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CANADIAN DEFENCE & FOREIGN AFFAIRS INSTITUTE

## **What makes the Middle East such a Difficult Place**

by Barry Cooper  
June, 2014



# POLICY PAPER

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Prepared for the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute  
1600, 530 – 8th Avenue S.W., Calgary, AB T2P 3S8  
[www.cdfai.org](http://www.cdfai.org)

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ISBN: 978-1-927573-25-9

## ► **Executive Summary**

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Because of a particular configuration of pride and interest, some political conflicts and confrontations can only be managed, not resolved. In the contemporary world the most evident example of this problem is the generations-long relationship between Israel and the Palestinians. There are historical, demographic, religious and geopolitical reasons that account for the political intractability of a multi-decade confrontation that has been punctuated from time to time with violent conflict, insurgency, and war. There is nothing in the long-term factors that account for the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation that suggest a resolution any time in the foreseeable future.





**P**olitical realists from Thucydides to Machiavelli, and from Machiavelli to the present, have known that the political problem was how to reconcile pride and interest.<sup>1</sup> Whether its municipal politics or international politics, the same fundamental issues are involved. If domestic politics were only about interests rather than somebody else – a faceless bureaucrat, for instance – could make decisions for you. Because you would not have to choose and let your short-sighted pride get in the way, that somebody else would likely make a better choice than you – better in the sense that her choice would be in your real, true, or rational interest. Such is the seductive and perpetual appeal of the “rational actor” model of politics and the desire to replace politics with administration. The only cost (to your pride) is that when others decide for you, you become dependent on them.<sup>2</sup>

In international politics the serious application of the rational actor model would involve something like an effective United Nations that could act internationally the way sovereign government bureaucracies do domestically. So long as sovereign states continue to exist, this dream is confined to a world of federalists and other marginal eccentrics. In international politics, where states, not citizens are actors, the leaders of states take care of their own interests, which may include the interests of citizens. As Lord Palmerston said in a famous debate on the Treaty of Adrianople: “We have no eternal allies and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual and those interests it is our duty to follow.”<sup>3</sup> State leaders take pride in defending their own interests.

Of course, pride can sometimes get out of hand, particularly under conditions of conflicting interests. In the Middle Eastern context this was what US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles may have alluded to when he joked, upon meeting with Jewish and Arab leaders: “Why can’t we all sit down together and work this out like Christian gentlemen?”<sup>4</sup> Whether the story is apocryphal or not, Christian gentlemen often disagree on the basis of their differing ambitions. More than religious differences, then, make the Middle East a difficult place. Nevertheless, who would deny that religious differences have exacerbated conflicts of interest in the Middle East? And in this dialectic of pride and interest, religion is an aspect of pride, which is the chief reason why human beings belong only to one religion at a time.

The religious sources of Israeli and Arab pride, however, are distinct, as are the political implications. In both cases, more than religious exclusiveness is involved, so let us begin with some recent history.

For decades before the founding of modern Israel, the disposition of the Levant was tightly bound up with the confrontation of the local great power, the Ottoman Empire, and the global power of Great Britain. The British looked to the lynch pins of the Mediterranean, from

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<sup>1</sup> Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, V: 84ff; Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. 15; *Discourses*, II: 23.

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion by Harvey Mansfield with respect to constitutional democracies. *America’s Constitutional Soul*, (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 73-5; 81-3; 213-4.

<sup>3</sup> Parliament, House of Commons, Debates, 1 March, 1848, vol. 97, col. 122.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Harvey Cox, “World Religions and Conflict Resolution,” in Douglas Johnson and Cynthia Sampson, eds., *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1995), 266; and in William Martin, “With God on their Side” in Hugh Hecllo and Wilfred M. McClay, eds., *Religion Returns to the Public Square: Faith and Policy in America*, (Washington DC, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2003), 353.



Gibraltar to Suez, to secure sea lanes to India. Defeating the Ottoman Empire in World War One was central to British strategy, but Gallipoli indicated that more than a straight-ahead military operation was needed. They then organized local alliances with Bedouin and Arab tribes across the region and engaged extra-regional proponents of a Jewish homeland. Their strategy, despite its internal contradictions, was successful in the sense that it added to Ottoman instability. The secret 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement between France and Britain contemplated an odd succession of quasi-nation-states along European lines despite the absence of anything like European social and political conditions. After the war they divided the Ottoman province of Syria, with the British taking the southern administrative district, Filistina, which they renamed Palestine. Despite modest Jewish immigration, the population remained overwhelmingly Arab.<sup>5</sup>

The outcome of the Second World War was crucial for both Britain and Israel. Britain began withdrawing first east of Suez and then west as well. The decline and fall of the British Empire meant that sooner or later they would abandon Palestine. In the event it was sooner.

