

**CULTURE AND CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST<sup>1</sup>**REVIEWED BY MAJOR J NELSON<sup>2</sup>

*I against my brother; I and my brothers against my  
cousins; I and my brothers and my cousins against the  
world.*<sup>3</sup>

*The primary objective of any COIN operation is to foster  
development of effective governance by a legitimate  
government.*<sup>4</sup>

**I. Introduction**

In *Culture and Conflict in the Middle East*, Carl Salzman effectively argues that his theory of “balanced opposition” undergirds social order in the Arab Middle East.<sup>5</sup> Drawing from various anthropologists who have studied nomadic tribes in the Middle East,<sup>6</sup> as well as from his own ethnography of the Yrahmadzai tribe in Iran,<sup>7</sup> Salzman’s theory is intriguing on two fronts. First, to the casual reader the theory of balanced opposition offers a persuasive, predictable reason as to why and how, either individually or collectively, Middle Eastern Arabs will react when an outside source encroaches on their security or their socio-economic interests. Second, for the reader serving in the military, Salzman’s theory fundamentally challenges the principle tenet of current Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine.<sup>8</sup> Although the author does not confront this doctrine in his book, after reading *Culture and Conflict* the military reader is left with the nagging, yet profound question, “can our current COIN doctrine ‘work’ in Iraq and Afghanistan?” Because Salzman argues that balanced opposition

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<sup>1</sup> PHILIP CARL SALZMAN, *CULTURE AND CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST* (2008).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Army. Currently assigned as Chief, Contract & Fiscal Law, Office of the Staff Judge Advocate, Multi-National Security Transition Command–Iraq (MNSTC–I), Baghdad, Iraq. This book review was submitted in partial satisfaction of the Master of Laws requirements of the 57th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course.

<sup>3</sup> SALZMAN, *supra* note 1, at 211.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. DEP’T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 3-24, COUNTERINSURGENCY (15 Dec. 2006) [hereinafter FM 3-24].

<sup>5</sup> SALZMAN, *supra* note 1, at 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 55–65.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 69–93.

<sup>8</sup> *See* FM 3-24, *supra* note 4.

precludes the rule of law and constitutionalism<sup>9</sup>—factors under COIN doctrine that are essential for achieving legitimacy of the host-nation government<sup>10</sup>—*Culture and Conflict* does not leave the military reader overly optimistic about future operations in those countries.

## II. Analysis

### A. General Thoughts

Salzman uses nearly 200 pages of *Culture and Conflict* to define and argue for his theory of balanced opposition. Through historical examples,<sup>11</sup> research conducted by other anthropologists,<sup>12</sup> and his ethnographies,<sup>13</sup> his analysis is systematic and persuasive. Nevertheless, the reader may find the book tedious because it reads like it was primarily written for students and scholars of Arab culture. Although Salzman adequately defines terms presumably understood by anthropologists and academics,<sup>14</sup> and not intuitively understood by the military or casual reader, his substantively dense, academic writing style could potentially lose the reader's interest. Additionally, Salzman does not apply his theory of balanced opposition to the social and political future of Arab Middle Eastern countries until the last chapter of the book.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, these two criticisms taken in tandem may cause the reader to overlook his theory's contemporary relevance to the current prosecution of overseas contingency operations.

### B. Balanced Opposition Described

Salzman argues that balanced opposition is a system of social control based on tribal affiliation.<sup>16</sup> As opposed to state authority, where the governed abdicate some of their individual rights to the polity, under the theory of balanced opposition, one is loyal to his tribe or kin group for

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<sup>9</sup> SALZMAN, *supra* note 1, at 211.

<sup>10</sup> FM 3-24, *supra* note 4, at 1-22.

<sup>11</sup> SALZMAN, *supra* note 1, at 152-59.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 55-65.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 69-93.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 50.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 197-212.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 13.

two reasons.<sup>17</sup> First, Salzman argues that pragmatically one believes strongly that he can only rely on those of his kin group to come to his aid, even at their risk of substantial material loss or loss of life.<sup>18</sup> Second, because honor is a central theme in Arab culture,<sup>19</sup> one will strive to live up to his commitment to his kin group even at the expense of his short-term interests.<sup>20</sup> If one fails in this respect, one has lost his honor and respect within his group and, consequently, members of his group will not partner with him in future endeavors.<sup>21</sup>

