The Past in the Present: Ancient Patterns in the Emergent Middle East

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In all spheres of human life decision making can be more or less well-informed and prudent. Sometimes ignorance or the passion of the moment yields disastrous results. Sometimes wise, circumspect decisions avert catastrophe. In politics and especially in foreign policy, the consequences of either good or bad leadership are potentially far-reaching. Those charged with making big decisions need to be as prepared as possible to understand the circumstances in which they are operating and to estimate the likely outcome of their actions. The effects of ignorance, superficiality, and rashness can be devastating.

What best prepares foreign policy decision makers to carry out their duties responsibly is a topic of great importance. Here the purpose is to draw attention to one of the requirements for sound decision-making, that of understanding the extent to which the past, sometimes the ancient past, influences the present. A leader ignorant of that which came

before may instead turn to a superficial or accustomed theory or set of assumptions, perhaps derived from a cherished ideology. Or a willful leader may discern from the facts an interpretation that accords best with his or her ambitions, selectively choosing from the available evidence. Or the leader in possession of overwhelming military might may assume that sheer force can obliterate whatever complexities and obstacles stand in the way of a desired outcome. To the more circumspect decision maker, it may seem far-fetched that overwhelming power can undo social patterns of very distant historical origin.

Contrary to the belief of many in this age of radical presentism, much of what is in the past profoundly influences the present. For political leadership to be truly pragmatic it must, more than superficially, take history into account. Assumptions and conceptual notions of some kind necessarily guide our thinking about issues of foreign policy. Unless historical knowledge forms a significant part of the decision-making paradigm, we are bound to make avoidable mistakes.

Here the focus will be on the Middle East. The Middle East occupies the attention of a very large portion of the U.S. foreign policy establishment and national security apparatus. A great deal depends on whether decision makers have access to reliable knowledge of the Middle East and are willing to heed that information. The purpose of this article is to show the immediate relevance of history for understanding and acting in the Middle East. The emphasis here is on the kind of historical patterns that would appear to be central to formulating a prudent approach to the Middle East. A different article might be written about the extent to which American foreign policymakers in the last fifty years have been guided by genuine understanding of the Middle East or about the extent to which strong motives or passions have pushed historical considerations to the side. Although this article has not been written to make a point of historiography or philosophy, it might serve as a case study of the close connection between the study of history and the study of present reality.

The Middle East of the twenty-first century is increasingly difficult to assess as an undifferentiated region. The state borders, political ideologies, and rivalries that defined the first century of the post-Ottoman Middle East system are less certain and, in some cases, absent. The emerging new era is replete with failed social compacts, religious resurgence, foreign military intervention, increasingly assertive regional powers, and a more multipolar global system in which the Middle East is embedded. The number of variables and their volatility create a de-

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gree of analytic complexity that is likely to defy attempts at projecting with high confidence a single future for the regional state system. The explanatory power of contemporary analytic approaches to the region such as security studies, political science, economics, or leadership studies is strong within bounded areas, but most of these disciplines refrain from attempting a systemic explanation of the entire region. Data analysis of unprecedented amounts of information can offer unexpected correlations that can prompt further inquiry but generally falls short of predicting the future of a still-emerging regional state system.

The task of managing such uncertainty begins by testing competing hypotheses that can plausibly account for events observed in the region and that involve the consideration of empirical data in a historical-humanistic sense. If the region lacks a single discernible and stable distribution of power—military, economic, and ideological—that could give shape to a regional state system, one way to begin to map a range of plausible futures is to generate different conceptual frameworks that can be tested, over time, with empirical data. Understanding something about the events and historical vicissitudes of the ancient world can help us imagine, test, and refine hypotheses about the future, basing our conjectures on the solid, empirical ground of known cause and effect.

