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Rethinking Middle East Politics

Islam, oil and the Third World

In chapter 1 we reviewed a range of theoretical debates on the character of the societies of the Middle East prior to their encounter with Western capitalism and in chapter 2 we attempted to account for the processes by which these regions were incorporated into the modern international system. Here we turn our attention to the fortunes of the Middle East in the modern world, the system dominated by an increasingly global, capitalist world market and a system of sovereign nation-states. We are, thus concerned with exploring the character of social and political development in the modern Middle East, in the period since the end of the First World War.

The problematic and peculiar nature of political development in the Middle East is perhaps the single most prominent theme in commentary on the region. This applies as much to journalistic reports as to the academic literature, as much to impressionistic accounts as to those of well-informed commentators and as much to Western discourses as to the claims of many indigenous voices. The specific nature of the charge is that the modern form of sovereign nation-state has singularly failed to strike deep and lasting roots in the region. Politics in the Middle East is, it is commonly alleged, somehow different from elsewhere, and it is this which accounts for the apparent turbulence and persistence of conflict in the region. The root causes of this phenomenon are commonly located both within and without the region.

The most common internal candidate for the specificity of the Middle East is, of course, Islam, but Arabism and tribal forms have also been cited. Accounts of the peculiarities of the Middle East which focus on its internal patterning typically argue that the significant units of social organization within the region, together with their corresponding forms of loyalty and identification, are either sub- or supra-national in their reach. That is, the social structure of the region takes the form of a *mosaic*. Tribal organization and relatively self-governing ethnic and religious communities either operate on a more restricted level than the typical nation-state or are no respecters of its legal codes and boundaries. On the other hand, pan-Arab and pan-Islamic movements are by definition supra-national in scope, operating beyond state borders and without reference to the claims of any particular, secularly constituted nation-state. The refractory, mosaic-like nature of these forms is taken to account for the instability of politics in the region and the relative failure of a territorially defined national consciousness to develop. The most common version of this argument currently ascribes to Islam the primary role in frustrating the consolidation of secular, national polities, but in the 1950s and 1960s it was Arab nationalism that was seen as the central problem, especially as focused through Palestinian antagonism to the Israeli state. From time to time, the persistence of tribal forms, whether understood as extended kin networks or as types of mentalities, has also been put forward to account for the closed, particularistic nature of Middle Eastern politics.[1]

For those concerned with external determinations, it is the presence of Western imperialism, above all in relation to oil, that is seen as the defining feature of the region. This interpretation of the specific character of the Middle East is offered by those who stress the importance of oil to the advanced sectors of the world economy, and the impact of oil in shaping the region's pattern of socio-economic and political development. Viewed from this perspective, it is primarily the imperialist interests of the West, concerned with securing the flows of oil to the consumers of the advanced capitalist economies, which have underpinned the arbitrary state system of the region. Middle East states are, according to this argument, typically rentier or distributive states, with a

1 In what follows I will concentrate on the arguments about Islam, but we will return to the question of Arabism later.

highly specific insertion into the world market. This status brings with it three further peculiarities. First, the dominance of the region's economy by oil has imposed on it a distorted form of growth which has sharpened inequalities within and between states and has strengthened the role of the state in the process of accumulation. The resulting polarization of class structures and emergence of rentier states have together enabled regimes to consolidate forms of rule without involving the population in more typical kinds of representation. Second, because of the premium placed upon the stability of oil supplies, Western patrons have not encouraged processes of political reform in the direction of more inclusive polities, for the latter might adopt policies which seek to direct oil resources towards domestic considerations at the expense of Western oil companies and consumers. Third, given the potential threat posed to Western interests by radical regimes and by any expansion of Soviet influence, the leading Western powers have been strong supporters of the state of Israel as a counter to such forces. In turn, the resulting Arab–Israeli/Muslim–Jewish conflict has played a major role in bolstering the position of military and authoritarian forces in the Arab/Islamic states.

In contrast to these assertions of peculiarity, others have strenuously denied that any such status exists, and have contested these attempts to exclude the Middle East from common frameworks of explanation. For example, Fred Halliday argued that 'neither the determination of the geological substructure nor those of the religious-ideological superstructure can establish a Middle East exempt from analytic universality' (1987:212). One of the main contentions of Roger Owen's exemplary study of *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (1992) is that the character of political development in the region does not differ markedly from that taking place throughout the Third World. And Sami Zubaida's fecund essays on *Islam, the People and the State* (1989) argue strongly that the Islamic features of Middle East politics are the product of contemporary combinations of forces and events, and that they can best be understood in terms of particular instances of *general* social and political processes.

Thus, against attempts to define the specificity of the Middle East in terms of ideology or geology, these writers have argued that its development is not essentially different from that of the rest of the (post-)colonial world. In other words, the most significant fact

about the Middle East is that it has developed as part of the Third World. Its problems of political development, of nation building and of economic growth are no more nor less than those of most of the regions outside Europe and the areas of European settlement. Of course, the pattern of colonial expansion and control was not even, and the impact of the encounter with the West differed from place to place. But these particular variations aside, the state system of the Middle East simply is part of the developing world, situated within a capitalist world economy dominated by its advanced regions. In addition, outside powers have continued to play an extensive role in the region, first the Europeans and then the superpowers, but this too has been a feature of much of the non-European world. Finally, as the contest between capitalist and communist forms of development was fought out on an increasingly global scale in the course of the twentieth century, so also in the Middle East alternative forms of social organization contested for dominance. Here again, though the strength of local communist parties varied as did the depth of Soviet influence, the Middle East fits into a picture that was repeated across the developing world at large.

In my view, while each of these perspectives sheds some light on the nature of political development in the region, these formulations – singly or in combination – do not address the basic theoretical questions involved in giving an adequate account of *dependent state formation*, and hence political change, in the Middle East. Building on the arguments of chapters 1 and 2 above, in what follows I will attempt both to further substantiate these claims and to begin the development of a more adequate theoretical and comparative framework for thinking about the process of state formation in the modern Middle East. Though it will comprise the bulk of what follows, I should stress at the outset the provisional nature of the latter undertaking. General theoretical studies of the development of the modern Middle East are still in their infancy. There are some very good general histories, many outstanding treatments of particular countries, a steadily increasing number of studies both of specific aspects of development and of a comparative kind and a small but growing number of thematic accounts.

As yet, however, the widespread dissatisfaction with earlier culturalist and modernization theory literatures has produced little of a theoretically explicit and genuinely comparative nature. With due recognition that the present eassy may as a result be somewhat

premature, it is this gap that I seek to fill. I propose to develop my argument in three stages. In this chapter, I will begin this task by reviewing more closely some of the existing approaches towards understanding the problems of modern Middle Eastern politics. On the basis of this critique, I will develop an alternative framework for posing questions about the process of state formation. This will focus on specifying both the social form of political development in the Middle East as well as situating these processes within their appropriate international contexts. In chapter 4, I will present a series of case studies of state formation in Turkey, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Iran and will attempt to explore both the common features and the different forms taken in each case. In chapter 5, I will draw out a general comparative framework from these case studies and, on this basis, suggest a number of theses about the pattern of political change in the modern Middle East. This will enable us to reformulate questions about the lack of democracy in the region and the place of Arabism and Islam in Middle Eastern societies without recourse to culturalist and essentialist judgements.

