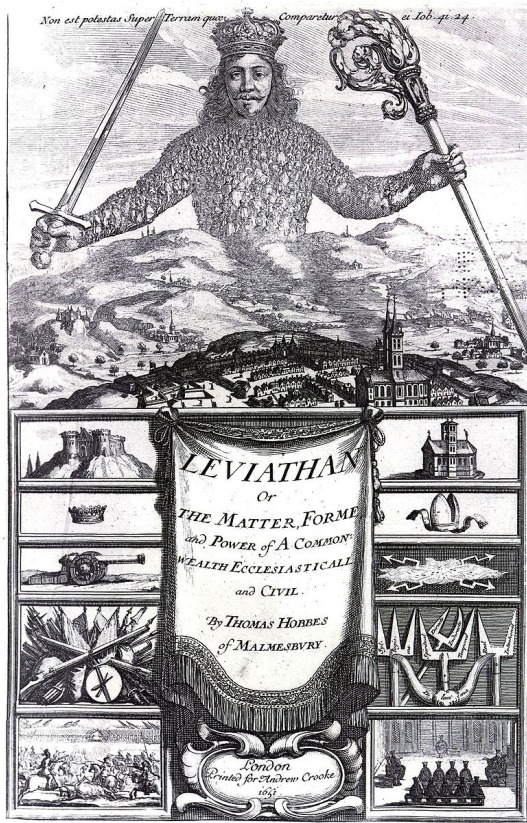


Why Secularism Matters for Peace in the Middle East

Mike King, 2017

© Stochastic Press / Papers



Abstract

This paper looks at the question of secularism in the Middle East as one of four factors pertaining to regional stability, the other three being suggested as firstly the comparative youth of its nations, secondly Western invasions and interventions, and thirdly its mineral resources. The uneven course of secularism in the Middle East is briefly charted and then the tensions are explored firstly between rival religious groupings and secondly secondly between religious and secular political philosophies. It is suggested that secularism is seen less favourably in the Middle East than in the West because it appears to lead to atheism, of greater concern in Muslim countries than in Western ones. Finally it is suggested that Islam may eventually form a better relationship with secularism than Christianity did because of its stricter rejection of the anthropomorphism of God (Allah).

Keywords: Middle East, secularism, stability, peace, toleration, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes.

First published: Stochastic Press.

Introduction

Past and ongoing conflicts in the Middle East make it one of the most unstable regions in the world. There are four factors in this. Firstly, many of its countries are more recently formed compared to those in more stable regions of the world. Secondly, it has been subject to alien powers and invasions. Thirdly, it has mineral resources which create inequality, are used to purchase advanced weaponry, and which attract destabilising foreign interventions. Fourthly, religion has great influence on politics.

This paper focuses on the fourth factor, religion. However, because all factors are deeply interrelated it is important in contemplating the fourth to first say a little about the other three.

Factors for instability in the Middle East

The Youth of Middle Eastern Countries

The model of nation state that defines the modern world is not perhaps a universal idea, but as a model no region in the world has been able to escape it or define a radically different kind of national unit. Countries like China, Japan, Britain and France became stable national units relatively early in their history; America a little more recently; and emerging nations such as the Czech Republic and South Korea more recently still. Many states in the Middle East are not only much younger in comparison to Western states, but also have arbitrary national boundaries that emerged from treaties between colonialist powers. The relative youth of these nations can also be measured by the extent to which their people's first identity belongs to smaller units such as clan, tribe, culture and religion. Kurds for example have large enclaves in Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran, though such an example is not confined to the Middle East; for example the Rohingyas span at least the countries of Bangladesh and Myanmar. Neither groups have yet formed modern nation states.

In many cases in the Middle East the tensions caused by different ethnic, cultural and religious identity are, or have been, held under control by authoritarian regimes. Again there is nothing unique in that: Tito's Yugoslavia fragmented into nearly half a dozen small states after the death of this "strong man" in 1980. The imposition of Partition in India also took the lid of tensions that exploded into the worst violence that the subcontinent had experienced in centuries, though the ancient nature of India as a nation state prevented any further fragmentation. In the Middle East the relative youth of its nations means that the collapse of "strongmen" states such as Syria, Libya and Iraq created instability with no immediate foreseeable end.