Rome's Threefold Breakup Reverberates Today

Examining the breakup of the Roman Empire is a useful starting point for analyzing the current situation in the Middle East. Rome is the most recent of the ancient empires that dominated the region, and Rome's territorial extent overlapped with much of what we recognize as the contemporary Middle East. A once-unified Roman civilization eventually separated into three distinct civilizations: Western Christendom in Europe, Orthodox Byzantium on the Anatolian plateau, and an Arabic-Islamic civilization along the southern rim. The process of settling into this threefold succession was lengthy. In the view of the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne, the Western Roman Empire's collapse did not fully occur until the rise of Islam in the sixth and seventh centuries when the economic relationships of the Mediterranean world began to fracture, casting western Europe back to a more primitive agrarian economy.[1] The migration in the fourth and fifth centuries of Germanic tribes into

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[1] Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne: 1862-1935*, Vol. 27 (London: Routledge, 2008) and *Mahomet Et Charlemagne: 1862-1935* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970).

Roman territory—tribes that preserved many Roman institutions and trade relationships—was not as disruptive to the continuity of Roman civilization in the West as was the rise of Islam. The surviving Eastern Roman Empire of Byzantium functioned as the third main actor after the breakup of the Roman Empire, struggling against repeated Islamic attempts at conquest until the victory of the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

The contemporary Middle East echoes this ancient world. The Roman southern rim has remained an Arab-Islamic world—only the Iberian Peninsula has moved back to Western Europe's sphere of influence. The Anatolian Plateau of Byzantium has become the Turkish republic whose separate geographic zone, Turkish language, and history of Ottoman political domination has differentiated it from its southern Arab-Islamic neighbors. Similarly, the West's crusader states in the Middle Ages, its separate rise to modernity, and France's return to the region with the landing of Napoleon's forces in Egypt in 1798 were anchored in the vestiges of the Western Roman Empire. European engagement in the regional state system of the contemporary Middle East reaches back to this Roman antecedent. In this ancient mold, the United States, as the successor to British military power arrayed against the Ottoman Empire, acts in the region as the most recent heir to the western remnant of the Roman Empire.

The breakup of the Roman Empire also provides a useful framework for thinking about Iran's contemporary role as a major state acting on the eastern boundary of the region. Beginning in the second century B.C. and until the Arab conquest of 651, the Iranian plateau gave rise to the Parthian and Sasanian kingdoms, which repeatedly contested Roman and then Byzantine power in the ancient Near East. The shifting frontlines of this centuries-long strategic competition were often in the Tigris-Euphrates basin and on the Anatolian Plateau. As the Western Empire broke into Germanic successor kingdoms, the surviving Eastern Empire of Christian Byzantium found itself in constant struggle with the Sasanian Empire to its south, a civilizational rival that professed the religion of Zoroastrianism, sponsored scholars and gathered texts from all over the ancient world, and maintained trade routes from Asia.[2]

Iran's contemporary military and political influence in the Tigris-Euphrates basin (Iraq) and its confrontation with Western powers there parallel the pattern of early Roman rivalry with the Sasanian empire.

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[2] In the Islamic era, the cultural and intellectual influences of defeated Sasanian Persia would eventually shape the emerging new Islamic civilization, perpetuating the pattern of Iranian influence on the wider Middle East even in defeat.

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The Sasanians, like their Parthian and earlier Achaemenid and Elamite predecessors from the Iranian plateau, projected power into the Tigris-Euphrates basin and frequently confronted Roman forces there—even capturing one emperor and killing another.[3] The struggle between Iran and the West for influence in Iraq since 2003 reflects this ancient rivalry between a Western power at the farthest extent of its reach and a rival power located on the Iranian Plateau. It is also worth recalling that the United States, on behalf of the West, backed Iraq in its war with Iran in the 1980s, consistent with the ancient pattern of Roman-Sasanian rivalry.

