

Babel: Translating the Middle East

Episode Transcript:

**Episode Title:
The Middle East's Political Economies**

**Guest:
Robert Springborg**

Jon Alterman:

Robert Springborg is the author of *Political Economies of the Middle East and North Africa*, a fellow of the Italian Institute of International Affairs, and adjunct professor at Simon Fraser University. He is a retired professor of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School. Bob, welcome to Babel.

Robert Springborg:

Jon, nice to be here. Thanks for inviting me.

Jon Alterman:

Your book has a striking opening. You point out that per capita, the Middle East and North Africa has 11 times the refugees, 10 times the number of internally displaced persons, 10 times the number of terrorist attacks, 14 times the number of battle deaths as the average state, and two-thirds of the world's known executions. Has the Middle East always been this way since you started studying the region?

Robert Springborg:

Fortunately, no. If we want to talk about the good old days back in the 1960s, it was a very different world. It was an optimistic world. This was not the immediate post-colonial era, but the shadow of colonialism was receding. The optimism of what was replacing it in nationalist regimes of one sort or another, was very manifest. One was easily caught up by the optimism of that era. Yes, it did have violence but nothing like the magnitude that has subsequently developed. If we cast our minds back to the Havana of the 50s, to some extent this was the Middle East at the time. Aleppo was a city which was not unlike Havana at that time. That is to say, it was a boom town.

The generation of wealth out of the Jazeera through cotton and other cultivation by irrigation as well as Syria's important role in trade in the region had stimulated a tremendous amount of bourgeois growth as manifested by the long tailfin Cadillacs and the like prowling the streets of the old city of

Aleppo. You had this sense that, wow, this was a place where things were happening. Art, poetry, so on, were really flourishing then. Since that time these various indicators of political breakdown and decay, have become all too manifest of a general broader decay of the political economies. And so the book was an attempt to sort of try to wrestle with what are the causes of this decay and what can be done to arrest that decay.

Jon Alterman:

Now, this is a book about the political economy of the Middle East and North Africa, assuming that it makes sense to talk about it as a region. What are the most important similarities in the political economies of this region across really varying sizes of states and quite varying levels of wealth between states?

Robert Springborg:

The title of the book is *Political Economies of the Middle East and North Africa* suggesting that they are not the same. They do differ, but they share a certain heritage. That heritage is not just colonial—which is the one that's most frequently pointed to. It's pre-colonial. Some of the countries of the Middle East—such as Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco—had states. The question then becomes, “what happened to these states over time?” The answer is that they retained a lot of the capacities that they had established going back well before the colonial era. The argument that everything was destroyed and everything was equalized by the colonial encounter was wrong.

The region was speckled by states with reasonably good histories of state capacities, those that were created by colonialism and then passed into a nationalist period, and those who simply imported a colonial model of a state and many of the civil servants to man it were from the West. You ended up with a patchwork quilt of three different types of states. There are states with a long history. There are states with a much shorter history and a radical anti-colonial phase that in many of them—Syria,

Iraq, and Yemen—led to frailty at the best and collapse at the worst. Then, there is a series of monarchies which imported their models from the West—as well as Israel, which also imported its model from the West.

Jon Alterman:

As you look around the world, is there something more coherent about political economy in the Middle East than in other regions? Are there parts of the world that you feel are similar to the Middle East in terms of political economy?

Robert Springborg:

What's unique about the Middle East is that it's a cultural area. The cultural area is reflected in the "Al Jazeera phenomenon." No other part of the world has anything equivalent to a media reach of the extent of satellite broadcast Arabic media.

Jon Alterman:

That's partly an issue of language and partly an issue of wealth—that you have state broadcasters in the Middle East with enough money to broadcast throughout the entire region without a real business model.

Robert Springborg:

It's true, but the audience is more attuned to affairs throughout this region than are audiences elsewhere in the world. So, post 90s—96, 97—and the rise of Al Jazeera the entire Arabic speaking world was caught up in a transnational media and an attunement to the politics of the region. Underpinning that—where political economy comes in—was the integration provided by oil. Had there not been an oil boom post-1973, the degree of, familiarity across the region would have been much less. The movement stimulated by the rise of the oil powers—the incorporation of expatriate labor, the dispatch of capital and ideas from the wealthier Arab states to the poorer ones—underpinned what we can call the Al Jazeera effect. The political economy

sinews were there to make it possible for a Moroccan to take an interest in affairs in Palestine. They had real interest in it. The region became integrated, not just culturally, linguistically, but also in terms of the life strategies of individuals living within it. They may end up in the Gulf. They may end up working in Libya. They may end up having an investment partner from the Gulf, so this region became one of the most integrated—if not the most integrated—in the world at that level.