Alien powers and invasions

Most Middle Eastern countries have been subject to colonial dominance by European powers, administered in varying degrees of competence but always by individuals belonging to what the indigenes perceive as alien cultures. After WW2 colonial dominance was replaced by Cold War rivalries where America and the USSR vied for influence in what became client states. The establishment of Israel amounted to the insertion in the Arab world of an alien European culture, though in a quite unique manner, this time at the diktat of the United Nations. Finally, the in-

vasion of Iraq by America and its allies in 2003, followed by a series of interventions in such places as Libya and Syria have shaped the most recent conflicts.

Oil and Gas

The vast oil and gas reserves scattered across the Middle East have made it of interest to foreign powers for centuries. Oil wealth not only distorts social structures within countries but also across them: for example Israel has no oil at all and North Sudan very little. In itself this disparity in oil wealth might not be that destabilising and the demand for oil from the developed nations might also not necessarily bring about conflict. It is however the huge acquisitions of modern weaponry made possible by oil that permit current conflicts in the Middle East to become so deadly: Yemen is one example, the arms flowing to ISIS being another.

Religion in the Middle East

The Middle East has seen the birth of three world religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, though by number Islam now dominates the region. What makes the Middle East so different to Europe and other advanced industrial economies is not so much which religion dominates but its role in public life. European culture is alien to the Middle East for a number of reasons, significant amongst which is its *secularism*. "Secularism" here will be initially defined as the complete divorce between religion and the state, including its use of armed force. In the English-speaking world secularism is understood as the separation of church and state, though this phrase can be misleading in the British context where this separation has not formally taken place.

In the Middle East religious authorities often either control armed force directly, as in local militias, or control the use of armed force indirectly through legislative assemblies of varying democratic tenor but which are subordinate to religious authorities. Moves towards secularization since WW2 have been made by many Middle Eastern countries but, compared to fully Westernized economies, this has been patchy and prone to considerable reverse. On the one hand much conflict in the Middle East has been between rival religious groups, notably between Sunni and Shia, while on the other hand much antagonism also exists between those political parties intent on secularization and those opposing it. The whole trajectory of Turkey from the 1920s, as led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was in the direction of secularization, now considerably reversed by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In Egypt secular advance was briefly reversed by the election of the Muslim Brotherhood party of Mohamed Morsi, only to be annulled by the military coup of Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi in 2013. In Libya Muammar Gaddafi's secular government was shattered by civil war and Western bombing in 2011, leading to rival Islamist militias creating separate governments and the rise of ISIS. In Iraq and Syria the Ba'athist parties led a move to a socialist secular state with power concentrated in the hands of a successional

elite. In Syria Western support for so-called “moderate” rebels led to the empowerment of a range of Islamist groups opposed to the Ba’athist regime, while the toppling of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the subsequent “de-Ba’athification” of its military and civil service allowed the Shia majority to emerge and pursue its religious festivals and alliances previously forbidden. In reaction to this the disenfranchised Iraqi Sunni military personnel – experienced and battle-hardened soldiers of all ranks – had nowhere to go other than ISIS. The Kurds, as perhaps the most secular-minded of ethnic groups in the Middle East, voted for independence from Iraq in 2017, a move that many commentators fear will further destabilize the region. In the Algerian Civil War in 1991 Islamists were poised to win an election which the military annulled, and which led to enormous bloodshed. As in Egypt the army was the secularizing force.

The Sunni-Shia divide

The division in the Middle East between Sunni and Shia is comparable perhaps to the division between Protestantism and Catholicism in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe and between Islam and Hinduism ongoing in India. In Europe it was partly the adoption of Locke’s principles that ended its religious wars, though far more devastating wars were later fought for entirely different reasons. In India Partition was meant to end communal violence but led to wholesale religious slaughter. In Palestine the Partition Plan of United Nations Resolution 181 led to instant war between Jews and Muslims. The separation of communities along religious lines leads to ethnic cleansing, the horrors of which the world community is in long recoil from. Once Partition was completed in the Indian subcontinent a new tension was created between the nations of Muslim Pakistan and Hindu-majority India, now both nuclear-armed, and in perpetual conflict over Kashmir. In Israel-Palestine the original Partition boundaries gave neither side defensible borders and so the stronger party, the Israelis, have pushed the Palestinians into the occupied enclaves of the West Bank and Gaza. While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a significant source of instability in the Middle East, if not the world, it should not be seen primarily as a religious conflict. Instead the major religious source of tension currently in the Middle East is between Sunni and Shia, both within states and between states.

