robert Springborg (2000), now in its fifth edition. This younger generation of political scientists, exemplified by Lynch (1999), is bringing fresh insights to the question of identity construction—one of the most fruitful areas of contemporary Middle East political science.

Gender

Though more the province of social historians (e.g., Leila Ahmed 1992; Amira Sonbol 1996; Barbara Stowasser 1994; Judith Tucker 1993), gender politics has generated a substantial debate among Middle East political scientists. Laurie Brand's *Women, the State, and Political Liberalization: Middle Eastern and North African Experiences* (1998) is a particularly important recent contribution. The work of M. Hatem (1991), S. Joseph (1999), and V. Moghadem (1998) merits special attention. Perhaps more than most regions, the Middle East highlights the dissonance between Western and local approaches to gender. The question of women's place in the public sphere is getting more attention in non-academic debate, even in conservative societies like Saudi Arabia, than it is from the scholars. There is a need, and perhaps there are even opportunities, for further work in this area by Middle East political scientists.

Informal and Local Politics

Middle East political science in general has been "state-centered," reflecting the dominance of the national government and also, perhaps, the unduly U.S. policy-oriented stance of much Middle East political analysis. But important steps have been taken to tackle the unexplored territory of informal and local politics. Going beyond tribal monographs, political scientists like Diane

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Singerman (1995) have explored the micro-level and regional politics of Egypt, and Mamoun Fandy (1999) has analyzed the informal (and electronic) opposition toward the Saudi regime. Drawing on the work of James Scott (1985) and others, they try to reveal the substrata of politics below the national level. With the apparent erosion of national-state hegemony in this region (as elsewhere), studies such as these open an important new frontier in Middle East politics that certainly has transregional comparative relevance.

Conclusion

While comparative politics today would seem to privilege rational choice approaches, quantitative data, large-n comparative frameworks, and formal modeling, Middle East regional studies have been characterized by single-case studies, interpretive methods, "soft" data, and an emphasis on history and culture. Perhaps this is just in the nature of the regional studies enterprise, but there is no reason to be apologetic about them. Middle East political scientists, moreover, are aware of the conceptual difficulties with "political culture" (see, e.g., L. Anderson and Hudson chapters in Brynen et al. 1995) and today some of them are doing cutting-edge work on issues of identity and authority. They are also bringing in fruitful political economy perspectives.

Middle East political science has produced some world-class, standard-setting work: At the top of the list would be the late Hanna Batatu's masterly studies, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (1978) and *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables and Their Politics* (1999). There have also been several notable large-scale and synthetic efforts at comparison across the region: e.g., Hudson's *Arab Politics* (1977); Ayubi's *Over-Stating the Arab State* (1995); and the edited projects of Norton et al. *Civil Society in the Middle East* (1995–1996), and Brynen, Korany, and Noble *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World* (1995 and 1998). In addition, a few Middle East political scientists have ventured beyond the region into the realms of general theory: Leonard Binder, James Bill, Clement Henry, Mark Tessler and Ian Lustick, as well as a number of impressive junior scholars. Without lapsing into stereotypical or essentialist notions of Middle Eastern, Arab, or Islamic "exceptionalism," one might fairly observe that comparativists with broader geographic horizons might find material from the Middle East region that would help them improve or refine their generalizations.

I think it is fair to conclude that the field of Middle East comparative politics is actually in better shape than many of its own scholars believe. Despite bad (and probably worsening) field research conditions, inadequate funding for Ph.D. candidates and established scholars, and a certain regrettable disjunction from mainstream political science, a great deal of interesting work is being done not only by political scientists from the West but also, increasingly, from the region itself. Paradigmatic eclecticism may not be such a bad thing. It has offered greater epistemological freedom for Middle East comparativists to do what they do best: study identity politics, the persistence of authoritarianism, societal ferment ("civil" or otherwise), the role of religion, the political economy of retreating states and the emerging private sector, and the political subcultures of the disenfranchised.

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