On the other hand, the selfishness—as one way of putting it—of the different regimes of the region, and their worries about penetration of their countries and of their governments by outside forces, has rendered virtually impossible the integration of the region in a way equivalent to that of the European Union. It's an area that integrated at a political economy and cultural level, but not at an institutional level, so regional integration associations simply don't exist in any meaningful way. They exist in their hundreds none of which really has any serious meaning at all. So it's a curious paradox that the political economy integrated the region at a human level, but didn't do so at an institutional level.

Jon Alterman:

What do you make of cultural arguments that there's a religious element to the authoritarianism in the region? There are some people who point to Islam and the institutionalization of Islam as teaching a sort of obedience culture and submission. Do you think that tells somebody anything about the Middle East, or do you think that's completely beside the point?

Robert Springborg:

Political economy arose in part as a reaction against—to coin a term here—the “over-culturization” of Middle Eastern studies and the attribution to Arabic culture, the Arabic language, and Islam as the causal factors explaining the performance and underperformance of the region. I'm not sure if

we threw the baby out with the bath water or not. I do think culture is important. I think the ignorance of the importance of culture is something that really should be addressed.

If you take the World Value Surveys, there is a very strong cluster of Arab-Muslim states along certain characteristics. It includes a combination of respect for authority, as well as a focus on materialism as opposed to idealism in one's approach to public life. Politics are based on patron-client networks in which it is the reward for your being in that network that is so extremely important. Is culture the cause of the orientation towards politics as instrumentalism or is it the opposite? Is contemporary Arab political culture influenced then by the fact that you don't have citizens—you have patrons and clients? I'm not sure, but I think these are important questions to investigate. I will confess right out, the book does not really investigate them, but I wouldn't want to dismiss culture as an important factor. I think it's interactive with the political economy in ways that are complex, poorly understood, and need further investigation.

Jon Alterman:

A lot of the political economy work in the 1990s had an undertone of expecting the imminent democratization of the Middle East—a sense that rising literacy, communications, and mobility would lead to a region that was more democratic, more liberal, and more pluralistic. Not only have we not seen that, but we've seen the rise of governments and populations looking to the China model as an alternative—the idea that you can have an authoritarian state that is deeply involved in the economy, that has a coercive police apparatus, and that delivers a tremendous rise in the standard of living and security to its population. Middle Eastern populations want security as well as a rising standard of living. Is the China model an alternative that Middle Eastern states are looking to or should be looking to? Is it a chimera?

Robert Springborg:

You're right that recent polls—the Arab Barometer, for example—revealed very starkly how important performance is to evaluation of government. Many of us lauded Tunisia being the exemplar of the country that came out of the Arab uprisings of 2011 in the strongest position to create an institutionalized democracy. Yet, the Arab Barometer data reflects the overwhelming concern that Tunisians have with economic performance—not with political participation and other indicators of democratization. Bread is naturally a priority, and this is a part of the world where one's orientation to authority is based largely on what authority does provide to one.

So, I think in, In the Middle East and North Africa, China is looked up to as a country that has done that for its people. Within the Middle East itself, one frequently encounters individuals who are reflecting on the good old days when Nasser was able to provide public educations for people who had formerly been denied them; when Saddam Hussein was able to deliver development of Iraqi infrastructure; when Muammar Gaddafi was able to provide for his citizens a far higher standard of living than before. I think there is the idea that economic performance can legitimate a regime, even ones as vicious and nasty as those of Gaddafi and Saddam.

In its current form, it is a worry for Western democracies. They are themselves underperforming politically—and to some extent, economically—and so the luster has worn off at home and abroad. It's pretty hard to make the case as one could easily make—during the Cold War that the West was outperforming. In my view, the West needs to improve its act in the region—and at home—and its act has to include this vital economic dimension. It's not enough to preach democratization without making contributions of a more effective sort to economic growth in the region, and that would now be diversification. It's clear the entire Middle East

North Africa region has to diversify its economies and so far has not taken adequate steps to do that.

Jon Alterman:

On that point of needing to have much better material progress, do ideology and legitimacy play into political economy or does it really come down to, “can you actually deliver the goods?”

