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The Middle East and International Relations: History Lessons Not Learned

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This chapter takes as its starting point the editors' introductory comments about prevailing trends in the study of Middle East politics and how these have been 'dominated by research topics and methods that find their origins in US political science'. The effect of these has been to overshadow other traditions such as those exemplified by the work of Charles Tripp, to whom this volume is dedicated. It argues that such comments are also appropriate to the trends in the study of Middle East International Relations. The International Relations of the Middle East, particularly in recent decades, has also been characterised by such tendencies, often squeezing out work that is informed by historical sensitivity, deep area knowledge or nuanced theoretical insights. This has evident consequences for the field itself, but also for the possible uses of International Relations (IR) as a guide to policy makers. This is no trivial concern. The limitations of political science in providing an adequate set of tools to understanding the trajectories of Middle East politics and IR has had consequences for the region and wider world.[2] It may not be the job of political scientists to foresee events, but it could be argued that the absence of regional sensitivity and deep area knowledge contributed to the failure to anticipate and comprehend the momentous dimensions of major events like the Iranian Revolution 1978–1979, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Iraq War 2003 or the

[1] This chapter draws on reflections in Louise Fawcett, 'Introduction: The Middle East and international relations', *International Relations of the Middle East*, 6th edn., ed. Louise Fawcett, 2023, 1–17 and 'International relations and the Middle East: Bringing area studies (back) in', *St Antony's International Review*, 16/1, 2020, 177–83.

[2] See, for example, Pinar Bilgin, *Regional Security in the Middle East: A Critical Perspective*, 2019; F. Gregory Gause, 'Why Middle East studies missed the Arab Spring', *Foreign Affairs* 90/4, 2011, 81–90; and Martin Kramer, 'Twin towers and ivory towers, 20 years later', *Middle East Studies* 2022, 1–7.

Arab Uprisings which commenced late in 2010 and whose consequences are still unfolding. To quote the late Fred Halliday, 'the end of the twentieth century and onset of the twenty first have not been kind to students of IR, let alone those of the Middle East'.[3] Halliday did not live to witness the Arab Uprisings, but these events, and their clumsy and often pejorative interpretations as alternatively part of an 'Arab Spring', or an 'Islamic Winter', would only have confirmed his impressions.

The above trends are hardly new. Nor are attempts to counter them. In his defence of the 'classical approach' to international theory, Hedley Bull advanced a critique of what he called 'scientific' methods that 'aspire to a theory of international relations whose propositions are based either upon logical or mathematical proof, or upon strict, empirical procedures of verification.'[4] Bull wrote of the then two competing approaches, but it is the classical one, that drew upon history, philosophy, law and empiricism, including deep area knowledge, that has lost its place amid the prevailing tendencies already described, justifying the oft-repeated claim that IR is an 'American Social Science' and largely follows prevailing US-led trends.[5] Later generations of scholars have developed and refined these arguments by pointing out, following Edward Said, that theories that are designed for a particular place may not travel well, may travel 'differently' or may be of little use.[6] These are, of course, well-rehearsed statements that need appropriate qualification and updating. Historians of

[3] Fred Halliday, 'Introduction: World politics, the Middle East and the complexities of area studies', *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology*, 2005, 1.

[4] Hedley Bull, 'International theory: The case for a classical approach', *World Politics* 18/3, 1966, 361.

[5] Stanley Hoffman, 'An American social science: International relations', *Daedalus* 106/3, 1977, 41–60; for a recent discussion see May Darwich et al., 'The politics of teaching international relations in the Arab World', *International Studies Perspectives* 22/4, 2021, 407–38.

[6] Edward Said, 'Travelling theory', *The Edward Said Reader*, ed. Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin, 2000; Darwich et al., 'The politics of teaching international relations'; Mark Tessler, ed., *Area Studies and Social Sciences*, 1999.

International Relations might protest that their field has rebounded, overcoming the 'eternal divide';[7] and International Relations scholars could argue that theirs is characterised by a far greater plurality of voices and approaches, including those that engage with Area Studies and the perspectives of the Global South.[8] More specifically, scholars of the IR of the Middle East can point to a gradual 'bridging' of the divides.[9] Yet few would deny the central claim above. The challenge to chart a course towards a more inclusive discipline, recognising its multiple and diverse foundations, and allowing a larger set of voices and experiences to speak, remains. A scholarly symposium on the origins and outcomes of the Arab uprisings, while recognising fine case studies and 'progress' in comparative politics approaches, found that there had been 'significantly less theoretical engagement by IR theorists'.[10] Another recent work concurs, describing the level of scholarly engagement as 'substantially inadequate', revealing also 'a strong and enduringly egoistic Western perspective'.[11]

[7] George Lawson, 'The eternal divide? History and international relations', *European Journal of International Relations* 18/2, 2012.

