

The Middle East and International Politics

Introduction: illusions of particularism

In the postwar period the Middle East has consistently *appeared* to be the most unstable and strategically alarming region in the whole Third World. After all, it was there, in the crisis over northern Iran in 1946, that the first Cold War began. It was in the Suez crisis of 1956 that European-US contradictions reached their highest point, and that the Soviet Union, for the only recorded occasion, threatened a direct missile assault upon Western European states. In 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars occasioned crises between the USA and the USSR more dangerous than any that arose over Indo-China or Europe, less dangerous only than that which erupted in 1962 over Cuba. The years after 1970 provided event after event that placed the Middle East at the forefront of international concern: the OPEC price rises of 1971-73, the Iranian revolution, the protracted agonies of the Lebanese civil war and the Israeli invasion of that country, the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88, the Gulf war of 1990-91. Events in what President Carter's security adviser Brzezinski termed the 'Arc of Crisis', encompassing Afghanistan, Iran, South Yemen and Ethiopia, played an important part in the onset of the second Cold War in 1978 and 1979. The war between Iran and Iraq was the second longest interstate war of the twentieth century, shorter by only two months than the Sino-Japanese conflict of 1937-45. The events following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, from August 1990 to March 1991, comprised one of the major international crises of the postwar epoch, both for the Middle East and for the United Nations.

Whether their intensity is assessed in terms of the impact upon East-West relations, the challenge to the workings of the international market, or the apparent threat to regimes in place in the region, the events of the Cold War decades were clearly of major and sustained importance, both for the Middle East itself, and for the outside world. Little wonder that the Middle East seemed to many to be the most critical and explosive area of the post-1945 epoch.

Yet such an impression needs some qualification, not least in terms of historical perspective. The Middle East was, arguably, the scene of a greater degree of interstate war than any other region of the world in the post-1945 period: the Arab-Israeli wars and Iraq's invasions of its two neighbours saw to that. But on other indices other areas of the Third World were the most contested: it was the Far East which saw the most costly conflicts of the second half of the twentieth century, in Korea and Vietnam, followed in southern Africa by the conflicts of Angola and Mozambique.¹ It was the Far East too which, in conjunction with these wars, saw the greatest levels of political upheaval (most of all in China) and which, from the 1950s onwards, became the site of the greatest economic transformations, in part as a result of the Gold War itself. On none of these three indices therefore – the human costs of war, the degree of political mobilization, the record of economic transformation – was the Middle East the most prominent region of the developing world. While recognizing the importance of the region for the international system as a whole, there is a need to guard against what may be termed a 'regional narcissism', a tendency to see the course of events there as uniquely dramatic by comparison with other areas of the world.

Coverage of this region, both academic and journalistic, reveals another distortion, a tendency towards suspending analytic rigour in the face of what appear to be impenetrable, or at least *sui generis*, political and social developments. Somehow, it is implied, the Middle East is simply not like other parts of the Third World: its dynamics, conflicts and patterns of behaviour are different. One version of this particularist approach, examined at greater length in chapter 7, is what has come to be termed 'orientalism' – the assertion of a special, Islam-dominated, area, where canons of rationality and comparative judgement are not applicable.² It is

asserted that the only way to understand the behaviour of Middle Eastern societies is through analysis of 'Islam': that class politics, or revolutions, or even social consciousness do not arise there, or that democracy, in either its liberal or socialist sense, is not possible in such countries. But the temptations of particularism are not confined to 'orientalists': for, in suitably altered form, they constitute much of the self-image of Middle Eastern peoples themselves. No one could be more 'orientalist' than the Arab nationalist vaunting the uniqueness and specificity of the 'Arabs', and arguing that forms of oppression found elsewhere – based on class, gender or ethnicity – do not operate in the Arab world. Equally, the vision of Islamic radicals of the 1970s and 1980s, epitomized in but not confined to Khomeini, stresses the different social and moral character of Middle Eastern peoples. The Islamist vision denies, explicitly, the relevance to the Muslim world of what are seen as alien, secular, criteria of assessment. Since the early 1970s, as part of the wide disillusion with earlier forms of socialist and secular thought, large numbers of Arab intellectuals have also focused their work upon a search for Arab identity, and the unearthing of what are presented as *al-turath*, the 'roots' of Arab culture and history. Even ex-Marxists and Arabs of Christian origin can be found extolling the virtues of the Arabs' Islamic culture. Essentialism and relativism of many stripes therefore pervade a broad sphere of discussion of the Middle East, both within the region and outside.

In reaction against this there has arisen, predictably, a contrary current, persistent if still subordinate. This dispenses with the apparent exceptionalism of the Middle East and instead seeks to assimilate, without major qualification, developments in the Middle East with those of Europe and/or other regions of the Third World. Thus in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, much liberal writing – Arab, Turkish, Persian and European – saw the region as progressing along an increasingly enlightened and optimistic path towards more acceptable democratic norms. In the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s a body of Marxist writing, part of it orthodox pro-Soviet, part of it independent or Maoist, and aspiring to be historical materialist in approach, portrayed the region in class terms, with almost no reference to factors of tribe, nationality, religion or faction. It seemed that here finally

the complexes of orientalism and colonial essentialism had been well and truly overcome. In these class analyses the 'petty bourgeoisie', the 'proletariat' and the 'semi-feudal forces', among others, were moved firmly to the centre. As the OPEC-led boom of the 1970s took shape, and led to the spectacular increase in producer-state incomes, it seemed also to many more orthodox economic and social analysts as if the pattern of Middle Eastern economic growth could be tidily assimilated to that of other states and models. This was the view taken by some about Egypt's economic liberalization, and nowhere was this optimism more common than in writing on Iran, where virtually all the literature of the 1970s colluded in some degree with unilinear and apologetic illusions of the Shah's modernization programme. Yet each of these universalist approaches has faced an apparent rebuff by history: the end of the twentieth century has not seen the universal triumph of liberal progress, or rigorous class politics, or orthodox capitalist modernization.

The particularist and the universalist approaches have profound problems associated with them: both have to some extent foundered on the rocks of empirical reality, both rest on questionable theoretical assumptions and both have evidently served ideological functions. But study of their competing ideological approaches is of more than discursive interest, for these ideologies have been espoused by groups, within and beyond the Middle East, who have been striving to gain power over societies and economies. The particularism of the colonialist, like the universalism of the capitalist modernizer, reflects a material interest in the region. Furthermore, the relativism of Arab nationalists or Islamic revolutionaries serves a comparable ideological function (i.e. to obtain or secure political power). The ideologies of Middle Eastern society, exceptionalist and universalist, are therefore themselves inseparable from the overall pattern of conflict and tension in Middle Eastern societies: whether generated from without or within, they are part of a competition for power and resources.

