

Tribes and Terror in the Middle East: A Conversation with Philip Carl Salzman

Peter Baehr

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Peter Baehr: *Your new book on Culture and Conflict in the Middle East, the main themes of which we'll discuss presently, has generated a great deal of interest. Can you tell Society readers what prompted you to write the book?*

Philip Salzman: I was puzzled by the agonistic and conflictual nature of the Middle East. There seemed to be so much enmity and so many major violent cleavages in the region: Arabs and Muslims vs. Israel and Jews; Turks vs. Kurds; Arabs vs. Kurds; Persians vs. Kurds; Arabs vs. Persians; Sunni vs. Shia; and Islamists vs. secular nationalists. Major historical conflicts include Turks and Kurds vs. Armenians; Turks vs. Greeks; Turks vs. Serbs; Muslims vs. Christians, Muslims vs. Hindus, and so on. Of course, the Middle East is not the only place to exhibit major and ongoing conflict. But the intensity of the discord, and above all its continuation into the twenty-first century, struck me as exceptional. How can we explain this? That was the question I asked myself and tried to answer in the book. Now I have to confess that I was not addressing this question in a pristine intellectual environment innocent of explanations of Middle Eastern life, politics, and conflict. But the favored explanations appeared to me unconvincing. One explanation is that of Samuel Huntington, who argues that there is no dominant country in the region to police it. This argument is unsatisfying because the lack of a strong country is not explained. Another approach is that of Charles Lindholm, who argues that states in this area are always illegitimate, because hierarchy is illegitimate as honor precludes subservience. This it seemed to me was a

good argument, but it did not explain why equality and honor are so valued. Finally, the most prominent explanation for the difficulties in the Middle East is the postcolonial argument, advanced by Edward Said. The postcolonial position is that the conflicts and in fact all problems in the Middle East are the result of Western colonialism and imperialism. This view seems to me weak because it demeaningly dismisses the powerful agency of Middle Eastern peoples, well demonstrated both historically and today, and exaggerates the significance of the relatively brief and ineffectual Western presence in the Middle East. So I searched for an alternative and deeper explanation. The book is my answer.

Baehr: *You are trained as an anthropologist. Who were your mentors? And what relevance has anthropology for understanding the current political situation of the Middle East?*

Salzman: The central tenet of anthropology is that culture matters. This means that the ways of life, the ideas and values, skills, conceptions, and hopes and dreams that people are taught and learn in a given place orient them in their understanding of the world and in their actions. While culture is not always totally consistent and unitary, and is to a degree multivocal, with variations and alternatives, it is nonetheless in any particular case limited and specific. In trying to understand the contemporary Middle East and its social and political characteristics, we need to ask about Middle Eastern culture: How do Middle Easterners think about their world, about relationships between people, about political ties, and about conflict? We do not want to make the mistake of some analysts of ignoring the agency of Middle Easterners themselves.

Being an anthropologist usually means more than just taking a cultural approach. It also means engaging in research with a particular population; we call this “ethno-

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graphic field research,” which involves living among the people and engaging in “participant observation” in order to learn about people’s lives and perspectives. We are trying to understand, as Clifford Geertz put it, “the native’s point of view,” whether the native is from Manhattan or Madagascar, Tehran or Timbuktu. For my part, I chose the Middle East for my field study. My first ethnographic research, over three periods for a total of 27 months, was among members of a nomadic tribe in south eastern Iran, in a region called Baluchistan. My general report of this study is *Black Tents of Baluchistan* (Smithsonian 2000). So the foundation of my work on the Middle East is knowing the particular people with whom I lived during my field research. I have learned my anthropology from many precursors and coevals who hold rather contrasting points of view, so I am probably open to the abusive label of “eclectic.” About the Middle East I have learned from Clifford Geertz in *Islam Observed* and other works, and Ernest Gellner, in *Muslim Society*, where he draws on Ibn Khaldun, among others. My work was stimulated by a close reading of Lindholm’s *The Islamic Middle East*.

Baehr: *You argue in the book that the key to understanding tribal societies is the phenomenon of “balanced opposition”? Explain that concept for us.*

Salzman: Most of us are probably familiar with the concept of “balance of power” as a policy of various European countries over the last centuries. During the Cold War between the West and the Soviets, “deterrence” was a policy approach to maintaining order and a degree of peace. Balanced opposition incorporates these ideas, but applied to the inner workings of a society.

There are many egalitarian tribes in the Middle East. In contrast to state organization, these tribes have no power and authority hierarchy, and thus no rulers. Therefore, political decision-making and political action must be founded on other arrangements. The organization of these tribes is based on kin groups, called lineages, defined by descent through the male line. These lineages are invested with responsibility for defence, and are irregular fighting units. Through collective responsibility, each is responsible for every other in the group, in the spirit of “all for one and one for all,” whether in defending life and property, taking vengeance, or paying blood money. The lineage groups, however, are contingent, activated according to circumstances. If individuals from brother lineages dispute, their small lineages must stand behind them, but no-one else in the tribe is involved. If members of different tribal sections are in conflict, the entire tribal sections must mobilize. And if members of different tribes conflict, all members of both tribes are involved. In terms of political activation, groups are defined by whom they are opposed to.