[8] One point of reference is Amitav Acharya, who introduced the concept of a 'Global International Relations', one that integrated the contributions of 'regional worlds'. See Amitav Acharya, 'Global International Relations (IR) and regional worlds: A new agenda for international studies', *International Studies Quarterly* 58/4, 2014, 647–59.

[9] Andrea Teti, 'Bridging the gap: IR, Middle East studies and the disciplinary politics of the area studies controversy', *EJIR* 31/1, 2007, 117–45.

[10] Paul Lynch and Curtis Ryan, 'The Arab uprisings and IR theory', *Political Science and Politics* 50/3, 2017, 643.

[11] Ahmed Abozaid, *Undesired Revolution: The Arab Uprising in Egypt* 2003, 1.

Were Charles Tripp to have positioned himself as an IR scholar, which he did not,[12] he would surely have sympathised with at least some aspects of the 'classical' or 'English school', notably in its insistence on the role of the state,[13] albeit with some caveats, particularly regarding the projected 'expansion' of international society.[14] When he did intervene in IR debates, even at the margins, he would not pin his colours to prevailing theories or dogmas. He was (rightly) sceptical, for example, that theories of regional cooperation or 'regionalism' that served to explain the case of early European integration, could be usefully applied to the Arab Middle East: 'leaders who are unwilling to make compromises with domestic constituencies appear similarly unwilling to make compromises with neighbouring states'.[15] Yet, in his multiple works on Middle East politics and societies, *international politics* are ever-present: in the break-up of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence and trajectory of 'new' states; in the Cold War Middle East; the Iran–Iraq War; the Iraq War; the Arab Uprisings; or the political economy of the Muslim world. His approach, however, has always been measured: aiming to strike a balance between the different 'logics' that informed the politics of regional states. In his study on Iraq, for a volume on the Cold War in the Middle East, these logics comprised, first, 'domestic political processes in Iraq', and, second, the 'Cold War in its various guises'.[16] The 'challenge', he wrote is 'to understand the ways in which the Cold War made a difference to the choices of successive Iraqi governments, without necessarily suggesting that those

[12] When I invited him to contribute a chapter to an Oxford University Press volume on the International Relations of the Middle East, he declined, declaring that he 'did not do IR'!

[13] Fred Halliday, 'The Middle East and conceptions of international society', *International Society and the Middle East*, ed. Barry Buzan and Anna Gonzalez-Pelaez, 2009, 8.

[14] Halliday, 'The Middle East and conceptions', 10–13; see also Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, *The Expansion of International Society*, 1984.

[15] Charles Tripp, 'Regionalism in the Arab Middle East', *Regionalism in World Politics*, ed. Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell, 1995, 302.

[16] Charles Tripp, 'Iraq', *The Cold War and the Middle East*, ed. Avi Shlaim and Yezid Sayigh, 1997, 186.

choices were dictated by purely Cold War considerations.'[17] In similar vein, in *Islam and the Moral Economy*, Tripp explores the significant yet diverse impacts of Islamic practices on the region's engagement with global capitalism, from accommodation to violent resistance.[18]

Against this melange of state and international level considerations, IR scholars, with some exceptions, have tended to explore this question principally via 'the policies and impact of the superpowers'.[19] The Middle East has been presented as 'the most penetrated sub-region'; the site of 'imperial adventures'; and a playground of the great powers,[20] justifying the realist approach. However, without diminishing the role of 'power politics', the attempt to balance international and domestic considerations, the 'challenge' referred to by Tripp, has enduring relevance not only in, but beyond the Cold War period. Put simply, 'any serious consideration of the international history of the Middle East must take into account the part played by all the major actors, both inside and outside the region.'[21] Of these, Middle East states themselves are never far from the centre of the analysis, and it is precisely the history of the state that is at the core of his analysis of Iraq.[22]

<a head>Connected Histories: From the Cold War to the Arab Uprisings

[17] Tripp, 'Iraq', 186.

[18] Charles Tripp, *Islam and the Moral Economy*, 2006, 11, 201.

[19] Yezid Sayigh and Avi Shlaim, 'Introduction', *The Cold War and the Middle East*, ed. Yezid Sayigh and Avi Shlaim, 3–4.