A preliminary solution to this problem can, however, be suggested, and informs the following analysis. The particularist approach to the Middle East, and its universalist antinomy, contain two distinct arguments as to the character of Middle Eastern societies. One is what can be termed an *analytic particularism*,

according to which the very categories used to describe these societies must themselves be specific to this region (the nationalist who rejects Weberian sociology or Marxism in the name of 'authentic' national or Islamic concepts, or some revised version of the thought of Ibn Khaldun, could be said to exemplify this analytic relativism). The other can be termed a *historical particularism*, according to which the specificities of the contemporary Middle East can only be comprehended in the light of the historical formation of the societies and politics of the region. In terms of this second particularism the Middle East is peculiar, not because the categories of analysis applicable elsewhere do not apply, but because of the specific processes of historical formation through which Middle Eastern states have passed. The particularity of the Middle East is therefore to be seen in the manner in which its contemporary social formations have emerged: these particularities are, however, to be grasped in terms of analytic categories that are universal, and that may be all the more revealing precisely because they are of general and comparative application. This approach, matching an analytic universalism with a historical particularism, can provide a means of avoiding both the rampant relativism that has dominated discussion of the Middle East in recent years, and that bland universalism that applies to the Middle East general schemata for the Third World, without taking its special character into account.

The problem of analytic relativism is matched by that of its ethical counterpart, of those outside who argue that it is wrong to criticize Middle Eastern societies in terms of what are termed 'our values' – be these on human rights, women, freedom of speech or even torture. The argument raised earlier can be restated here: that the criteria for such judgements must be universally applied, even if it is possible to comprehend the specific historical forces that led to a particular Middle Eastern abomination. Some of the grotesque positions of Western 'understanding' or of 'solidarity' groups in recent years, of critics of Western imperialism defending the firing squads of Khomeini's *pasdaran* or the clitoridectomy of some Arab Muslim societies, show where such relativism can lead. For many years, no one was a greater beneficiary of such confusion than the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. Those who criticized the brutalities of his regime were

all too often accused of collusion with Western imperialism, a charge all the more spurious when it was directed against Arabs, and above all Iraqis, who voiced such criticisms.³

Analytic relativism has equally affected questions of national rights – a good example of this being the metropolitan left's attitude to the Arab–Israeli dispute. If in the period after the mid-1960s the majority of the Western left sided with the Palestinians, the majority before that, and a significant minority since, sided with Israel. There have been all too few who have taken up clear, critical and independent positions on this issue. Two who did, and who were repeatedly denounced for so doing, were Isaac Deutscher and Maxime Rodinson.⁴ Both criticized the chauvinism and repression of the Israeli state, and declared their support for Palestinian statehood. But both also named and opposed the chauvinism of many Arab politicians, a chauvinism meekly reproduced in much metropolitan 'anti-imperialism' which simply called for the abolition of an Israeli state. Where such direct expressions of this view were judged unwelcome, coded formulations, such as that equating Zionism with racism, were espoused. The clear democratic position adopted by both Deutscher and Rodinson argued that *each* nation should have its own state in a partitioned Palestine. Such a position required both a detailed study of the issues involved and a political willingness on the part of both to distance themselves from two political camps that have managed virtually to monopolize the terms of discussion. The great tragedy of so much external concern with the Middle East is that for too long it took the form of support for one or other chauvinism in the Arab–Israeli dispute and, indeed, in other conflicts.

Determinations: external and internal

To look for a common pattern or cause in the conflicts that ravaged the Middle East in recent decades is futile.⁵ The societies themselves are too different, their distinct political characters and state formations already too diverse, to permit of any unified *endogenous* explanation. To invoke one common *external* factor would also be misleading. For many years, Cold War writers tried to blame all the problems of the Middle East on Islam or Soviet influence. Equally simplistically, others ascribed these events solely to the

workings of imperialism. Imperialism, conceived of as a system of external domination, formal or informal, certainly played a part – whether it be understood as the historic legacy of colonial rule and capitalist penetration, with all its disruptive impact, or as the subsequent exercise of Western (and particularly US) power in the region, both directly and through local allies. The external factors must be incorporated into the picture; but regional conflicts arose equally from forces located *within* these diverse societies themselves. This can be seen by examining three of these conflicts: the war in Lebanon of 1975–90, the Iran–Iraq war of 1980–88, and the Gulf war of 1990–91. Beyond their intrinsic importance, these conflicts may serve as examples of how internal and external factors combined to produce, and sustain, specific Middle Eastern antagonisms.

The war in Lebanon that exploded in 1975 arose from the long and unresolved crisis within that country that had been developing ever since independence from France in 1943.⁶ The initial political arrangement reached at independence, the National Pact, had established a form of power-sharing between representatives of the Christian and Muslim bourgeoisies: positions in the state, from the president down, were to be allocated by religious affiliation; the two confessional elites and their allies were to run the state's policies together. Lebanon was to occupy a correspondingly cautious place within the Arab world: part of that world, but to a considerable degree insulated from its politics.

The main problem with this 1943 system was that it took inadequate account of change, internal or external. Internally, the demographic balance shifted in favour of the Muslims, while within each community new social forces emerged that did not accept the dominance of their respective elites. The most striking case of the latter process was the rise of a Shi'ite Muslim community that rejected the Sunni Muslim leadership, and which constituted much of the poorer population of Beirut. An initial attempt in the 1950s to challenge the balance of forces in Lebanon that had begun to favour the rise of Arab nationalism in the country ended abruptly in 1958 with the intervention of US marines, at the request of the Christian leader and President Camille Chamoun. The US intervention was, in the short run, successful. Internal change at the political level, and the appeals of Arab nationalism to the Muslim population, were contained.

But social change did not stop and the class and confessional conflicts within Lebanese society only festered the more as they failed to find political expression. Hence by the mid-1970s Lebanon faced an explosive domestic situation, born of the inability of the political system to adjust to changes within the society.

External factors then compounded the internal and played a significant role in generating the explosion. Lebanon's Christians did not feel themselves to be part of the Arab nationalism that swept the region in the 1950s and Lebanon stayed out of the Arab-Israeli wars. But it was not possible to insulate Lebanon completely from the turmoil of the Arab world. Its economy was a satellite of the oil-producing states, in that moneys from the oil producers were invested and spent on services in Lebanon. It was thus sensitive to developments in the Gulf. The Muslim community was increasingly drawn to Arab nationalism, and Syria never accepted that Lebanon was entirely a separate state (even after 1943 Damascus continued to regard Lebanon as within its sphere of influence). Most important, however, was the presence within Lebanon of a Palestinian exile community which from the early 1970s became politically and militarily mobilized against the Israeli state to the south. This Palestinian community established a loose alliance with the political representatives of the Muslim community; it increasingly became an autonomous and unassimilable factor within Lebanese politics.

