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## The Middle East and Conceptions of 'International Society'

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### **Introduction: IR theory and regional analysis**

Of all the areas of the third world, the Middle East is the one that has the longest history of interaction, military, political and economic, with the 'West' and, in particular, with the European state system, this latter understood as the set of institutions and norms that have together shaped modern, that is post-1500, and in particular post-1945, international relations. China, remote and unsubjugated, and the Americas, subjugated but unassimilated, have for sure provided alternative points of reference, not least with regard to arguments as to the universality of human character and customs, but for all their importance, real and symbolic, they have been markedly less important than the Ottomans, the Arab world, 'Islam' and Persia. At the same time, engagement with this region, and the conceptual, normative and policy debates this has occasioned, has done more than any other to stimulate and challenge European and more generally 'Western' thinking on international relations. In recent years this engagement has taken particularly acute and vivid form, in debates on the 'Clash of Civilisations', the incidence of terrorism, the failures of democratisation, and broader discussions of cultural and normative difference between the Muslim and Western systems.

However, such challenges long predate the contemporary, post-Cold War period: we need only think of the nineteenth-century discussions of how to relate to the Ottoman Empire; of eighteenth-century musings on the issue of 'Asiatic' or 'Oriental' despotism; of the seventeenth-century discussion of Islam, or 'the Turk', as a spur to the greater integration and co-ordination of European states' foreign policies. At the same time, the implications for contemporary academic discussion are many: the

argument as to Islam as an enemy, or 'Other', and as a substitute for the communist foe lost in 1991, broaches deep issues within International Relations while in broader discussions of the relative universality and particularity of values the Middle East, and 'Islam', often play a significant, if contrapuntal role, as in the work of Michael Walzer, on 'thick' and 'thin' values, or in the role played within the later work of John Rawls (1999) by a mythical, but clearly Islamic, illiberal state, 'Kazanistan'.

All analytic and theoretical engagement with a particular history, state or region, involves a two-way, double, challenge: it is not just a matter of seeing if a particular theory can explain and conceptually order the politics, and international relations, of a specific country or region, but also of seeing how far this specific case, be it a state, event or region, itself challenges the theory.<sup>1</sup> All major historical events, be they wars, revolutions or economic transformations, pose such a double challenge, and the same is true of regions. The list of those theories that have, in recent decades, encountered and been challenged by the Middle East is long: modernisation theory, dependency theory, Orientalism (however defined), constructivism, democratic peace theory not to mention many varieties of conceptualisation based on nationalist myth, conspiracy theory, Cold War paranoia, or overzealous imposition of military and security considerations. There has, indeed, been no shortage of words and general theories in analysis of the Middle East. The exploration of how the English school could engage with the region is, therefore, both a creative and a welcome one, and invites precisely that kind of dual interaction, of theory and region, that has stimulated discussion within other conceptual frameworks. In what follows, exploring some of the reflections I have earlier expressed on the English school approach in general, and some of my own findings and intuitions on the international relations of the Middle East in particular, I shall attempt to sketch out precisely such a dual, exploratory and critical engagement.

## 1 The English school: achievements

The original tenets of the English school are well known to students of IR, and are clearly expounded in other chapters of this book.<sup>2</sup> In summary form, the classical variant of the English school (for example Bull, 1977; Wight, 1977; Bull and Watson, 1984; Mayall, 1990) posits a theoretical, and historical, framework that combines elements of classical realism, such as the emphasis on military power and competition, the primacy of the state, the role of great powers, and the interstate function of wars, with themes normally associated with a 'liberal' or 'Grotian' approach