

Politics of DESPAIR

The Gulf war is causing massive devastation. But the Gulf crisis has already remade the region. ALR assembled a roundtable discussion of experts before the outbreak of war to speculate on the new face of the Middle East.

Bob Springborg teaches in politics at Macquarie University; Michael Humphrey teaches Middle East studies at the University of Western Sydney; Clive Kessler teaches in sociology and Asian Studies at the University of NSW; and Ralph Pettman teaches in government at Sydney University. The discussion was chaired by Stan Correy, a journalist with ABC Radio's *Background Briefing*.

Whoever wins in the confrontation between the allied forces and Iraq in the Gulf, how will the Arab world be changed by the invasion of Kuwait?

BOB: In the first place, a new alliance structure has been formed between Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia, an alliance

that will try to draw within its orbit a variety of the weaker Arab states. On the other hand, the Iraqis have been able to solicit some support from weaker, more marginal actors—the Yemenis, the Jordanians, and the Arafat wing of the PLO. But that group really doesn't have anywhere to go if Iraq doesn't come out of this in a strong position. Various countries are watching and waiting to see what exactly happens, and will to a greater or lesser extent throw in their lot with the Egypt-Saudi-Arabia-Syria triangle, assuming that they come out of it in fairly good shape.

That will further distance the Arab regimes from their publics. It would be an alliance backed up of course by the United States. It will therefore further exacerbate domestic political tensions within those countries and between the rich and the poor Arab states.

I've read comments that the Arab world now is very much as it was at the end of the Ottoman Empire



Looking to the future: (left to right) Stan Correy, Bob Springborg, Clive Kessler, Ralph Pettman and Michael Humphrey

just after the First World War. Is the whole region up for grabs?

MICHAEL: I think talking in terms of a new conservative alliance probably gives too much solidity to the relationships between states. The consequences of the present conflict are a huge Pandora's box. The irony is that it is totally built on American and European military and economic power. Despite all the previous alliance structures in the region, none of these states were able to defend themselves in military coalitions, so there will be a strong underpinning of American military backing in any Middle East alliance from now on.

So the Americans are a bit like, say, the British and the French after the First World War?

MICHAEL: No, I think the national identities are much more discrete now than they were at the end of the First World War. Whatever the arrangements of the states and boundaries and decisions about future national identity, the reality is that the Pan-Arab movement has been

eclipsed by the nature of military, technological and economic arrangements in the region, which emphasise local national identities over Pan-Arab ones. Kuwait in particular had internationalised itself, both in terms of its foreign and increasingly non-Arab workforce, and in terms of its downstream marketing of petroleum products.

RALPH: I think it's important to look at the larger context. What we're seeing overall is the privileging of the state, and the ideology of statism, by both sides in this conflict. This is a long-term process. Behind statism is nationalism, the attempt to create that organic 'we' feeling that's supposed to inhabit these odd and arbitrary territorial lines on the map, and which Hussein has been busy building up behind his paper ramparts.

The paradox, then, is that behind all this statemaking you have the dramatic internationalisation of the world economy. We can say on the one hand sovereignty is dead, but on the other it seems all the more important on a day-to-day basis. So you get these curious fault-lines run-

ning across the world. And in addition you get people on the margins, the periphery, trying to fight back against this monolithic statemaking.

CLIVE: Whatever the outcome of this crisis, what's happened already has changed the pattern of both international alliances and domestic politics in the region. Think of what the possible outcomes might be. If Saddam Hussein prevails, this will give a tremendous boost to those who have supported him and have a massively destabilising effect on many of the regimes in the region. The consequences throughout the region of his defeat in war would be enormous. You would then have a radicalisation not of optimism or hope, but a radicalisation of despair, such as we saw in the Middle East after 1967.

*Michael:
"To maintain the status
quo, it would be much
better not to have a war."*

Is one of the difficulties for an Arab solution to the problems of the region, and for their desire to have control over their destiny, the fact that they have 60% of the world's oil resources? Whoever wins, that fact still remains and makes the region important to the world economy.