So the civil war that broke out in 1975 had several dimensions. It was a war between confessional groups - Christians and Muslims - and between social forces within each group. The Palestinians sought to ally with the Muslims, but found no stable alliance either with the Sunni leaders or with the representatives of the Shi'ites. At the same time, Syria became increasingly involved, first on one side, then on the other, trying to re-establish some coalition of confessional groups that could govern the country under its direction. In 1978 and, more importantly, in 1982, Israel intervened directly, hoping to assist the Christians to re-establish domination, and to crush the Palestinian forces in Lebanon. It failed, and was forced in the end to withdraw from Lebanon. A decade of civil war, and of intervention by Syria and Israel, had not produced a new coalition to replace that which had been swept away by the explosion of 1975. If a

complete disintegration of Lebanon was improbable, the fragmentation, destruction and bitterness occasioned by the war certainly made any new stable political system the harder to achieve. Confessional hatred, social tension and the dynamics of war-lordism in each camp made restabilization all the harder to attain. Only in 1990, with the establishment of a Government of National Reconciliation on 24 December, did a combination of internal exhaustion and external realignment make possible a slow, often interrupted, return to peace and to the reconsolidation of a single state.

A different combination of confessional, social, national and international factors contributed to the other major war of the early 1980s, that between Iran and Iraq that began in September 1980.⁷ The immediate cause of this war was the Iranian revolution of the previous year. Like virtually all revolutionaries, Khomeini in a rhetorical way sought to spread his revolution: he advocated a set of universal revolutionary ideals and believed that the security of his new regime could best be ensured by the establishment of similar regimes elsewhere. Although he did not envisage all-out war with Iraq, his call for a generalized Islamic revolution led his new regime within months into conflict with neighbouring Iraq, and into support for dissident Islamic groups within that country. Ethnic factors also played a part: antagonism between Arabs and Persians was fanned by both sides, and each sought to encourage ethnic dissidents within the other's state - the Iraqis backing Kurds and Arabs in Iran, the Iranians assisting Kurdish rebels in Iraq.

The resort to history alone cannot explain such wars. One has always to ask the question of why the past comes to influence the present. However, deeper causes of the conflict lay in the rivalry between Iran and Iraq within the Persian Gulf region. Evident for more than a decade, this rivalry had led Iran, then under the Shah, to wage a long, destabilizing covert war against Iraq in the early 1970s. Temporarily halted by an agreement between the two states in 1975, this regional rivalry was reopened by the Iranian revolution of 1979. The Iraqis, facing what appeared to be a determined new challenge from Iran, decided to hit first and to press their cause in the regional contest. When they attacked in September 1980 they expected a rapid victory. Instead they

became embroiled in a massive land and air war they could scarcely sustain. Both sides had played their part in the outbreak of the war, and both suffered terribly in the killing and destruction that followed.

After eight years of war, neither side was able to achieve its combat goals. Iraq had failed to defeat Iran in its initial attack: by the summer of 1982 Iraq had withdrawn its forces from enemy territory and was calling for peace on the basis of a return to the status quo. Iran, while unable on its part to defeat Iraq, was occupying some Iraqi territory and proclaimed itself determined to continue the war until its goals were met. These included the removal and 'punishment', presumably execution, of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, the payment of war damages of \$150 billion or more by Iraq, and the condemnation of Iraq as the aggressor by an international tribunal. On some occasions, Iranian leaders implied that they would continue the war until an Islamic Republic like their own had been established in Iraq. For six further years, Iran persisted in these demands despite its inability to prosecute the war successfully. Only in 1988 did Khomeini, with bitter reluctance, agree to a compromise peace.

Claims about external control of both states involved in this war were not hard to find: the Iranians accused Saddam of being a tool of the Americans, and having attacked on Washington's instructions; the Iraqis accused Khomeini of being, among other things, an Israeli agent and of sending envoys to Tel Aviv to receive instructions. Demagogy aside, neither party to this war was wholly or mainly motivated by exogenous factors, though neither side could have fought the war that they did without external support. Both needed money, and this they obtained from selling their oil and, in the case of Iraq, from sympathetic Arab states. Both also needed arms, since they had only limited domestic arms-production capacity. Iraq experienced no difficulty in obtaining arms, since most Arab states, the Soviet Union, France and the USA supported its cause. Iran did face much greater difficulties and no states, apart from Libya and Syria, were willing openly to support it. But Iran was able to obtain substantial supplies of arms for cash payment on the world market, from Western sources and from North Korea, and thus acquired at least part of the outside help it needed.

Yet despite these external inputs, neither state could be said to be acting at the behest of or under the control of other states. None of the many suggestions to this effect managed to demonstrate that any outside power was actively encouraging or prolonging the war for its own interest. The outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war, and its long duration, underlined the considerable autonomy of the states involved and of the tensions within them that led to war.

The Gulf war of 1990-91 lends itself, as do these earlier two examples, to analysis of an almost wholly exogenous or endogenous kind. Thus there were many who saw Iraq's attack on Kuwait as the result of external factors, be these the crisis of the Middle East state system at the end of the Cold War, the cold war between Arab states themselves, going back to Egypt's peace with Israel in 1977, or (for those favouring a more conspiratorial approach) direct US enticement of Iraq into the war, with the hope of then crushing an Arab state that threatened Western hegemony in the region. On the other hand, there was no shortage of analysis that stressed factors within the states themselves: the crisis of the Iraqi state, frustrated and empty-handed after its eight-year war with Iran, the very ideological dementia of the Ba'thist regime and of its leader, for whom war was an attractive way forward, and, on the other side, the political crisis in Kuwait which led the leaders of that country to risk confrontation with Iraq in the hope of silencing domestic critics within. There will be a more detailed analysis of the Gulf war, and of explanations of its origin, in chapter 3. Suffice it to say here that no simple explanation, focusing wholly on the external or the internal, is possible. Rather, a combination of international and regional, domestic and personal factors combined to lead Iraq's leader to provoke a war.

The examples offered by these three conflicts - the Lebanese civil war, the Iran-Iraq war and the Gulf war - underline two of the most salient features of the contemporary Middle East, and of its place in the overall pattern of world conflict. One is the apparent explosiveness of the region and of the political systems within it: this is why the Middle East has been consistently a source of international concern since the end of World War Two. The second salient characteristic is the considerable independence of these conflicts from the broader skein of international politics.

The contemporary Middle East cannot be understood apart from the historical experience it underwent in the colonial era, the character of its economic links to the developed countries, and the impact upon it of prolonged Soviet-American rivalry. But while these international factors provide a context and often a catalyst, it is equally important to locate the conflicts of the region in their specific, local origins and to develop judgements and political assessments also based on these particular factors. It is, indeed, in the tension between these two approaches that the specific difficulty of analysing the Middle East lies. Of inescapable importance for international conflict as a whole, and for an informed, critical evaluation of the contemporary world, the Middle East remains the site of violent local conflicts that are largely independent of broader international patterns.⁸

Historical formation

The Middle East, a region in 1995 of 20 independent states with a combined population of around 300 million, is the only area of the Third World geographically contiguous with Europe. Conflict between it and Europe, taking military, economic and religious-ideological forms, has been in train for centuries, reaching far back beyond the era of contemporary imperialism into the epoch of feudalism, the Crusader wars and the rise of Islam. The modern period of interaction between Europe and the Middle East began in the late eighteenth century, first with the Russian assaults upon the Ottoman empire in the war of 1768-74, and then with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798.