Reconsidering the Regional State System

Remembering the geopolitical legacies of a once-unifying Roman civilization provides a conceptual map for policymaking in a period of significant change in the regional state system. The conflicts within the Arab-Islamic region raise the key question, for example, of how Arab power will eventually be organized and assert itself in a recovered Middle East state system. The breakup of Rome also provides a modern conceptual framework for assessing the interaction of Rome's Western vestige with its southern Arab-Islamic vestige. A key question in the aftermath of the recent mass migration to Europe from the Middle East and North Africa, including peoples from Afghanistan and sub-Saharan Africa, will be whether the barrier that Henri Pirenne theorized had arisen with the rise of Islam has begun to resurface. It is unclear whether the West will choose to see the turmoil along its southern reaches as threats to its security and political order and culture or will embrace the migrant flow as a potential economic benefit of human capital and seek to integrate Muslim refugees into a secular Europe. What is clear, however, is that analytic assessments and policy options on migration will benefit from thinking with a conceptual framework that can be plausibly tested using the empirical data of historical knowledge. The vestiges of the breakup of Rome in the contemporary Middle East help provide such a conceptual framework.

Turkey, as the Anatolian Plateau's modern vestige, also has the potential to exert significant influence on the emerging regional state system. Key analytic and policy questions will revolve—as is often the case with whatever power emerges on the Anatolian Plateau—around how much of a Middle Eastern or European power Turkey will aspire to become. A

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[3] The emperor Valerian was captured in the upper Tigris-Euphrates basin at the battle of Edessa in 260 by the Sasanian King Shapur I. The emperor Julian died of his wounds in 363 campaigning against the Sasanian capital.

more Islamic politics that orients Turkey once again toward the Middle East is gaining ground on a still-resilient secular national politics and culture. Turkey's willingness to commit military forces in Iraq and Syria has demonstrated that the security of Turkey's southern border and the political and military disposition of neighboring Kurdish areas matter to Ankara.

Understanding the ancient pattern and precedent of Iran's projecting influence into the Tigris-Euphrates basin in competition with the West can broaden the ways we think about Iran in the emerging regional state system. Using ancient history, we can see Iran not just as a religious state opposed to U.S. influence in Iraq, seeking nuclear technology, harboring a legacy of hostage-taking and other acts of terrorism, determined to diminish U.S. regional influence, and a rival to Israel. History suggests that Iran perceives the Tigris-Euphrates basin as part of its sphere of influence, a perception so ancient that it is unlikely to be reversed any time soon.

Iran's current attempts to assert influence as far as the Eastern Mediterranean also raise the strategic question whether it is acting according to a Persian imperial precedent. In the Achaemenid Empire of the late sixth and early fifth century B.C., Persian power extended not only throughout the Anatolian Plateau, Eastern Mediterranean, and Egypt but also into part of modern-day Bulgaria. Ancient history cannot predict Iran's current strategic ambitions or the extent of the sphere of influence its leaders may desire, but knowing ancient precedents permits us to generate hypotheses about Iran's regional strategy and its potential impact on the regional state system which we can test against observable events. We can think with conceptual tools not usually in our analytic toolkit and become better able to think beyond the most recent behaviors and policy responses that usually fill our thoughts about the states in the region—including Iran.

A reconsideration of Israel's role in the region can also flow from the conceptual framework that arises from the breakup of Rome. In a region of competing Western, Turkish, and Arab-Islamic vestiges of Rome, with Iran again knocking at the region's door, Israel is no longer the besieged outpost of Zionism confronting Arab—especially Palestinian—nationalism and engaging in repeated Arab-Israeli wars and suppressing Palestinian uprisings. Instead, Israel sits at the crossroads of an emergent regional state system whose strategic center of gravity has moved east. Israel faces the challenge of asserting its interests, especially toward its rival Iran, in a region with an uncertain center of power.

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In the old twentieth-century order, Israel's regional options were largely shaped by the Arab-Israeli conflict and external influences of the United States and the Soviet Union. Now, Israel finds itself in a multipolar and more fluid regional state system that is more preoccupied with ethnic and sectarian conflict than nationalism. In a region with well-armed non-state actors and states willing to cross borders, Israel will have to seek security as all parties adjust to new distributions of power. If the framework of Rome's three vestiges plus Iran persists and if Israel can wield creative diplomacy successfully, its central location in the region could redound to its strategic benefit.

