Charles Tilly and the Resilience of Authoritarianism.

War and State in the Middle East

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This paper was presented at the international workshop on “State-Formation Research in an Post-Tilly Era” organized by Lars Bo Kaspersen and Jeppe Strandsbjerg at Copenhagen Business School, October 2-3, 2009. With reference to the Middle East, this essay takes up the more general question of the workshop as to which extent Charles Tilly’s thesis on war-making and state-making applies to the building, consolidation and/or decay of contemporary states.
States make war and wars make states. In this simplistic form, this proposition of Charles Tilly certainly makes sense for Middle Eastern state formation. The contemporary political landscape of the Middle East evolved from the violent competition of the European powers and its explosion in the First World War. At San Remo in 1922, the victorious war alliance, in particular Great Britain and France, decided about the distribution of Ottoman territories and to a large extent determined the political borders of the Middle East. Moreover, they were decisive in admitting regional leaders to and preventing others from power, thereby almost completely disregarding the political aspirations of the respective populations. To be sure, the state borders of the Middle East are not artificial as so many scholars claim. They are utterly historical, but often drawn in a very arbitrary way. Nevertheless, they undoubtedly reflect both the strategic interests of Europe’s great powers and the political ambitions of their regional clients.

In order to assess the validity of Tilly’s warfare and state-formation paradigm, this paper will first briefly recapitulate the major theoretical elements of his thesis in light of some other relevant concepts of historical sociology. Then, I shall give an overview on the occurrence of warfare in the Middle East since 1945. This part will include some reflections about the relationship between war and state-formation in the region. In taking up the current debate about the resilience of authoritarianism in the Middle East, I conclude with some tentative suggestions regarding the status of Tilly’s thesis.

Tilly’s paradigm and historical sociology
In an article from 1985, Charles Tilly put the inherent relationship between war-making and state-making in European history in the rather ironic formula of “war making and state-making as organized crime” (Tilly 1985). He identified a mechanism of protection and extraction facilitating the transition of the protection rackets of former warlord into state-like institutions. While state-makers accumulated the means of coercion, civilian entrepreneurs accumulated societal wealth. These mutual accumulation processes gradually established a new kind of reciprocal relationship between military and civilian elites. The dialectical relationship between civil claims of protection (security) and the states’ need for extraction (taxation) tamed the violent forces of this social process in two ways. Internally, the formal rationalization and legal institutionalization of state-society relations brought about the liberal and pluralist democratic state which we perceive as the role-model for successful state-building today. Externally, the violent elimination contest of emerging states has been gradually trans-
formed into economic competition between states as mutually accepted like-units that interact within the international framework of a “norm-governed society of states” (Brown 2000). In Tilly’s analysis, this “civilized” standards of both the democratic state and international law were the late and non-intended outcomes of intensive bargaining processes between war-makers and state-makers. From its beginning path-dependent this bargain reflected the particular historical context in which the circularity of the competencies of territorial control and economic extraction evolved. (Tilly 1990: 160). With respect to European state formation, Tilly suggested that the emergence of modern statehood was characterized by the “central paradox ... that the pursuit of war and military capacity, after having created national states as a sort of by-product, led to a civilianization of government and domestic politics” (Tilly 1990: 206).

In emphasizing the relationship between state-formation and war, however, Charles Tilly’s paradigm was anything else than new. He rather reformulated some of the core findings of historical sociology. With reference to the violent history of European state-building, it was Max Weber who defined the central feature of modern statehood as “the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (Weber 1991: 78). In Weber’s words, the war-prone formation of state monopolies of physical force was a long-lasting process of “political expropriation” in which all political communities other than the state gradually had been deprived of the means of coercion (Weber 1991: 83). Contrary to Tilly, however, Weber added to this process an ideational factor. In order to establish consolidated states the factual monopoly of the use of physical force has to be considered legitimate by both rulers and ruled. Stable systems of political authority do not only rest on a monopoly of coercion alone, but this state monopoly also has to be anchored in the cultural and symbolic order of society at large. A political order needs legitimacy.