European interest in the region was, until this century, mainly strategic. Throughout the nineteenth century, external rivalry took the form of the 'Eastern question', the competition between rival powers, especially Russia and its competitor Britain, for influence in the region and control over communications at the expense of the Ottoman empire. Until 1914 the Ottoman empire survived, in part through a system of flexible alliances with Western powers, but in the preceding decades various imperial powers had succeeded in establishing themselves on its periphery - France in Algeria (1830), Tunisia (1881) and Morocco (1912), Italy in Libya

(1911), Britain in Egypt (1882), in Sudan (1898), in South Arabia (1839) and in the string of coastal Persian Gulf states (late nineteenth century to 1914).

With the end of World War One the Eastern question was dramatically transformed. On the one hand, the Ottoman empire was dismembered, its heartland becoming the nation state of Turkey and its former Arab dominions divided into seven separate states or colonial entities. Two of these new entities (Lebanon and Syria) were now ruled by France, three (Iraq, Jordan and Palestine) by Britain, and two (Saudi Arabia and North Yemen) became independent Arab monarchies. While the territory of the Ottoman empire was thus divided, the strategic rivalry in the region was simultaneously redefined by the new developments: by the discovery, just prior to World War One, of substantial quantities of oil in and near the Persian Gulf, by the entry of a rival imperial power, the USA, into the Middle Eastern arena for the first time, and most important of all by the political transformation of Russia, one of the powers central to the Eastern question, through the 1917 revolution. Thus, if World War One meant the end of the old order and its Eastern question, new problems simultaneously emerged to elicit a renewed interest in the region. Hitherto of *geostrategic* importance, with the discovery of oil the Middle East now became of *intrinsic economic* significance. The pre-existing inter-European imperial rivalry between France, Britain, Italy, Germany and Tsarist Russia was now complicated by the entrance of the American challenger - albeit, at this early stage, mainly in the form of oil companies. Superimposed upon these economic and inter-capitalist concerns, there emerged a new global conflict, between the Bolshevik revolution and the Western capitalist powers as a whole. This impinged directly on the Middle East. One of the first acts of the Bolshevik revolutionaries was to publish the secret agreements on the Middle East between Britain, France and the Tsarist government, and thereby stimulate Arab nationalist hostility to Western intrigues.⁹

In addition to these changes, the decline of the Ottoman empire and the events accompanying and succeeding World War One had produced two other major changes within the Middle East itself: one was the entry into the political arena for the first time of popular movements, the other the consolidation of Zionist

settlers in Palestine. A combination of factors stimulated the former development – the increased economic impact of the industrialized world, foreign occupation, the spread of new ideas of religious and national radicalism, peasant resistance to agricultural change, urban resistance by the traditional merchant class to foreign imports. Together these produced considerable resistance and revolt across the region in the decades after 1880. In Egypt it was nationalist military forces under Urabi Pasha that resisted the Anglo-French invasion of 1882, while in 1919, as Britain was preparing to deny Egyptian nationalists their right to attend the Versailles Conference and demand independence, a major revolt broke out in the villages of the Nile delta and in the cities. To the south, in the Sudan, a mass revolt led by the Mahdi wiped out the expeditionary force of General Gordon in 1885 and prevented Britain from establishing control there for more than a decade. In the Arab areas of the Ottoman Empire World War One was preceded by substantial political organization against Turkish rule, and in the war itself Arab nationalists and officers rose up to join the British in driving the Ottomans northwards.¹⁰ The imposition of colonial rule in the territories freed from Ottoman rule was itself followed by a series of uprisings – in Iraq in 1920, in Syria in 1926 and in Palestine in 1936–9. In Iran there had been a nationwide project against foreign economic influence in 1891, a major urban uprising against the Shah in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–08, while in the aftermath of World War One communists and nationalists established a distinct revolutionary regime in the northern Gilan province.¹¹ The complex new strategic situation in the Middle East was therefore tied to the onset of widespread popular dissent and resistance to foreign domination, both of which were to prove formative influences in the twentieth century.

This mobilization of elements in the indigenous populations of the Arab countries and Iran was matched by the simultaneous movement to colonize Palestine by Zionist settlers. This movement had begun with the first emigration or *aliya* in the 1870s, and by World War One there existed a substantial, but still minoritarian, Jewish community in Palestine.¹² The world war dramatically altered the conditions under which this settlement took place: it provided in Britain an administrative power whose more favour-

able attitude towards such settlement was enunciated as policy in the 1917 Balfour Declaration, which promised Jews a 'national home' in Palestine; and it laid the basis in Europe of the political and social conditions that were to drive many of those Jews able to survive Nazism towards the comparatively safer haven of the Middle East. Substantial Jewish migration to Palestine continued between the wars, and by the end of World War Two the Jewish community there was strong enough to demand, and establish, an independent state.¹³ Britain purported to be even-handed as between the two nationalities, Palestinian and Jewish. But it had itself opened the door to the new settlers in Palestine (while closing the door to them in Britain itself) and by the end of World War Two it was so vulnerable to American pressure, by then firmly pro-Zionist, that it in effect abdicated in the face of mounting pressure for an Israeli state. The result was that in 1948 a third non-Arab state emerged in the Middle East: it was one that the Arab states long refused to accept and which was to provide the focus for nationalist and religious resentment for decades to come. It is common to talk of 'the Middle East problem' as if it consists solely of the Arab-Israeli dispute. This is a simplification. However, if the modern history of the Middle East cannot be reduced to the conflict between Israelis and Arabs, it was nonetheless affected, enflamed and warped by it to a remarkable extent.¹⁴

It was the World War One settlement, for all its contradictions, that established the state system of the Middle East as it has emerged today.¹⁵ Immediately after the war, there were only four fully independent states in the region. Saudi Arabia and North Yemen were conservative monarchies: these arose in those parts of the Arabian Peninsula that the Ottomans abandoned but where no colonial power sought to exercise its domination and where new tribal coalitions seized power. The two others were non-Arab states that had escaped colonial rule after World War One, partly because of their size and partly because of the need felt by all outside powers to create buffers on the south of the USSR: these were Turkey and Iran. Both had been the sites of major resistance to the victors of World War One – in Turkey this took the form of Kemal Pasha's military revolt of 1920–2, in Iran it led to a popular mobilization that forced Britain to abandon its 1919 plan to turn Iran into a protectorate.

The remaining Arab states all now fell under colonial rule, and divided up into three main groups. The states of the Maghreb, or North Africa, all already subjugated before World War One, comprised three French colonies (Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia), one Italian (Libya) and two British colonies (Egypt and Sudan). In the Arabian Peninsula, Britain maintained control over six distinct administrative entities around the coast (Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the Trucial Oman States, Oman and Aden or, as it later became known, South Arabia). It was in the third Arab region, the east, or Mashrik, that the territories taken from the Turks were parcelled out as five distinct entities between Britain and France.