Salzman also argues that the application of balanced opposition is an “ingenious” way to organize security.<sup>22</sup> Because everyone is born into a specific kin group, and one’s loyalty is to his group, everyone, in principle, is equal.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the act of one group member can be attributed to any other member of that particular group.<sup>24</sup> As Salzman argues, “members of lineages were considered not as unique individuals but interchangeable equivalents.”<sup>25</sup> This group loyalty is arrayed on how close one is to the member of the group who needs his aid.<sup>26</sup> If one injures another, he knows that, in turn, an individual of the injured party’s group will confront him.<sup>27</sup> This confrontation will pit family against family, and, if escalated, lineage against lineage, tribe against tribe and so forth until, ultimately, Islamist against infidel.<sup>28</sup> As the Arab saying goes, “I against my brother; I and my brothers against my cousins; I and my brothers and my cousins against the world.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, the “ingenious” aspect of balanced opposition is that it fosters security because of the pervasive threat of allied retribution.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 17.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 12.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 107.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 11.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* at 92.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at 11.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 211.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 194.

### C. The Contemporary Failure of Balanced Opposition

Although balanced opposition may afford a sense of security, Salzman argues that because it “resort[s] to violence to resolve conflicts, and governance by coercion,” Arab Middle Eastern countries “do not function well” and have remained largely “premodern” with respect to their surrounding countries.<sup>31</sup> To shore up this argument, he relies in part on a study conducted in 2002 by the U.N. Development Programme and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, titled *The Arab Human Development Report 2002*.<sup>32</sup> In this report, Arab countries consistently scored lower in a number of indices compared to other regions of the world.<sup>33</sup> Those indices varied widely from “voice and accountability,” which considered “aspects of the political process [like] civil liberties, political rights and the independence of the media,”<sup>34</sup> to education and illiteracy.<sup>35</sup> The authors of this initial report conducted subsequent studies with the hope of creating a comprehensive strategy to overcome the deficits noted in the 2002 report.<sup>36</sup> In the 2003 report, the administrator of the U.N. Development Programme stated in the foreword that an outside source backed by a military occupation cannot achieve meaningful change in these countries; rather, the change must come from within.<sup>37</sup> Salzman parallels this notion when he states that “in the Arab world and elsewhere, culture matters.”<sup>38</sup> Therefore, according to Salzman, to understand Arab culture one must understand balanced opposition.<sup>39</sup> However, his contention is not without its critics.

### D. Criticism of Balanced Opposition

In *Culture and Conflict*, Salzman preemptively strikes at post-colonial theorists that may criticize his contention that balanced

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<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 11.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 187.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at 188–93.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 189.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 190.

<sup>36</sup> See United Nations Development Programme, Arab Human Development Reports, <http://www.arab-hdr.org/> (last visited July 23, 2009) (explaining the purpose of creating the initial and subsequent Arab Human Development Reports).

<sup>37</sup> Mark Malloch Brown, *Foreword* to UNITED NATIONS DEV. PROGRAMME & ARAB FUND FOR ECON. AND SOC. DEV., THE ARAB HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2003 I–II (2003), available at <http://www.arab-hdr.org/contents/2003/intro-e.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> SALZMAN, *supra* note 1, at 195.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.*

opposition stifles the modernization of Arab countries.<sup>40</sup> The post-colonial movement, which was inspired by Edward Said's *Orientalism*,<sup>41</sup> contends that negative characterization of the Middle East can be attributed to the harmful effects of Western colonialism.<sup>42</sup> Salzman argues that this theory, which is widely held by many anthropologists and academics,<sup>43</sup> "negates both the possibility of knowledge in general and the fact-based understanding of the Middle East."<sup>44</sup> The fact that Salzman proactively refutes this potential criticism lends general credibility to his theory that balanced opposition has stunted the socio-economic advancement of Middle Eastern countries. Notwithstanding, the reader may find this advanced posturing distracting. In very short order, Salzman sums up post-colonialism and then systematically dismantles it, without much explanation or authority.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, one may be left with more questions than answers about post-colonialism's criticism of Western scholarship as it relates to Arab culture.

#### E. The Conflict Between COIN and Balanced Opposition

Salzman's theory of balanced opposition forces the military reader to consider how its application works, or potentially fails to work, with current COIN doctrine. If Salzman's contention has merit—that balanced opposition "makes an inclusive, integrated polity virtually

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<sup>40</sup> *Id.* at 207.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.* at 14. Richard Bulliet described Said's work in the following way:

*Orientalism*, Edward Said's celebrated critique of western thinking about Islam and the Arab world, focuses on Europeans rather than Americans. It illumines the ways in which travelers, writers, artists and scholars imagined a lurid Orient of sexual decadence, obscene cruelty, and craven pusillanimity—all, Said argues, with the hidden (or not hidden) design of justifying imperialism and adding intellectual to colonial subjugation.

