

Review – Break All the Borders: Separatism and the Reshaping of the Middle East

Written by Gökhan Bacık

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Break All the Borders: Separatism and the Reshaping of the Middle East

By Ariel I. Ahram

Oxford University Press, 2019

Ariel I. Ahram studies separatist movements that have tried to change states at a fundamental level in the Middle East since the 2011 Arab uprisings. The book successfully starts by providing a vivid presentation of how key actors in Middle Eastern politics, including Islamic State (IS), have long entertained the idea of correcting the Sykes-Picot Agreement. For Ahram, Sykes-Picot is a metaphor “gesturing to that fundamental mismatch between deep primordial identities and contemporary political institutions” (p.4). Thus, many actors share the belief that there is a structural problematic in the foundation of the political order in the region and use this as an ideological factor to legitimize their separatist agendas. Ahram puts separatism in the period after the Arab uprisings in a context of historical continuity among various groups who have disdained the historical origins of the Middle Eastern political order. In this regard, he defines separatists as those who are “taking unilateral steps to break away from existing states” (p.4). Given that one major consequence of the Arab uprisings was the erosion of state power, studying how separatists used that opportunity for their agendas is a timely topic.

We read in the introduction a successful categorization of contending theories that explain separatism. The author skillfully covers sociological, historical and international relations approaches (p.7-10). However, the section where we read how “bygone institutions” are kept in memory and become the framework when “the central state’s authority disappears,” is written too concisely, so that it sounds almost as a metaphysical assumption (p.10). Though I agree with the author’s arguments in this part, one expects a more detailed analysis of the subject (how is this reconnection with ‘the memory of the past’ done?), particularly given that the debate is fundamental to the book’s general theory. This critique can be extended to the first chapter. The author again successfully examines the historical evolution of the international system and the Middle East’s integration into it. However, the chapter is written largely in line with the *outside-in-approach*, that is, the study of the subject from the perspective of international dynamics. One would expect a narrative on the origin of the state-system in the Middle East more in line with the *longitudinal approach*, that is, more about the domestic dynamics, which Ahram claims to be the primary framework. Thus, it is contradictory to put more emphasis on the international dynamics while only providing short discussions of domestic dynamics, such as various strategies in state-building (e.g. irrigation reforms). In this regard, Chapter 1 gives the impression that the fate of the Arab state is more determined by external dynamics.

Having presented the evolution of the international system in the Middle East, we read about how the Arab uprisings unfolded in three states: Libya, Syria, and Yemen. The purpose of this chapter is to summarize how the protests, and later rebel groups, formed in each case. The chapter provides a neat picture of the cases in terms of how protests started, different opposition groups formed, and external powers intervened. It is also methodologically a clever idea to discuss these developments in a separate chapter before the following chapters where each case is analyzed in detail. Thus, Chapter 2 has the goal of clarifying the revolutionary situation in Libya, Syria and Yemen. However, I repeat my previous criticism also for this chapter: It does not provide much regarding the domestic dynamics behind the uprisings in the three countries. For example, the section on Libya narrates the whole story in this country as a

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kind of intra-elite rivalry (p.48-49). Similarly, we read about the Syrian National Council in the section on Syria (p.56), but we are not informed as to how they came to existence and which domestic (tribal, sectarian etc.) factors played a role in its formation. Treating political actors as 'given', Ahram here overlooks the social and domestic forces which formed political actors and their strategies.

Separatism: reframing the past

In Chapter 3, Ahram provides a highly successful narrative where he eloquently merges theory and subject matter. We read about how the federalists in Libya made direct references to the Emirate of Cyrenaica, a political entity which was formed in 1949 as a Senusi emirate, and demanded the recreation of autonomies as was the case before the Qaddafi period. As Ahram illustrates, it is a typical case where the actors 'remember' the previous institutions, which then leads to the formation of separatism. As we are informed in the introduction, separatism here does not take the form of 'secessionism,' but one of demanding territorial and legislative control. This emphasis is critical to understand other separatist movements across the region, such as the Kurdish problem in Turkey and the state of the Kurds in Iraq. Separatism is no longer an attempt to go back to primordial entities. As Ahram demonstrated in the case of Libya, it is an attempt to reframe 'separatism' within the institutional format and discourse of claims to "interim governments, parliaments, political parties and civil society organizations" (p.93). This transformation in the form of separatism, that Ahram illustrates in the case of Libya, is so critical that it might be taken as a default to understand many other cases in the region. The separatist bargain, even if it originates in identity, is no longer articulated in the traditional format: unlike during the 19th century, separatism is a modern phenomenon which is attuning itself to recent institutional and normative changes in the international system. Reading Ahram's account (though he does not write this explicitly), we get the sense that many state-elites of countries in the region do not grasp this transformation and wrongly keep approaching their 'separatist' movements in what could be named as a traditional outlook.