Imperial control of the Middle East was to prove relatively transient, and the decolonization process began in the interwar years. By the end of World War Two, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq were all formally independent: but the process of decolonization then became a much more bloody and conflictual affair. In Palestine, the process led to open conflict between Jewish settlers and Palestinians; when in 1948 the predominantly Jewish state was established, half the Palestinian population became refugees.¹⁶ British troops only finally left Egypt's Suez Canal zone in 1954, in the face of nationalist opposition: they then tried to return in the Suez invasion of 1956. France hung on in the Maghreb: it took the deaths of over one million Algerians, out of 14 million, for the nationalists to prevail in the war of independence that lasted from 1954 to 1962.¹⁷ In South Yemen, Britain's plans to establish a strategic pivot for its east of Suez policy at Aden were only thwarted by the nationalist, and increasingly radical, guerrilla-led revolution of 1963-67.¹⁸ British rule elsewhere in Arabia lasted until 1971, when the last of the Persian Gulf colonies acceded to independence. The transition in the Gulf involved substantial repression, of a workers' movement in Bahrain and of the guerrilla resistance in the Dhofar province of Oman.¹⁹ Short as it had been, imperial rule in the Middle East was only established and terminated amidst substantial resistance and conflict. These conflicts over decolonization did not usher in a new more quiescent period. The outbreak of the first Cold War over Iran in 1946 set the scene.²⁰ The tensions of the Middle East since decolonization were consequently of far more than local interest.

The 'conformity' of the Middle East: six Third World characteristics

Recognition of the international importance of developments in the Middle East tends to coexist with a markedly uncertain, and persistently mystified, approach to the internal character of these societies. One central aspect of the countries of the Middle East is their great diversity, a factor often ignored in generic statements about them. The modern history of the Middle East, and the decisions of the World War One victors, have produced a region of great variety and instability. Of the 20 independent states in the region, 17 are Arab, and three – Israel, Iran and Turkey – non-Arab. This ethnic diversity is matched by that of demography. The total population of around 300 million is divided up most unevenly between these states, three of them – Egypt, Turkey and Iran – having near 60 million each, and some – Bahrain, Qatar and Oman – having populations of under one million. The salience of certain shared characteristics – strategic position, Islamic culture, arid geography and, for most, the Arabic language – is offset by great differences and conflicts between them. As much as any other area of the Third World, the Middle East is united by some common features and relations to the outside world, but riven by contradictions and distinguished by variations within.

Before analysing what is specific about the Middle East, it is useful to recognize a number of characteristics of Middle Eastern societies that, in general terms, are shared with other regions of the Third World.

The Middle East has for a century or more been subjected to domination by the developed capitalist world, through direct colonialism in some areas and through indirect control in others. This experience of domination provides the fundamental context in which Middle Eastern politics and society have been formed and has given rise to certain features that are also visible in other societies of the Third World. These include movements of nationalist resistance, frequently unstable post-colonial states, extremes of economic distribution, manipulation by metropolitan states and penetration by metropolitan economies. For all its apparent eccentricity, the Middle East has *not* escaped the colonial and post-colonial experiences characteristic of the rest of the Third World.

In common with parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and the whole of the Americas and the Antipodes, the Middle East also endured, for a period, *direct* colonial settlement. In general, colonial settlement in Asia and Africa took three broad forms: settlement followed by long-term accommodation to the local population (Kenya and Morocco); settlement followed by forced departure (Angola and Vietnam); settlement and elimination of the local population (the bulk of the Americas). But there was a fourth intermediate model where neither accommodation nor elimination was possible, an unstable situation of prolonged post-colonial conflict - South Africa. In the majority of Middle Eastern cases, the first options prevailed and settlers were either assimilated or later expelled (Algeria, Libya and Egypt). But in one case, that of Palestine, there occurred precisely that intermediate and unresolved situation found also in South Africa.

In common with all others of the post-colonial world, the state structures and interstate boundaries of the Middle East reflect not long-established divisions, but the decisions of colonial administrators that cut across pre-existing regional linkages. This is as true for North Africa as it is for the Arab states of the Mashrik (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan) and for the states of the Arabian Peninsula. Yet, arbitrary as they were in origin, Middle Eastern state boundaries have survived beyond the departure of the colonial powers. States have neither disintegrated nor, with the possible exception of Yemen, have they successfully or lastingly merged. Rather they have endured, under the control of ruling groups with roots in the colonial period. These groups have seen their interests as being best served by the preservation of a state system inherited from colonialism.

In their conflictual relationship with the metropolitan states, the countries of the Middle East have followed the pattern of other Third World states and developed forms of nationalism that exalt their specificity and distinct historical origins, while at the same time maintaining and developing economic relations with the metropolitan countries. The image of Arab oil ministers negotiating over OPEC prices from beneath their headdresses epitomizes the two sides of this attitude: The exaltation of the Islamic past, or of the supposed greatness of the Arabs and their component individual nations, is part of a much wider Third

World pattern of simultaneous rejection and acceptance of the international system dominated by Western states. The rejection focuses on the symbolic, the acceptance on the material.

Again in common with the Third World as a whole, a violent relationship with the metropolitan countries, and the tensions generated within Middle Eastern societies by this contact, have led to recurrent waves of popular unrest and mobilization against the forces of external domination and against those who have cooperated with them. The history of the modern Middle East has been punctuated time and again by uprisings, riots, demonstrations, revolts and protests, in cities, villages and oases, against the influence, real and imagined, of foreign powers. The uprisings in Egypt (1919 and 1952), the Iranian revolutions (1906 and 1979), the Yemeni revolutions of North (1962) and South (1963), the Algerian revolution (1954-62), the repeated popular upheavals of the Sudan (notably, 1964 and 1985), and a host of other resistance movements testify to this recurrent pattern of uprising and mobilization. The energies of the Middle Eastern peoples may have too often been misdirected, but they have been frequently rebellious and intransigent.