Long-lasting political institutions require a stable set of rules that in normative and cognitive ways regulate the social conduct of rulers and ruled. In referring to the inner justification of systems of domination, Weber precisely distinguished political authority from mere power relations by the category of legitimacy. His concept of legitimacy is intended to give an answer to the question of when and why people obey (Weber 1991: 78). With regard to modern statehood, this obedience rests on legal or rational authority, i.e. the belief “in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rule to issue commands”. This modern authority based on formal legal procedures he distinguished sharply from pre-modern or traditional forms of authority, which rest on personal ties and the “established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them” (Weber 1968a: 215).
In the 1930s, Norbert Elias critically took up Weber’s core definition and conceptualized European state formation as a “civilizing process”. In doing so, he applied a double perspective:

The civilizing process, seen from the aspects of standards of conduct and drive control, is the same trend which, when seen from the point of view of human relationships, appears as the process of advancing integration, increased differentiation of social functions and interdependence, and the formation of ever-larger units of integration on whose fortunes and movements the individual depends, whether he knows it or not (Elias 1994: 332).

In his theory of the civilizing process, Norbert Elias put together the macro-sociological aspects of state formation and the micro-sociological consequences of this process: the ways in which the evolution of the modern state has shaped social practices. Combining Weber with Freud, he defined the immanent link between the macro- and micro-levels as the conversion of outer constraints into self-restraints, and concluded that the formation of modern states has been reflected in increasingly differentiated patterns of self-control on the side of the individual (Elias 1994: 443-56). The pacifying institutional setting of modern statehood was accomplished by a particular normative restriction of the public behavior of individuals. In this sense state structures and social practices are inseparably knitted together and the maintenance of public order relies on both functioning state institutions and forms of social action that are able to transform legal authority into daily practices.

In historical terms, however, this civilizing process has not been “civilized” at all. On the contrary, Elias traced the origin of both the internal pacification of society and the autonomy of the modern individual back to an unrestricted and violent elimination contest in which any individual or small group struggled among many others for resources not yet monopolized (Elias 1994: 351). In mainly abstracting from the history of France, Elias differentiated between two distinct phases in the emergence of the modern state monopoly of physical force:

1) In the first phase, a factual monopoly of physical force is established. An increasing number of people lose direct access to the means of force, which progressively become centralized in the hands of a few and thus placed outside open competition.

2) In the second phase, this relatively private control over the monopoly of physical force tends to become public, i.e. it moves from the hands of
state-makers into a political setting of legal institutions and appointed rulers under the control of the public. (Elias 1994: 345-55).

While the first phase of the monopoly process is associated with absolutist and authoritarian forms of rule, the second phase deposes coercive state-makers and establishes structures of legal political authority based on popular sovereignty and representative democratic institutions. The second phase conceptualizes Tilly’s central paradox in Weber’s terminology as the transition from traditional to rational authority in the emergence of the modern democratic state. Consequently, state formation comprises not only the establishment of the monopoly of physical force, but also the transition of the normative and institutional order on which this monopoly rests from personal rule toward democratic governance.

War-Making and State-Making in the Middle East
In the history of the Middle East we may observe a number of similar processes of protection and extraction as in European history. The establishment of the Ottoman and Safavid empires, for instance, could be explained in applying Tilly’s mechanism as an ideal type. From this perspective, modern Turkey and Iran have roots in patrimonial state structures which previous to colonial times evolved in century-long accumulation processes characterized by the relationship between warfare and the making of political institutions. In the nineteenth century, Egyptian state-formation possibly was following the European ideal type most closely. During the reign of Muhammad Ali (1811-49), we can observe the monopolization of physical force with regard to a certain territory and population, as well as the gradual evolution of a modern state administration. From the mid nineteenth century onward, the traditionally legitimized rule of the Egyptian khedive came under pressure of a constitutional movement. Demanding the transformation of the absolute monarchy toward a form of legal authority based on representative institutions, these constitutionalists initiated the second phase of Elias’ monopoly mechanism. However, these observable processes of modern state-formation were derailed in the context of the colonial penetration of the region. The modern state as an institutional setting and as a membership condition for the “international society of states” was eventually not the result of intense bargaining processes between regional state-makers with their respective populations, but conditioned by the interests of international powers and implemented by the rules of decolonization.