MICHAEL: Phrasing the question in terms of 'the Arabs' is part of the problem, because 'the Arabs' in general don't have the oil. Particular states do, and their arrangements in terms of maintaining their own regimes' stability and their control over those resources are not with other Arab states; they are with the international economy and international military alliances.

One of the slogans from the anti-war camp is 'No Blood for Oil'. Yet a lot of blood has been shed over oil. And presumably one of the key questions that people have to consider is what can the Arabs do about this problem.

MICHAEL: The Middle East remains a dependent region. You could describe the states as rentier states. And they are hardly able to embark on development and industrialisation programs for which they cannot use the oil money as development capital. Therefore they remain dependent on those international alliances.

RALPH: You may have to call them state-makers rather than states. But you're looking at a small elite in each state who relate either to each other or to the world economy as a whole. That's where this language becomes a bit of a trap. What lies behind the term 'Iraq'? There's one man, Saddam Hussein, but there are many millions of Iraqis who are very diverse. They don't all agree with Saddam Hussein—though a lot of them do.

BOB: We should see this as part of a 200-year history of Western intervention in the region and, in the course of that involvement, it has always been the case that various parties, groups, tribes and now states have attached themselves to those external actors to enhance their power at the expense of their neighbours. As a result of the economic dependence that Iraq incurred during the eight year war against Iran, America's assumption was that Iraq would then be subordinate in the same way that Saudi Arabia or Kuwait or the United Arab Emirates or Egypt were. But Saddam Hussein rejected that and decided to adopt the radical and mobilisational power of Pan-Arabism to try to challenge that inevitability. And that's why the United States has reacted so strongly to him and so now they have to try to destroy him. They would prefer not to destroy Iraq, because the oil has to be sold. Iraq has a large outstanding debt; it is in a subordinate position; it would simply be another Saudi Arabia if Saddam Hussein was not there.

Will there be any payoffs for the Arab states who've come to the party with the West? Can a linkage be made with the Palestinian question, for instance?

BOB: Yes, there will have to be, because Israel has become an obstacle for the West in the subordination of the Arab states. Regardless of how the conflict with Saddam Hussein ends, there is going to be some effort to confront the Shamir government and the threat it poses to the West's conceptualisation of the proper Arab order.

Can that be done? Can you defuse Yizhak Shamir and can the Israelis be brought to the party to defuse the problems in the Arab world?

RALPH: They don't seem to me to be in a very compromising mood!

CLIVE: They definitely aren't. The continuance of the Shamir government has indeed become an obstacle to the US pursuit of its own policies and interests in the Middle East. And the embrace of Syria by the US as part of the anti-Iraq coalition changes things considerably. There's the question of how well King Hussein in Jordan manages to walk the tightrope between the Palestinians in Jordan and the Israelis. Israel will come under pressure to make some kind of gesture toward reconciliation with the Palestinians. That would then bring home the inevitability of a Palestinian settlement both to the Shamir government and to Israelis more broadly.

MICHAEL: The power of the state in the Middle East is much more solid than we often allow. But if we look at the Middle East, one of the distinctive things has been the continual emergence of social and political movements

against the state and across state boundaries. Neither a colonial nor a decolonial solution has not been effective. US intervention in the world has not been markedly successful since the 60s in securing its alliances and the loyalty of its allies by military means. And that's been nowhere more dramatic than in the Middle East. On the occasions when it has directly intervened—and specifically in Lebanon—it's just turned and run away, because the costs are so high. Only six or 12 months ago we would have been looking at Islamic fundamentalism as the major threat of the region. But the reality is that since the attempted mobilisation of Pan-Arabism by Saddam the key feature of the region is again the mobilisation of social movements by Pan-Islam. We cannot assume that because an alliance emerges between the Saudis and the Egyptians—and the Egyptians get paid off by grants and additional development funds—that this is anything but a temporary solution.

