State Cohesion in the Middle East: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

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The Middle Eastern territorial state came into being after a prolonged period of Westernization that resulted in the formation of mostly secular authoritarian regimes. Over time, the state's ability to bend the will of its citizens increased, and political stability in most countries was reinforced. But toward the end of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, secularism gradually eroded, Islamic politics became considerably more popular, authoritarian regimes in the region were put on the defensive, and with the advent of the "Arab Spring," state cohesion has been seriously undermined in a number of countries.

Stateness, Cohesion, and the Arab States

There is no single, uniform entity called the Arab state. The 22 members of the League of Arab States can be categorized according to a number of criteria, including regime type, ethnic and religious makeup, degree of "Arabness," and historical trajectories, and hence varying degrees of social cohesion. One may also distinguish them from one another according to their degree of "stateness," a concept promoted by J.P. Nettl, and often referred to in the writings of Gabriel Ben-Dor, and Joseph Kostiner.[1] "Stateness" is related to "cohesion." But like stateness, cohesion is an elusive term, for it includes vital social, economic, and institutional components. It does not just simply mean political stability.

In fact, the overall degree of cohesion plays a critical role in determining the degree of political stability in any particular state. It similarly determines whether a heightened degree of political instability or even a regime-toppling crisis might pose a threat to the very existence of the territorial state itself. Without trying to idealize Tunisia's situation or minimize its difficulties in any way, the country where the first spark of the Arab Spring protests was improbably lit stands at one end of the Arab spectrum as the one with the most reasonable chance of establishing functioning legitimate institutions that can ensure a critical mass

of social and political pluralism. If achieved, this will, in turn, reinforce the legitimacy of the system and those chosen to lead it. The source of Tunisia's comparatively favorable prospects lies in the country's relatively high degree of social cohesion, not just referring to an immediate familial, tribal or religio-communal level, but also to a broader collective sense of self, captured by Ernest Gellner's pithy and insightful observation that Tunisians appeared to feel "quite at home in their own cultural skin."[2] Yemen and Libya, where tribalism is deep-rooted and stateness is extremely low, are at the other end of the spectrum; the post-'Ali Abdallah Salah and post-Qaddafi eras there, respectively, have rendered them as empty shells of formally sovereign entities, as competing tribal-oriented militias jockey for position, often violently.

There are vital social and economic components to measuring the degree of a state's cohesion, such as the authorities' capacity to collect taxes, deliver services, maintain social peace and security, and provide an overall vision or direction that would be considered legitimate by the majority of the population. Employing the terminology of Joel Migdal, one may think about whether these states are "strong" or "weak" in relation to their societies, i.e., whether states have the requisite degree of social control that enables them to overcome existing social forces resistant to centralizing policies aimed at transforming social and political realities to the state's benefit.

Migdal's ideal type is an entity which is both a strong state and a strong society, in which a healthy balance is maintained between the two. In his analysis of Egypt's land reform policies during the Nasser period, he concludes that for all of the changes introduced, Egypt's "society" won out over the "state," and that the state remained essentially weak, with limited capabilities.[3] Indeed, today's Egypt, while being the epitome of an entity with a high degree of "stateness," even to the point of being a "deep state," is nonetheless a "weak" state, unable to effectively address its deep-rooted social and economic problems, build viable and legitimate governing institutions, and assume its so-called "natural," self-defined role as the leader of the region and of the Arab world in particular.

Mention of the "Arab world" necessitates a discussion of the intricate, complex relationship between Arabness, Arabism, Arab nationalism and territorial nationalism. The grand narrative of Arab nationalism, which was propagated by Arab nationalists and accepted by generations of Westerners, was one that emphasized Western betrayal of war-time Arab allies, and the carving up of the "natural" Arab political space into unnatural territorial units which lacked the basis for social and political cohesion.

The pan-Arab movement, whose heyday was the 1950s and 1960s, but whose world view was formed earlier, championed this view, and used it as a weapon to de-legitimize the newly independent, narrowly based and weak regimes. But more and more scholars understand the limitations of this narrative, for it is

more ideological than a reflection of what actually transpired. Israel Gershoni, Philip Khoury, and others have shown that there is not one Arab nationalist experience, but rather many experiences, as the modern Arab state system gradually emerged in the decades after the World War I.[4]

More than two decades ago, Ilya Harik poked major holes in the grand Arab nationalist narrative, arguing that a majority of the member states of the Arab League, from North Africa to the Gulf, acquired a considerable degree of legitimacy which predated the arrival of colonialism.[5] This was true regardless of the specific pre-modern regime types: the Ottoman Regencies of Tripoli, Tunis, and Algiers, were all run by military-bureaucratic oligarchies with only tenuous ties to Istanbul; the imam-chief system which prevailed in Morocco and Oman, in which religious and political legitimacy were invested in a single person; the Arabian chieftaincies of Najd and Hijaz; and 19th century dynastic Egypt and Maronite-dominated Mount Lebanon.

