

# The Case for Colonialism in the Middle East

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In August 2020, after a warehouse explosion destroyed the Beirut port, an online petition began circulating in Lebanon requesting a return to French rule. “We believe Lebanon should go back under the French mandate in order to establish a clean and durable governance,” the petition stated. Within the first day, it had attracted sixty thousand signatures.

The petition was an appeal for a return to the short-lived French “mandate” over the former Ottoman province granted by the League of Nations after World War I for the purpose of “rendering administrative advice and assistance to the population” as well as “such steps as it may think best to ensure the development of the natural resources of the said territory.” Under French rule, agriculture was expanded, a stable administration created, and social relations balanced, especially in comparison to the tumult resulting from the mandate in adjoining Syria. Even for critical scholars, the facts of Lebanon’s success under the French mandate are hard to ignore. One historian wrote:

Beirut port, confirmed as the principal port of the Syrian interior, was enlarged and modernized, a second dock was constructed and the city, provided with an airport, progressed to become a center for international communication. According to a new urban plan, the city was re-centered around Place de l’Étoile, designed on the model of that of the French capital, and the Parliament and a new business quarter were inaugurated there on the occasion of the French Colonial Exposition of 1921. These projects contributed to the development of a tertiary sector dominated by a merchant/financial bourgeoisie, which was becoming more and more embedded into the mandate system. This was supplemented by the expansion of education, another mandate policy, which helped create a middle class destined for liberal professions and the bureaucracy.<sup>1</sup>

A constitution of 1926 prepared the way for self-government, and internal self-rule was initiated in 1936. To maintain local support after driving German and Vichy France forces out in 1941, Free France pre-emptively declared Lebanon an independent state in 1943.

After the war, independent Lebanon slowly deteriorated, leading to the outbreak of protracted civil war in 1975. When French president Emmanuel Macron visited the wreck of a country in 2020, the same week that the petition was launched, he promised “a new



political pact” to drag Lebanon out of its morass. This would include German control of the airport, United Nations control of security, International Monetary Fund control of public finances, and French proconsular leadership to bring it all together. The organizers of the petition declared victory.<sup>2</sup>

Middle East commentators expressed alarm at the explicitly colonial relationship being proposed. “Foreign forces are eager to kick around a concept of the country’s external management. . . . Ideas of colonialism are still resilient and might be applied to modern conditions,” wrote one concerned Azeri analyst.<sup>3</sup> But the Lebanon petition is a reminder that the once unthinkable is no longer so in the context of dire prospects for human well-being in Lebanon, not to mention the West Bank–Gaza, Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, and Libya. The same revival of discussions of colonialism may figure in future chaotic transitions in Iran, Morocco, and Algeria.

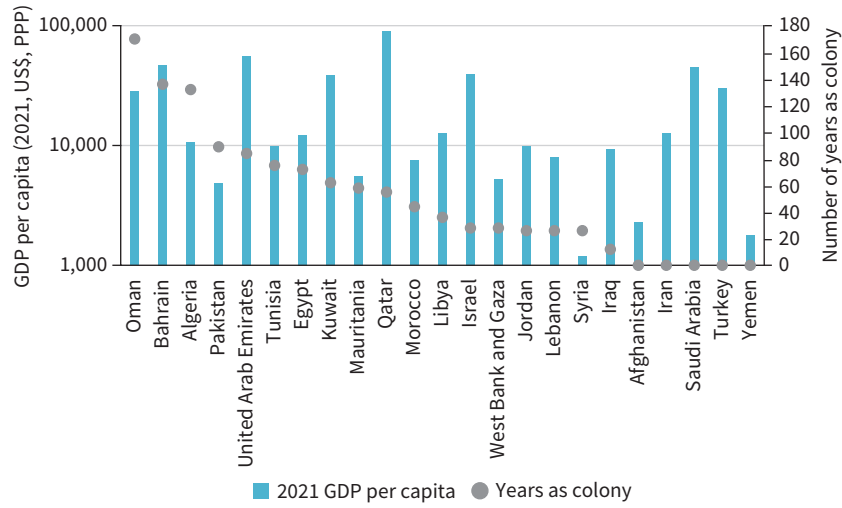
As the critical commentator above suggests, any renewed form of colonial management in the Middle East would look profoundly different from the colonialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Still, the justifications and forms it would take are already becoming clear. Since colonialism remains as much a dirty word in the Middle East as it is in Africa, it is worth clearing the air about the colonial past and what a colonial future might look like.