This balanced opposition serves as a deterrent against attacks on individuals or small groups, because they always

have their kinsmen behind them and against aggressors. In any situation of conflict, men depend upon their group for support, and must always stand together against the opposition. So there tends always to be a strong sense of “us versus them,” however “us” and “them” are defined in any particular case. This oppositional framework is so basic to the thinking of tribesmen that I would venture to say that the principle is both unconscious and unquestionable. The concept of balanced opposition is an example of a part of culture that Middle Eastern tribesmen learn and internalize, and in terms of which they think and act. In this sense, Middle Eastern tribesmen are not like us, because the culture that they have assimilated and by which they chart their course is different from the culture that we have assimilated and by which we guide our lives.

Baehr: *The Middle East has a long history of states and empires. In trying to understand the region, how relevant is a discussion of tribes and tribal organization?*

Salzman: The founding Arab Islamic Empire of the contemporary period in the Middle East was based on tribes and partook to a remarkable degree of tribal organization, especially balanced opposition. While the Byzantine and Persian Empires that it conquered may have been based on non-tribal principles, the Arab Islamic Empire was an empire of and for Bedouin tribesmen. It could have been no other, because Islam arose in the northern Arabian desert where the entire population was Bedouin. The Islamic army was a tribal army, organized on tribal lines, and the lands it conquered—from the Iberian Peninsula in the west to India in the east—were devastated and occupied by tribal troops. Islam, the spur of the conquests, provided a new religious framework and a higher level of socio-political integration for the tribes. But at the same time it assimilated certain principles of tribal organization, which no doubt accounts for its success among its tribal adherents. Just as balanced opposition among the tribesmen meant lineage vs. lineage, section vs. section, and tribe vs. tribe, balanced opposition is represented in Islam by the dar-al Islam vs. dar al-harb, the land of Islam and peace vs. the land of the infidel and war. In Islam, the believer is always an opponent of the infidel. Splits within Islam have also taken the form of balanced opposition. The Sunni, who base succession to the Caliphate on the tribal principle of consent, are in opposition to the Shia, who base succession to the Caliphate on the tribal principle of descent. It is noteworthy that this split, inadvertent as far as the founding principles of Islam are concerned, also replicates balanced opposition. After the establishment of the Arab Islamic Empire, the tribes did not disappear; they continued on as before, dominating the mountains and deserts that fill so much of the Middle East, and occupying some of the plains along with the occupants of villages, towns, and cities. And the tribes continue functioning today, if with more limited

freedom. The Bedouin tribes of al-Anbar and other provinces of Iraq have made their contemporary mark, as have the Pakhtun tribes of southern Afghanistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan. Many villagers and urban dwellers are descendants of tribes, and, valuing tribal virtues, continue to share in the tribal mentality and the tribal spirit.

Baehr: *If the foundational Bedouin tribes are democratic and egalitarian, why are Middle East societies, with the exception of Israel, authoritarian or despotic states?*

Salzman: Tribes want to be autonomous, independent political units. They do not want to be part of states. Freedom, for tribesmen, is not paying taxes, not being drafted into armies, and not taking orders from anyone. Tribes resist the state when they are able, and accommodate when they must. The tribal values of autonomy and equality are violated by an authority hierarchy. Honor is based on doing one's duty to one's fellow tribesmen, while maintaining one's autonomy. Taking orders from a political superior would remove autonomy and undermine honor. States and their political hierarchies are thus regarded by their subjects as illegitimate, because they by their very nature violate autonomy, equality, and thus honor. Without legitimacy among their subjects, rulers can only maintain their positions through coercion. The despotic states of the Middle East are thus as much a product of their subjects' culture as they are a result of their rulers' will.

Baehr: *And what, would you say, are the key differences between the idea of a "citizen" as we understand it in the West and the notion of being a tribe member?*

Salzman: The obligation of tribesmen is to support their group at all costs. The obligation of a citizen of a liberal democracy is to obey the universal laws that apply to all. Tribesmen are group oriented; citizens are rule oriented. Tribal loyalty is exclusive; citizenship commitment is inclusive. In the U.S.A., the constitution is the ultimate universal set of rules; President Obama has sworn, as have all of his predecessors, to uphold the constitution, which applies to all citizens, with no special privilege for President Obama's particular group.