In all of these cases, important foundations had been laid for what would become modern states. It was only the Fertile Crescent, Harik noted, that lacked this long history of durable local centers and ruling elites. Given the Fertile Crescent/Levant's social, religious and ethnic fragmentation, it was only natural that Arabism, Arab nationalism, and pan-Arabism would develop there, providing a possible tool to overcome the "primordial" divisions and absence of independent political traditions.

Radical pan-Arabism was usually contrasted with territorial states, threatening the existing order by de-legitimizing local regimes. At one point, the decisive component of a fragmented Syrian elite even gave their country away for a brief period (1958-61) in the name of pan-Arabism. But Syria's subordination to Egypt under the banner of the United Arab Republic did not last, and thus began the gradual fall from grace of the pan-Arab doctrine, accelerated by the 1967 debacle.[6]

However, the dichotomy between integral pan-Arabism and the territorial state is only part of the story. Arab nationalism and the adherence to pan-Arab norms were also crucial in terms of state building and for the forging of cohesion.[7] As Malik Mufti has shown, this was true for Iraq and Syria where unionism was an effective defensive mechanism to ensure the respective Ba'thi regime's authoritarian hold on power.[8]

Secularism, Authoritarianism, and the Territorial State

Despite the upheavals of the Arab Spring it would be premature to speak of the end of authoritarianism. But one can point to the fall of the totalitarian-like "*mukhabarat* state" of Ba'thist Iraq and the severe weakening of its Ba'thi twin

in Syria ("fierce states," to use Nazih Ayubi's term).⁹ In today's Arab states, and even in Iran, public space is increasingly contested and turbulent while Turkey's admittedly imperfect democracy has long stood apart from its Middle Eastern neighbors. Nearly all Middle Eastern states are being challenged to build workable institutions which can channel and manage social differences, and address underlying economic problems.

Questions are being raised regarding the appropriate guiding values of society, such as the exact mix of Arab identity, the degree of religiosity, the desired amount of openness to modernity and the extent of toleration of religious minorities and women, as well as other minorities including secular liberals and the youth of Facebook and Twitter. However precisely defined, this erosion of authoritarianism meant that one of the key forces that had contributed to the maintenance of a degree of cohesion in the Arab states has been seriously undermined, calling into question the stability and integrity of various countries.

In the Middle East of the nineteenth century, under the impact of the Western challenge, the Ottoman Empire and Egypt underwent a prolonged period of Western-style reform, which extended well into the twentieth century. European ideas reshaped the local discourse and gave rise to intensive intellectual ferment and debate. Secular liberalism challenged the centrality of religion in political life, eventually producing a headlong assault on tradition and the subsequent emergence of new forms of collective identity that gave preference to common language, territory, and cultural heritage over religion. European ideas and influence and the measured secularization of society went hand in hand with the creation of the Arab territorial state, while in Turkey's Kemalist Republic secularization was the leadership's explicit mantra.

But in recent generations, many of these processes have been arrested or even reversed. Western cultural influence and secularism have been in retreat for decades as religious revivalism has captured much of the popular imagination. Neo-traditionalism in its various manifestations such as political Islam, religious sectarianism, and tribalism have all resurfaced with great force in recent years, posing an unprecedented challenge to the secular-based ideas of the age of Westernizing reform, such as nationalism and in some cases, the territorial state itself. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring convulsions, which have reinforced these neo-traditionalist trends, some Arab states are presently facing what is possibly the most serious challenge of their entire century of existence.

For centuries, it was customary for the peoples of the Middle East to define themselves collectively not by the territory they inhabited nor by the language they spoke, but rather by their religious belief. The Muslim majority belonged to a community of believers (*ummat al-mu'minin*) who shared a common destiny

with co-religionists who spoke different languages, and lived many hundreds or even thousands of miles away, more than they did with their Arabic, Turkish, Persian, Kurdish or Berber-speaking Jewish or Christian minority neighbors, with whom they shared the same city or town, somewhere in North Africa or the Fertile Crescent, and who similarly defined themselves by their faith.

The idea that people who spoke the same language and inhabited a clearly defined territory were a nation unto themselves, irrespective of their religion (at least in theory, even if in practice this was often not entirely so), was a European import to the Middle East. It was gradually introduced during the nineteenth century as an integral part of the process of Westernizing modernization and reform.[10]

Territorial nationalism, intimately linked to the post-enlightenment notion of self-determination, was an essentially secular idea. Those who espoused it postulated the inherent right of nations to determine their fate in this world by their own collective rational decision, as opposed to religious observance designed to secure their well-being in the next world through devout belief in God. Nationalism was about the sovereignty of man and not the sovereignty of God, and at least in the European experience, nationalist movements were very often built from the bottom up by revolutionary movements for whom collective self-determination went hand-in-hand with the establishment of representative, popularly elected institutions.