[20] Brown, L. Carl, *International Politics in the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game*, 1984; Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East,* 2013, 8.

[21] Sayigh and Shlaim, 'Introduction', 3.

[22] Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 2007, 4–5.

In offering a set of reflections on the connections between Charles Tripp's extensive scholarship and the International Relations of the Middle East broadly conceived, this chapter focuses principally on events surrounding the Iran–Iraq War, the Iraq War and the Arab Uprisings. Bringing his work into conversation with some core IR themes and debates, the aim throughout is to demonstrate how his finely tuned understanding of Middle East politics, society and history has provided some of the most compelling insights into the region that IR scholars could possibly hope for. Recognising this, Fred Halliday, himself the author of an important volume, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology*, described Charles Tripp as 'one of the most learned and astute of contemporary political sociologists writing on the region'.[23] This astuteness meant that he, unlike some political scientists, was not caught entirely by surprise by the onset of the Arab Uprisings.[24] In his 2013 work, *The Power and the People*, which uncovered the longer histories of popular resistance under authoritarian rule, Tripp revealed how, dramatic and unexpected as the events of 2011 were, many of the signs were already there, if only observers had chosen to look for them.[25]

If the history of the Cold War, which closely coincided with the processes of state and nation building in the region, offers one useful starting point in exploring the co-constitution of domestic and international politics in the Middle East (and Iraq is but one of a number of possible case studies), the particular confluence of events around the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), a highly destructive, late Cold War conflict, offers another. As Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp show in their co-authored volume on the war, the entanglement of domestic, regional and international

[23] Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations*, 41.

[24] Eva Bellin, 'Reconsidering the robustness of authoritarian in the Middle East' *Comparative Politics* 44/2, 2012, 127–49.

[25] Tripp, *The Power and the People*, 7; see also Lina Khatib's review in *Perspectives on Politics* 13/1, 2015, 167–68.

politics offers an essential backdrop not only to understanding the conflict itself, but also to the shaping of a new course for Iraqi politics.[26] Arguably, it served a somewhat similar purpose for Iran, a point which Tripp alludes to briefly, as a 'test' or in *confirming* the results of the revolution.[27] For Saddam Husain, the great opportunist, it was the changed regional situation, following President Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977 and the subsequent Arab-Israel Peace Treaty, followed soon after by the onset of the Iranian Revolution, that provided a unique opportunity to consolidate his position and hold on power. On the one hand, the Peace Treaty, signed in September 1978, by isolating Egypt from other Arab countries, allowed Husain to seize the advantage and advance Iraq's leadership credentials, situating Iraq at the centre of the Arab stage.[28] On the other, the events in Iran leading to the Iranian Revolution, and the immediate threat it posed to Iraq's political stability, given its own large, if diverse, Shi'i population, brought domestic politics to the fore. The threat of revolutionary contagion from its Shi'i neighbour needed to be swiftly dealt with, providing an opportunity to crack down not only on Iraqi Shi'is, but also on all potential opposition and thereby secure 'absolute control'.[29]

The war with Iran, which commenced in 1980, was a calculated risk, but one which promised simultaneously to serve Husain's domestic and regional ambitions—to consolidate his position both at home and abroad. Iran's position was relatively weak: it had few regional allies, and the revolution was still not consolidated at home. The opportunity to exploit that weakness, and to revise the outcome of the 1975 Algiers Agreement (a settlement of outstanding boundary issues) in Iraq's favour, were compelling. As with the Cold War itself, the international dimension was an

[26] Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War*, 1988.

[27] Tripp, *Iraq*: 224; Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History*, 2017*,* 840–48.

[28] Amanat, *Iran*, 840–48; Tripp, *Iraq*, 210–11.

[29] Tripp, *Iraq*, 212.

important but not all-determining one, allowing Saddam Husain, exceptionally, to draw on the support of *both* superpowers, while retaining considerable autonomy of action. It also provides an excellent example both of the persistence of inter-state war, at a time when scholars thought such wars were on the decline, and of how the Cold War had become a secondary theatre. Rather than Cold War geopolitics, therefore, it was regional geopolitics, informed by a desire for hegemony, which drove Iraq's desire to reshape the status quo.[30] Such efforts by regional states to secure a favourable regional balance of power are no less a feature of Middle East politics and international relations today, even though the main actors have changed.