The twenty-three countries of the Middle East region, defined broadly as an area stretching from Mauritania to Pakistan, experienced on average fifty years of European colonial rule during the high tide of classical colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (sixty-four years if we count only those eighteen countries that were actually colonized). Of these twenty-three, eleven came under British rule (11.5 if we count the southern part of contemporary Yemen), six under French rule, and one (Libya) under Italian rule—each for different periods. The region also has a diverse cross section of five noncolonized contemporary countries: Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, and most of what became Yemen. These five provide useful counterfactuals to colonial rule.

Using the blunt measure of number of years spent under nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western colonialism, there is only a slightly positive relationship to the equally blunt measure of development of contemporary income levels (a correlation of  $r=0.22$ ) (see figure 1). The region displays almost as many long-colonized states that are underdeveloped today (Pakistan) and noncolonized states that are modestly developed (Turkey) as it does colonized and developed (U.A.E.) and noncolonized and undeveloped (Afghanistan).

There is a more significant correlation ( $r=0.43$ ) between years spent under Western colonialism and the present state of the rule of law (see figure 2). But again, the variations are so great—with long-colonized countries like Algeria being more lawless and noncolonized countries like Saudi Arabia being relatively law abiding—that one would hesitate to draw firm conclusions.

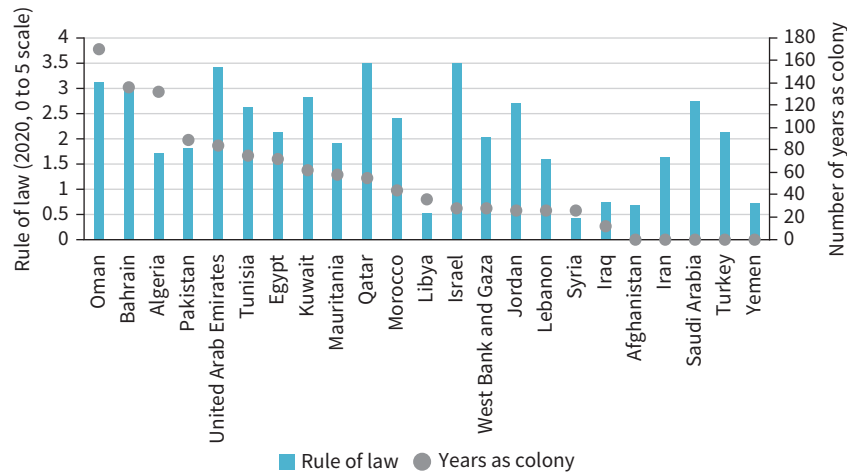
Figure 1. Colonialism and development in the Middle East



Correlation between gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, expressed as purchasing power parity (PPP), in US dollars, and number of years spent under colonial rule among the twenty-three nations of the Middle East.

Sources: International Monetary Fund, author calculations.

Figure 2. Colonialism and rule of law in the Middle East



Correlation between measure of rule of law and number of years spent under colonial rule among the twenty-three nations of the Middle East.

Sources: World Bank Governance Indicators, author calculations.



Making general statements about Western colonialism in the Middle East is also confounded by the different circumstances under which it appeared: of the eighteen colonized cases, six (Israel, Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon) resulted from the collapse of Ottoman rule during World War I, while at the other end of the spectrum, three (Oman, Algeria, and Bahrain) predated the era of modern colonialism that many date to the mutiny in India in 1857. There is, in addition, the unavoidable question of how to treat contemporary Iraq and Afghanistan, which experienced eight and twenty years, respectively, of US-led occupation in the early twenty-first century.