Politics in the Middle East

Islam and the state

In line with the culturalist perspectives reviewed in chapter 1, there have been a number of attempts to comprehend the specificity of modern Middle East politics in terms of Islam. In his book on *Islam and the State* (1987), P. J. Vatikiotis argues that Islam rejects the idea of the nation-state and with it modern, secular conceptions of nationalism. Thus he avers that:

> Islam and nationalism are mutually exclusive terms. As a constructive loyalty to a territorially defined national group, nationalism has been incompatible with Islam in which the state is not ethnically or territorially defined, but is itself ideological and religious. . . . Nationality among the majority of their populations is still overshadowed by the religious community; national frontiers are still measured by religion. Cultural oneness, especially among the Arabs, is still supreme, since Islam is their greatest cultural achievement. . . . The loyalties of the masses, as we can witness today from Iran to North Africa and from Central Asia to the Sudan, remain religious and local. (1987:42, 43, 44)

Confrontation, not co-operation, has marked the Islamic world's response to the modern. Passive obedience to *de facto* authority is the political theory of Islam, government by consent is unknown and autocracy is the only real form of government. This is a result of the fact that in 'Islamic history', religious authority rested with the *ulema* and, in consequence, much of society became non-political, and the state became separated from society. Accordingly, Muslims reject temporal political power.

Another rehearsal of these themes can be found in the last testament of a noted Middle East historian and political scientist, Elie Kedourie's astringent and amusing treatment of *Politics in the Middle East* (1992). Applying the standard formula, Kedourie opens his account as follows:

> Whether it is defined in geographical or cultural terms, and whatever its exact boundaries are held to be, there can be no disputing the fact that the Middle East is predominantly Muslim. . . . [the early Arab Muslim rulers] speedily transformed an unsophisticated tribal polity into one of the most sophisticated and most durable kinds of rule, that of oriental despotism, the methods and traditions of which have survived in the Muslim world to the present day. What the Muslim jurists did was to articulate and theorize the conditions of political life in oriental despotism, and to teach that it was compatible with a Muslim way of life. (1992:1, 12)

For Islam is a religion that does not recognize a separation of temporal and spiritual power, that permits of no intermediate institutions between the religio-political ruler and the individual, and that is only saved from the worst excesses of oriental despotism by the segmented nature of agrarian and pastoral society. With the resources of an industrial society at its disposal, and thus the ability to break down the segmented character of traditional society, Islam can only wreak havoc. So, from the collapse of the Ottoman empire to the present day, the history of the Middle East has been a 'tormented endeavour to discard the old ways' (1992:346).

Kedourie's general conclusion is that this endeavour has been unsuccessful, and therefore that the tension between religion and politics in the Middle East is far from resolved. Like Vatikiotis, he argues that Islam is incompatible both with secular nationalism and with representative government. However, unlike Vatikiotis, Kedourie does hold out the possibility (in the Turkish case) that Dankwart Rustow's more optimistic thesis about Islamic modernization might be correct.

Rustow held that the development of an increasingly literate, educated, mobile and urbanized society will bring with it a secular, democratic form of politics. But Kedourie can offer no way of understanding in what way, if this is the case, such an evolution might occur in *this* region. In other words, if an 'Islamic society' can be transformed into a modern, secular nation-state, what are the preconditions for this path to be taken? And surely if it can occur in one Muslim country, then why not in all, and what then of the alleged incompatibility of Islam and modernity? Kedourie has no answer to these questions, concluding instead that 'only time, of course, will show if this optimism is warranted' (1992:154).

A still more optimistic assessment of the fortunes of Islam in the modern world has been offered by John Esposito in his valuable survey of *Islam and Politics* (1991). Substantively, Esposito shows the great diversity of views and practices amongst groups defining their goals in Islamic terms, and he is at pains to stress that in practice there has been a degree of accommodation to the nation-state and even to elements of liberal notions of representative government. However, the basis of this optimism is not clear, given Esposito's understanding of Islam. Adopting a model of 'Islamic society' similar to that outlined by Lapidus (1988), Esposito argues that Islamic history has been marked by a number of enduring continuities which have both given it a determinate form and have set the terms for its encounter with modernity. Central to this tradition has been the role of Islamic law, the *shari'a*. Esposito summarizes the influence of this as follows:

> Islam continued to be operative in political notions of society and citizenship, law and judiciary, education and taxation, war and peace. State institutions concerned with law, the judiciary, education, and social welfare services were administered in large part by the *ulama*. The state was often a major patron of Islam and Muslim institutions . . . Moreover, Islam has remained a primary principle of social cohesion and identity in spite of its loss of power and autonomy occasioned by colonialism and the Western secular path followed by most Muslim governments. Its continued presence among the vast majority of Muslims explains the continued appeal to and acceptance by many Muslims of 'Islamic' politics. (1991:280)

Now it is certainly true that from the time of the Abbasids the *shari'a* operated as the framework for judgement by *qadis* appointed by the ruler. But the *shari'a* was considerably less than law

in any modern sense of the term. Some of its provisions were not implemented and it was subject to considerable interpretation. Indeed, *ijtihad* (literally, 'exerting oneself', or reasoning by analogy free from orthodoxy in order to interpret Islamic law) provided a means of adaptation to new circumstances. In any case, the *shari'a* was both unevenly applied (*qadi* justice did not operate everywhere) and uneven in its coverage. According to Albert Hourani, Islamic law 'was most precise in regard to matters of personal status – marriage and divorce, bequests and inheritance; less so in regard to contracts and obligations, and all that concerned economic activity . . . and it said virtually nothing about 'constitutional' or administrative law' (1991:161). The existence of Islamic law, then, cannot provide the basis for a claim about Islamic 'society'. As we saw in chapter 1, to the extent that they existed at all, the institutional continuity of Islamic practices noted by Esposito and others depended on their insertion within the process of production and rule in pre-capitalist societies.

Moreover, what of the influence of Islam once secular legal systems have developed? Here Esposito speaks of the social cohesion and identity provided by Islam. But what does this refer to? Once again, it remains obscure just what this 'continued presence' of Islam among Muslims consists in, save an appeal to the widespread existence of Muslim belief. Equally, the mere existence of Muslim forms of identification in a society tells us very little about the causes of political mobilization, for the same people also identify themselves in terms of a variety of social roles and a range of political ideologies. Which of these aspects of their social position, singly or together, determines their (varied) political behaviour needs to be explained. It cannot be inferred from their religious identification, since that is precisely what they are supposed to have in common. Finally, Islamic teachings do not and cannot prescribe a unitary set of goals, forms of organization and tactics for those groups which do define themselves in religious terms. The doctrines of Islamic forces, as of all other forms of political mobilization and organization, are socially contingent (see, especially, Zubaida 1989a).

In sum, accounts which stress the mosaic character of Middle East societies generally fall back on essentialist definitions of Islam (or Arabism or tribalism), depicting these as unchanging entities which are mysteriously resistant to transformation. But in no region of the modern world did the process of modern state formation

begin *ab initio*. On the contrary, everywhere it had to work with a mixed inheritance of particularistic communities and diverse forms of religious and metaphysical identification. These 'Orientalist,' or culturalist, formulations are thus logically driven to argue that political culture in the region is *sui generis*, and unlike that in other parts of the world. In truth, as we saw in chapter 1, there is no such thing as 'Islam' (or, by implication, 'Arabism'[2]), understood as a preconstituted quality, that could in principle constitute such an obstacle to modernity. Any continuing presence of Islam – whether understood in cultural or institutional terms – has to be explained, not by an appeal to the character of belief, but by an account of its active reproduction in the present, in terms of the concrete social and material relations and practices in which it is imbricated. It is only thus that we will be able to explain both the *contemporaneity* and the *variation* in Islamic politics.