The Iran–Iraq War, however, did not produce the desired dividends. Quite the reverse: it was a 'catastrophic miscalculation' in Tripp's words.[31] It may, paradoxically, have helped to strengthen the Husain regime in the short term, though his maintenance of a constant culture of offensive and fear; but the Iranian regime also grew stronger though its resistance to the Iraqi invasion.[32] This was one side effect of the war that neither the superpowers and their allies, nor indeed Iraq's Arab allies, had desired or envisaged. The war's ending, however, was directly facilitated by external factors. With the Cold War winding down, warming superpower relations provided the opportunity for the United Nations to showcase its revived powers by brokering a ceasefire. But if international logics helped to bring an end to one war, it was above all domestic concerns, including the maintenance of a large army, how to pay off its huge war debts, and regional barriers to achieving this, notably around the price of oil, that once more took the lead in prompting Saddam Husain to embark on to his next

[30] Efraim Karsh, 'Geopolitical determinism: The origins of the Iran-Iraq War', *Middle East Journal* 44/2, 1990, 257.

[31] Tripp, *Iraq*, 224.

[32] It also served to consolidate Iran's enduring hostility and suspicion of the United States, arguably encouraging its decision to revive the nuclear programme.

foreign policy adventure against Kuwait.[33] This proved to be another, fatal, miscalculation, one which would ultimately cost Saddam Husain his job and his life, though the process would take more than a decade.

It was arguably symptomatic of the nature of the dictatorial regime he had created, underpinned by 'a personality cult of awesome proportions', as described by Tripp,[34] that Saddam Husain failed to read the many warning signs around his fateful decision to invade Kuwait: 'Far from facing a supine Arab world, or an acquiescent international community,' Tripp wrote, 'Iraq found itself roundly condemned in the Arab League and at the United Nations.'[35] Saudi Arabia's alarm at developments on its border and subsequent request for US military assistance was met with an unequivocal commitment to securing Iraq's withdrawal and a restoration of the status quo. Indeed, the restoration of Kuwaiti sovereignty became intimately bound up with the emerging narrative of the 'New World Order' articulated by President George W. Bush. In that new order, there was no space for 'rogue' states—states that refused to respect and adhere to international guidelines and sanctions; that aspired to acquire weapons of mass destruction, or who, particularly after the 9/11 attacks, were suspected of harbouring terrorists. Following those attacks, though Iraq was not implicated, Saddam Husain's continuing 'misbehaviour' placed Iraq second in line for corrective action after Afghanistan.

If Saddam Husain had misread the international and regional mood in 1990 and continued to misread the US mood right up until the decision to go to war in 2003, the tables were quickly turned. This was, for the US, its own 'catastrophic miscalculation', revealing at once the extreme hubris that

[33] Tripp*, Iraq*, 242–44.

[34] Tripp, *Iraq*, 217.

[35] Tripp, *Iraq*, 244.

accompanied the 'unipolar moment' and its shallow understanding of the nature of the Iraqi state and society. The war was hotly contested at home and abroad. As with Husain's prior invasion of Kuwait, the US found no 'acquiescent international community'. Despite the support of certain loyal allies (some of whom, notably Spain, defected in 2004), this was no UN-backed operation and considered highly detrimental to US authority and legitimacy. And there was widespread, almost universal, opposition from the Arab world, which earned the US lasting hostility. When the 'success' of the initial military operation to remove Saddam Husain from power (hardly surprising given the asymmetry of the two sides) quickly gave rise to the failure of the occupying regime to lay the basis for a viable and functioning state, any confidence in the whole US nation-building project started to erode. In a 2004 review article of 'America's role in nation-building from Germany to Iraq', published by the RAND corporation, Charles Tripp started by quoting the book's back cover, which includes a 'warm endorsement of its contents by none other than Paul Bremer, effectively the US Governor General of Iraq from May 2003 until June 2004.' Bremer, who, as Tripp notes, had little prior foreign policy knowledge, claimed to regard the book as 'a marvellous "how to" manual for post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction. I have kept a copy handy for ready consultation since my arrival in Baghdad.' Tripp then goes on to wryly comment how subsequent events in Iraq 'would suggest either that he misplaced his copy of the book early in the occupation—or simply chucked it behind a sofa when he realised that it no longer told him what he wanted to know.'[36] His words could scarcely have been more prescient, and would soon be joined by a chorus of other critical voices from the academic and policy worlds. Larry Diamond, renowned political sociologist, who served as senior advisor to the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad in early 2004, also describes 'a long chain of U.S. miscalculations', a litany of security and political failures, falling 'far short of what the Bush

[36] Charles Tripp, 'The United States and state-building in Iraq', *Review of International Studies*, 30 2004, 545–58.