A prudent analyst might refrain from making *any* general statements about “colonialism and the Middle East.” The circumstances and patterns of the colonial encounter vary so widely that one is forced to reckon with twenty-three different case histories. Indeed, the most reasonable conclusion from a cursory glance is that the colonial encounter, in whatever guise and intensity, is more or less irrelevant to the contemporary Middle East as a general statement. It would appear to be no more important as a determinative structural factor than, say, the distance of the capital city from Mecca (which is negatively correlated to contemporary income levels at a reasonably interesting level of  $r=-0.39$ ).

Melani Cammett, for example, after considering several explanations of the region’s lagging economic development, rejects the importance of colonialism per se in favor of a more historically dynamic account of how precolonial and colonial legacies were variously acted upon by the critical agency of postcolonial elites in the region to shape varying outcomes through distinctive forms of government-business ties. As she notes about structural determinism, “A single framework cannot explain the diverse cross-national economic trajectories because the region includes countries with widely variable natural resource and human capital endowments, while state institutions and state-society relations have evolved differently in countries with distinct levels and experiences of colonial rule and postcolonial state- and nation-building.”<sup>4</sup>

Such carefully designed empirical studies tend to undermine broad theoretical claims. This has not prevented many scholars from making precisely such broad claims about “colonialism and the Middle East.” Almost without exception, these individuals insist that colonialism was *the* critical structural fact that explains *all* bad outcomes in the region today. Since contemporary social science rarely discovers iron laws that are not subject to boundary conditions and whose causal effects do not change over time, colonialism is something of a social science unicorn if these claims are to be believed.

For instance, Mark Fathi Massoud argues that the rise of Islamic extremism in the region is a result of the sidelining of sharia law under colonial rule.<sup>5</sup> While the decision to continue with secular legal systems was made by postcolonial rulers, he argues, the structural tendencies for this were laid by colonialists. The result: “Muslim-majority countries stunted the democratic potential of Sharia by rejecting it as a mainstream legal concept in the

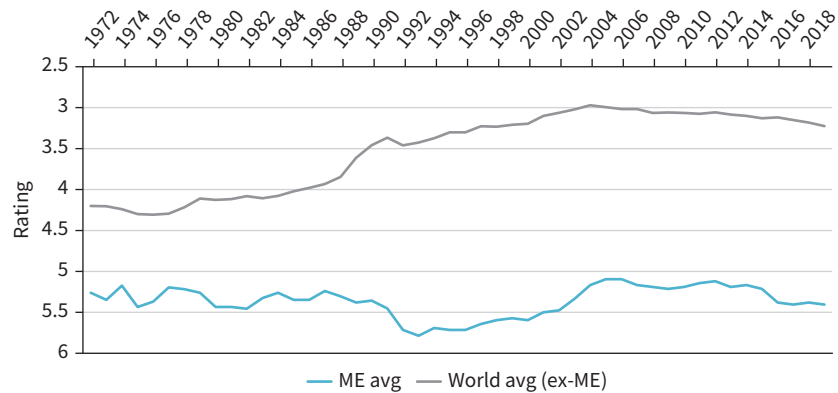
1950s and 1960s, leaving Sharia in the hands of extremists.”<sup>6</sup> That the article contains the phrase “blame colonialism” reflects a remarkable lack of intellectual maturation in the Islamic world for over half a century, transporting us back to the days of soapbox revolutionaries in dusty squares. By definition, his theory could not account for Islamic extremism in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, or Yemen. This is a rather significant deficiency, since it implies the need to discover the explanation for Islamic extremism in those countries and then to see if that explanation works better for the former colonial countries as well. Without engaging in an extended critique of the logic and evidence that Massoud deploys, one might ask why political agency was so reduced in this one domain in countries where political agency over all other matters was (tragically) so great; and, second, if there is a single example of a country ruled by sharia law that has been democratic.