This context of Middle Eastern state formation is also clearly visible in the wars which have marred the region since 1945. The political histories of Palestine and of the Gulf region are two examples where war, peace and state-
formation are closely interconnected, however, in a very different way as Tilly proposed. In the case of Palestine, the institutions of the Israeli and of a nascent Palestinian state largely have been created without direct contact to a population and a territory. The Zionist movement imported its organizational structure into a country with a population which was excluded from its state-building efforts. Some decades later, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) almost copied the Zionist example and erected state-like institutions in exile. The state-makers on both sides did not extract war-relevant resources from their subject populations but from the international system. The bargain took place between state-makers, international organizations, transnational groups and other states, largely bypassing the respective populations. This particular structure of the Palestine conflict led, on the one hand, to the confusion of international and regional conflicts, contributing enormously to the militarization of Middle Eastern states in general. The region’s role in international politics allowed the ruling elites to extract political rents from the international system, facilitating the building-up of huge security apparatuses that are predominantly directed against their own populations. In this way, many states consolidated the first phase of the monopoly mechanism, the establishment of monopolies of physical force, and prevented its subsequent nationalization toward representative government. On the other hand, the impact of the Palestine conflict on international politics has put major constraints on the military behavior of regional states, to a decisive extent limiting the length and intensity of regional inter-state wars and therewith the ability of regional war-makers to change the political structure of the Middle East.

The changing coordinates of international politics are also instrumental in understanding why the Gulf region more recently has developed into a major regional theater of war. The First Gulf War between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saddam Husain’s Iraq (1980-88), the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait (1990), the Second Gulf War, in which an international alliance liberated the emirate from Iraqi occupation (1991), the low-intensity warfare with which the US and Great Britain maintained the non-flight zones over Iraq, and, finally, the US-led military occupation of Iraq (2003) are thereby inherently connected with each other. Until the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1978-79), the international power structures prevented large-scale interstate warfare in the Gulf region, as we know it from European state formation. Until the 1970s, for more than 150 years it was Great Britain that exerted military control over the area. Since the Second World War, the USA gradually took over the British role. In the context of the Cold War, Gulf security became closely knitted into U.S. containment policies. Prior to the Islamic Revolution, any larger war to settle territorial and ideological issues between Iran and Iraq was impossible. Instead the two states turned Kur-
distant into their military battlefield, thereby increasing the fragmented nature of Kurdish society. In supporting the separatist aspirations of different Kurdish factions against each other the two countries were engaged in a sort of war of proxies.

In the course of the post-First-World-War negotiations, the territories with predominantly Kurdish population were mainly distributed among three territorial states: Turkey, Iran and Iraq. Since 1945, the conflict between these three states and Kurdish movements resulted in seven wars. Besides the wars in Turkey (1984-99) and Iran (1946-47 and 1979-88), the Kurdish conflict has been most belligerently fought out in Iraq, where four wars have taken place. The Kurdish conflict is essentially characterized by questions of territorial consolidation and political integration, in which the interest of the Turkish, Iranian and Iraqi states clash with Kurdish aspirations for autonomy or independence. In all three cases, the national state-building processes have been threatened by separatist tendencies among their Kurdish populations. In contrast to the state elite in Iraq, Turkish and Iranian rulers have been able to at least partly integrate modern Kurdish segments into their state-building processes through economic and political participation, whereas radical groups have been contained by means of state repression. In the late 1970s, however, this phase came to an end. In both countries, the economic disparities between the Kurdish regions and other parts translated into ethnically perceived conflicts between winners and losers of the regimes’ modernization efforts. In utilizing the internal fragmentation of the Kurds, however, Turkey, Iraq and Iran have been able to successfully prevent the emergence of an independent Kurdish state. Only under the international protection scheme for Northern Iraq since the second Gulf War in 1991, Kurdish state-makers had the opportunity to build up internal state structures on the territory of the Iraqi national state, however, so far without being able to achieve the necessary international recognition.

These examples may suffice to show the various ways in which the ambitions of Middle Eastern state-makers have been constrained. Referring to Middle Eastern state formation, Ian Lustick (1997) explained “the absence of Middle Eastern great powers” with the normative and power-related constraints that were imposed on regional state formation by an existing international order. Under the impact of international norms and great-power policies, Middle Eastern state-makers were not able to fight those large-scale state-building wars as their European predecessors did. Being from its inception dominated by the larger unit of the Western state system, the Middle Eastern system was not allowed to operate by the same rules (Lustick 1997: 655-63). In this way, the models developed by Charles Tilly, Max Weber and Norbert Elias, in principle based on the concept of “free competition”, i.e. the absence of any superordi-
nated authority, are only of a limited explicative value in understanding the evolution and shape of the contemporary Middle Eastern state system. In pursuing their interests, the political entrepreneurs of the Middle East have had to conform their actions to the already existing norms and power relations of a hegemonic international system.