Ancient Unipolar and Multipolar Regional Systems

The study of the ancient world's political orders raises the broader question of whether the region is tending toward a multipolar distribution of power or toward a more centralized political order that might arise again in the modern era. The gradual demise of the Ottoman Empire as a single political order is a story of Ottoman retreat over three centuries to its original base on the Anatolian Plateau. It is the story of Ottoman territorial losses on the southern Mediterranean belt to European colonial rule and, after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I and subsequent European decolonization, to individual Arab States. This Ottoman contraction represents a transition over centuries from a unipolar regional system to a multipolar regional system whose principal components—the West, an Arab-Islamic southern tier, and a Turkic Anatolian Plateau—have their antecedents in the breakup of the Roman Empire.

The pattern of a dominant single power transitioning from a unipolar to a multipolar regional system has ample precedent in the ancient world and in Late Antiquity. The Achaemenid empire—drawing upon earlier Assyrian and Babylonian techniques of administration and expansion—became the Middle East's first all-encompassing imperial order and the precedent for a unipolar regional system. This Persian achievement would last from the sixth to the fourth century B.C. when, after decades of Persian entanglement with the Greek world on its western frontier, the Achaemenid Kings became the target of Alexander the Great's Macedonian territorial ambitions.

The unipolar Persian order that Alexander appropriated through conquest quickly disintegrated after his death in 323 B.C. into competing kingdoms of his Hellenistic successors. These kingdoms were mostly centered along the region's traditional political geographic fault lines of

the Nile River basin (Ptolemaic Egypt), the Tigris-Euphrates basin (the Seleucid empire) and the Anatolian Plateau (the Attalid and Antigonid dynasties). The eventual absorption of these states into the Roman Empire would give the Middle East another unipolar regional system under Roman rule until the breakup of the Roman Empire beginning in the late fourth century.

The Islamic conquests under the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates between the sixth and eighth centuries A.D. created empires that reached from North Africa to the Indus but the unipolar moment would again prove fleeting. By the late tenth century, the Sunni Abbasid Caliph had ceded effective control in Baghdad to a Shia military occupation of the Iranian Buyid dynasty. To the West, another Shia dynasty, the Fatimids, took control of Egypt so that by the late tenth century the Middle East had again become a multipolar regional system.

The return to a multipolar system in the Middle East in the wake of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire has been—like the ancient transitions from unipolar to multipolar systems that preceded it—turbulent and lengthy. With these ancient patterns in view, we can suggest plausibly that the events of the Arab Spring are part of an historical trajectory from Ottoman unity to post-Ottoman disunity. Discerning this pattern does not reveal the specific contours of the future regional state system, but it gives us a way to think about that system as it emerges. Accordingly, we can prepare diplomatic and military strategies that are best suited for safeguarding Western interests in a Middle East where power continues to disperse to newly assertive regional actors and to sub-state actors.

The Ancient Pattern of Interventions from the Steppe

This framework for thinking about the region's state systems over millennia, however, is incomplete. It also requires a consideration of the role of the Eurasian Steppe from which some of the region's most consequential conquests have arisen. The Steppe has acted influentially across the Middle East's northern and eastern boundaries, not only as a periodic military threat, but also as a source of grain, other raw materials, and labor for the urban centers of the region's civilizational core. The importance of the peoples of the Steppe to the ancient world is clear from the lengthy treatment of Scythian customs and military tactics which Herodotus provides in Book IV of his *Histories*.