The rentier state and oil

The thesis that politics in the Middle East is above all shaped by oil and its associated Western interests is linked to debates about the rentier character of the state and the economy. A rentier economy is defined as an economy in which income from rent dominates the distribution of national income, and thus where rentiers wield considerable political influence. In a rentier state the bulk of the externally derived rent is received, at least in the first instance, by the government, and rent provides the greater part of the state's income. In the case of oil states, income from rent may well dominate the revenue side of the state's budget, and even the generation of foreign exchange, without dominating the distribution of national income as a whole. But whether this is so or not, where rent dominates the state budget, then the primary economic function of the state is concerned with the allocation of these resources. The essence of state activity is simply an expenditure policy. And since the bulk of the surplus available to the state is not generated by the majority of the population, indeed is not in any real sense even generated within the territory of the state, the resulting patterns of representation and legitimacy are likely to diverge strongly from those states that depend either on taxing a domestic productive

2 Culturally speaking, the heart of Arabism is often taken to lie in the unity of Arabic civilization given by linguistic continuity and the central place of Islam in this world.

base, or on managing a large state-owned sector. Whether this form of autonomy for the state contributes to its strength or weakness in relation to its domestic society is itself much debated.

In the case of those Arab oil states with relatively small populations, these features are of course particularly marked. In this context, Giacomo Luciani has argued that the linked developments of colonial expansion and the exploitation of oil resources have consolidated the process of state formation in the Arab world. Moreover, he claims that 'oil production appears to have a strong and decisive influence on the nature of the state. It does so through its effects on the structure of state revenues and the ratio between revenues that are obtained domestically and revenues that are obtained from abroad' (1990:70). However, the rentier effects are not confined to the oil states alone. This is so for two reasons. First, to a limited but still significant extent the rents of the oil states have been recycled to the non-oil Arab states through migrant workers' remittances, through transit fees and through aid. Second, because of oil the Arab world has assumed a wider geopolitical significance in international politics and is thus the recipient of very large location, or strategic, rents in the form of economic aid and military assistance. Hazem Beblawi thus concluded that:

> the oil phenomenon has cut across the whole of the Arab world, oil rich and oil poor. Arab oil states have played a major role in propagating a new pattern of behaviour, i.e. the rentier pattern. . . . The impact of oil has been so pre-eminent that it is not unrealistic to refer to the present era of Arab history as the oil era, where the oil disease has contaminated all of the Arab world. (1990:98)

Similar arguments have also been advanced in relation to Pahlavi Iran during the 1960s and 1970s.

In addition to these specific features of rentier states, the presence of oil in the Middle East has had two further effects. As already noted, oil has attracted the interest of outside powers, and with them the dispensing of strategic rents. But the presence of the Western powers, especially the United States in the post-Second World War era, is also argued to have frustrated reform movements within the region in order to protect the West's access to oil. Defence of the *status quo*, in which the distribution of oil reserves in relation to population (particularly marked in Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Gulf states) favours the West, has been the principal

aim of US foreign policy in the region. At the same time, the threat to these arrangements posed by radical nationalist forces (with or without Soviet assistance) has resulted in solid support for the Jewish state of Israel. In turn, the continued reproduction of the Arab-Israeli conflict has conspired to make the Middle East the most armed region of the world, and has thereby bolstered the presence of military and authoritarian forces in the region's polities.

Theories which stress the impact of oil and Western imperialism have a firmer purchase on the patterns of social and material reproduction in the Middle East than essentialist claims about Islam. However, they tend to neglect the internal organization of these societies before the discovery of oil on the one hand, and to relegate the impact of other forms of surplus extraction in shaping modern political development on the other. More specifically, these oversights carry over into two basic problems faced by any attempt to read the development of the Middle East exclusively in these terms. In the first place, some of the salient features of political development in the Middle East are common to both oil and non-oil states, and these derive from certain aspects of the region's history before the discovery of oil, as well as comprising general features of dependent development. Secondly, the variation of political forms between oil-producing states is itself considerable, indicating that other factors are at work in shaping state formation. Therefore, though the rentier character of a number of Middle East states is undoubtedly important, too much emphasis should not be placed upon the role of oil.

The Middle East in the Third World

As indicated above, accounts of the relation between religion and politics and notions of the rentier state do not focus in detail on the *historical process* of state formation in the Middle East. It is here that those approaches which deny the peculiarity of the region are on their strongest ground. Owen, for example, argues that in order to understand political change in the Middle East, as elsewhere in the developing world, we need to take account of a number of common features, among which two in particular stand out. First, these societies underwent a process of development that was shaped by their integration into the capitalist world market, bringing with it a dynamic new relationship between state and

society. Second, the establishment of a 'national political field' (Zubaida) with the arrival of the modern state produced determinate effects in the character of political activity. In this regard, Owen suggests that the territorial states inherited from the colonial powers provided the context in which attempts to administer the population were undertaken. This involved both the elaboration of bureaucratic forms, and an emphasis on maintaining internal security through policing. Focusing on timeless categories such as 'tribe' or pan-Islam or pan-Arabism is therefore unhelpful, since 'methods of political organization and styles of political rhetoric are largely defined by the context and . . . from the colonial period on, this context was created by the territorial state' (1992:20).

Since creating a nationalist opposition to the colonial power was not the same thing as obtaining domestic legitimacy, and since the structures of the post-colonial state were extremely fragile and fluid once the material and coercive resources of the occupying power were removed, it is not surprising that:

> the difficulties experienced in the first post-independent decades do not seem markedly different from those to be observed elsewhere in the Third World . . . political instability was overcome largely as a result of the general process of the expansion of the power of the central bureaucracy and of the security forces. (1992:26)

Within the context given by this general expansion and centralization of the state apparatus, socio-economic development was frustrated by the power of the urban, notable classes, and thus opposition forces increasingly turned towards the military. During the subsequent period, the post-independence state of an urban-centred, landowning class gave way via military-backed coups to the authoritarian polity common to many post-colonial societies.

This emphasis on the historical process of state formation within the context of integration into the capitalist world market is a salutary antidote to the determinism of culture and oil offered by theorists of Islam and the rentier state, respectively. In contrast to the accounts offered by Vatikiotis and Kedourie, Owen argues that religion neither determined the nature of state power, except in relation to how power was on some occasions legitimated, nor did it provide a significant obstacle to the consolidation of the state's rule: on the contrary, the modernist strand of Sunni Islam was mobilized to legitimate the policies of the state, and political control

was extended over the *ulema*. And as against the mono-causal focus on oil, Owen seeks to present a more general framework for understanding Middle East state formation in terms of the consolidation of the state apparatus. Against this background, the development of the oil sector is only one factor to be placed alongside other relevant determinants.