Robert Springborg:

I'm not sure ideology would be the right term because the region has been swept with different ideologies for a long time and none of them have really performed. The most recent casualty is Islamism—which has seemed pretty much a spent force, whether in Tunisia, Egypt, or wherever. What sometimes goes under the name of ideology is adherence to sub-national units of one sort or another—whether ethnic, religious, or linguistic. As the macro system deteriorates at the national or regional level, it's substituted by localist loyalties of one sort or another, and they then are sometimes dressed up, with an ideology. One can think of Hezbollah in Lebanon or the Popular Mobilizational Forces in Iraq as having done exactly that, but that's not ideology of the transcendental sort, like Marxism—which is to appeal to workers around the world, regardless of their linguistic, national, or ethnic group.

Jon Alterman:

But, but there's also the ideology of neoliberalism—the sense that we need to move toward freer economies and freer political life. That's also an ideology.

Robert Springborg:

Like the others, it's largely failed. The great boom of neoliberalism was in the wake of the huge expansion of globalization at the end of the Cold War from 1990 on. The United States and other countries of the West were trying to export neoliberalism and the assumption was

that everything would turn out well—that this was our era, and it was a no-brainer that this system had proved its superiority, and everybody would love us, and they would all follow in our wake. That proved to be absolutely, profoundly, and dramatically wrong. Neoliberalism did not deliver. Neoliberalism reflected and enhanced the power distributions and the variations of power, economic and political, that were already there. The rich became richer. The poorer did not catch up. Yes, there was some growth by virtue of oil monies, but more than that? Not really. The Middle East—which had been proclaimed to be a relatively equal area by the World Bank through its various Gini indices—has become a profoundly unequal area and that inequality has increased. Neoliberalism that was meant to float all ships didn't work that way. It was an ideology like the others that did not perform well and so the luster has definitely gone off it.

Jon Alterman:

You've been looking at the Middle East for a while. You've been involved with institutions that are trying to provide assistance to the Middle East for a long time. You've done consulting. As you think back, what have you concluded about the malleability of Middle Eastern institutions? What parts are more malleable and what parts are proving equally sticky for people, both in the region and beyond who want to change them?

Robert Springborg:

There's basically a wall between those who are exercising power and those who are powerless. That wall in the Middle East is patrolled by the deep states—which I described in detail in the book. Those in power have little reason to change. They are in a position of power, fearful for their status, and are relying upon deep states to patrol the border so that others are not able to penetrate it and the political and economic rewards go to those inside the limited access order—not on the outside of it. So it's not government—or at least central

government—where one is going to find an enthusiastic backer of some new idea.

It's those on the outside—who are disempowered and have a much bigger incentive to want to pick up a new idea and run with it—not only because they are less jaded but because they have an incentive to think of doing things in a different way. In education, for example, the further one is from the ministry of education, typically, the more likely one is to find receptive ideas to teacher empowerment and decentralizing curricula development into schools themselves. It is similar with security assistance to militaries. The top brass is typically pretty careful about any sort of innovations in meritocratic based promotions—as opposed to those based in patronage and the determination by the top brass itself. Innumerable U.S. military officers who've been involved in training in the Middle East and North Africa comment on this phenomenon—how they find junior officers really receptive to ideas and quite gung-ho about doing things in the U.S. way, but that they can't sell it higher up the chain of command.

The answer to this really does lie in where the individual or institution is within the overall access order. If it's on the inside of it, then you're not going to get much responsiveness because they are inherently defensive. They will make enough changes that they see will maintain—if not enhance—their power, but they are far less likely to make changes that would really impact things. For that sort of response, you have to go to the periphery. Much of the developmental work in the Middle East and North Africa is now peripheral in its nature. And I know the CSIS was itself involved in that sort of work. Working with central government has proven not to go well for USAID, GTZ, and all the rest of them, so they go to local government to try their hand there and they generally speaking have more success.

Jon Alterman:

One reason that central governments are proving more open to this is because we are

clearly on the verge of a global energy transformation that is likely to come within the lifetimes and anticipated ruling periods of many of the region's leaders. Saudi Vision 2030 is just the largest and best known, but throughout the region we're seeing the Gulf states feeling like the status quo isn't durable. It seems to me that a change in global energy markets isn't only going to affect the energy exporting states, it's also going to affect the labor exporting states that make billions in remittances from sending workers from Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon, into energy exporting states. Are you seeing this as an opportunity for elites to genuinely get on board with change from the center? Are you seeing any sign that elites are interested in taking that opportunity?