administration promised'.[37] The consequences of this extended far beyond Iraq, resulting in a loss of confidence in US leadership, in both the Middle East theatre and the wider world.[38]

The third, revised edition of Tripp's book *A History of Iraq* includes a new 40-page chapter on 'The American occupation and the parliamentary republic'. In it, he writes of an 'ambivalent legacy', a period of contradictory policies characterised by multiple flaws in design, planning and execution. leaving 'a troubled and increasingly insecure country in which insurgency, lawlessness and sectarian conflict claimed growing numbers of Iraqi lives'.[39] He could have said more. However, Tripp was writing before the 2007 'surge', and his concluding thoughts offered some cautious hope for future stability: 'new possibilities have been imagined and the space for their expression has been created, but not yet safeguarded.'[40] Such hope has since vanished, and the passage of time has done nothing to mitigate the mounting critiques. Toby Dodge noted in 2013 how 'beyond regime change itself and the turnover in the governing elite, the sustainable results of Liberal Peacebuilding are hard to detect.'[41] And, as blandly stated at the start of the 2016 British Iraq or 'Chilcot' Inquiry: 'The consequences of the invasion and of the conflict within Iraq which followed are still being felt in Iraq and the wider Middle East'. A later section reports how, 'when the invasion began, the UK government was not in a position to conclude that satisfactory plans had been drawn up and

[37] Larry Diamond, 'What went wrong in Iraq', *Foreign Affairs* 83/5, 2004, 34; also, Larry Diamond, *Squandered Victory: The American Occupation and the Bungled Effort to Bring Democracy to Iraq*, 2005.

[38] Louise Fawcett, 'The Iran War ten years on: Assessing the fall-out', *International Affairs* 89/2, 2013, 325–43.

[39] Tripp *Iraq*, 277.

[40] Tripp, I*raq*, 321–32.

[41] Toby Dodge, 'Intervention and dreams of exogenous statebuilding', *Review of International Studies* 39, 2013, 1209.

preparations made to meet known post-conflict challenges…in Iraq to mitigate the risks of strategic failure.'[42]

Here some powerful comparisons, and some history lessons, may be drawn between the British invasion and occupation of the provinces of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul during the First World War, marking, in Tripp's words, the beginning of 'the history of Iraq'.[43] Such comparisons might be a 'risky business' but are suggestive nonetheless, as Iraqi historian Thabit Abdullah writes: 'both came about as a result of imperial rather than local concerns' and 'there is no reason to assume that America's impact will be any less severe.'[44] Abdullah cites another historian of Iraq, the late Peter Sluglett, who also found that 'the blunders and errors of judgement whose consequences resonate so loudly, today are eerily reminiscent of the failings of the British Mesopotamia Campaign in 1914–1917.'[45] Critiquing both for their 'imperial myopia', Sluglett nonetheless makes a point which also resonates with the comments at the start of this chapter regarding undue reliance on ahistorical and regionally insensitive methods and approaches, which derive largely from US experience. For all its poor planning and heavy paternalism, British policy-making at the start of the twentieth century did at least draw upon individuals with 'a fair understanding of the Middle East, Arabic, Islamic, tribal society…expertise almost entirely absent among those involved in the planning and execution of the

[42] *Report of the Iraq Inquiry: Executive Summary*, 2017, 4, 100. Cited in Louise Fawcett, 'The Iraq War twenty years on: Towards a new regional architecture' *International Affairs* 99/2, 2023, 567–68.

[43] Tripp, *Iraq*, 30.

[44] Thabit Abdullah, *A Short History of Iraq*, 2nd edn., 2011, 166–67.

[45] Peter Sluglett, 'Imperial myopia: Some lessons from two invasions of Iraq', *Middle East Journal* 62/4, 2008, 593.

2003 invasion.'[46] One is here reminded of the absence of Farsi speakers among US political analysts around the time of the Iranian Revolution, making 'understanding Iran' impossible.[47]

Still, merely speaking local languages or immersing oneself in the region is not, in itself, a sufficient condition for understanding the countries of the Middle East or avoiding policy mistakes. This is nicely demonstrated in one of Charles Tripp's most recent publications, comprising a set of essays (co-edited with Peter Collins) on Gertrude Bell.[48] Bell was a highly educated and much-travelled British woman who, in different advisory roles at the Foreign and India Offices, was influential in helping shape British policy in mandatory Iraq. Her views on Arab peoples, monarchy and the benefits of 'indirect rule' together reveal how an Orientalist mindset helped to inform British thinking about Arab culture, politics and society.[49] In their introduction, the editors also hint at how these attitudes and prejudices, revealing in Bell the 'tension between her own industrial, rational world and a true and timeless "orient"', could serve as a salutary reminder to the twenty-first century reader.[50]

Whether in the world of great power foreign policy after the First World War, when Britain, in Gertrude Bell's words, was still 'making history',[51] or in the world of the US history-making nearly a century later, the same tensions and contradictions arise. They bear the marks of hubris and self-assurance, a hegemonic world view, contributing to flawed understandings and policy prescriptions. Ultimately, both the making and unmaking of the Iraq state demanded deep area knowledge and

[46] Sluglett, 'Imperial myopia', 593.