The ideological details of Zionism and of illegal and legal Jewish immigration were central to the recreation of Israel and of Jewish pride. The new state would protect the Jews in an uncertain, often hostile, and recently murderous world by establishing a Jewish state. By so doing, Israel would reconstitute the Jewish people as a political unit capable of historical action. Political scientists would say that the state of Israel “articulated” the Jewish people into a historical and political actor. Of course, some wanted a secular and socialist state and others wanted a state governed by Jewish religious law, but these intramural disputes were secondary to two necessities. First, that the state of Israel afford physical protection to the Jews; and second, that Israel be governed by Jews. With the memory of the Holocaust still fresh, the combination of those two necessities account even today for the configuration of Jewish pride and Israeli nationalism.

Arab pride is much more closely tied to religion, chiefly Sunni Islam, but also to the glories of remote Arab (and Ottoman) history. Moreover, when one considers the far less glorious but more recent history of the Muslim Middle East, shame, which arises typically when self-respect is insulted, has enhanced the element of pride in regional politics. Together the religious exclusivity of Islam and the historically recent insults of Christians and Jews have made gentlemanly negotiations next to impossible.

Consider first the conventional Muslim understanding of Islam. To paraphrase Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Islam is the religion of God as Judaism is the religion of the Jews and Christianity the religion of Christians.<sup>6</sup> The conventional implications, accepted by most Muslims, are extraordinarily significant. Chief among them is that the religion of God is eternal and that Judaism and Christianity are simply phases that have been superseded by Islam. On the one hand this interpretation allows pre-Islamic “Abrahamic” religions to be practiced by “people of

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<sup>5</sup> See Albert Hourani, A History of the Arab Peoples, (London, Faber and Faber, 1991), Ch. 19. See also Jakub J. Grygiel, ed., Great Powers and Geopolitical Change, (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 96-102; Philip K. Hitti, History of Syria: Including Lebanon and Palestine, (New York, Macmillan, 1951).

<sup>6</sup> Smith, Islam in Modern History, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957, 15-16; 28-31. See also Michael Cook, Muhammed, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983) and Andrew Rippin, Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London, Routledge, 2001).



the book,” but on the other, as Sura 33:40 said, Mohammed is the “seal of the prophets,” which is to say the last prophet in a line that included Jesus and Moses.

In short, God gave His final message, in Arabic, by way of the messenger Gabriel, to Mohammed. The mission of the Prophet, moreover, was to enact the struggle between truth and falsehood until all the world submits to truth (8: 40-1). This is what another Islamic scholar, Fazlur Rahman, called the Muslims’ “duty to succeed.”<sup>7</sup> Muslims not only embraced such a duty, they had the word of God to rely on that eventually they would succeed. No pious Muslim can doubt this and whatever one makes of such a promise or such a profession of faith, it is a source of self-respect for Muslims everywhere, even in such currently unhappy venues as Gaza.<sup>8</sup>

For decades growing into centuries after the *Hijra* of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina, Muslims fulfilled their duty to succeed. Despite occasional interruptions, including the Crusades, Muslims had good reason to understand their own civilization as the acme of human civilization, a worldly confirmation of the view that theirs was the final revelation of God. Beyond Islamic civilization lay only barbarism and the lands of the infidels, which constituted an invitation to further civilizing and Islamicizing action, but little more.<sup>9</sup> Successful Muslim conquerors were neither the first nor the last to combine religious, military, and civilizational superiority.

Fulfilling the duty to succeed is all very well so long as the actions are successful. Not surprisingly, successful political actors take pride in their accomplishments and are filled with shame at their setback and defeats. This consideration introduces a current problem for the Muslim Middle East captured in the title of Bernard Lewis’ best-selling book: “what went wrong?”<sup>10</sup> There are many scholarly and popular versions of the decline of Islamic civilization. Moreover, there are numerous accounts of the causes of what went wrong, from the “closing of the Muslim mind,” as Robert Reilly recently put it, to the exhaustion of gold and silver mines in the region. Others blame predatory bark-eating goats for turning fertile lands into deserts. Among human causes are successively the Mongols, western imperialists, and, of course, the Jews.<sup>11</sup> Whether the explanation is sober and plausible or simply fantastic, the effect is to rekindle pride or exacerbate shame and resentment. Either way, the difficulties of the region have been magnified rather than reduced.