The 2003 Iraq War dramatically shifted the previous Sunni-Shia balance of power in the region, yielding a new Shia “axis” running from Iran through Iraq and to Syria and Lebanon. This has alarmed powerful Sunni states like Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The civil war in Yemen begun in 2015 provoked the intervention of Saudi Arabia on the grounds that Iranian-backed Houthis had challenged the legitimate government. The real source of anxiety is that the Houthis might further extend Shia power in the region as Iranian proxies. Similarly the 2017 diplomat crisis between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Gulf states lies in the perception that Qatar is leaning to Shia Iran despite being majority Sunni.

The Shia-Sunni divide also creates conflict *within* Middle Eastern nations. In Iraq Saddam Hussein was the head of a minority-Sunni state apparatus ruling a Shia majority, since turned on its head after the 2003 invasion. The Sunni ruling minority were largely deprived of their former status and this in part led to the creation of ISIS, as mentioned. In Syria a minority-Shia state apparatus led by the Alawite Assad dynasty ruled a Sunni majority, and the civil war was partly about the Sunni majority seeking democratic reforms. In both Iraq and Syria however the governments were run on Ba'athist secular lines that, while far from democratic, kept the lid on religious divides until Western intervention.

Secularism in the Middle East

With this background in mind we can now ask our key question about peace in the Middle East: what role could secularism play in ending regional instability? To answer this we turn to the man who virtually invented the idea in the West, John Locke. During his exile in the supposedly tolerant Netherlands he was witness to much religious violence and in response to which wrote the foundational document for secularism called the "[A Letter Concerning Toleration](#)." In it he elaborated on his fundamental observation that much violence could be avoided if religious authorities were separated from the armed force of the state. In those days it was the "magistrate" who could order the arrest, torture, imprisonment and execution of citizens, not to mention the confiscation of their property, and Locke argued that the magistrate should do so on a strictly non-religious basis. Magistrates should not let matters of religion influence any of their judgements, and conversely no religious authority should be able to pass or enforce laws on the populace. Religion was an elective matter, like joining a club, and all should be free to join whatever religion they chose. All that the club could enforce on its members for the violation of its codes was expulsion from the club. Put simply, religion should be relegated to the private sphere.

Most Westerners would find Locke's ideas, when put this way, so self-evident as to be not worth commenting on. Yet at the time they were radical and in competition with the views of the opposing philosopher of the time on this issue. This was Thomas Hobbes and expressed in his book on statecraft called [Leviathan](#). Its famous front cover (the illustration at the beginning of this paper) shows the ultimate power in the land with sword in one hand and sceptre in the other, the latter symbolizing not just authority but divine authority. Hobbes insisted on uniformity of religion, and therefore its central role in the state's monopoly on violence, while Locke insisted on religious pluralism in which religion could play no part in the exercise of that legitimate violence. It is hard to convey just how central to Western systems of governance Locke's ideas are, and how indeed they intimately shaped the American Constitution (specifically in the Establishment Clause of the First

Amendment) and how intimately they shaped American religious life. It is held by some academics that American religious life is so much more vibrant than that of Britain and France, for example, precisely because separation of Church and State is enshrined in the Constitution.

The question here however is what secularism has meant to the Middle East, and what it could mean for stability in the region. Why, we need to ask first, has the course of its development been so uneven? Westerners are horrified that, for example, Saudi Arabia can prosecute a person for heresy and inflict the most horrible punishment for it. This is the absolute polar opposite of the secular mindset. But Muslims throughout the Middle East are perhaps not that impressed with secularism either. Intuitively the reasoning of Hobbes might appeal to them: for a unified state you must have a unified religion. What else can hold the people together? Worse, secularism as practiced in the West appears to be nothing more than atheism. In principle the retreat of religion to the private sphere can mean that people are free to pursue the religion of their choice, so should this not make a nation more religious, as some argue. But in practice this retreat means that schools cannot teach religion as anything more than ethnography, that popular culture celebrates sex and violence instead of piety, and that intellectuals devote their energies to the hard sciences, or if not, to the social sciences where religion, if it appears at all, is again merely an ethnographic topic. Theology departments may exist in the major universities but do so only as a relic; their influence on mainstream culture is zero.