[47] Nikkie Keddie, 'The Iranian Revolution and US Policy', *SAIS Review* 2/1, 1981–1982, 13.

[48] Paul Collins and Charles Tripp eds., *Gertrude Bell and Iraq: A Life and Legacy*, 2017.

[49] Paul Collins and Charles Tripp, 'Introduction', *Gertrude Bell and Iraq*, ed. Paul Collins and Charles Tripp, 1–17.

[50] Collins and Tripp, 'Introduction', 5–10.

[51] Collins and Tripp, 'Introduction', 14.

expertise, but critically an expertise that could not simply be derived from an enduring belief in superior Western experiences and practices. In the case of twenty-first century Iraq, this was borne out most forcefully by the conviction that regime change and democracy-building, based upon earlier Western templates, were possible and desirable. Indeed, so brash were the expectations surrounding the new political order being created in Iraq, that US policy makers imagined that this could serve as a model and inspiration for the wider region—to produce a kind of democratic 'contagion' effect, as witnessed in post-Cold War Eastern Europe.[52] It was not, of course, that Middle Eastern peoples were not desirous of change. They were, as the popular resistance movements that exploded around the Arab Uprisings revealed, but the calls were not simply for 'democracy', or not explicitly so. While tailored to local circumstances, as Tripp shows, they were often framed in terms of opposition to corrupt regimes and practices and demands for their reform. Indeed, 'bread, freedom, social justice and human dignity' rather than democracy became the slogans of the uprisings.[53] As he records, one of the early sites of violent protest in Dar'a, Syria, was renamed 'Dignity Square'.[54]

The repertoires of resistance that Tripp describes in *Power and the People* provide some interesting connections between the effects of the Iraq War and occupation and the onset and evolution of the Arab Uprisings. Despite their widely differing origins—the first provoked by top-down foreign intervention and state-making, the second by bottom-up social protest movements, they nonetheless coalesced around certain ideas and practices: in contesting and resisting systems of power, or in violent armed resistance 'as a way of communicating with the dominant power'.[55] In

[52] Fawcett, 'Iraq War ten years on', 329.

[53] Fawaz Gerges, *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World*, 2014, 3.

[54] Tripp, *The Power and the People*, 2.

[55] Tripp, *The Power and the People*, 7, 33.

Iraq this started as early as 2003, and continued until the last US soldiers finally left at the end of 2011, fulfilling a pre-election promise by President Barack Obama. By then the major protests and public uprisings that started in Tunisia had taken off and spread like wildfire around major Arab countries and cities, once more catching observers by surprise. This was not part of any familiar model of democratisation. The onset and course of the uprisings, which openly challenged well-rehearsed arguments about authoritarian resilience, based upon the longevity of incumbent regimes, their politics of succession and fine-tuned mechanisms of repression, meant that even the most acute of regional scholars were unsettled.[56] Tripp himself admits also to have been taken off guard, but having set himself the larger task of examining the 'repertoires' of resistance politics over time—and drawing on themes introduced in his earlier work Islam and the 'moral economy'[57]—was able to uncover long-standing patterns and practices: 'years of quiet encroachment and not so quiet resistance' which helped to make sense of what was happening across the Arab world.[58] These repertoires helped to make the uprisings less surprising, and to provide a distance between his work and the rush of scholars and policy makers to identify first an Arab 'Spring' then soon after a 'Winter'.

The decision by US President Obama to leave Iraq, the promise of a 'reset' with the Middle East and a more pragmatic, regionally sensitive, even *laissez-faire*, set of policies, appeared at first to suggest a change in thinking and tone, even learning from past mistakes. Yet broad policy continuity soon prevailed.[59] The US and European Union were slow to move towards any quick or favourable

[56] See for example, Roger Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life*, 2012.

[57] Tripp, *Islam and the Moral Economy*, especially Chapter 5.