Given that the Americans have now established a military presence in the region, and given their past record in dealing with their 'colonies', can America actually cope with this new colonial role? What is the view from Washington of what to do once this crisis has been settled?

BOB: This crisis has underlined the reality of two Middle Easts—there is the Gulf, and there is everything else. The Gulf was declared by President Carter as an area of vital strategic interest for the US, and now we have the fruition some ten years later of the policy of incorporating the Gulf into Europe as a vital area of American strategic interest. As far as the rest of the Middle East is concerned—the periphery, if you will—the US doesn't care very much. They wrote off Lebanon and Libya; they have written off Saddam. Most of the periphery doesn't have oil. It means that Israel now has to accommodate itself to a subordinate role, because there is no place for Israel in the security structure of the Gulf. The Americans want the Palestinians finessed out, too. The settlement is going to be between Israel and Syria, and Israel and Jordan, and ultimately Israel and Lebanon. And the US is going to seek to broker a series of bilateral deals of that sort. But it is going to ensure that the Palestinians remain subordinate to these state-to-state relations.

So they aren't really serious about changing the boundaries: they want to keep the states as they are?

CLIVE: The history of this goes back to the 1920s, when the principal player in the Middle East was Britain. In the emerging politics of Palestine there was a very complicated triangle between the emerging Zionist movement, the British and King Abdullah of Transjordan. And all of them had at least tacit agreement to sort out the relationship between the Zionists and the Palestinians as a matter of states, in which the Palestinians would be a people but not a state; they would be spoken for by others. And that has been a constant theme in the Middle East ever since. But so long as people go on trying to find a solution to the Palestinian problem without a Palestinian state of some sort, the problem will not go away. And eventually Israel is going to be compelled to find a solution that disengages the Israeli-Palestinian problem from the game of states now played between it and the other existing Middle Eastern

states — a game which previously worked to Israel's advantage and now works to its disadvantage. The question is whether Israeli politics is going to allow such an option to emerge and allow it to prevail.

Bob:

"There's even a view that the US set Saddam up for this."

RALPH: Bob's strategic map of the region is a convincing one. But when you look at it you have to say: where do the Palestinians go? They're really not going to go away. You can politely organise these bilateral deals between state-makers and hope to stick a Palestinian state in somehow. But it's tantamount to stuffing jellyfish into pigeonholes. People fight back in all kinds of ways, not just against the tyranny of statemaking as we've seen it practised in the Middle East, but also against that modernising logic that's built into capitalism worldwide - that quartet of key values: individualism, rationalism, centralism, materialism. But people don't necessarily want to live like that: they also want to be communal, idealistic, divine. How do we read these things into this very convincing strategic map? This is why the map will ultimately not be the clear reading of the conflict you would like.

Every other region of the world has now had its perestroika. Can there ever be a perestroika in the Arab world? It seems to me there were a few experiments with political difference—elections in a few places—but that's been stopped now by events, particularly the invasion of Kuwait.

BOB: No, because the Americans now see this as the key to unlocking many of their ambitions. The liberalisation of South America is vital to American national interests there. Likewise in the Middle East it is very important for the legitimacy of their presence. The regimes under their umbrella now are seen as fragile and transient: much better to liberalise. From the other end, of course, there's a tremendous desire for liberalisation on the part of the Arab masses. How you get these two ambitions to work together, and at the same time preserve the regimes that are in control of the various states: that's the difficulty. The regimes want a token liberalisation; the Americans want one that goes rather further; while those on the ground want a fullblown one.

There is another problem. The Middle East is the lagging part of the world, both politically and economically. If we look at developments in Latin America and Asia, we see that the Middle East still has the second highest birthrate in the world after sub-Saharan Africa. Its rate of industrialisation again is greater only than sub-Saharan Africa. Its levels of political democracy are near the most backward. The Middle East, which was one of the most developed parts of the world at the turn of our century, is now one of the least developed.