The peoples of the Middle East may have good reason to doubt the value of secularism as they perceive its outcomes in the West. Their own experience of it is also mixed as its leading practitioners have failed to bring many of its alleged benefits to Middle Eastern countries, these being firstly economic development and secondly democracy. But worse, for many, is its silence regarding the essential piety that people look for in their societies. Both factors may well have played a part in the turning away of Turkish people from the great secular experiment of Atatürk. Those living under Ba'athism in Iraq and Syria may have no fond memories of it either. In the case of Iraq it appears to have brought some social advances but it also brought extreme nationalism leading to disastrous wars with Iran and the ill-fated invasion of Kuwait ending in the first Gulf War.

Was Locke wrong then? Or was his foundational idea for the governance of Western-style democracies suitable only to the West? Is his central idea of the separation of religion and armed force one that is inappropriate to the Middle East? Should the Middle East stick instead to the path effectively advocated by Hobbes of "one nation, one religion"? The pious cannot see an alternative, for anything else seems to lead only to the destruction of piety. If the pious are the majority in the Middle East – a proposition perhaps incomprehensible to the average Westerner – then this is crucial. To answer these questions we first need to consider the history of secularism as it arose in the West.

Secularism and anthropomorphism

The lazy answer to the question of how secularism arose in the West is that science defeated religion. A quite different argument is put forward in the book [*Secularism: The Origins of Disbelief*](#) which suggests that Christianity's God had become too anthropomorphic (too human-like) and that this conception of God could not satisfy the growing intellectual strata of society, given impetus by the rise in science, and increased wealth enabling the spread of education. Though a new Christian movement called Deism emerged in the eighteenth century which denied this anthropomorphism, it failed to create a viable religious alternative for the well-educated, who turned instead to atheism.

The eighteenth century Western philosopher David Hume noted that Islam was much better at eliminating the tendency towards the anthropomorphism of God. We see this in the proscription on visual representations not just of Allah in Islam but also on the Prophet Muhammad, and in fact all sentient beings (aniconism). Islamic architecture is therefore devoid of statues and paintings of saints and is instantly recognizable in its use instead of geometric patterns and calligraphic motifs. Although not justifiable in a multicultural world, the destruction by the Taliban of the Bamiyan Buddhas and by ISIS of polytheistic statuary in Palmyra in 2016 can be simply understood as expressions of this proscription. Arguably then, Islam has been successful in ensuring that the abstract or intangible nature of the divine is pre-eminent in its theology, where Christianity has fallen into, if not outright idolatry, then at least a misplaced literalism. It is this literalism that has perhaps forced Western intellectuals into atheism. In contrast Islam appears to retain an intense piety comprehensible to the more emotional, less educated, and simply more intuitive sectors of its populations while yet providing the intellectual and the scientifically-minded no indigestible elements of faith.

Is it here that hope lies for a new form of secularism that could help bring stability in the Middle East? A secularism that does not necessarily bring atheism in its wake? Of course a pluralist society has to tolerate atheists too, but in theory at least the separation of the institutions of state from religious control should permit greater variety of religion without cause to abandon the central place of religion in society. If the West got it wrong because Christianity was too anthropomorphic in its theology, perhaps the Islamic world might develop a form of secularism better suited to it.

Conclusions

We have arrived at highly speculative proposition, that the Middle East, or indeed the entire Muslim world, might develop a secular form of statehood that permits religious pluralism but does not erode the general ambience of piety from public

life. The experience of the West suggests that there are enormous obstacles to such a development, but it is suggested here that Islam may provide a better starting point for this than Christianity. From this point of view some re-assessment of Ba'athism, or movements like it, might be fruitful, not just for the Middle East but for foreign powers which to date have supported violent regime-change against its proponents. If ISIS is the phenomenon the West least desires then a better understanding of and support for Arab secularist movements should be its most urgent priority.

Further reading: King, M. R. 2007. *Secularism: The Hidden Origins of Disbelief*, Cambridge: James Clarke & Co.

[More papers by Mike King from Stochastic Press](#)