A similar concern with state formation can be found in some other recent studies which seek to bring the study of Middle East politics into the mainstream of social and political theory (see, for example, Davis and Gavrielides 1991 and Sharabi 1990). Eric Davis (1991) has identified a number of different approaches in this field. To begin with, he suggests that much of the work on state formation has been unduly restricted, focusing on the process of formal institution-building in relation to parliaments, bureaucracies, the judiciary, armies and police forces, etc. Davis argues that these developments need to be understood within the context provided by the already existing 'organic social formations' of the Middle East: namely, the forms of social organization that existed before the advent of the modern state system. He is also critical both of liberal approaches which focus on the state's search for legitimacy, and of Marxist concerns with the state's ability to extract a surplus (by which Davis means state revenues). In his view, both kinds of analysis ignore the lack of congruence between the nation and the organic social formations, and both minimize the role of consent (as opposed to force) in Third World state formation. Davis believes that in the Arab oil-producing countries, access to oil wealth has meant that the cultural dimension of state formation is particularly important. He illustrates this point and the *variety* of state formation by comparing the experiences in Iraq and Kuwait:

> In Iraq, the main concern of the state has been to erase confessional and tribal loyalties from political consciousness. Under the al-Sabahs, the main effort of the Kuwaiti state was not to eradicate tribal identities but rather to channel them in directions that it saw as serving its own interests in promoting a paternalistic modern welfare state. (Davis and Gavrielides 1991:132)

The same point about the importance of culture in relation to state formation is made more generally in relation to the vexed question of Arab nationalism by Lisa Anderson as follows:

> The individual states of the Arab world are not congruent with, and cannot wholly appropriate, the powerful nationalism of Arab identity, yet they are equally unable to fully transcend or replace it by cultivating purely local loyalties. Thus the political elites of the region have vacillated between attempts to portray themselves as the vanguard of Arab unity and to rely on provincial identities and loyalties to engender political support. (1991:72)

These formulations of Davis and Anderson are especially interesting because they show that a concern with state formation may lead in a rather different direction from that suggested by Owen. For the latter it was the new context provided by the national political field which was uppermost and which largely determined the course of political activity. By contrast, the former emphasize the obstacles to stable state formation posed by the pre-existing organic social formations, as well as the variety of ways in which these are incorporated into the new political systems. Clearly, shifting our attention towards the process of state formation does not, in and of itself, solve our substantive problems of explanation.

Nevertheless, treating the Middle East as but part of the Third World does have the signal merit of applying a common explanatory framework to different forms of society. Yet in practice many such accounts note the imposition of Western state forms in the colonial and mandate era, and then proceed to argue that subsequent political activity is patterned largely by this fact. This is to a large extent the position adopted by Owen. As a generalization, this has much to commend it. But in the process, the variation of social forms found in the non-European world prior to the colonial impact tends to be relegated to a relatively minor role. However, as Davis suggests, these forms (often themselves products of an earlier encounter between local pre-capitalist arrangements and European informal imperialism) have been very diverse. One might generalize this point by noting that it is not that the Middle East is peculiar as the Orientalists have claimed, but rather that *all* contexts of state formation are peculiar. And the variant patterns of subsequent state formation in the post-colonial world might, therefore, be in part a reflection of these differences. The pertinence of this point is reinforced by another consideration: namely, the uneven impact of colonialism itself in the Middle East. Some of the states in the region were the direct result of European imposition,

but in other cases either the impact of capitalist penetration or the role of the European powers was more indirect. The imposition of a 'Western' type of state was correspondingly uneven. Thus, while respecting the need to maintain an approach of *analytic* universality, this must not be pressed into an assumption of *empirical* homogeneity. And if we are to explain the specificity of the Middle East, then our historical reach needs to be longer than is commonly supposed, and the indigenous matrix of state formation needs to be considered carefully.

Theorizing state formation

State formation and surplus appropriation

How, then, should we proceed? At one level, the differences between Owen, on the one hand, and Davis and Anderson, on the other, appear to rest on relatively simple matters of fact. Surely, it is an empirical question as to whether or not forces (organic social formations) that did not operate in the national political field were, in Owen's words, 'soon marginalized or destroyed'? Unfortunately, things are not so straightforward, as we do not know which forces, under what circumstances, count as significant. In other words, neither Owen nor Davis provides us with any theoretical criteria by which to assess the processes of state formation. This can be seen most clearly in Owen's account of the consolidation of state power through the territorial definition of politics, the urban location of organized political activity, enhanced administration, the growth of resources devoted to the bureaucracy and the expansion of coercive powers. These changes are indeed central to the process of state formation, but for the most part, the picture drawn is one of an essentially quantitative expansion in the capabilities of the state. The specific forms of power, the social form of the state, goes largely unremarked, save being described as 'authoritarian.'[3]

3 Elsewhere, Owen has suggested that an appropriate methodology for studying state formation in the Middle East might involve looking at the impact of a 'general dynamic', the creation of capitalist property relations, in the context of a 'fluid political and administrative environment' (Mitchell and Owen, 1990:181). He also pays attention to the *constitutional* character of the state – monarchical, republican, etc. – and draws some illuminating conclusions from this. In addition, Owen's discussion is very attentive to questions of historical specificity.

In order to make some theoretical progress here, it is necessary to develop some determinate, qualitative criteria concerning the character of modern state formation. In short, we need a theory of state formation. So, let us begin by rendering explicit some of the theoretical assumptions lying behind the recent concern with these questions. What will emerge is that state formation cannot be understood by isolating it from changes going on elsewhere in society, specifically from changes in the dominant forms of surplus appropriation.

A good illustration of taking the state seriously is Michael Mann's influential essay on 'The Autonomous Power of the State' (1984), and this is the kind of framework that has influenced recent writing about state formation in the Middle East as elsewhere. Mann asks what can explain the *sui generis* nature of state power? His answer to this question is simple and elegant. Noting that the means used by states are the same as for any organization seeking to mobilize power – economic, military and ideological – he suggests that the power of the state is none the less

> irreducible in quite a different socio-spatial and organizational sense. Only the state is inherently centralized over a delimited territory over which it has authoritative power. . . . Territorial centralization provides the state with a potentially independent basis of power mobilization, being necessary to social development and uniquely in the possession of the state itself. If we add together the necessity, multiplicity and territorial centrality of the state, we can in principle explain its autonomous power. (1984:123, 124)[4]

As Mann clearly recognizes, this autonomy is only a *potentiality* and, more importantly, the state does not in fact 'possess' an independent basis of power mobilization, for its infrastructural penetration of society comprises a complex web of social *relations* which neither the state nor its elite can be said to *control* in any straightforward sense. The degree of power exercised can only be ascertained historically and empirically. From a similar standpoint, Giddens (1985) also explicitly cautions against both the realist view of the state as a unified geopolitical agent and the neo-Weberian conception of the state elite as radically autonomous. Neither of

4 By the 'necessity' of the state Mann is referring to its organizational role in social development, and by 'multiplicity' he means the range of functions performed by the state.

these substantive propositions follow from the arguments of Mann and Giddens. However, there remains none the less a major difficulty with the formulations of Mann and Giddens. For just as Marx (in the *General Introduction* 1857) cautioned against any attempt to derive the forms of capitalist production from the features of 'production in general', so the project of constructing a general theory of the state in terms of its infrastructural (or administrative) power is bound to involve similar kinds of reification.[5] In particular, Marx argued that while it may be possible to fix some features of all production, these 'so-called *general conditions* of all production . . . are nothing but . . . abstract moments, which do not define any of the actual historical stages of production.' Similarly, Mann's theory of state power encourages the view that the process of state formation is primarily one of a quantitative expansion of capabilities, rather than a qualitative shift in the moment of the 'political' within the totality of social relations. To be sure, in the genesis of the modern state system both quantitative and qualitative transformations have taken place. But no amount of historical attention to the bureaucratic expansion of the state will register the structural discontinuity involved in its new social form. What Mann abstracts transhistorically as the 'arena' of the state is actually constituted in fundamentally different ways in different historical instances. And these differences – far from being explicable *sui generis* – can only be understood in terms of their correspondence to the broader variation in the mode of production and reproduction of social life. To adopt Mann's terminology, the *arena* constituted by the state in the social formation as a whole varies with the mode of production concerned (for a historical and comparative treatment, see Therborn 1978).