Clive:

"The greater the setbacks in the region, the more people are driven to a politics of identity."

Are the Arabs themselves to blame for that? Or is it because of the Western presence over the years? Can Arab political culture actually deliver that kind of liberalisation?

CLIVE: The impulses towards liberalisation, modernisation, participation and a politics of citizenship appropriate to the region are important, but they're only half the picture. The other half is that the greater the setbacks and reversals of modernisation, and the more adverse the consequences of the subordination of the Middle East in the world political order, the more people are driven to take refuge in a politics of identity, of authenticity; a politics that invokes some notion of Arab unity which is powerful precisely because it doesn't have much reality. One of the consequences of this process is that this Islamic politics of identity has not had as its only adversary the West 'out there': it has had a closer adversary in the Westernisers within. And the whole cause of modernisation, secularisation, the redefinition of Islam in ways that modern Muslims would see as being authentic, but which are displeasing to traditionalistic Muslims—that whole process as gone backwards, particularly over the last 30 years. And this is something which is characteristic not only of the Middle East but also of large parts of the Islamic political world. I am not confident of the prospects of the revival of an Islamic politics which sees the essential Islamic message as egalitarian, activist, participatory, emancipatory—all of which is what modern Muslims claim the Islamic political project has been, going back to the time of Muhammad the Prophet. That interpretation of Islam, and that basis for Islamic politics, has had the ground cut from under it. And to the extent that the creation of such a culture

is to some extent in the interests of the United States, I think the US actions in the current crisis may well have been self-defeating.

Some revisionist Arab intellectuals are very critical of the sorts of pan-Arab slogans which have dominated Arab political discourse for the past ten or 20 years. They talk about the need for a new political language, one which would replace pan-Arabism and its various slogans. What do you think of that kind of call?

MICHAEL: Even if you wanted to argue that pan-Arabism is bankrupt, or has no mobilisatory potential, the reality is that the nature of the region make ideas such as pan-Arabism and anti-Israeli sentiment very potent forces. And that is part of the distinctiveness of the Middle East. When Saddam Hussein says he will lob chemical weapons at Israel, it actually causes rumbles within the conservative Arab states in the international alliance against Saddam. So we have a big problem in imagining the possibility of another discourse without Pan-Arabism. Pan-Arabism still has a mobilisatory potential in this region which, say, pan-Africanism or Latin-Americanism have never had.

So you disagree with the revisionists who call these things empty slogans?

MICHAEL: Pan-Arabism certainly hasn't achieved any specific institutional or political reforms in the Middle East. But it still has great power, and it won't go away, for the same reason that Palestinian nationalism won't go away. So this attempt to deal with the problems of the region by recourse to military and political alliances between states runs in the face of these incredibly destabilising elements. That's the dilemma and the terrible danger of the situation, because this is such a highly militarised area. One big problem in discussing the liberalisation of politics and the state is that these rentier states are built around economies which have injected huge amounts of money into militarisation, to a large part generated by the relationship between Arabs and Israel. And they are not inclined to liberalise, but rather to command through military institutions and alliances. I don't see a potential for liberalisation. You can look at the developments within Iraq and its confrontation with Kuwait as part of a logic of state development fuelled by and running along the tramlines of oil revenue and militarisation. And Iraq achieved its current level of militarisation by means of the war with Iran.

BOB: What's hindered political debate in the Arab world is lack of success. The Arabs cannot point to any great success that gives them confidence in a particular model. I'm not going to argue that the state system is going to sweep all before it. Nor am I going to argue the opposite proposition, that the Arab masses through mobilisation by Islam or some other ideology are going to redraw the borders of the Middle East. I think the success of one or other of the models that are available will then breed further success, and ultimately one will triumph. In the end we come back to economics. What's standing in the way of Arab economic development is the phenomenal net drain

of capital out of the region since the great oil boom of 1973. And this is because the major oil-exporting states with small populations—the chief example of which is Kuwait—have invested vast sums of money overseas. It is inconceivable that the Middle East is going to develop while there is such a major capital outflow. And the West wants that export of capital.