Moreover, if the claims were true, then those countries with more colonialism presumably would have less sharia law today. In fact, the correlation of the Islamic nature of the constitution to years of colonial rule (which should be strongly negative on Massoud’s theory) is virtually nil at  $r=-0.17$ .<sup>7</sup> It is true that the two states that have the most Islamic constitutions, Iran and Saudi Arabia, were never colonized. It is also true that countries that were colonized by the secularizing French see relatively lower levels of Islamization than countries that were colonized by the British. But in general colonialism per se tells us nothing about the ability of postcolonial rulers to shape their nations. Pakistan and Bahrain were heavily colonized and yet have created strongly Islamic constitutions while Turkey and Jordan, freed of any intensive colonial period, nonetheless have more secular constitutions. There is also some debate about whether secular states are necessarily at odds with sharia law: Western countries are the most consistent with Islam, according to the work of Hossein Askari.<sup>8</sup>

The large canvas approach of “blame colonialism” was given academic respectability by Edward Said’s 1978 *Orientalism*, a study of the European cultural encounter with the Middle East and South Asia that has been used as a template by students of Middle East politics as well. Said had very little to say about the actual practices of colonial governance. Since colonialism was obviously evil, his interest was more in the causes of that evil. His answer was Orientalist thinking that “embodies a systematic discipline” that “fatally tend[s] towards the systematic accumulation of human beings and territories.”<sup>9</sup> Quite apart from distorting the humane and diverse content of *Orientalism*, as Ibn Warraq retorted, Said offered Middle East societies “a kind of comfort and absolution in being told that none of your problems are of your making, that you do not have to accept any responsibility for the ills besetting your society. It is all the fault of the West, of infidels.”<sup>10</sup> Said’s main legacy seems to have been to emasculate a previously empirical and well-grounded Middle East intellectual tradition and replace it with an effete, wounded intellectualism. This is reflected in Hamid Dabashi’s updating of Frantz Fanon for the contemporary Middle East, *Brown Skin, White Masks*, or in a recent offering from Université Internationale de Rabat entitled *Decentering Patterns of Otherness: Towards an Asymmetrical Transcendence of Identity in Postcolonial MENA*.<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 3. Democracy in the Middle East**



*Freedom House combined average rating (7 low to 1 high) for democracy among countries of the Middle East, compared with the rest of the world, 1972–2018.*

**Source:** Freedom House: “Freedom in the World,” <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>.

The modern Middle East has lagged behind the rest of the world in terms of not just development but also democracy. From a gap of 0.90 in 1977 on the seven-point Freedom House scale, its divergence in average levels of democracy from the rest of the world grew steadily to a yawning 2.4 in 1997 and has only slightly closed since then (see figure 3). The “third wave” of democratization (beginning in 1974) bypassed the region altogether. Not surprisingly, the anticolonial tradition in Middle East studies departments has pinned the blame for democratic collapse not on postcolonial despots or on the unreformed patriarchal tradition of Islam in the region but on colonialism. In a recent book, Elizabeth Thompson claims that Britain and France “stole” democracy from the later Syria and Lebanon in 1920 by accepting League of Nations mandates, fatally undermining their urges to self-government.<sup>12</sup> Colonialism in the Middle East was thus “a crime against humanity” and but for it, these two countries would have emerged as flourishing American-style democracies. Radical Islam is, as ever, the fault of the West. Thompson promises to “slay the demons” of colonial apologetics about the Middle East and debunk the stubborn belief that Arabs are in any way responsible for their own fates since 1920.

Likewise, critics of colonialism often highlight the ongoing insurgencies and resultant counterinsurgency campaigns waged by colonial authorities as evidence of the “violence” at the heart of all colonial undertakings whose legacies have persisted to the present. That none of these works, especially that of the propagandistic Caroline Elkins, bother with standard scientific questions—What level of violence in defense of political order would be normal in such a situation? What level of violence would have obtained absent colonial rule? What degree of force was proportionate to the security threat? What level of violence ensued following the end of the colonial period?—is evidence of the stiff gale of irrationalism

and decadence in scholarship that colonial undertakings face in postmodern societies like the United States.<sup>13</sup> The one thing that contemporary radical critics studiously ignore is the widespread consent and active participation in “colonial violence” by the colonized, for to engage such data would reveal the tragic dilemmas at the heart of modernization rather than evil, White, pith-hatted men poring over maps in London. As Eric Louw summarizes: “Since revisionist historians are primarily involved in pushing a ‘victims-of-colonialism’ narrative, they must of necessity hide the fact that large numbers of indigenous loyalists are always a feature of empires.”<sup>14</sup>

Of course, whatever the probabilistic or “tendency” arguments about European colonialism and bad outcomes, it is easy enough to cite one or two cases that show it is not an iron-clad law.