Turning to the second problem, the problem of interests let us begin from Lord Palmerston’s realism. The permanent interests of which he spoke were conditioned by genuinely permanent features of the political landscape such as geography but also by long-term factors such as the history of peoples and demographic changes as well as medium-term matters such as economics

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<sup>7</sup> Rahman, *Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1979), 16-19

<sup>8</sup> I have discussed this problem in more detail in *New Political Religions: An Analysis of Modern Terrorism*, (Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2004), Ch. 3

<sup>9</sup> See Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1993), 43-57; Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol. I, *The Classical Age*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1974), 50-60; 109-10

<sup>10</sup> Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Reilly, *The Closing of the Muslim Mind: How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis*, (Wilmington, ISI Books, 2010); Caroline Cox and John Marks, *The West, Islam and Islamism*, (London, Civitas, 1982); Roger Scruton, *The West and the Rest*, (Wilmington, ISI Books, 2002); Oliver Roy *The Failure of Political Islam*, tr. Carol Volk, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1994).



and technology. That is, any discussion of interests in the context of the Middle East necessarily involves a consideration of geopolitical constraints, those large-scale factors that limit the effective options of political actors no matter how self-assured or how filled with shame, anger, or resentment they may be.<sup>12</sup> To illustrate with a very practical example, consider the Israeli-Palestinian problem, which is surely one of the major confrontations making the Middle East a difficult place. Let us start with Israel.

Geographically Israel is a small country, under 400 kilometers north to south and at its narrowest, about 30 kilometers wide. It would seem to be devoid of strategic depth.<sup>13</sup> There is some comfort in desert buffers and the advantage of fighting on internal lines and thus having the ability to concentrate forces for sequential engagement. The Israelis' great disadvantage is demographic so its overriding strategic objective is to ensure that its Arab neighbours, chiefly Egypt and Syria, are never able to mount a coordinated attack. Almost as important, Israel must avoid fighting a war with its neighbours at the same time as dealing with an *Intifada* or uprising by the Palestinians. Managing its neighbours and the occupied territories has proven possible to date, but it remains a permanent problem.

One of the reasons why Israel has been relatively successful is because it has been able to rely on an external great power as a patron – since 1967, the United States. There is not now, nor has there been since the end of the Cold War, any guarantee that Israeli and American interests would be congruent, let alone identical. American interests in the Arab world have meant constraints on Israel's relations with the Palestinians, but the Israeli lack of strategic depth means that it cannot easily abandon the occupied territories. Its chief problem, therefore, is how to manage this long-term confrontation and occasional conflict. Victory, in any meaningful sense, does not seem possible because, ethical considerations aside, ferocious Israeli repression of the Palestinians would both risk uniting its Arab neighbours and add to the stress of Israel's relationship with the Americans. Either consequence could easily enough lead to a genuine existential threat.

Turning to the geopolitical constraints on the Palestinians, one encounters additional factors that add to the difficulties of the region.<sup>14</sup> To begin with, and granting that the Palestinians are a nation, which as indicated below is contested both by Israel and by its Arab neighbours, they are a nation nevertheless without a state. In this respect they resemble the pre-Israel Jewish people inasmuch as they are not fully "articulated" as a political unit capable of historical action. The territory they inhabit is not what they or other countries recognize as their own. They lack both a state and the appurtenances of statehood, such as a military. The organization that speaks in the name of the Palestinian people, the Palestinian National Authority, does not speak for all Palestinians.

Palestinian pride is not simply opposed to Israel – although it surely is opposed to Israel. It is also opposed to the claims of all of Israel's Arab neighbours. Those who, after World War One, saw themselves as Syrians included both Lebanon and Palestine/Israel (and some included

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<sup>12</sup> See the excellent restatement of basic geopolitical principles in Robert D. Kaplan, [The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle against Fate](#), (New York, Random House, 2012). See also Jeremy Black, [Maps and History: Constructing Images of the Past](#), (New Haven, Yale University press, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> See Stratfor.com, "The Geopolitics of Israel: Biblical and Modern," May 14, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> See Stratfor.com, "The Geopolitics of the Palestinians," May 15, 2011.