Accordingly, the establishment of the modern state cannot be properly understood as a process in which the intermittently expanding infrastructural powers of society as a whole were arrogated to the centralized control of territorially bounded state machineries. For this is to confine our analysis to the general features of political power, the moment of 'rule', and it fails to penetrate the necessary changes in the social relations which underpin and make possible the emergence of modern forms of sovereignty. Modern states do not simply do what traditionally states did – only

5 The much-maligned Marxist theorist, Nicos Poulantzas, made this point some time ago (see 1978, part 1).

more effectively. There is rather a qualitative breach between the personalized forms of political domination in the pre-capitalist world and the character of the capitalist state system. For this reason, the state cannot be understood fully in neo-Weberian terms, as a territorially based apparatus of administration and coercion. Of course it is this, for as Marx once said the state is nothing without its apparatus, but it is also a distinct structure of social relations whose character varies systematically with the form of surplus appropriation dominant in any given society. And the establishment of new social relations is itself a historical process, in which prior forms of appropriation are reworked, destroyed or incorporated into the new arrangements.

Where these relations of production take a (liberal) capitalist form a dual redefinition of the political occurs. On the one hand, the customary powers and definition of property are privatized in the form of economic ownership rights. Property is shorn of its social functions, and appropriation becomes 'economic'. In the process, rule becomes separated from appropriation and can be reconstituted in the form of the sovereign state, taking on an abstract form embodied in law and bureaucracy. The latter is now concerned with general public functions rather than the direct political defence of a dominant class. Historically, these processes usually occurred the other way around: the centralization of the location of rule typically went before the narrowing of its content by the privatization of rights of appropriation. In fact, in many cases neither process was fully accomplished. The centralization of rule may face formidable obstacles in the form of unyielding local sites of authority, especially when these have an independent material base. And even where they are destroyed or incorporated, the production and acquisition of the surplus need not take a private, economic form, in which case the state acts as the dominant appropriator. In both cases, either pre-capitalist forms or the state (or both) remain directly involved in organizing the material reproduction of society and the appropriation of surpluses. And in these instances neither liberal forms of sovereign polity nor liberal democratic systems of representation can emerge. Across much of the post-colonial world, this pattern of development has provided one very important social base for authoritarian rule (see chapter 5 below).

Another powerful stimulus to authoritarian rule has been the subordinate position of the state in the world market and the state

system. Long before the development of a *national* market, many regions of the Middle East were more or less forcibly integrated into the *world market* by European traders, investors and governments. Indigenous minority groups (Armenians, Greeks, Jews, etc.), precisely because of their relative exclusion from the prevailing tributary apparatus, also played a central role in this pattern of incorporation. Finally, indigenous mercantile interests, as well urban-based, absentee landlords also became part of these networks. The 'nationalist' dispossession of these forces was, therefore, widely seen as necessary for social development. The transformation of agrarian class relations and the development of agriculture was a prelude to state-led models of catch-up, late-industrialization. The only agency with enough power and legitimacy to carry through such a programme was, of course, the post-independence state. And the inevitable result was that the state came to play a central role in many of the most important sectors of the economy (and this often went along with the persecution of minority groups). By these means, then, *dependent* state formation assisted in imbricating the state directly in the appropriation of surpluses.

Nevertheless, such projects varied in their relation to imperialist interests. Where the region had escaped formal colonial control (Turkey and Iran), or where development was based more or less exclusively on a commodity whose value could only be realized by an alignment with the West (oil in Saudia Arabia and the Gulf states), or where there were elements of both (Iran), then dependent state formation need not take an anti-imperialist form. Indeed, domestic projects geared towards state formation and a degree of independent development might be encouraged by the imperialist powers in order to create sub-imperialisms which could then manage the regional system under broad constraints dictated by the West. In these circumstances, nationalist forces were a threat to the project of the pro-Western ruling groups. By contrast, where foreign control of the economy and polity was marked (Egypt and Iraq), then domestic programmes of state formation and industrial development were more likely to take an anti-imperialist, if not anti-capitalist, form. In these cases, political opposition from the dispossessed landed and mercantile classes was portrayed as inspired or assisted by foreign interests.

In both models, however, the process of state formation had the effect of restricting the play of forces in the political field. On the one hand, pre-emptive state formation in a pro-Western fashion

necessitated the repression of nationalist and Leftist groups in the domestic sphere, and on the other hand, nationalist mobilization against foreign influence made it difficult to sustain the open competition between domestic forces. Dependent development, whether for or against the grain of the international system, buttressed an authoritarian form of state.

These general considerations suggest three guidelines for investigating the processes of state formation. In the first place, *a satisfactory account of state formation must relate the development of the state apparatus to the changing nature of those social relations which govern the material reproduction of the society concerned.* This means that we must examine the relation of the state to the important social classes and groups: merchants, landlords, peasants and tribes. We also need to consider the role of the state itself as an agency of surplus appropriation, and not see it as solely concerned with the politics of rule. (In chapter 5 we will see how such an approach enables us to reopen the questions of Arabism and Islam in a non-essentialist fashion. For while culturalist accounts of Islam are unsatisfactory, it is nevertheless the case that the path of secular development in the Middle East has not been smooth. This needs to be explained in terms of the varying social locations of Islam, by virtue of its mobilization by contemporary political forces and by the uses to which states have sought to put it.) Secondly, *the pattern of state formation will be shaped by the position of the state in the world market and state system and the nature of the indigenous response to this.* All state formation in the Middle East was dependent development, but the pattern of integration into the world market varied widely, as did the nature of relations with the dominant powers in the system. (Again, it is in this context that questions about oil and imperialism need to be posed. Whether or not the state was a rentier state has had an important bearing on the pattern of political development, and the presence of oil has also affected the particular patterns of integration into the world market and the state system.) Thirdly, *if we are to grasp the process of state formation as history, then we must be attentive to the play of the social forces which struggle to reproduce and to transform the relations of appropriation and command.* These guidelines, brought together in the substantive investigation of Middle East state formation in chapter 4, will enable us to reopen the vexatious questions of Islam and oil in a way that no longer offers essentialist and reductionist answers. Focusing on

these aspects of social reproduction will, I hope to show, furnish us with some determinate criteria for analysing and assessing projects of state formation. Those, at any rate, are the hypotheses which the case studies of chapter 4 seek to test.

The international context of development in the Middle East

It is the pressing need to consolidate capitalist forms of production and rule over and against pre-capitalist, fragmented forms and to establish a degree of independent manoeuvre in the international system (whether sub- or anti-imperialist) which together account for the central role of the military in Middle East politics. In addition, as Charles Tilly (1990) has pointed out, the structure of the international system in the post-war period has augmented the power of the military in Third World states. Thus, before we move to a consideration of our case studies – Turkey, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Iran – let us consider briefly the general international environment within which Middle East state formation was accomplished. This will then enable us to fix the role of interstate competition, the scope of military rule, the scale of resources devoted to military ends and hence the role of the military in the process of state formation.

The position of the Middle East in the international system has been widely discussed (see, especially, Lenczowski, 1980, Ismael 1986 and Korany and Dessouki 1991) and I do not propose to add to this literature here. Rather, we shall sketch in some of the main trends in external involvement from the end of the First World War up to the present and attempt to see how these were connected to the pattern of social and political development within the region. We have seen in chapter 2 how British expansion in relation to India, inter-imperialist rivalries before the First World War, the collapse of the Ottoman empire and the Anglo-French machinations during and after the war all transformed the political map of the Middle East. In addition, we suggested that the new strategy adopted by the British was best understood as a continuation, albeit under new circumstances, of a longer project to establish capitalist markets and stable forms of polity that could complement the international position of the British empire.