Analyzing the historical background of the Ottoman Empire’s decline, Carl Brown (1984) derived characteristic patterns in the close interaction between the emerging Middle Eastern and the international system of states. This organizing and explanatory device he called the “Eastern Question System”. According to Brown, the intense interrelationships between the unequal power systems led to a center-periphery struggle in which domestic and international politics became thoroughly blended and confused (Brown 1984: 72). On the one hand, the Middle East provided European powers a convenient arena in which to fight out their rivalries with little risk, while on the other hand, regional and local forces were able to instrumentalize great-power politics to their own ends. This entire confusion of international, regional and local levels is then expressed in the systemic characteristic that no outside state has been able to dominate and organize the Middle East, just as no state from within has been able to do so (Brown 1984: 270-4). With regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict, according to Brown, this systemic characteristic is reflected in the fact that all Arab-Israeli confrontations have been stopped by international diplomatic intervention, yet so far outside intervention has not been able to bring about real peace (Brown 1984: 241).

One aspect of the Eastern Question System is that it shaped to a large extent the existing territorial political landscape of the Middle East. The boundaries of Middle Eastern states and the emergence of modern monopolies of physical force reflect compromises of both the interests of international great powers and the assertions of regional actors. More closely linked to Elias’ second phase of state-formation, the transformation toward democratic governance, is another crucial difference between the Middle Eastern and the European examples. The competitive nature of European state formation resulted in a concept of security that was predominantly externally oriented. This stress on external security permitted a strong identification of state security with the security of its citizens and thus a high legitimacy of state rule (Krause 1996: 320). The overlapping notion of security together with the bargaining processes between military men (war-makers) and entrepreneurs (bourgeoisie) resulted in the subsequent subordination of the military to the civilian state elite (Krause 1996: 325), and it contributed heavily to the convergence of nation, state and society. The currently intensively debated authoritarian nature of Middle Eastern politics has its origin not least in the fact that as political and economic rent-seekers (Oil produc-
ing countries), Middle Eastern regimes have been able to extract their material needs from international resources. Bargaining processes between the military and civil society comparable to the European experience and the convergence of state and society, thus, have been essentially hampered. The security of the state is essentially confused with the security of the regimes in power.

**Theory of Contemporary State Formation: Charles Tilly and Beyond**

This sketch of the relationship between war-making and state-making in the Middle East supports Tilly’s thesis in its most general sense. Also in Middle Eastern state formation war-fare is intimately linked to the establishment of modern state apparatuses and to the ways political institutions have developed. Wars are inscribed in the political landscape of the Middle East, yet not in a direct way. There are no linear paths connecting regional wars with the formation of states. In the complex setting of international, regional and local power relations we can not identify warfare as an independent variable in the formation of regional states. The emergence of Jordan is a good point in case. The ruling dynasty, the Hashemite family, has never lived on the territories of Jordan before. Having their roots in the Hejaz, the Hashemites received this part of Ottoman territories from Great Britain as both an acknowledgment for siding with London against the Ottomans in the First World War (the so-called Arab revolt) and as a compensation for France’s destruction of the short-living Kingdom of Syria (1918-20) under Hashemite rule. The state monopoly was erected with the help of British troops and until the 1950s a British officer remained to be the commander in chief of the Jordanian army. Nevertheless, the royal family succeeded in consolidating Jordanian state structures and achieving a high level of political legitimacy.

Applying Norbert Elias’ concept of the monopoly mechanism, only the establishment of a few regional monopolies of physical force can be linked to violent elimination processes. Most state monopolies were directly transferred from colonial to regional rulers. Looking at the relative stability of the political map in the region, however, this transfer seemingly represents a rather successful first phase of state formation. The second phase, however, the nationalization and democratization of the monopolistic state structures, is still in its infancy. This applies in particular to Arab states. While Turkey and Iran have developed quite different forms of republican systems with electoral democracies, the political institutions of most Arab states remain utterly authoritarian. Here, Elias’ second phase of the monopoly process almost has been reversed. We can observe the strengthening of structures of personal authority at the expense of attempts to establish forms of democratic governance. Even formally republican
states such as Syria and Egypt turned into “presidential monarchies” in which incumbent presidents are succeeded by family members who continue authoritarian rule.