Robert Springborg:

I'll refer to another idea of the book to try to answer your question, and it's infrastructural power. Infrastructural power refers to the nature of interactions between states and societies. The more the interactions allow a flow backwards and forwards between states and societies, the more policy ideas can be generated in society, examined, looked upon, and decided about by the states and then clearly communicated to their populations. The ability of a country to effectively tax its citizens with an income tax, to know their income and have it accepted as a legitimate form of taxation, is a good measure of infrastructural power. And it's not incidental that the lowest rates of income tax collection in the world are in the Middle East and North Africa.

To what extent is this model of infrastructural power—or public brain power—operating in the Middle East and North Africa? The answer is hardly at all—precisely because of the limited access orders that keep societies away from, not only contributing to the making of decisions, but even to know what the policies are. There are prerequisites for trying to turn the Middle Eastern energy economy to be more diversified, and to provide greater returns at the level of individuals, and those prerequisites

really are effective interaction between state and society.

To go back to Vision 2030 in Saudi—like all the other vision statements—it was created by Western consulting firms with no input from local citizens. The Western consulting firms are very mindful that their contract is being written by those within the limited access order and who are not wanting to rock the boat. The Vision 2030—whether in Egypt, Oman, or the Emirates or wherever they are, and they are everywhere—are plans concocted within the confines of limited access order and largely divorced from reality.

I don't think it's going to be easy for the visions to be successful in the absence of a more effective engagement with citizens. Citizens will have to come on board and ultimately, have to play a role in the implementation of any plan. They can't be simply ordered to do so, they will really have to put their shoulder to the wheel in whatever form it's going to take. It's going to take human resource development, and the quality of educational systems in the Middle East is abysmal. You have vast numbers of years of education and investments in education that are wasted in the Middle East and North Africa. If you're going to diversify a highly sophisticated oil economy and take it into new areas for the use of hydrocarbons and you're going to engage an ever expanding citizenship in it, then you have to educate your population at a much more effective level. It takes a generation to do that. You don't just turn the switch on education. The idea that you're going to implement a dramatic change to the region—and you rightly point out, it is region wide—is fanciful. It's just not going to happen in that time period, and in the meantime, the stresses and the strains mount. The threat posed to the incumbent orders within these limited access regimes is growing evermore profound and they are responding, not by opening up, but by cracking down yet more.

Jon Alterman:

I went to graduate school in the 1990s and there's an optimism to some of the political economy work that was written then. Nazih Ayubi in *Overstating the Arab State* had a chapter about how we can get toward greater democratization in the region or at least greater pluralism and liberalization. As I read your book, it didn't feel like a very optimistic book at all. What are the green shoots of optimism that you see? Where do you think really interesting and promising experiments are taking place, being allowed to take place? Where are people doing things that, that really seem to you have hope?

Robert Springborg:

Our Latin American colleagues coined this term, “transitology,” It refers to the transition from an authoritarian regime. Transitology showed that the coalition formation that's necessary for a transition to be successful is one that brings together moderates within the limited access orders with those outside of it, so that both of them see it's in their interest to moderate their demands and to form a coalition with someone on the other side of the wall. If you look for the signs of elites who are willing to reach out to others and those on the outside who are willing to do business with these somewhat discredited elites, you'll find them in a variety of different settings.

These are difficult transitions. They're more difficult than in Latin America. The assessment by those who did comparisons between Latin America and the Middle East always said that the “sultanism”—to use their term— that prevails in the Middle East is the most difficult one in which to secure transitions away from authoritarianism. That's true, so to be overly optimistic would be foolish. To give up hope would also be foolish. I don't think that one should do that. I think one has to take a look at a pragmatic and programmatic level to see, “well, what can we do to reform the quality of education? What's possible within that system?” You have to be able to engage at a higher level in backing it. You want to operate in programmatic areas and engage experts who are in authority and who have no authority. And

that way, you're in a better position to create public brain power simply by the exercise of trying to improve education or public services of a different sort—or whatever they might be. I don't think there's reason to give up hope, but you have got to know this is a tough game to play.

Jon Alterman:

Bob Springborg, thank you very much for joining us on Babel.

Robert Springborg:

Thank you for having me, Jon.