It was in the pursuit of this strategy that the British reluctantly came to support a qualified form of self-determination, in

the era of the mandates, for the reasons given by Lord Curzon in 1918:

> I am inclined to value the argument of self-determination because I believe that most of the people would determine in our favour . . . if we cannot get out of our difficulties in any other way we ought to play self-determination for all it is worth wherever we are involved in difficulties with the French, the Arabs, or anybody else, and leave the case to be settled by that final argument knowing in the bottom of our hearts that we are more likely to benefit from it than anybody else. (quoted in Louis 1984:205)

Or, as Stafford Cripps put it in 1939, in the post-mandate era and in relation to the future of Palestine, the mandate territory was 'to continue as an annex of the British Empire, though it will be annexed by treaty and not by conquest' (Louis 1984:210). This was the general logic of British policy in the Middle East during the interwar years. Stable administrations, respecting capitalist property rights and holding foreign policy obligations towards Britain, would contribute both to the integrity of the empire and to the reproduction of the capitalist order. This was so in a number of ways. By safeguarding the key routes of transportation and communication in times of peace and by providing bases and resources in times of war, these new states would enable sovereignty to be recognized in their domain while formal empire was maintained elsewhere, especially in India. Through the provision of the necessary administrative framework for the exploitation of oil resources, clear boundaries and stable forms of administration and revenue collection facilitated the extraction of resources to support the new states and provided oil on favourable terms to the Western powers. And by encouraging a more general economic development under the control of notable classes and foreign intermediaries, what was essentially a colonial division of labour – imports of manufactures in exchange for exports of agricultural produce and raw materials – was reproduced.

However, while the various rebellions against and political challenges to the newly constituted states of the region were contained, as was any prospect of Soviet influence, the inter-war years witnessed an erosion of British power and a consequent loss of control in the Middle East. On an economic plane, the inter-war depression was associated with falling levels of world trade, a drying up of international capital flows, declining terms of trade for the primary

producing regions of the world and a break up of the international gold standard based on sterling and Britain's pre-eminence in world trade and investment. This produced a general shift to economic nationalism as trade, payments and investment shifted away from multilateral, expansive systems towards bilateral, closed and politically regulated forms of exchange. In turn, new centres of economic growth were developing outside of Europe, above all in the Soviet Union and in the United States. These alterations in the character of the international system reduced the economic dependence of the Middle East economies on Europe and encouraged the start of state-led attempts to sponsor economic growth in those regions that had a significant degree of political independence, their own currencies and tariff autonomy (Turkey and Iran). Elsewhere, the persistence of colonial forms of control, including the absence of central banks and currency autonomy as well as the external supervision of the state's finances, blocked such transformations.

Allied intervention in the Middle East during the Second World War was extensive – for example, the British occupied Iraq and Egypt, while British and Russian forces occupied Iran – but the conflict nevertheless marked a significant phase of decline for the European empires. In the first instance, the European powers were economically weakened by the war, and their relative standing *vis-à-vis* the United States and the Soviet Union was further reduced. Secondly, the war gave nationalist movements an opportunity for agitation and organization, thereby raising the costs of colonial control. And thirdly, the dominant powers in the post-war years, the superpowers, were formally opposed to the maintenance of colonial arrangements. At first, in the new strategic environment of the Cold War, the British position:

> rested on two assumptions: that Arab governments would regard their major interests as being identical with those of Britain and the western alliance; and that British and American interests would coincide to the extent that the stronger party would be willing to leave the defence of its interests to the weaker. (Hourani 1991:357, 358)

Neither assumption proved to be well founded. To be sure, some of the early points of conflict in the Cold War centred on Soviet interests in Iran and Turkey, and the Truman Doctrine was formulated in relation to the eastern Mediterranean countries, Turkey and Greece. (An early draft of the Truman Doctrine mentioned Turkey's proximity to the great natural resources of the Middle East, as well as its border with the Soviet Union.) And Anglo-American co-operation on these issues did seem to confirm the British stance.

However, notwithstanding Turkey's membership of NATO in 1952, it soon became clear with the Egyptian revolution (1952) and the rise of Mossadeq in Iran in the early 1950s that nationalist forces in the Middle East were not ready to throw their weight behind the Cold War policy of the West. Unlike Turkey, they had yet to throw off foreign (Western) control, to consolidate their rule internally and to initiate programmes of state-led capitalist industrial development. In these circumstances, the British sought to maintain their vital interests: support for the Hashemite monarchies in Jordan and Iraq; the supplies of oil from the Gulf; and the protection of their clients in the periphery of Arabia. As Pierre Rondot pointed out, 'this policy of "limited commitment" made [the British] the associates of reactionary governments on the wane, and this was the great weakness of the system' (1961:131).

This can be seen most clearly in the fortunes of the Baghdad Pact (1955). The Pact comprised Britain, Turkey, Hashemite Iraq, Iran (with the shah restored to power) and Pakistan, and it was aimed as much against Egypt as against potential Soviet influence in the region. Together with the rivalry between Egypt and Iraq, this inevitably pushed Nasser's Egypt towards a reliance on the Eastern bloc. Similarly, Syria, pressed by Baghdad Pact powers (Iraq and Turkey) on the one hand and by the United States allies of Jordan and Lebanon on the other, also turned to the Soviet Union. Thus, those states which had undergone a degree of anti-imperialist and anti-landlord mobilization aligned with the Soviet Union, while the powers where the landed class or tribal elites remained in control, or as in the Turkish case where relatively stable capitalist development was already under way, joined the western camp. With the Iraqi revolution of 1958 the Baghdad Pact disintegrated.

During the Second World War the United States had, on the basis of pre-war oil concessions to US oil companies, established relations of economic and military assistance with Saudi Arabia. (Elsewhere on the Arabian littoral Britain remained the protecting power.) The restoration of the shah in Iran, together with the recomposition of the Iranian oil concession, also gave the United States significant economic and military relations with Iran. Before

long, the United States came to oppose radical anti-imperialist (nationalist) forces contesting British and French colonial power – as in Iran in the era of Mossadeq and in Egypt under Nasser – and began to support both the conservative, monarchical regimes in Jordan and Saudi Arabia and the pliant nationalist regimes such as Iran once the shah was restored to power and Iraq under Hashemite rule. (Although not a member of the Baghdad Pact, the United States joined its sub-committees on anti-subversion, economic matters and military organization.) US support for conservative forces in the region increased after the radical turn taken in Egypt after 1956 and after the revolution in Iraq in 1958. This was matched by Soviet support for the new radical regimes. Thus, the opposition of the United States to the European empires did not necessarily translate into support for nationalist movements because of the overriding need to maintain imperialist influence in the region and because of the overarching context of Cold War.

Whereas the relative isolation of the Soviet Union in the inter-war years had meant that the dominant feature of world politics concerned inter-imperialist rivalry between the leading capitalist powers, after the war the conflict between 'East' and 'West' came to the fore. Fearful of the implications of nationalist regimes for Western interests and their willingness to align with the Soviet Union, the United States often opposed them through a general anti-communist offensive. At the same time, the Soviet Union hoped that its assistance to the independent states of national democracy could bring about their transition from colonial underdevelopment to socialism – without the need for a phase of capitalist development.