The Middle East shares with other Third World regions the character of its local state structures and ruling classes. The post-1945 period has seen the seizure of control by rulers of the state structures inherited from colonialism, and their exploitation of the economic opportunities resulting from integration into the world economy. In this way they have succeeded in consolidating power domestically against their subjects and regional rivals. For all the rhetoric of Islamic or national communality uniting rulers and subjects, the tenures of these rulers and their administrations have been marked by a persistent, often ruthless, use of the instruments of political and social control - repression, massacre, demagoguery, censorship, bribery. Moreover, while maintaining political power over subjugated classes has been the predominant and most general concern of these ruling groups, they have demonstrated equally their concern to preserve other forms of power - over subject ethnic groups, such as the Kurds in Turkey, Iran and Iraq, over subject confessional groups, such as the Shi'ites in Lebanon, and over women, whose subordinate position throughout the Middle East has been perpetuated through a ferocious combination of,

violence, law and ideology. When it comes to maintaining the mechanisms of domination, on class, ethnic and gender bases, Middle Eastern rulers have resorted to all too characteristic practices in order to sustain their position.²¹

Regional anomalies? Islam, Palestine, Arab unity, oil, terrorism

The dimensions of Third World societies described above show how little the Middle East has escaped the experience of other regions of the Third World in the era of imperial domination and then of post-colonial independence. They also serve to place the apparent particularities of the Middle East in another, less anomalous context. Indeed events or trends that are often taken as distinguishing the Middle East from other parts of the Third World can, in this comparative light, appear far less particular. This can be illustrated by reference to what are most commonly held to be five key examples of Middle Eastern particularity: the hold of Islam, the Palestine question, the devotion to Arab unity, the rise of the oil states, and the incidence of terrorism. Far from relativizing the region, these five prominent features of the modern Middle East can in fact illustrate the analytic universality of its politics and society.

The Islamic religion, which originated in the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century, is, first of all, no preserve of the Middle East. Most of the world's one billion or so Muslims are not only not Arabs, but do not live in the Middle East: the largest Islamic countries lie elsewhere and are Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nigeria. At the same time, significant numbers of Arabs – in Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt and Iraq – are Christians. By definition, therefore, an *Islamic* political or social character can hardly define what is *specific* to the Middle East; generalizations about 'politics' or 'society' deployed to explain the Middle East would have to apply to these other non-Middle Eastern societies as well and would have to exclude the behaviour of the region's Christians. Examination of what Muslims *do* also reveals the fact that Islam cannot dictate a politics: Islam itself is politically and socially contingent. While the Islamic religion does have certain specific im-

plications in theory for social and even political practice, and legislates for areas some other religions exclude, these doctrinal specifications are meagre and partial; they tell us very little about how Muslims will or do act in any society or political situation. The very variety of behaviour in Muslim societies bears this out.

To explain the *particular* social forms and political beliefs of people in Muslim societies, other factors, external and additional to Islam, have to be examined. These include the patterns of state domination and class rule, the relation to external forces and the historical formation of the country and its economy.²² Certainly, as we shall see in chapter 2, the Iranian revolution of 1979 took the form it did in part because of the belief systems of the Iranian people and the presence of a clergy committed to a course of political action. But the particular version of political Islam espoused by Khomeini, the willingness of the population to follow him, the inability of the state to defeat its unarmed opponents, and the failure of the Shah's allies to help him – none of these can be explained by reference to the Quran.²³ In a comparative perspective, the Iranian revolution, which took place in the major cities of Iran after a decade of rapid socio-economic change, has much in common with urban-based populist movements in other Third World countries, from Peronism in Argentina and Getulism in Brazil to the mass movements of the Hindu right in India.²⁴ It had an Islamic ideological character, yet it cannot be explained by Islam any more than an abstracted Christianity can explain the peasant movements of Germany in the early sixteenth century, or the *Solidarnosc* movement of the 1970s in Poland.

Many in the Middle East, and outside, consider the region to be unique because of the Arab-Israeli question – the refusal of the Arabs for many years to accept the state of Israel, the protracted struggle of the Palestinians and Israel's resistance to any compromise with the Palestinians. In some ways, this dispute is unique; but it is not so anomalous. For as has already been suggested, the Palestine question is in origin the product of a colonial situation which in the nineteenth century saw the outward expansion of European settlement. Trans-Mediterranean colonialism was by no means specific to Palestine: it encompassed every country on the southern Mediterranean shore from Morocco to Palestine. What *was* specific to the case of Palestine was, first, the

particular ideological and religious character of that settlement movement embodied in Zionism; second, the fact that the Zionist settlers evolved into a separate Israeli nation while neither of the two conventional resolutions of colonialism occurred (the local inhabitants were not eliminated or definitely crushed, nor were they able to resist the establishment of a settler state); and third, the very intense and ultimately decisive support which this settler community obtained from the metropolitan countries, and in particular from the USA. The specific character of this colonial experience, one in its origins and essence nonetheless similar to dozens of other colonial settler processes, produced the conflict now seen as the Arab-Israeli dispute. That the immigrants, initially a multi-ethnic community drawn from many lands, should themselves have become a distinct nation is by no means unique: many of the current nations of the Americas were so formed.²⁵

Of equal importance in the panorama of Middle East politics, and ideologically linked to that of the Palestine issue, is a third special feature: the drive for Arab unity.²⁶ The Middle East contains 17 independent states, plus Palestine, which consider themselves to be Arab; they are formally committed both to Arab unity and to 'solidarity' on the Palestine issue. They are members of a regional body, the Arab League, founded in 1945. In the post-1945 period there have been several attempts by Arab states to merge, most notably that by Egypt and Syria in the period 1958-61. The failure of such attempts at unity has not apparently lessened the formal commitment of Arab states to this goal. On closer examination, however, this anomaly is not quite as peculiar as it may appear. Commitments to unity are not specific to the Middle East. In some cases they have succeeded (the German and Italian unifications of the nineteenth century), in others they have faded after initial enthusiasm (notably, the aspiration for unity among Latin American revolutionaries in the 1820s, briefly revived by Che Guevara, and among African states in the early 1960s, as advocated by Nkrumah). The European states have, in the past decade or two, also proclaimed an interest in greater unity and, short of that, coordination. Arab unity is one of those unificatory movements.

If the reality of Arab unity is examined more closely then it appears even less surprising. First, there is the reality of unity at

the economic and cultural levels. The growth of economic ties within the Arab world, as a result of the oil boom, is substantial; this can be measured in terms of migration and financial flows. But these linkages are not in any way unique, being comparable to other flows of labour and capital in the contemporary world economy. They have, moreover, created a new hierarchy between Arab societies rather than greater fraternity or equality. The sense of cultural unity which Arabs have, based on language but extending to music, poetry, film and humour, is certainly stronger than that within most parts of Asia and Africa. But that of Spanish-speaking Latin America is certainly comparable, and that of the English-speaking world is becoming so.²⁷ On the other hand, when we come to the political, the reality is one of Arab disunity. Abstracting from the rhetoric, the post-colonial states of the Middle East have remained as separate and as jealous of their state and rulers' interests as any other. After decades of demagogy about unity, the post-colonial divisions have endured in the Arab world, just as they have in Africa and Latin America. Nor did the Palestine question in reality provide a transcendent, unificatory cause; it led to little common action or sacrifice, except where states actually had common frontiers with Israel, and in those cases the conflict invariably took the form of a border war, a phenomenon by no means unique to the Middle East.