The colony at Aden (in today’s Yemen) and its surrounding protectorate, for example, was a whole-cloth creation of the British from 1839 after the Turks abandoned the port for better coffee in nearby Mocha.<sup>15</sup> The population soared from under 1,000 in 1839 to 25,000 by 1844. The main fear among natives was that the British would not stay. Fortunately, they did, signing treaties with ninety sheikhs, sultans, emirs, sharifs, and naibs in the hinterland to create a large protectorate surrounding the port colony. A cosmopolitan “Adenese” identity emerged in the port that included Jews, Muslim Indians, Arabs, Iranians, and Somalis, all of whom spoke Arabic as a lingua franca. Thousands more people “self-colonized” in the ensuing decades, pushing the population of the port colony to 80,000 by 1946.

In 1954, British Petroleum opened a refinery in Aden that drew in thousands of Arabs from the northern sultanate of Yemen. London promised “a considerable degree of internal self-government” to the colony and protectorate, while insisting that they would remain British. The imam of Yemen in the north became envious and deflected domestic unrest by styling himself a “liberator” of the south. As the London *Times* observed that year: “The growing prosperity and increased security enjoyed by the sheikhdoms in the Protectorate contrast all too favorably with the failure of the medieval regime in the Yemen to provide even a modicum of sound administration.”<sup>16</sup> By 1962, the north was enmeshed in civil war after the imam was overthrown. Thousands more fled to the stable British south, pushing the population of the port of Aden to 150,000 by 1965, while another half million lived in the surrounding protectorate.

This “colonized factual” was by any measure a triumph of human flourishing. There is, by definition, no “noncolonized counterfactual” in such situations. Whatever replaced the British would *by definition* be another alien ruler, and when it came, it was a group of mercenaries funded by Egypt and allied to the feudal rulers of North Yemen. The “National Liberation Front” that overran Aden was neither national nor aimed at liberation. When its political chief announced in 1967 that he was declaring himself the rightful ruler of “the liberated areas of the occupied South Yemen” and would brook no external



interference, the *Times* reported he “sat beneath a portrait of President Nasser, ‘the leader of all the Arabs,’ and the walls were plastered with revolutionary slogans or quotations from Che Guevara.”<sup>17</sup>

After this, Yemen descended into chaos. Wars erupted between the south and north in 1972, 1979, and 1988, and then, after unification as Yemen, continued as civil wars that began in 1994, 2004, and, the current one, in 2014. “Get out! Get out! O, colonial power” southern rebels chanted when the latest civil war erupted, calling for a re-creation of the southern state that was left by the British. It seems apt that the global wake-up call about the string of failed postcolonial states across the greater Middle East began with the bombing of a US warship that was refueling at Aden in 2000.

The same is true of Israel, which is a pure creation of British imperialism. Without the British presence there in World War I, there would be no mandate, no Balfour Declaration, no Jewish homeland, and no independence in 1947. As with Aden, it is difficult to argue that this successful British colony, which attracted an insurgency from hostile groups on its periphery, was thereby the *cause* of slow development and a weak rule of law in those peripheral areas, whatever the justness of their complaints against the British colonial creation. The case of Jordan, for instance, shows that the Arab areas of the West Bank and Gaza were likely to be significantly less developed and less lawful with or without a separate Israel.

A better case to cite in refuting the “colonialism is bad” arguments are the stately emirates. It is surely a tragedy of the modern Middle East that the British were unable to find a similar sheikh to hold on to Aden as they found to continue sound administration in the United Arab Emirates. Appeals at the United Nations for a continuation of British rule by Adenese sultans like Muhammad Farid al Aulqi fell on deaf ears. Another sheikh who defended British rule, Ahmad Abbad al-Sharif, died at age ninety in 2021 after a lifetime of political scheming to stay on the right side of the incumbents of the moment.