RALPH: The Americans are a black hole in the world economy, sucking in funds from all over the world because of their massive deficit, accumulated from printing money to pay for the Vietnam War and their own domestic welfare programs. They need all the capital they can get, from the Middle East, from Latin America. So what you're seeing is America colluding with particular national elites to keep this kind of arrangement going.

MICHAEL: I agree that the question of retaining capital in the region and limiting the outflow is important. But part of the problem is that one of the key industries that has been associated with this export of capital is armaments.

RALPH: You might actually have the local elites asked to produce some real development for ordinary people in these countries!

CLIVE: It comes back to the curiously ambiguous character of the Kuwait crisis. On the one hand, for better or for worse, we have an international order of states, within which people are not being entirely hypocritical—though they may be self-serving—when they protest that one member of this order shouldn't be able to march in and obliterate another. But if you want to uphold in a realistic worldly way the sanctity of states, Kuwait is a very poor state through which to defend this particular principle. There is no civil society, there is no proper notion of citizenship. It survived by virtue of its economic involvement with the world order. So does one support military action to support such a state? I for one am very ambivalent.

A number of times in the discussion we've come back to this point. Military action is not going to solve any of the key problems of the region. But there is a crying need for massive economic action. Should that perhaps be the starting point of any negotiations which result from this conflict?

CLIVE: I disagree with Bob to some extent because I feel that economics, while important, is not fundamental to the situation. If there is to be an alternative to war, then it will only be if people begin to create the circumstances in which alternatives can be pursued. That involves economics, but the primary requirement is some kind of social and cultural transformation of the nature of those political entities, of the notions of political action and participation and citizenship. Only within that context will change take place.

MICHAEL: It could well be galvanised by war, however. The irony is that to maintain the status quo, it would be much better not to have a war. A war could generate dramatic political transformations, though in a chaotic and unpredictable way.

BOB: I think these transformations could well be a setback. For example, I think the Arab-Israeli conflict is an enormous red herring. A conflict will rekindle that issue and encourage everyone to think that if that issue is resolved then the whole problem of the region is over.

Ralph:
*"The strategic chess game
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 metaphor."*

MICHAEL: On the question of the Arab-Israeli conflict, I agree absolutely that it's not central, and that its resolution is hardly going to solve the problems of the Middle East. But the political and diplomatic reality is that the Arab-Israeli conflict has been the core around which militarisation has occurred in the region, and around which alliances have been formed. I don't think you can ignore this question of the regional balance of power.

BOB: But as I mentioned earlier, the US has found its new alliance structure in the Gulf, and within it Israel will play no role. This makes the Israelis as nervous as hell. They see the writing on the wall. And that's why they want a war which destroys all of this. They want a very bloody war, that's long-lasting with high consequences. And that's what they're going to try to facilitate. And the Americans certainly don't want that.

So in a way Saddam's invasion cleared the decks, and not necessarily to the disadvantage of what the Americans wanted in the region. Because it gave them a chance to cement their new alliance?

BOB: That's right. There's even a point of view that the US set Saddam up for this. Whether it's true I don't know.

RALPH: I want to believe Bob, because it's so plausible. This strategic chess game is a very attractive metaphor. It's intriguing: you do this, and then that happens, and then you've lost your queen, check, checkmate. But it has its dangers, too. All these plans seem to make sense from a distance. We're pattern-makers; we want to see clarity. I don't think the resolution of this crisis is going to be as clear as that, either. Some Americans are trying to achieve one thing; some are trying to achieve another. You get momentary resolutions of their own conflicts in a policy. We put it all together and we call it world affairs. And we think we're clever about it.