Solidarity with the Palestinians themselves was largely rhetorical. In practice Arab states used the issue of Palestine for domestic legitimacy, while avoiding direct confrontation with Israel and trying for self-serving purposes to manipulate the Palestinian resistance movement itself. The zenith of Palestinian activity, from 1967 until the mid-1970s, generally concealed this. However, from 1948 until 1967 the Palestinians were permitted no independent political presence in the Arab world, and were afforded scant attention. Developments after the mid-1970s - Sadat's independent initiative towards Israel in 1977, the division of the Arab world into several camps, and then, in 1983, Syria and Libya's direct attack upon the Arafat leadership of the PLO - helped to strip away the mythology about a unificatory and pan-Arab commitment to the Palestinians. These events revealed the separate, self-regarding interests of Arab states that lay behind their supposedly common position on Palestine.

Oil is a fourth issue that has, for many, come in recent years to symbolize the uniqueness of Middle Eastern societies. Yet, as with Islam, so with this black gold. In the first place, the majority of OPEC producers have not been Arabs, and many are outside the Middle East - Venezuela, Ecuador, Nigeria and Indonesia amongst them. Secondly, the impact of oil upon producer states varies greatly depending upon the character of the society in question. Only a few Arab producers - Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and the Emirates - have enjoyed substantial oil surpluses in the post-1973 period. The rest remain capital-hungry and, with large populations, they are beset by many of the problems of other developing countries. Most importantly, the reality of 'oil power' has been far more restricted than was thought in the 1970s. In political terms, the Arab states have not been able to any significant extent to alter metropolitan policies on Palestine: the 'oil weapon' has proved a chimera. Economically, the producers were able for some years to raise the price and their real incomes by combining to enforce a near-monopoly position in a favourable market. But it is the law of supply and demand rather than any Middle Eastern specificity that explains this success. About all the Arabs did achieve politically were some increased arms sales by the USA to Saudi Arabia and a few anodyne utterances by the then EEC: after 1973, only one OECD country - Japan - recognized the PLO. Moreover, even in economic terms OPEC's power proved to be temporary: in the early 1980s OPEC's share of the world market declined.

The uniqueness of oil resides quite elsewhere, in the peculiar form of payment resulting from it, a rent to producer states that does not entail the forward and backward linkages within the local economy that are characteristic of other primary production in the Third World.²⁸ The collection of this 'rent' enables the producer state, and those controlling it, to amass enormous sums of money without engaging in any form of production; it is this which has generated such major social tensions within the producer states. These tensions - growing income inequality, rampant corruption in the state, grandiose development projects, neglect of productive activity and skills, especially in agriculture - have been seen as much in Lagos and Jakarta as in Tehran and Riyadh. Islam, the Palestine question, Arab unity and oil do not, there-

fore, define a *sui generis* Middle East. Neither the determination of the geological substructure nor those of the religious-ideological superstructure can establish a Middle East exempt from analytic universality.

Finally, there is the issue of terrorism, a question widely associated in the Western public mind with the Middle East and, in particular, with a special brand of Islamist bent on acts of hijacking, kidnapping and bombing of civilians. Actions of such kinds have indeed been carried out by militants of a variety of ideologies in the Middle East. Yet there is much confusion in the discussion of terrorism.²⁹ A measure of historical proportion is essential. In the first place, taking 'terrorism' as any act of terror by a civilian political group directed against non-combatant civilians, the phenomenon is by no means specific to the Middle East. Acts of terror of this kind have been present throughout much of recorded history, and have been a pervasive part of political life in many countries and cultures during the twentieth century. The first terrorists of modern politics did not come from the Middle East but were Russian anarchists, Irish republicans, Armenian and (Hindu) Bengali nationalists, later to be followed by Zionist Jews, Greek Cypriots and others in the post-1945 period. Modern political terrorism did not originate in the Middle East, or among Muslims, nor has it been predominantly carried out by such people.

Discussion of terrorism suffers not just from a selective application of the term, but also from problems of definition. The term itself was originally used in the context of the French revolution to refer not to acts of unofficial terror, but to the use of terror, for political purposes, by the state. In that sense, of course, it has been a widespread instrument of Middle Eastern states in the modern period, but by no means exclusively so. Terrorist acts against one's own subjects, or against populations deemed to represent a threat in neighbouring states, have been committed by many Arab states, and by Israel, Turkey and Iran. They have also, it need hardly be underlined, been committed by states in much of Europe and elsewhere during the twentieth century.

Perhaps the greatest confusion in the 'terrorism' debate has been the idea that the practice is usually directed outside the region itself - at Europeans, or at visitors to the region, at journalists,

tourists or diplomats. Criminal attacks on such people have occurred, but by the far the highest incidence of terror, be it by states or unofficial groups, has been carried out within the region *against peoples of the region themselves*. And the greatest number of victims of terror by a state are invariably the subjects of that state. Equally, the killings in inter-communal conflict (Lebanon providing the most obvious example) have exceeded anything seen in the foreign operations of militant groups.

Discussion of 'terrorism' is as often as not an instrument, a tool in a polemical exchange rather than a means of clarification. What much usage of the term serves to obscure is the issue of why a given group is fighting in the first place: the implication which those who use the term hope to convey is that, by dint of the very methods they use, the militants concerned have no legitimate cause. But this is, on a moment's reflection, untenable. Some groups, or individuals, may commit acts of terror for the sake of it, for revenge or because of psychological disturbance. But this has been true of very few terrorist groups. In the main, such actions have been carried out by groups which, while employing reprehensible means, have been motivated by political goals that at least merit discussion. These goals are usually related to some form of national independence. To brand such people as 'terrorist' is a means of using a (probably legitimate) condemnation of their means as a way of excluding discussion of their goals. But whether it is Palestinians or Zionists, Algerian FLN or Egyptian fundamentalists, there are issues beyond terror which such actions draw attention to. In any moral calculation of such situations, as in major wars, criminal behaviour must detract from consideration of the legitimacy of its goals; but it is rare indeed for the former wholly to invalidate the latter. Here, as much as in any of its other analytic dimensions, the question of terrorism in the Middle East is part of, rather than distinct from, the broader political issues and debates of modern times.

The discriminations of history

Such are the historical origins of the contemporary Middle East and those formative characteristics which it shares with the colonial and post-colonial world as a whole. This discussion should

make it apparent that those features of Middle East politics that are often thought to define its distinctiveness do no such thing. It now becomes possible to identify with greater accuracy the real particularities which are born not of the workings of a socially abstracted religion, or of a timeless 'Arabism', but out of the specific history of the Middle Eastern region, and of its component societies.

The Middle East in the post-colonial period continues to be markedly influenced by the individual character of its pre-colonial societies.³⁰ Modern forms of communication and ideas of nationalism obviously did not exist prior to the impact of imperialism: but in the context of the great Muslim empires, the far-flung regions of the Middle East were to a considerable degree bound by ties of trade, administration, religion and migration in a way that gave a certain cultural and social unity. The current ideology of its unity as a region, or of the Arabs as one people, despite its imaginary quality, does reflect the fact that some elements of a certain *pre-colonial* cohesion have endured. Of equal import are many of the specific features of pre-colonial social structures: the prevalence of tribal forms of organization, not only amongst nomads but amongst settled agricultural populations in the Peninsula and in some other countries such as Libya; the adherence of much of the population to Islamic values which, for all their political contingency, provided a common demotic culture in the face of external, imperial and post-imperial, domination; and the presence in the cities of trading and financial sectors opposed to central government and able (as in Syria and Iran) to express political opposition to them under propitious circumstances. These, among other features of the pre-colonial Middle East, have substantially affected the politics and society of the more recent decades.