The remarkable resilience of authoritarianism and personal rule in the Middle East brings Tilly back in. The concept of the so-called rentier state is derived from Tilly’s logic of protection and extraction. A conceptual device of international political economy, it tries to understand the exceptional features of Middle Eastern politics through the ways in which regional states were integrated into the international system. The main argument runs as follows: By achieving huge economic rents at the international level the rulers of oil-rich states did not need to establish effective representative institutions. The political economy of the region rendered the crucial relation between taxation and representation irrelevant. In short, a circularity of the competencies of territorial control and economic extraction simply does not exist. Consequently, the regional oil-producing states have gained their material foundation and political legitimacy primarily from the international system. This separation between ruler and ruled, between state and society, has also characterized the so-called Arab confrontation states. Egypt, Jordan and Syria, do not dispose over enough natural resources to attract sufficient economic rents. Yet due to their key role in the Palestine conflict, they have been able to attract substantial political rents at regional and international levels. In the case of Egypt and Jordan, the presidential and royal autocrats have even turned their rent-seeking strategies upside-down. In striking peace accords with Israel in 1979 and 1984, they successfully turned previous war dividends into peace dividends. In sum, based on economic and political rents, Arab states have been able to build up an enormously high level of regime security and to hold societal demands for more participation at bay.

With the concept of the rentier state, Tilly’s thesis is at the heart of a major analytical device to explain the resilience of authoritarianism in the Middle East. However, it is worth to listen to some of the critics of the concept of the rentier state who demand the inclusion of ideational elements in understanding the authoritarian path which Middle Eastern state formation has taken. A number of scholars and media pundits, for instance, fundamentally question the compatibility of Islam and democracy. Defining Islam as an all-encompassing, determinant and unchanging system, they perceive Muslim culture as intrinsically different from the democratic culture of the West. Consequently, they perceive the resilience of authoritarianism as a result of the predominantly Islamic symbolic order of the region, rather than of structures of international political economy. In pointing to the examples of Turkey and Iran, also predominantly Muslim states, another camp assumes Islamic diversity and therefore
has singled out Arab culture as an obstacle to democratic governance. This camp emphasizes the patriarchal nature of the political culture of the region and the roles which tribal formations, extended families and kinship-ties have played in Arab politics. Accordingly, they do not perceive Islam, but specific traits of Arab culture as responsible for the authoritarian nature of regional politics. Yet the question is whether the various personal ties which characterize Arab societies are anti-modern/anti-democratic *per se*? In Europe and the United States, community types of social organization have been rediscovered as compatible with and even conducive to the establishment of modern democracies. In the Middle Eastern context, however, they are exclusively perceived as obstacles to modern developments, as anachronistic remnants of a traditional past. To conclude, Tilly and other historical sociologists have provided us with an ideal type of state formation. Yet this ideal type explains the origin of the modern state as an institution rather than the concrete paths which the formation of historical states has taken. It is a conceptual yardstick for investigating state-building processes, but not a general model for the evolution of contemporary states. As a heuristic instrument it is still very useful to understand contemporary state formation. However, in order to comprehend the consolidation of states, the absence of democratic governance in many parts of the world, or so-called state failures such as in Afghanistan or Lebanon we must complement Tilly’s thesis with Weber’s category of legitimacy and Elias’ perspective of the mutual interdependence of macro- and micro-sociological developments. The modern state is not only a coercive macro-structure, but also a network of interdependent social actions. As a social practice, the state is a complex and often amorphous tangle of social actions which make sense in reference to a social imaginary that we call a state. In analyzing contemporary state formation we must keep Elias’ linkage between its macro- and micro-sociological dimensions in mind, we have to analyze the various ways in which schemes of formal legal authority and daily social practices interlace.

Moreover, we should not underestimate the implicit normative assumptions behind Tilly’s thesis and, in particular, Elias concept of the monopoly mechanism. For both, democratic governance appears as the progressive end-result of modern state formation. Although not intended by European state-makers the democratic state based on the rule of law has been turned into the normative blueprint for successful state formation. As a living political entity, however, the authoritarian Middle Eastern state seems not to be less successful than its democratic competitor. The Middle Eastern experience hints to the fact that there might be other forms of reciprocity between state-makers and societies than Tilly’s thesis suggests. It seems to be important to analyze the various ways in which the micro-sociological dimension of societal values and norms
has repercussions in the institutional setting of contemporary states. The longevity of the authoritarian state in the Middle East is not a result of structural configurations alone. To a certain extent, also authoritarian rule enjoys legitimacy and becomes a reference point for individual strategies and ways of life. The high level of patronage and corruption in the region is not only a result of authoritarian rule and economic deprivation, but also a genuine expression of forms of social reciprocity which contradict the normative pretentions of the formally rationalized norms of “good governance”.

**References**