In general, Soviet policy involved a profound misreading of the pattern of socio-economic development in the Middle East and indicated the failure of its model of development to provide a long-run, generalizable alternative to integration into the world market. On the one hand, as Samir Amin (1978) has argued, the nationalization of foreign property by radical nationalist regimes or the creation of a public economy based on oil rents produced not aspirant socialist regimes but a series of state capitalisms which, increasingly after 1967 and 1973, became tied to the world market. This fragmented Arab unity, undercut the basis of a socialist path of development and strengthened the Western position. On the other hand, the autarchic pattern of extensive economic growth in the Soviet bloc and the command character of its economy

meant that it could provide only short-run competition with the West. The planned nature of development, with its limited alienability of assets and the consequent absence of exchangeability between money and other resources, implied that the rouble could not function as a hard currency in competition with the dollar. This structural disability of Soviet power in the world market, in particular in relation to the United States, was further compounded by the relative backwardness of Soviet technology, especially in strategically crucial sectors such as agriculture and oil.

This basic failure of the radical challenge, with or without its Soviet support, to alter the pattern of social development in the region in an anti-capitalist direction presaged its medium-term reintegration into the world market and the Western orbit. By these means, the informal control of the United States, organized through treaty networks, bilateral military alliances, an increased presence of US oil capital in the region and economic assistance, replaced the more direct semi-colonial arrangements of the British. Above all, US hegemony within the world market, and the difficulty of anything other than short-term development outside it *in the absence of mass social mobilization*, worked to strengthen capitalist forces in the region. (Indeed, US hostility towards the radical regimes may even have delayed their integration with the West by encouraging a detour through a spell of alliance with the Soviet Union.)

The strength of capitalist interests was underlined by the fact that the post-war order was not only characterized by United States hegemony and the politics of Cold War but also by the economics of the long boom. Until the early 1970s, growth rates throughout the advanced capitalist world and some favoured regions of the Third World, including the Middle East, were unprecedented. In contrast to the inter-war years, post-war growth was based on an international system increasingly open to trade and investment and on the spread of advanced technologies to less developed regions by means of direct foreign investment and import-substituting industrialization. (The terms of trade for raw materials remained stable or gradually deteriorated, but the absolute increase in supply meant growing incomes for many primary producers, in particular for the oil producers.)

Thus access to technology and capital, expanding markets and favourable demand conditions meant that the international opportunities for a degree of industrialization in the 1950s and 1960s

were good. To a considerable extent, whether or not a given country was able to take advantage of these circumstances depended on the structure of its internal classes and the orientation of its state. Strong, monopolistic landed classes frustrated industrialization, but equally inappropriate forms of state regulation, in particular policies geared to augmenting consumption (at the expense of investment) and excessive protection of monopolistic producers (thereby discouraging low-cost, efficient production), held back the prospects of industrialization. In economies that could none the less earn significant foreign exchange through access to oil or strategic rents, these problems were often exacerbated still further by a reduced pressure to compete in international trade.

Oil also played a major role in fashioning the character of the Middle East's integration into the international system after the Second World War. It is essential to recall that the states of the region were formed to a considerable extent through the agency of British imperialism (with France playing an important secondary role), both to manage its strategic interests and to control access to oil reserves. In the post-war period, as the informal empire of American hegemony came to replace the more direct administration of Britain and France, strategy centred on integrating the oil-rich economies of the southern Gulf as imperialist relays into a metropolitan circuit of capital whilst simultaneously arming Israel and Iran as counters against the more populous nationalist Arab regimes of the north. The Gulf producers (in alliance with Iran prior to the Islamic Revolution) thereby disciplined the price of oil for the West in return for military protection, investing their returns in the core rather than sponsoring pan-Arab growth.

This maintained Western control of the region and its reserves in order to provide a key material base of American hegemony. For Middle East oil primarily fuelled the rapid growth of post-war Western Europe and Japan and the equally dramatic move out of coal. It was only later during the 1970s that oil imports into the United States became significant. The ability of the United States to underwrite this order with its military power proved to be crucial to its wider management of inter-capitalist rivalries.

Within the Middle East itself, the main threat to that order, from Mossadeq, through Nasser and Khomeini, to Saddam, has come not from the Soviet Union but from indigenous social and national movements seeking to direct resources toward domestic ends, sometimes developmental, more often military and state-building.

Strategic management has therefore turned on isolating or containing any challenge from the more populous states. Virtually unqualified support for Israel has been one consistent element of this approach, a fact strengthened but not caused by the powerful pro-Israeli lobby in Congress. In addition, through a steady supply of arms transfers and economic assistance, it was hoped that in time nationalist ambitions could be tamed further by integrating local ruling classes into the capitalist world market and hence the Western orbit – not without some success in the case of Iran between 1953 and 1979 and in Egypt since 1973. Thus, another aspect of the strategy has been the strong support given to the other pro-Western, non-oil states – Turkey and Egypt – after 1973. (A similar strategy pursued in relation to Iraq during and after the Iran–Iraq war failed dramatically as Saddam Hussein refused to be bound by Western interests and invaded Kuwait in 1990.)

Furthermore, while the Soviet Union could arm and aid its allies in the region (Egypt until 1972, Syria, Iraq and the PLO), only the United States could bring direct pressure to bear on Israel in the Palestinian conflict. Together with the Saudi alliance with the United States and Egypt's turn to the West, this implied that the influence of the Soviet Union in the Middle East was limited even in the strictly geo-political sphere. Paradoxically, the rivalry of the superpowers and the Cold War played a stabilizing role in the region. For as long as the Soviet Union retained a significant influence in the Middle East it generally sought to temper any ambitions of its principal allies which might embroil it in a direct conflict with the United States, while taking opportunistic advantages where possible. But the Soviet position was always weak in the economic sphere, and especially in the oil industry: compare the position of either Iraq or Syria with that of the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia. Finally, Soviet relations with its allies began to deteriorate after the mid-1980s, as it turned its attention inwards to concentrate on domestic reform. Once the Soviet Union began to retreat, its main ally, Iraq, also had a freer hand.

Despite this overall weakness of the Soviet position in the Middle East, the Iranian revolution resulted in the collapse of the 'twin pillar' strategy associated with the regional application of the Nixon Doctrine. This had involved arming Iran and Saudi Arabia as regional clients. The West was therefore prepared to arm and (materially) support Iraq's aggression against the new Islamic regime as a means of containing and subduing Iran (and also Syria).

Throughout, support for Israel continued while the PLO's positions were repeatedly rebuffed. However, while Iran was suitably cowed, stability did not return, as was again demonstrated by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and the subsequent United States – Iraq war of 1991.

Beyond the conjunctural and structural advantages of the West in its rivalry with the East in the Middle East, the long-term position of this post-war structure of Western (and specifically, US) control embodied a number of potentially explosive contradictions. Most obviously, the United States was the economic and military backer of both the conservative Islamic monarchies of the Gulf and the state of Israel. More important, materially speaking, have been three aspects of the socio-economic development of the contemporary Middle East. First, the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia in effect exchanged US military protection in return for managing the region's oil in the interests of Western consuming nations rather than the rest of the Arab world. Second, the class basis of the nationalist regimes, together with the willingness, even enthusiasm, of the superpowers to arm local clients, provided a fertile soil for authoritarian and highly repressive regimes. Third, the growing integration of local ruling classes into the capitalist world, combined with the essentially domestic base of their social and material reproduction, aggravated indigenous ethnic, religious and social tensions. Given these deep social tensions and long-standing hostility to the contrived and unstable political order in the region, conflict was always a possibility – as events since 1979 have violently demonstrated.