Critics may respond that these small states should not hold equal analytic weight to the “big eight” of Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Algeria, Iraq, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia, which together account for 80 percent of the region’s population. Here again, however, care is advised. Only four of these—Pakistan, Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco—have a significant colonial history. These four account for 49 percent of the region’s population and attract an inordinate amount of attention from anticolonial scholars, especially scholars of Egypt and Algeria. By contrast, the other four—Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia—should, by this measure, be modern miracles showing the benefits of not being colonized. That may explain why most anticolonial scholarship on these countries centers on nonfalsifiable claims of “neocolonialism” made on the basis of political and economic ties to the West.

Against the fierce gale of anticolonialism in Middle East studies, there has been a wispy breeze of procolonial arguments. The most interesting of these have been made by people



Figure 4. An Emirati aid shipment arrives at the Yemeni port of Mukalla in 2017



Source: Dubai Media.

of the Left. Marx, mainly in newspaper articles, expressed a belief in the progressive role of colonialism in breaking down feudal social orders. The “tragical couplet” of backward societies and avaricious capitalism, he predicted, would lay the foundations for communist utopia. Colonialism was “the unconscious tool of history.”<sup>18</sup> These views found expression in leftist writers on the Middle East who, in Said’s view, were unconsciously captured by the “omnicompetent definitions” of Orientalism despite their otherwise humane instincts, and who went all in for colonialism.<sup>19</sup>

The Spanish writer and republican activist Aurora Bertrana, for instance, wrote an impassioned plea for more intensive Spanish colonialism in Morocco after visiting the protectorate in 1935. She noted the continued low status of women and bemoaned “our incurable incapacity for colonial administration,” contrasting it unfavorably with French rule in Morocco.<sup>20</sup> The title of her 1936 book, *Sensual and Fanatical Morocco*, is enough to send a modern academic to the fainting couch. Bertrana is today scolded by postmodern professors for “perpetuating Orientalist stereotypes” and of having “a colonial gaze,” yet her arguments resound strongly among liberals and democrats in contemporary Morocco.<sup>21</sup>

The greatest traitor to the Left on matters colonial in the Middle East is without doubt Albert Memmi, whose about-face on the issue caused a minor storm. In a 1957 essay, issued in English in 1965 as *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Memmi described the impossible relations between outsiders like himself—a Tunisian Jew—and rising nationalists in the colonies. It was heralded, in the words of a reviewer of a 2003 reissue, “first and foremost as a documentary expression of the human catastrophe which colonialism truly was.”<sup>22</sup>



Well, perhaps. But Memmi's follow-up book with the nearly symmetrical title *Decolonization and the Decolonized* suggested life had not been half bad under colonialism. His book was a catalogue of folly and collapse once those nationalists took power throughout the Third World. He now admitted to "a sense of remorse" for his earlier "lack of perspective."<sup>23</sup> The academy was enraged by Memmi's "reactionary turn" and never forgave him for shifting the blame from the colonizers to the colonized.

French-language research is considerably cleaved in half between the reliably anticolonial establishment of the academic sinecures and the doughty procolonial amateur historians, many of them descendants of the *pieds noirs*, a million or so descendants of White settlers to mostly Algeria who moved to France after Algerian independence. They publish a steady stream of procolonial accounts of French rule in North Africa, having early on established countercultural publishing enterprises that bypass the ideological gatekeeping role performed by mainstream academic publishers.<sup>24</sup>

One exception within the academy was the University of Paris scholar Daniel Lefevre, whose 2006 *Pour en finir avec la repentance coloniale* built upon his earlier work on Algeria to declare that French rule in the north of Africa had been the only lifeline to save the country from the misery and starvation it later descended into. Rapid population growth was for Lefevre the main challenge for Algeria, as he outlined in his 1997 *Chère Algérie: La France et sa colonie (1930–1962)*, and this is what had made it susceptible to nationalist propaganda.<sup>25</sup> The problem of French colonial rule, he argued, was that it was simply not up to the enormous task of *civilizing* Algeria, a word he does not place in the usual quotation marks as a sign of intellectual sophistication and knowing cynicism.

From the likes of Bertrana, Memmi, and Lefevre emerges a procolonial argument for the Middle East, which would go as follows: taking account of precolonial stagnation under Ottoman, caliphate, or warlord rule, and controlling for the particular challenges arising from Islamist tendencies, oil, and geography, historical colonialism played a mostly positive role in development in the Middle East. Absent that colonial encounter, Middle East countries today would be poorer, more autocratic, and less socially developed than they are. Those that were not colonized at all would more likely than not have better outcomes today if they had experienced colonial rule.