[58] Tripp, 'Introduction', *The Power and the People*, 1–18; Tripp, 'Politics of resistance and the Arab uprisings', Fawaz Gerges*, The New Middle East*, 135–54.

[59] Fawaz Gerges, 'The Obama approach to the Middle East: The end of America's moment?' *International Affairs* 89/2, 2013, 299–323.

response to the events unfolding in the Arab world, revealing again long-standing prejudices and misperceptions. The West had grown accustomed to doing business with authoritarian regimes which maintained a favourable status quo and offered valuable access to much-needed resources and markets. Obama described abandoning support for US ally President Mubarak as among his 'toughest' decisions. Europeans were similarly cautious to respond to the Tunisian uprising, having developed close relations with the previous regime, proving themselves to be 'no friends to democratization'.[60] The Iraq War may have provided some salutary lessons about the follies of 'new' interventionism, particularly in the absence of domestic, regional and global support, but not much more. The interventions that did take place, in Libya for example, albeit with regional and international sanction, did not produce successful outcomes; a number or regional states, including Libya, but also Yemen, soon entered prolonged periods of conflict and civil war. The West stood by as the Bahrain uprising was crushed by GCC forces. Syrian intervention was contemplated, but rejected on domestic grounds, permitting President Assad, with the support of regional allies, Russia and Iran, to gradually restore control, at least until the surprise collapse of his regime late in 2024.

As the uprisings evolved, however, giving birth to escalating patterns of violence often of a sectarian nature, any initial enthusiasm faded, and bold new narratives took hold. Perhaps the most compelling narrative of the post-Arab Spring order became that of the 'failed state', characterised by the breakdown of central authority, fragmentation and border porosity, and, in the most extreme case, the emergence of the transnational territorial entity that became known simply as 'Islamic State'.[61] In this narrative, multiple Middle Eastern states were deemed to be at risk. In 2016, for

[60] Rosemary Hollis, 'No friend of democratization: Europe's role in the genesis of the Arab Spring', *International Affairs* 88/1, 2012, 94.

[61] This draws on Louise Fawcett, 'States and sovereignty in the Middle East: Myths and realities', *International Affairs* 93/4, 2017, 789–807.

example, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria and Yemen were ranked high on the 'Fragile States Index'.[62] Since many states were, from their origins, deemed artificial and fragile creations, the product of colonial interests, it followed naturally therefore that the Uprisings were merely a manifestation of their final unravelling, making 're-imaging the regional map…something of a pastime'.[63] The notion that some Arab states were failing or failed, producing new sites of disorder, inviting intervention and remaking, drew on established scholarship that served to underline already deep-seated beliefs and prejudices about the nature and capacity of the Arab state, and the contrast with 'strong' and successful states.[64] Yet here again, the rush to claim state failure was premature. Not *all* Middle East states were weak, some were already strong, or at least 'fierce'. Even some of those states pronounced failing proved resilient—Syria is a case in point. The Arab state, as Bahgat Korany once put it, if at times appearing 'alien and besieged' is 'here to stay'.[65] Charles Tripp's work, focusing as it does on the origins and histories of states and 'the power of the state to act as a centre of gravity', is particularly instructive.[66] Ultimately, the logics surrounding state survival prevailed.

<a head>Conclusion

This chapter has offered a short *tour d'horizon* of just some of Charles Tripp's many interventions and contributions in areas that intersect with the International Relations domain to show how the kind of scholarship he advocated remains vital and enduring today. As a scholar of Middle East Politics, he had much to say about the international relations of the region, or at least about the relative importance of international logics that informed the development and trajectory of Middle

[62] *Fragile States Index*, 2016, https://fragilestatesindex.org.

[63] Ariel Ahram and Ellen Lust, 'The decline and fall of the Arab state', *Survival* 58/2, 2016, 7.

[64] Robert I. Rotberg, 'Failed states in a world of terror', *Foreign Affairs* 81/4, 2002, 127–40.

[65] Bahgat Korany, 'Alien and besieged yet here to stay? The contradictions of the Arab state', *The Foundations of the Arab State*, ed. Giacomo Luciani, 1987.

[66] Tripp, *Iraq*, 1.