The most lasting impacts of the Steppe peoples on the Middle East's state system, however, would occur during the Middle Ages. At the

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battle of Manzikert in Eastern Anatolia in 1071, for example, Byzantine forces fell decisively to an army of Seljuk Turks invading from the East, precipitating the gradual conversion of the Anatolian Plateau to Islam and the eventual fall of the Byzantine Empire to the Ottoman Turks. Similarly, the sacking of Baghdad and the destruction of the Abbasid Caliphate by the Mongol armies of Hulagu Khan in 1258 ended the golden age of Islamic civilization. In these conquests, the Steppe demonstrated that, although outside the geographic scope of most definitions of the Middle East, its peoples could have lasting strategic impact on a usually bounded state system that corresponded to the territorial extent of the Roman Empire and Iran.

Any comprehensive analysis of the emerging state system in the Middle East would do well to recall the ancient and medieval patterns of power from the Steppe and the ways in which those patterns shaped events in the region. The Russian resurgence in the region, in defense of its Syrian ally, for example, amounts to more than a return to Cold War Russian assertiveness. Such a rearview characterization ignores the reality that Russia did not engage directly in major combat operations in the region during the Cold War as it now is doing in Syria. Instead, Russia's Syrian intervention can be understood with the conceptual aid of ancient history which suggests Moscow's military actions are the latest example of power from the Steppe influencing the course of events in the region following ancient historical precedent.

China's ambitions to link its economy to Middle Eastern markets by building infrastructure projects across Central Asia is another potential modern example of the ancient pattern of the Steppe shaping the contours of the Middle East's regional state system. An economic analysis of the Middle East component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) could emphasize China's surplus production capacity and the prospects for trade and industrialization as well as its financing of transportation and energy infrastructure development in the Middle East. A broader political and economic analysis might examine whether the BRI is expanding China's geopolitical reach across Eurasia while gaining strategic leverage through financing projects—some of which may not be economically viable—in poorer countries. Yet China's strategic ambitions could also represent the bellwether of a different future for the Middle East— one that could be radically different and which can best be grasped by remembering the precedents of Seljuk and Mongol seismic impacts on the course of the region.

For observers in the West confronting the challenges of an emerging

Middle East state system, conceptualizing Russian and Chinese involvement in the region as part of the ancient pattern of the Steppe penetrating into the Middle East helps place these extra-regional actors in a systemic context. We are able to move beyond economic, military, Russian-, or Chinese-centered analysis and can understand these states as outside actors once again pressing from the periphery into the core of the region. Russia and China, viewed as the most recent political expressions of Steppe power, can also provoke unfavorable comparisons in the Middle East with other outside Steppe powers from the ancient and medieval worlds, potentially constraining the freedom of maneuver both states might seek in the region.

Ancient Patterns of Collaboration in the Middle East

Analyzing the Middle East at the system level tends to lead to assessments of the regional balance of military and economic power and can obscure other forces—including collaborative forces—that could function again in the system. The ancient history we have reviewed here has divided the region along geographic and civilizational lines, implicitly emphasizing conflict over cooperation. Conflicts are a key part of the historical identities that can shape the strategic goals of key actors, influence the formation of social compacts and the distribution of power in the region, and redefine the religious identity of the defeated. As such, conflict gets most of the analytic attention.

Precedents of territorial conflict between rival empires in the ancient Near East, however, can obscure a significant shared intellectual and cultural heritage whose precedents, while often less known, are also key to the history of the region and its peoples. Amid conquests and defeats, the Near East from antiquity to the early Middle Ages yields precedents for the exchange of ideas, the mixing of peoples, and mutual intellectual discovery in a broad range of scientific, literary, and religious fields. Cultural interaction that has the potential to soften the hard lines of identity has a distinguished pedigree worth considering in the shadow of today's political and security challenges.

The Greek achievement has played a key role in this paradigm of knowledge exchange and cooperation. A common and persistent reverence for Greek knowledge exported to the Near East through the Hellenistic culture of Alexander and his Seleucid successors beginning in the fourth century B.C. endured for victors and vanquished alike in the arc of subsequent Near Eastern history. In civilizations as diverse as Byzantium, Persia, and the Arab Abbasid Caliphate, Greek knowledge not

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only was prized but shared and developed across each of these empires despite persistent military conflict among them.