Baehr: *How does your theory help explain recent conflicts in the Middle East, for instance the 2009 war in Gaza?*

Salzman: Conflict in the Middle East is overdetermined, i.e. a number of influences coincide to generate conflict. One influence is the relentless, reflexive partisanship resulting from the balanced opposition deep structure. Total commitment to "us," and limitless opposition to "them," colors every situation. For example, Westerners, defining their concerns universally, are constantly worrying about, lobbying for, and contributing to Palestinians; yet after the attacks on 9/11, Palestinians, defining their allegiance in exclusive terms, celebrated in the streets. A

second factor is the despotic nature of Arab governments. An elementary method for distracting disgruntled subjects is positing an external threat, an enemy outside of the country. It is in the interests of these governments, to save their positions and their lives, to keep external conflict going, and their subjects worrying about their external enemies rather than their own ruling despots. A third factor is an extreme Islamist vision. During the twentieth century, Arab countries tried nationalism and socialism, and both failed. When secular solutions fail, what remains? Religion. And Islam has a great militant and military history. We must not forget that Muslims conquered much of the known world, slaughtering and enslaving vast numbers along the way, and dominated it for a thousand years. This inspirational history has led many in the Middle East to want to return to Islamic basics as a means of once again dominating. For Islamists, the opposition between the dar al-Islam and the dar al-harb is a mandate, no, an obligation to re-conquer the world for God. As non-Muslim countries refuse to surrender—well, Europe remains an open question in this regard—conflict is bound to arise, sooner than later. Hamas takes just such an uncompromising Islamist view, and acts on it. Israel, for its part, has been forced to resist Hamas. In the tribal spirit, the "other" is fair game; but in the Islamic overlay, the "other" is obligatory game.

Baehr: *On occasion, for instance when I am at an academic conference, a person will ask me whether Hong Kong universities are victims of censorship imposed by the Central Government of China. My answer is "no". I add that I am freer than I was in the West to raise uncomfortable and unpopular questions because political correctness is largely absent in Hong Kong. Now, you are in a Canadian university with a large population of multicultural faculty and students, including those from the Middle East. How are your ideas received by students and your peers?*

Salzman: My arguments are received with surprise and then skepticism, and sometimes (perhaps often) with disdain. I once assigned *The Myth of Islamic Tolerance*, and a student reported that she was shocked, having initially read the title as *The Myth of Islamic Intolerance!* One reason is that there is an "academic consensus" in favor of the postcolonial argument that everything wrong in the Middle East is the fault of the imperialist and colonialist West. Edward Said is read, lionized in fact, in every discipline in the social sciences and humanities. When in one seminar, we considered Lindholm's reservations about Said's views, and I elaborated with my objections, the students were shocked, because they had never heard criticism of Said. They said that they thought of him as "God." One colleague suggested that I had written the book to favor Israel. My reply was that my brief discussion of Israel was simply a case of the general argument, and I

asked whether, with the Israel case deleted from the book, the general argument would still stand. My colleague could not deny that the argument and evidence remained independent of the Israel case. But this was my most sympathetic colleague; others tend to take, if not always express, a much more negative view.

Baehr: *If tribalism is among the root causes of the Middle East malaise, is this a perennial condition? What might change it? Do Middle East people want to change a culture with which they are familiar and may well be comfortable?*

Salzman: Tribalism and the tribal spirit are pervasive in the Middle East. In many places, tribal affiliation is practical and even necessary for security, and so will not be given up easily. Furthermore, basic cultural structures such as balanced opposition are often held at a subconscious level, and it is difficult to break out of this framework for thinking. Middle Eastern exclusivism, rejectionism, annihilationism, and triumphalism are all manifestations of the extreme partisanship arising from balanced opposition. Major cultural changes often replicate the same framework in a different way; the popular and growing Islamism, committed to conquering infidels worldwide, is an example. The Islamists believe that, with God on their side, they will win. They are not likely to reconsider their premises unless they are soundly and decisively defeated. In the absence of such defeat, the conflict will continue and likely spread indefinitely.

However, many regions around the world with past tribal, feudal, despotic, and warring cultures have evolved into developed, democratic societies. At any earlier stage, it would have been difficult to imagine the major changes leading to the next stage. So the present is not necessarily the future. Major social change does take place, and it would be short-sighted to imagine that the Middle East will always continue on its present course. What should we look for in anticipating such change? It would not be a change in the capabilities or talents of Middle Easterners. They are, and have for thousands of years been, highly effective in social and cultural development, and are one of the earliest populations to institutionalize entrepreneurship. Nor would

any conversion in religion be required, for Islam is a complex body of understandings and can support a wide range of orientations and attitudes. Rather, what is needed to advance development and democracy is a shift away from strong group affiliation to greater individualism, and a corresponding de-emphasis on honor in favor of citizenship. This can only happen with the establishment of legitimate government which can protect all of its citizens, so that dependence on kin groups, tribes, and sectarian militias for protection and security is no longer required. Is there any prospect of such changes? There are two major processes currently at work that favor these changes. The first is economic globalization. Many opportunities exist for economic engagement, while at the same time competition is fierce. This process encourages entrepreneurship, capital accumulation, and merit, none of which are friends of group dependence and social division. The second is modern education, which is required for success in competition in a globalizing world, and which also favors merit and individuality. Once these factors come into play, a third may be activated: emulation, resulting from the demonstration effect of economic development, democracy, and human rights. For many years we have been surprised in disappointing ways by events in the Middle East. Perhaps in years to come, we will be surprised in pleasant ways. Where should we look for such developments? Perhaps the best candidate is Iraq, in spite of, or perhaps because of its difficult modern history. While many other Middle East countries appear stagnant, Iraq is evolving daily. Its capable, educated population may surprise us in a pleasant way. For their sake as well as ours, I hope so.

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