Jordan) as part of Syria properly understood. In 1976 Syria invaded Lebanon in part to extinguish the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Fatah. Nor do the Jordanians welcome the notion of a Palestinian state. Indeed in 1970 they attacked the PLO and forced them into exile in Lebanon and the tender mercies of the Syrians. Egypt has never been pro-Palestinian. In 1948 the Egyptians herded the Palestinians fleeing the war in Israel into the “Gaza Strip.” At the same time, they considered it an extension of Sinai and thus of Egypt. Nasser’s dream of a United Arab Republic, while resolutely anti-Israel, would also have incorporated the Palestinians and, in its more ambitious form, the Saudis and Jordanians as well. In this context, Yasser Arafat was part of Nasser’s plan, but to the extent that he was also the father of Palestinian nationalism he was distrusted not just by the Israelis but by everybody else in the neighbourhood too. This made, and still makes, perfect sense: no one but the Palestinians think that the creation of a Palestinian state is in their interest. The much-ballyhooed “two-state solution” is DOA, at least in the Arab world. This is why no Arab state assisted the Gazans when Israel launched Operation Cast Lead in 2008-9; it is also why the Palestinians current patrons include Iran and Turkey, neither of which is Arabic.

The Palestinians are constrained, therefore, by the indifference and even hostility of their and the Israelis’ neighbours. Their interests are also constrained by the geographic separation of Gaza and the West Bank, by the great differences between what is essentially an entirely dependent city-state in Gaza and a more self-sufficient and much less densely populated West Bank that, in the Middle Eastern context, conceivably could be thought of as another quasi-nation-state. If the two geographic entities were politically united, Gaza would be by far the largest Palestinian city—which may be one reason the two parts have grown more politically distant. In any event the inhabitants of both places are more or less dependent on external aid and on the Israeli economy for their livelihood. Any peace treaty that acknowledged the existence of Israel as legitimate would increase the dependency of the Palestinians on the Israeli economy.

It should be no surprise therefore that the Palestinians still seek the destruction of Israel. Unfortunately for them, they lack the capability of doing so. Moreover, there is nothing in the history of their Arab neighbours’ actions towards Israel that could reasonably give them hope of assistance. And even if as in a dream, Israel were removed, there is no reason to expect a Palestinian state to emerge *au bout de la nuit*.

In sum, the Middle East and its epicenter, the confrontation between Israel and the Palestinians, is a difficult place because pride, in the form of self-respect, nationalism, and religious identification, is reinforced by incompatible interests. For the Palestinians to achieve a state they must defeat Israel militarily, but they cannot because the Arab states have interests distinct from those of the Palestinians, whatever their religious and ethnic solidarity. There is no reason therefore to think that the Middle East will cease to be a difficult place for the foreseeable future. Lacking solutions to the political problems of the region, its difficulties can only be managed.

## ► About the Author

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**Barry Cooper**, a fourth generation Albertan, was educated at Shawnigan Lake School, the University of British Columbia and Duke University (PhD, 1969). He taught at Bishop's University, McGill, and York University before coming to the University of Calgary in 1981. He has been a visiting professor in Germany and the United States. His teaching and research has tried to bring the insights of Western political philosophers to bear on contemporary issues, from the place of technology and the media in Canada, to the debate over the constitutional status of Quebec and Alberta, to current military and security policy. Cooper has published 30 books and over 150 articles and papers that reflect the dual focus of his work; most recently (with Lydia Miljan) he wrote *Hidden Agendas: How Canadian Journalists Influence the News* published by UBC Press (2003). In the spring of 2004, *New Political Religions: An Analysis of Modern Terrorism* was published by the University of Missouri Press. In 2009 he edited Tilo Schabert's *How World Politics is Made: France and the Reunification of Germany*. He publishes a regular column in the *Calgary Herald* and other CanWest Global papers.

Cooper has lectured extensively in Europe, the United States, India, Australia and China. He has received numerous on-going research grants from public and private Canadian, French, German, and American granting agencies. In addition he has received two major awards, the Konrad Adenauer Award from the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung, and a Killam Research Fellowship.

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