East states. It started by pointing out some of the long-standing problems of prevailing International Relations approaches and methodologies which have eschewed historical and empirical research in the search for generalising theories. It has also critiqued the cultural 'blindness' or short-sightedness of much Western scholarship, which has failed to adequately acknowledge and address its own in-built biases and prejudices when it comes to understanding different parts of the world. As Lisa Anderson wrote of US politics and political science, the principal 'issues and methods developed to explore them are of relatively little consequence' for the Middle East.'[67] While pointing to certain advances, she called for a further breaking down of the 'parochialism' that has characterised the field.[68] While IR scholars have sought to address similar challenges, significant obstacles remain, reflected even in the 'marginality' of good qualitative research on the Middle East in leading journals.[69] That is why the tightly-focused empirical work of Charles Tripp and others, alongside those who continue to work at overcoming disciplinary divides, such as the IR-Area Studies controversy, will likely stand the test of time far better than some of the more recent fashions that have claimed the attention of political scientists. Whether in his analysis of the processes of state and regime consolidation, the politics of popular resistance, the behaviour of regional powers in matters of war and peace, or in their responses to the pressures of globalisation, Tripp has eschewed universalising theories and disciplinary fads. His focus is firmly on the state and its repertoires, but also its resilience as the dominant form of government in Middle East.

[67] Lisa Anderson, 'Politics in the Middle East: Opportunities and limits in the quest of a theory', *Area Studies*, ed. Mark Tessler, 1999, 2.

[68] Anderson, 'Politics in the Middle East', 9.

[69] Andrea Teti and Pamela Abbott, 'Scholarship on the Middle East in political science and international relations: A reassessment', *PS: Political Science & Politics* 56/2, 2023, 259–64.

He is in good company. The late Roger Owen, another eminent scholar of Middle East Politics, despite his attachment to political economy as a source of understanding regional politics, nonetheless underlined the importance of paying serious attention to the regional history of the Arab world and exploring those conditions—external and internal—that gave rise to the types of states, and of regimes that have nurtured these states.[70] It is only through a better understanding of Middle East states and societies, not as some exceptional product conditioned by their Arab, Islamic or geopolitical context, that one can arrive at a closer understanding of the region's IR. This is a key lesson for both scholars and policy makers. Writing along such lines, Fred Halliday provocatively declared in 2005:

> One of the costs of winning the Cold War is that the West has failed to rethink its assumption about the conduct of International Relations. Instead, and above all with the [George W.] Bush administration, we have seen the recycling of policies that were as wrong then as they are now: the fabrication of threats by hostile states, accompanied by dire warnings about how 'time is running out'; the repetition ad nauseam of platitudes about the role of force in international affairs that no first-year student of the subject could get away with repeating; a suspicion, if not terrier like disdain, for international institutions, notably the UN and international law; a historically short-sighted and grossly exaggerated set of claims about how many of the states of the world conform to an acceptable model…[71]

These are strong words, certainly, but there is something eerily familiar in these nearly two-decades-old statements (some echoed by Bush's successors), which still resonate across today's Middle East, as the US and its allies struggle to position themselves with regard to the latest round in the Israel–

[70] Roger Owen, 'Preface', *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, 2004, xi–xiv.

[71] Fred Halliday, *Political Journeys: The openDemocracy Essays*, ed. David Hayes, 2011, 51–52.

Gaza War, the perceived 'Iran threat' and the continuation of a series of conflicts in and around the region, in many of which they are, or have been, deeply implicated but whose origins, consequences and possible futures they still struggle to understand.

Some very important things, however, have changed in the world of Middle East International Relations that make better understanding imperative and place new demands on scholars and policy makers. The age of US hegemony is fast fading, hastened by acts like the Iraq War and other failed efforts at 'liberal' peace-building.[72] Other global powers like Russia, China and India have moved to fill in some of the gaps, including building stronger economic and security relationships in the Middle East. Here one could point to China's brokering of the Saudi–Iran deal in 2023, or to Russia's 'return' to the Middle East facilitated by its role in the Syrian War. Second, and relatedly, moves towards a new regional balance of power or 'architecture', supplanting earlier orders and understandings of regional hierarchies, are already well under way.[73] Whether one thinks of the competitive Saudi–Iran axis, the subject of an earlier insightful work by Chubin and Tripp,[74] or the new authority of the Gulf States and their increasingly global reach, Middle East states, for all their presumed weaknesses, no longer occupy a second or subordinate tier of states in the international system. All this points to a quite different future than the one imagined during the Cold War, or the post-Cold War period, one in which the Middle East state, for all its supposed contradictions, will continue to occupy a significant place. In understanding that place, the work of the generation of Charles Tripp will remain vital.

[72] Dodge, 'Intervention and dreams of exogenous statebuilding'.

[73] Fawcett, 'Iraq War twenty years on'.

[74] See Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, 'Iran-Saudi Arabia relations and regional order', *Adelphi Paper* 304, 2004.

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