Whatever the historical debate, any attempt to revive colonial modes of governance would of course face a stiff headwind in the contemporary Middle East. The opposition to any renewed form of colonialism comes from both Left and Right.

On the Left, the argument is simple: Colonialism was evil and harmful, so why would we revive such a practice? As mentioned, the evidence for this is scanty, but the argument is politically powerful. The semidemocratic government of Tunisia, for instance, has been trying to draw back tourists by refurbishing its colonial sites and centers. This effort has won

them a good scolding from postmodern professors in the West who do not need to worry about where their next meal is coming from. “There exists a lucrative market for tourism based on nostalgia that perpetuates orientalist views cultivated during the colonial era,” scolds one American professor. The renovations “have arguably had the effect of reinforcing the longstanding colonialist duality of juxtaposed ‘old’ and ‘new’ city wherein ‘traditional’ Tunisian culture is fetishized for visitors within the medina [older area of narrow streets], while modernity and global integration are stressed without.” While insisting that he does not want to rush to judgment, the professor cannot resist rushing to judgment, reductively explaining that any participation in the global economy is essentially a continuation of colonialism: the sites “represent just a few examples of Tunisia’s participation in a globalizing tourism economy that arguably reinforce the neocolonialist agendas of the [European Union] and other Western powers, as well as general internationalist interests.”<sup>26</sup> That this tourism might generate needed revenue to pay for life-saving health and other public services appears not to enter into the critic’s calculations.

Standing up to such criticisms is made easier because they are so cliché. The more significant challenge may be standing up to antiglobalists of the Right who see the sovereign state as inviolable and national interests as necessarily excluding foreign assistance. The deeply entrenched European ideal of sovereign modern states overseen by Weberian bureaucracies is one that is more popular today outside of Europe than within. Even if the reality of Middle East governments reflects the sovereignty of despots rather than of the people, and the states are more often failed than modern, still the ideal holds sway.

One justificatory approach may be to recenter analysis on *legitimate* forms of rule, whatever the form. As the Lebanon case illustrates, foreign participation in domestic governance structures may generate more legitimate rule than the current model. This is particularly the case if we consider non-Western governments that might play this role, since a strong undercurrent of specifically anti-Western as opposed to anticolonial sentiment continues to animate much of the region.

Yemen, for instance, is strategically situated close to both the United Arab Emirates and India. In 2016, the UAE ousted al-Qaeda from the eastern port city of Mukalla and instituted what in other contexts would be described as a colonial regime in the region, known as the Southern Transitional Council. The rebuilding of Mukalla draws upon the broad Hadhramaut diaspora in the region, which could spur internal investment under a stable regime. The UAE has been rebuilding hospitals and schools in the city and, along with the Saudis, providing oil grants to power electrical plants. It has a fine bulk terminal at its port. A small American military presence at its airport provides security alongside Saudi and British forces deployed elsewhere in the former southern republic. In 2021, shipping company Maersk reopened regular service to Mukalla in a partnership with the UAE’s Port of Salalah, now marketing itself as the “gateway to Yemen,” the way the British used to market Aden.



The fact that the government in exile has been hosted by Saudi Arabia since 2015 also cannot escape notice for its “colonial character,” a faint echo of the days when local leaders spent more time in the colonial capital or at international conferences than in the colonies themselves. The prime minister of Yemen visited Mukalla briefly in September 2021.

The sort of “new political pacts” being forged by the UAE and Saudi Arabia for southern Yemen, and as suggested by France for Lebanon, with a clear colonial character provide models for how other Middle East countries could be rebuilt. The “public face” needs to be a trusted power, and this in turn creates the conditions in which Western governments, militaries, and businesses, as well as the resource-poor United Nations system, can operate.