A seam in this cultural exchange ran along the southern border of modern-day Turkey where Byzantine Greek, Syriac, and Persian languages and ideas comingled in late antiquity. In the schools of Edessa and Nisibis—under alternating Byzantine and Persian control—Christian theologians writing in Syriac spread their texts and commentaries east. These schools also sponsored Hellenistic philosophers where Greek treatises—notably those of Aristotle—and the medical works of Galen as well as other studies of grammar, astronomy, and mathematics began their long journey into the wider Near East. The fruits of these efforts would lead to an expanded cosmopolitan and intellectually diverse elite culture in Sasanian Persia. As the Byzantine official tolerance for secular learning and theological dissent dwindled, a religiously, linguistically, and culturally varied cadre of refugees arrived in the Sasanian Academy of Gondeshapur. There, the philosophical and scientific traditions of India added to the breadth of intellectual inquiry underway.

In the aftermath of the Arab victory over Sasanian Persia, the locus of knowledge generation and learning would shift to Baghdad—the seat of Abbasid power. In the transition, Arab Caliphs would imitate the academy at Gondeshapur by establishing their own "House of Wisdom" in Baghdad in 830. There, Syriac translations of Greek works were further translated into Arabic, commentated upon, and would eventually contribute to the rediscovery of Greek ideas in medieval Europe in Latin translation. The enduring power of translated knowledge for political and social development was underscored in a United Nations-sponsored report in 2003 on Arab Human Development which pointedly contrasted the achievements of the Abbasid Translation Movement with the lack of translated knowledge in the modern Arab world.[4] The elements of cultural synthesis and a shared knowledge generation that appeared in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages in Edessa, Nisibis, Gondeshapur, and Baghdad[5]—although always in the shadow of violent conflict—offer an alternative historical narrative for the Near East at a key moment in the region's transition. Granted, the revival of this intellectual history

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[4] *The Arab Human Development Report: Building a Knowledge Society*, United Nations Development Programme, New York, 2003, pp. 67 and 119, http://www.arab-hdr.org/publications/other/ahdr/ahdr2003e.pdf

[5] Similar successes in the development of cosmopolitan cultures outside the core of the Near East, such as in the Caliphate of Cordoba in Muslim Spain (929-1031 A.D.) and under the Persian Samanid Emirs of Central Asia (c. 875-1000 A.D.) attest further to the precedent of knowledge exchange and cultural flowering in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

would not be likely to supersede the power struggles underway in the region by changing military balances or endowing economies with new resources. Nor would such a revival of particularly positive historical memory be likely to drown out the echoes of decisive military conquests that define the separateness of the region's peoples.

Recalling such historic patterns of collaboration, nonetheless, might seed the political imagination of some parties and assist in the diplomacy of conflict resolution by appealing to common experience and shared tools of intellectual inquiry that have long precedents in the region. The legacy of Greek knowledge and its reception and expansion by the peoples of the Near East will be especially worthy of study as a bridge linking the Near East to the West and as a vessel for both religious and secular learning. Since history will matter much to the future of the Near East, let all parties willing to reconsider make the best of it.

As should be evident from this historical review, an adequate understanding of the Middle East, one sufficient for guiding policymakers, requires knowledge of its history. To formulate strategy and policy without recognizing how deeply the past is influencing the present is to underestimate the obstacles to political and social engineering and the costs of misguided policy. It is also to miss opportunities for mitigating conflict and to overlook sources of unity and cosmopolitan synergy. To a troubling extent Middle East studies and American policymaking have succumbed to specialization and ahistorical theorizing, to say nothing of the argumentation of intense partisans who look to support preconceived conclusions. The serious study of history, by contrast, has a way of lifting policy-relevant discussions above the passions and prejudices of the moment.

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