The influence of these pre-colonial factors has been all the greater given the comparatively superficial impact of colonial rule itself and the limited transformation of society by European imperialism in the region. In North Africa imperial rule did take the form of colonial settlement and agricultural transformation: the former was particularly strong in Algeria, the latter in Egypt. But in the rest of the region – in Turkey, Iran, the Arabian Peninsula and, with the exception of Palestine, the Mashrik – no comparable

transformations of the pre-colonial society were effected. Four of the states escaped colonial domination altogether; in the remaining Mashrik and peninsular states, colonial rule was effected through local social and political forces, either inherited from the pre-imperial period, as in Kuwait and Oman, or in the form of monarchies and local administrations installed by Britain and France in the wake of the Ottoman retreat. This relative abstention happened partly as a consequence of colonial parsimony, and partly because apart from oil – whose production as described above requires little social or economic linkage – there was little in these arid lands to attract metropolitan economic transformation. The result of that uncharacteristic forbearance was that in contrast to most of Africa, to Latin America and to the rest of Asia, the Middle East states of the Peninsula and the Mashrik acquired independence with many archaic social and political structures intact. Many retained their pre-colonial ruling classes. Even in the Maghreb the degree of continuity was striking, as the survival of the kings of Morocco and, up to 1969, Libya demonstrated.³¹

Another distinctive feature of Middle Eastern societies has been the virulence of ethnic and confessional differences. As elsewhere in the Third World, the current force of these divisions derives from a combination of pre-colonial historical legacies with later colonial and contemporary social and political divisions. Historical evidence shows that relations between different religions and ethnic groups in the pre-colonial period were *certainly not* wholly harmonious or egalitarian: the idea that they were, and that current divisions are *solely* the work of an external factor, imperialism, is part of contemporary nationalist mythology. But colonial rule often did much to worsen divisions, by playing off one group against another, by provoking forms of nationalism that exalted one group's past and so antagonized another's, and by stimulating the divisive search for 'genuine' national values. The pattern of confessional conflict in Lebanon and Egypt has in this way much in common with that of Cyprus and India, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. In Palestine it had additional elements, combining settler-native conflicts, nationalistic but in some measure theologically sanctioned Jewish-Muslim enmities, and a comprehensive interstate rivalry between Israel and the Arab states.

In the modern Middle East there has been no shortage of

popular movements, social in origin, that have been warped and diverted by sectarian and confessional forces. Time and again social, inter-class contradictions have developed in Middle Eastern societies but have then taken a confessional, religious or even chauvinist form. As we have seen, the Lebanese civil war that began in 1975 was a result of the long maturing of social contradictions within the country, as the power bloc established in the 1940s came under increasing pressure from underprivileged groups. Similarly, the Islamic fervour of the Iranian revolution reflected the sharp social tensions within Iranian society created by the oil boom and the Shah's autocracy. The sense of outrage and solidarity among Arabs at the plight of the Palestinians has often cascaded into an anti-Jewish demagoguery and chauvinism as retrograde as it is ineffective. At the same time, large sections of the Israeli population, including the more deprived social groups, have swung behind the semi-religious bigotry of the Likud and its overtly religious satellites.

The Middle East is characterized by what is peculiar to oil, the anomalous economic and social consequences of its production. Less than half of the Middle Eastern states are oil producers, and the majority of those have small populations. The majority of states with large populations do not have oil. This asymmetry of population and oil resources has provoked substantial migration from oil-less to oil-producing states, while at the same time enabling the oil producers to use their wealth for individual political purposes in the region. That ability to focus their power has been compounded, however, by the peculiar economies of oil production itself, which has a minimal linkage with the society in which it is taking place. In this context the main, indeed sole, significant effect of oil is that the producer state obtains a substantial rent from overseas sales. Inputs of labour, capital or agricultural goods are very small: hence oil production has an enclave character. Taken together, these two features of oil production – its asymmetrical distribution, its provision of rent rather than generation of national income – mean that some of the states most marked by pre-colonial continuities have been the very ones endowed with substantial quantities of surplus capital. This they have deployed to promote not only their particular political values but also their social values as well; a

form of conservative 'Islam', whether in its Saudi or Qaddafi-ite varieties.

If the degree of international conflict has in comparison with other regions been exaggerated, the politics of the Middle East have been characterized by a combination of popular mobilization and political regression unique in the Third World. This had, however, only an indirect relationship to the dominant world contest of the post-1945 period, the Cold War. For all the West's anxiety up to 1991 about Soviet influence, the fact that the Middle East bordered the Soviet Union and that the USSR played a role there in support of states allied to it, had in the end rather little impact on the domestic character of politics within that region. Egypt's ability to manipulate Soviet aid and, under Sadat, to expel Soviet advisers was a case in point. So too was the denunciation heaped upon Moscow by the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The USSR's role in the Middle East was a strategic and military rather than a political one. The forces of the left that emerged were in some cases substantial: communist parties were, at certain times, powerful in Iran, Sudan and Iraq. But these parties were subjected to severe repression and faced increasing competition from rival Islamic radicalisms. In other cases where groups of an 'anti-imperialist' and allegedly socialist character emerged, these took the form of military dictatorships of a most repressive and chauvinist kind, as in the Ba'thisms of Syria and Iraq. Those left-wing regimes that survived and avoided the degenerations of the Ba'th, as in Algeria and South Yemen, were comparatively isolated from the mainstream of Middle Eastern politics, and in time succumbed to the authoritarian temptations of their own.

The end of the Cold War has, in several respects, revealed to what extent the region shares many of the broader features of Third World development, even as its politics retain a particular character. With the waning of the Soviet-American conflict from the mid-1980s onwards, it became possible for a range of regional conflicts to be approached in a more diplomatic way. The Iran-Iraq war ended in 1988, and at the end of the same year Palestinian recognition of the need for a two-state solution paved the way for subsequent Arab, and particularly Palestinian, negotiations with Israel. At the same time, the collapse of the Soviet

system led to a dual realignment of regional powers by permitting both new relations with Moscow and Washington, and the emergence of new centres of regional influence such as Turkey in the context of a wider Middle East that included some of the former Soviet republics. Perhaps the most conspicuous issue to surface in the changed international environment was the generally alarming condition of Middle Eastern economies, an underlying crisis often obscured in the past by military confrontation and by oil money. The triple challenge of demographic explosion, declining water supplies and stagnant agricultural production confronted most Middle Eastern states, irrespective of political structure or ideological orientation.³² It is these problems, eminently comparable to the challenges facing the rest of the Third World, that confront the Middle East.