Like in Libya, separatism in Yemen cannot be reduced to seeing this country as another typical, artificial Arab state. Ahram here underlines that how the separatists in South Yemen 'remember' the once-independent South Yemen (People's Democratic Republic of Yemen/PDRY) as a point of departure. The case of the PDRY is interesting as it is perceived by separatists as an inspirational historical model even though the PDRY was a short-lived state with many problems. But recalling the past is more complex: Ahram successfully shows how separatists articulate many other aspects of the past, such as British colonial rule and anti-colonial uprisings. In this regard, Ahram provides a clear picture of how the separatist imagination strongly re-visits the past and re-frames it in line with the needs of the time. Interestingly, the present Southern separatists repeat pro-independence slogans which were originally used during the independence struggle of the 60s (p.115). However, the chapter on Yemen ends with a puzzle: Ahram admits that the international community accommodated "separatists as de facto rulers" and such types of gains are "hard to revoke" (p.120). Thus, his conclusion echoes other scholars like Lisa Weeden, whom he quotes, repeating that the moments of unity in the history of Yemen were brief and exceptional (p.98).

Internal and external limits to separatism

When it comes to the case of the Kurds, Ahram refers to the lack of intra-Kurdish coordination, which has left the Kurds exposed to external manipulation (p.159). Undoubtedly, the differences between various Kurdish factions (Barzani, Talabani and Öcalan) is a major dynamic to understand the Kurdish issue. However, the chapter lacks a satisfactory discussion of the various factors which have historically pushed these factions apart from each other. For example, unlike the traditional tribal identity that is held by the Barzani fraction, Öcalanism, which is represented by the PKK in Turkey and by the YPG in Syria, operates as a more modern political movement. Thus, the differences between Kurdish groups in terms of how they frame 'separatism' in reference to identity is like the difference that Ahram illustrates in the cases of Libya, where separatists employ a modern narrative of international institutions, and Yemen, where tribal and sectarian motives are more prevailing. In this regard, Ahram's praising of the KRG in terms of building "the framework of cultural, political and economic institutions necessary to join the burgeoning process of globalization" (p.160) might be read as an over-interpretation. The comparison of Barzani-led policies with the previous modernization of the Ba'ath regime is similarly problematic: There is no doubt that the KRG has been successful in establishing an embryonic state in the region, however, in terms of the differences in intra-Kurdish

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politics, the Barzani model is the most traditional if not tribal one. The overlapping nature of the KRG – in terms of an autonomous Kurdish state, the tribe, and the Barzani family – is somewhat underestimated in this chapter.

Indeed, one very interesting chapter in Ahram's book is the one on the Islamic State. Ahram successfully put IS into the context of how a separatist group with an anti-system Islamic ideology 'bargains' with the international system. As a group that rejects the legitimacy of the system, IS's method is war. Ahram successfully explain the geographical element in the rise of IS. The failure of various external powers such as the Ottomans and the British in taking control of the 'Syrian desert' is really helpful in understanding how land played a role in the whole story of IS. Ahram's analysis of how IS changed its mind in terms of its name reveals how an ecumenic Islamism, i.e. a political claim to represent Islam globally, clashes with modern international system (p.179). This 'ecumenism' nonetheless also required the killing of tribal leaders. The case of IS demonstrates how a radical Islamic group deals with the institutions and norms of the modern international system, such as sovereignty and homeland, in order to claim a new political configuration. As the "most disruptive claimant to sovereignty" (p.197), IS was therefore not only a terrorist threat, but it was also an ideological attempt to establish a completely different form of statehood.

Ahram's book studies the Middle Eastern politics in the post-Arab uprising period through the lens of separatism and thus gives us a detailed account of how actors in the region appeal to key concepts of international relations such as sovereignty, identity, independence, regional autonomy, as well as war. There is no doubt that Ahram's book is ambitious. It derives its arguments through the analyses of five cases. Naturally, any book that studies five highly complicated cases is poised to have some weak points. But again, Ahram's *Break All the Borders* is a timely work that helps the reader understand what happened recently in the region and how those changes affected the regional order from an international relations perspective. The book also reminds us that international relations as a discipline is not sociology nor is it history; the study of international relations places the state as its prime subject.

About the author:

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