RICHARD W. BULLIET, *THE CASE FOR ISLAMO-CHRISTIAN CIVILIZATION* 96 (2004).

<sup>42</sup> SALZMAN, *supra* note 1, at 207.

<sup>43</sup> E-mail from Philip Carl Salzman, Professor, McGill Univ., to author (30 Aug. 2008, 07:39 EST) (on file with the author) [hereinafter Salzman E-mail].

<sup>44</sup> SALZMAN, *supra* note 1, at 207.

<sup>45</sup> *Id.* at 14–15, 187, 207–08.

impossible”<sup>46</sup>—the success of COIN in Iraq and Afghanistan is up for debate.

The primary objective of COIN is to legitimize the host-nation government.<sup>47</sup> As the doctrine prescribes, legitimate governments rule through the consent of the governed.<sup>48</sup> The rule of law establishes security, and those rules are preferably “recorded in a constitution.”<sup>49</sup> Without security, “disorder spreads” and the voluntary acceptance of the governed is weakened.<sup>50</sup> If the governed do not feel secure, the host-nation cannot achieve legitimacy, and consequently the COIN effort will not achieve “lasting success.”<sup>51</sup> This summary of COIN doctrine, which pairs the success of the host-nation with its ability to establish security through the rule of law and a constitution, is squarely at odds with Salzman’s contemporary application of balanced operation in the Arab Middle East.

Salzman argues that balanced opposition is the fundamental alternative to the rule of law and constitutionalism.<sup>52</sup> Under balanced opposition, one is loyal to his group; he has no loyalty to a rule or some universal principle because “the frame of reference is always ‘my group vs. the other group.’”<sup>53</sup> Under the rule of law and constitutionalism, “right and wrong” are defined principles and applied fairly to the governed.<sup>54</sup> In contrast, under balanced opposition “right and wrong” are not as important as whose group will be “advantaged or disadvantaged.”<sup>55</sup> Because Salzman believes that his theory is woven into the cultural fabric of the Arab Middle East, absent a “delegitimization” of the tribal groups where power is shifted to individuals and not other groups, the prospect of legitimizing a central state authority in the Arab Middle East is a daunting task.<sup>56</sup> As Salzman

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<sup>46</sup> *Id.* at 205.

<sup>47</sup> FM 3-24, *supra* note 4, at 1-21.

<sup>48</sup> *Id.*

<sup>49</sup> *Id.* at 1-22.

<sup>50</sup> *Id.* at 1-23.

<sup>51</sup> *Id.* at 1-22.

<sup>52</sup> SALZMAN, *supra* note 1, at 205.

<sup>53</sup> *Id.*

<sup>54</sup> *Id.* at 211.

<sup>55</sup> *Id.*

<sup>56</sup> *Id.* at 210; *see also* Salzman E-mail, *supra* note 43 (explaining “delegitimizing” by a central power has worked with mixed results in the Middle East; the establishment of constitutionalism and the rule law can only be possible when the tribes are replaced by individuals, rather than “corporate groups”).

suggests, for conditions to change in the Middle East, Arabs must “decide that *what they are for* is more important than *whom they are against*.”<sup>57</sup>

### III. Conclusion

*Culture and Conflict in the Middle East* is recommended, with some qualifications. Substantively, the book is quite dense, and without the academic background of an anthropologist or Arab scholar, the casual or military reader may struggle with the author’s prose. Because Salzman’s theory may be criticized by other academics in his field, I presume it was not intended to be an “easy” read. Nonetheless, his notion of balanced opposition is thought-provoking. Considering that the United States will likely have a presence in the Middle East for many years to come, U.S. servicemembers should be familiar with Salzman’s perspective because of the challenge his theory poses to our COIN doctrine.

My recommendation to the reader is to read the last chapter of the book first. From the military reader’s perspective, this is the most important chapter because Salzman applies his theory of balanced opposition to the future of the Arab Middle East. Because Salzman adequately defines the contours of his theory in this last chapter, it is not necessary to read the entire book to grasp the crux of his argument. If intrigued, the military reader can then, “cafeteria style,” pick and choose portions of the book for further study.

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<sup>57</sup> SALZMAN, *supra* note 1, at 212.