Conclusions: state formation, interstate competition and war

According to Elizabeth Picard, 'military intervention in politics had become commonplace in many Arab states, actually with a much higher frequency than in most Third World countries during the 1950s and 1960s' (1990:190). In Turkey also the military played an important role in the political field, as did the shah's repressive apparatus in Iran. From the early 1970s through to the 1980s, the share of military expenditure in GNP in the Middle East was nearly twice that of the next most militarized region (the Warsaw Pact) and over three times the world average. (In Egypt military expenditure currently accounts for nearly one-fifth of total public

expenditure, in Saudi Arabia around one-third and in Iraq over one-half.) During the same period, the proportion of states under military control,[6] however, was on a par with Latin America (just below the world average), and much less than in South Asia, the Far East and Africa. As Tilly has pointed out:

> about 40 percent of the world's states now live under military control, and the proportion is slowly rising. Variations from region to region are dramatic: in Latin America 38 percent of all governments are military, and this proportion declining (after a rapid rise in the 1960s and early 1970s); 38 percent in the Middle East, up from 25 percent in the 1970s; a stable 50 percent in South Asia, a mildly fluctuating 60 percent in the Far East, 64 percent and rising in Africa. Military control, of one variety or another, has become the standard form of government in much of the Third World, notably in South Asia, East Asia, and Africa. (1990:212)

Tilly's explanation for this depressing phenomenon turns on the implications of superpower bi-polarity, and the ensuing competition for the allegiance of Third World states, for the relative strength of the Third World military in relation to other domestic social forces. According to Tilly, the *direct* role of the superpowers in sponsoring military control is limited: only rarely do they play a major role either in coups (he suggests that nearly 90 percent of post-war coups in the Third World 'occurred *without* substantial foreign intervention') or in the direct support of military regimes. But the *indirect* effects of bi-polarity are marked: 'alterations in relations of Third World states to great powers and to each other seem to have contributed importantly to changes in the overall rhythms of military control in the world as a whole' (1990:223). The heightened availability of weaponry, training and other kinds of support, alongside the increased willingness to provide these in return for political favours, access to strategic bases and essential resources, have radically changed the relation of the military to the state as compared with the European experience.

Now this is clearly an important feature of the context of state formation in the post-war period, and it undoubtedly strengthens

6 Defined by Tilly as one or more of the following: 'key political leadership by military officers, existence of martial law, extrajudicial authority exercised by security forces, lack of political control over the armed forces, or occupation by foreign military forces' (1990:211).

the position of the Third World military in their contests with other local groups. But it is, surely, a mistake, a confusion of permissive and proximate causes, to view this as the primary dynamic of Third World militarization. The proximate causes of military rule derive from the dilemmas of state formation in conditions of dependency. For dependent state formation brings with it great vulnerability and hence insecurity: the exigencies of rapidly consolidating state power, fostering industrialization from a subordinate position in the international division of labour and forging a new social basis for the regime all conspire to augment the power of the military in the state.[7] It is the imperatives stemming from these necessary tasks, the urgent and primary functions of any developing society, that so bolster the power of the military. In short, the strategic importance of the military is determined by its functional role. And it is on the terrain provided by this *central* feature of Third World politics that the new context identified by Tilly, the superpower competition, worked its wretched logic.

Indeed, as the comparative work of Tilly and others (Sivard 1986) has shown, the level of interstate conflict in the Middle East is not as high as the region's reputation might suggest. The Middle East has been a safer place to live than most of South Asia, the Far East and Africa. (The Arab–Israeli wars were all relatively minor in terms of casualties and force deployments.) In fact, until the Iraq–Iran war of 1980–88 and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, the main source of conflict in the Middle East was *intra*-state, concerned with the internal pacification and repression of domestic populations. Thus, the objective pressures of militarization deriving from interstate competition are not qualitatively higher in the Middle East than elsewhere in the Third World. What differentiates the Middle East, then, is not the scope of military rule, nor even the scale of conflict, but rather the disproportionately large amount of resources devoted to the military in relation to any conceivable measure of objective need. Of course, the context defined by Tilly assisted here, as he has rightly noted elsewhere:

> With fair consistency, the US acted to protect Israel, to crack Arab unity, to foster oil-producing collaborators who would undercut OPEC unity, to sell American weapons to reliable clients, and in the process to establish the legitimacy of its own military presence in the Middle East. The United States did not act alone. . . . [Between 1960 and 1986] world-wide military expenditure, in constant dollars, rose about 40 percent, in the Middle East it sextupled; military expenditure rose less rapidly than national income in most of the world, but increased from 5.6 to an exhausting 18.1 percent of GNP in the Middle East. With help and encouragement from the United States, Israel pumped up its military expenditures from 2.9 to 19.2 percent of GNP, Saudi Arabia from 5.7 to 22.7 percent, Iran from 4.5 to 20 percent, Iraq from 8.7 to a debilitating 32 percent. (1991:40)

7 For persuasive accounts of some aspects of these processes in the Arab world, see Lawson (1993) and Sayigh (1993).

But as Tilly is well aware, the reason for this is as simple as it is obvious: the availability of oil rents. It is no accident that the biggest military spenders are Iraq and Saudi Arabia, not the so-called frontline states in the Arab-Israeli conflict: Egypt, Jordan and Syria.

The need for rapid political and economic development imposed by dependent state formation is what defines the salience of interstate competition and war in the Middle East, as it does throughout the Third World. More generally, the statist tradition of analysis represented by Tilly, Mann and others, with its focus on the geopolitical logic of interstate competition as one of the principal motors of state power, mispecifies the character of the state and the process of state formation. This point has been well made by Justin Rosenberg who has pointed out that:

> states have not been principally concerned with war. They have been principally concerned with rule as the precondition of regularised relations of surplus extraction. The reproduction of this rule as a set of social relations has of course required the continuous and costly mobilisation of military sanctions against internal and external challenges. . . . But we do not for this reason theorise the role of the state by casting it as a military agent constituted outside the social order which then approaches . . . society armed with a series of demands and incentives in order to further its quite separate military ambitions. (1990)

If we follow Mann and Tilly, then we start with the state as an actor whose main strategy is warfare, and we reify interstate competition into a game whose rules are relatively constant. Alternatively, if we start with the process of consolidating rule and the

relations of this to diverse forms of surplus appropriation, then it becomes possible to see the state as first and foremost a set of social and material relations concerned with rule and hence to situate the *changing* role of interstate competition both historically and structurally. For this reason, the case studies which follow do not examine the logically and historically second-order questions posed by statist theorists. In a fuller account they would have their place, but here we are trying to establish the general framework.

4

Comparative State Formation in the Middle East

Comparative and historical analysis

There are a number of different ways in which comparative and historical inquiries can be carried out. One increasingly common approach is to adopt Mill's method of comparison, involving recourse to both the method of agreement (where the outcome to be explained is common to all cases reviewed and where one searches the otherwise diverse antecedents for a common factor) and the method of difference (where the outcome to be explained is absent in one case and where one searches the otherwise shared antecedents for the significant difference).[1] Logically powerful as this procedure is for clarifying causal paths of social development, there is a danger that the method will determine the conclusions reached. For, in effect, any application of Mill's method must make the following assumptions: first, that the instances to be explained are all members of the same class of objects; second, that there is *one* set of causes operating in all cases; and third, that the basic causal patterns leading to the absence of an instance are different from those leading to its presence (see Burawoy 1989). In these ways, a rigorously applied comparative analysis can, by assuming in advance that all the examples studied are of the same kind, have the

1 The *locus classicus* of this kind of approach is Theda Skocpol's structural theory of social revolution developed in her *States and Social Revolutions* (1979).