Syria, Libya, and Afghanistan present the most obvious cases in need of a colonial governance structure. These would entail central roles for Turkey, Egypt, and Pakistan, respectively, in the reconstruction of these countries, just as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are the natural quarterbacks for the rebuilding of Yemen. One little-noted aspect of the Abraham Accords may be the creation of an alliance of states in the Middle East that, unlike the Arab League, is committed to regional stability, good governance, and modernization, the very heart of the colonial enterprise. Deciding “who” will colonize and “why,” after all, remains the most urgent issue for any colonial strategy, because, far more than the issue of the consent of the colonized, the issue of the willingness of the colonizer to expend precious resources on the well-being of alien peoples looms large.

It is notable that the United States, despite having a footprint in the Middle East that bespeaks its global power and responsibilities, is not a likely actor in any colonial-style partnerships in the Middle East in future. To Tony Badran’s question of whether the US even needs a policy on Lebanon, we might add a more general question of whether the US needs a policy for failed states in the region beyond those that comport with its security and economic interests.<sup>27</sup> Brief colonial periods—a virtual UN mandate in Afghanistan that lasted twenty years and a more traditional eight-year colonial occupation of Iraq—are far briefer than the average sixty-four-year colonial imprint for the eighteen Middle East countries that experienced Western colonial rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While portrayed by critics as examples of “endless war,” both protectorates experienced large month-to-month variations in levels of internal conflict not inconsistent with many colonial episodes of the past. The reason that colonialism was drawn into such varying contexts in every region of the world, after all, was the universal existence of premodern social patterns characterized by weak political organization, endemic civil conflict, and vicious developmental cycles.

At present, it is unlikely that the United States will be a player in reviving new forms of governance in the Middle East. It will, however, almost certainly be called upon to support those forms that emerge, and to do so will require some intellectual background to the colonial experience in the region as a whole.

## NOTES

- 1 Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2012), 92.
- 2 The petition can be viewed online at AVAAZ.org, [https://secure.avaaz.org/community\\_petitions/en/emanuel\\_macron\\_place\\_lebanon\\_under\\_french\\_mandate\\_for\\_the\\_next\\_10\\_years\\_/](https://secure.avaaz.org/community_petitions/en/emanuel_macron_place_lebanon_under_french_mandate_for_the_next_10_years_/).
- 3 Teymur Atayev, “Blown Up Lebanon,” Turan Information Agency, August 15, 2020.
- 4 Melani Cammett, “Development and Underdevelopment in the Middle East and North Africa,” in Carol Lancaster and Nicolas van de Walle, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Politics of Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 597.
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- 7 Dawood Ahmed and Moamen Gouda, “Measuring Constitutional Islamization: The Islamic Constitutions Index,” *Hastings International and Comparative Law Review* 38, no. 1 (December 2015): 1–76.
- 8 Hossein Askari and Hossein Mohammadkhan, *Islamicity Indices: The Seed for Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
- 9 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 123.
- 10 Ibn Warraq, *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said’s Orientalism* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007), 246.
- 11 Hamid Dabashi, *Brown Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2011); Najib Mokhtari and Aomar Boum, *Decentering Patterns of Otherness: Towards an Asymmetrical Transcendence of Identity in Postcolonial MENA* (Rabat: Université Internationale de Rabat, 2016).
- 12 Elizabeth Thompson, *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2021).
- 13 See Caroline Elkins, *Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2022).
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- 15 Bruce Gilley, “A Big Dose of Colonialism Is Needed to Fix Yemen,” *The Article*, February 25, 2019.
- 16 “Frontier Raiders,” *The Times* (London), July 16, 1954.
- 17 Nicholas Herbert, “Aden NLF Demand to Britain,” *The Times* (London), November 9, 1967.
- 18 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Colonialism: Articles from the New York Tribune and Other Writings* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 216, 41.
- 19 Said, *Orientalism*, 156
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## About the Author



### BRUCE GILLEY

Bruce Gilley is professor of political science and public policy at Portland State University and a member of the board of the National Association of Scholars. His latest book is *The Last Imperialist: Sir Alan Burns' Epic Defense of the British Empire*. His next book, *In Defense of German Colonialism*, will be published in 2022.

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*The Caravan Notebook* is a platform for essays and podcasts that offer commentary on a variety of subjects, ranging from current events to cultural trends, and including topics that are too local or too specific from the larger questions addressed quarterly in *The Caravan*.

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