According to Israel Gershoni, nationalism in the Middle East, as in many other societies, was a "principal agent" for the introduction of Western modernity and progress, "forging a new and authentic collective identity, a 'new nation,' able to inculcate 'in its own way' a modern value system."[11] Focusing on language and territory (rather than on religion) as the dominant cohesive elements of society, nationalism became the main secularizing vehicle of politics in the Middle East of the twentieth century. Everywhere in the Muslim world, a process of consolidation of nation-states was in motion: in Egypt, and the successor states to the Ottoman Empire, the process of marginalizing religion had been underway for more than a century.[12]

Arabism, Egyptianism, and Turkish and Iranian nationalism demoted religion to a secondary role, as but one component of the peoples' cultural heritage. Their movements rested on two main pillars: the rejection of foreign control and the need for internal reform and cultural change. Referring to Arab movements, Immanuel Wallerstein wrote that "the future they envisaged was a modern one, by which they meant a secular one," and they "shared many of the premises of Kemalism."[13]

Kemalism itself was the natural outcome of a century of Ottoman reform — the innovations of the *Tanzimat*. The most revolutionary of all the reforms was

the formal proclamation of equality of all Ottoman subjects before the law, first in the reforms of 1839, and then again in the decrees of 1856. The granting of equality was a radical departure from the very core of the *shari'a*, which guaranteed and enforced a legal system that had traditionally preserved and enforced Muslim superiority over all other tolerated, but not equal, religious communities. The Ottoman sultans had hitherto been more insistent than all their Muslim predecessors on the strict application of the *shari'a*.[14] The deviations of the Tanzimat were therefore all the more meaningful and had far-reaching implications as they slowly but surely eroded the supremacy of the *shari'a* in the Ottoman legal system.

Most importantly, secularizing reforms from the very outset were intimately related to both territorialism and authoritarianism. By proclaiming all equal before the law, Ottomans were all henceforth to be subject to a unified legal code, thus gradually abandoning the differential legal systems that applied to the various religious communities, with their autonomous court systems that enforced their own religious law. The same law was to apply equally to all Ottoman subjects in the entire territory of the Empire, thus establishing a territorialized legal system instead of the communal systems that had applied previously. This was a great step towards the territorialization of collective identity, first to Ottomanism and then, on a more lasting footing, to Turkish nationalism.

The reforms were hardly popular among Ottoman Muslims. To override long-standing Ottoman-Islamic traditions and to subdue the opposition of the widely supported and established classes, including the men of religion (*'ulama*) required the establishment of a more centralized and authoritarian state. The Tanzimat measures, as much as they were about reform, were also about the creation of a modern centralized state to implement the reforms, top-down, on a population that had hitherto treated any ideas or innovation of "infidel" origin with total disdain.[15]

The introduction of Western-inspired reforms led to an unprecedented intensive internal debate on Islamic modernism, in an effort to establish a synthesis between Islamic culture and civilization and Western thought. Leading Muslim intellectuals, such as Muhammad 'Abduh in Westernizing Egypt of the late nineteenth century, argued that there was no inherent contradiction between Islam and reason and science, or between Islam and democracy.

Though 'Abduh's style of Islamic reform "remained firmly anchored in the basic teachings of Islam about morality, society, and order," it set the stage in the early twentieth century for what P.J. Vatikiotis called the "stirrings of secular liberalism." 'Abduh inspired a generation of liberal-minded thinkers who sought rational and secular answers to the questions of Egypt's collective identity,

political orientation, and socio-economic development, as opposed to those who still believed in the prescriptions of Islamic tradition. The Young Turks' ascent to power in Istanbul in 1908 added impetus to the secularizing trend.[16]

Concurrently, liberals in Egypt gained momentum and adopted the European secular notion of the nation-state instead of the basically religious concept of the *umma*. As far as they were concerned, Egyptian patriotism, "the allegiance and loyalty of individuals, irrespective of religious belief or community, to an 'Egyptian nation,' was now the guiding principle of political action instead of the supranational and universalist formula of Islamic and Pan-Islamic nationalism." As they formulated "a strictly Egyptian national consciousness," in a "territorially-defined nation state," they abandoned Islam "as a principal of political organization and action." As they decoupled the Egyptian nation from any Islamic identity, they simultaneously contributed to the general awareness "of the need to escape the bonds of traditionalism in favor of modern scientific knowledge."[17]

In the 1920s and 1930s, secular liberal intellectuals in Egypt placed special emphasis on the role of science and technology in the modern world. They proclaimed Western civilization as the highest stage of man's spiritual and material development, declared Islamic civilization and culture dead and useless, and advocated the adoption of Western civilization and culture without reservations as the only way for the advancement of their country.[18]

The secular liberals' promotion of Egyptian-ness and their concomitant attempt to identify a peculiarly Egyptian culture independent of either its Islamic or Christian heritage opened the way for a questioning by Egyptians of Islamic ideas, values and institutions. The promotion of Egyptian-ness was, therefore, "not only part of the nationalist wave, but also an integral dimension of the attack upon Islam and its values."[19]

Indeed, not only in Egypt but also in the newly founded states of Syria and Iraq, the Turkish Republic and Pahlavi Iran, the general nationalist tendency, whether territorial or pan-Arab, was secular in principle, defining the people by language and/or territory but not religion. The state, therefore, tended to formally ignore, deny or suppress sectarian and even ethnic differences (the Kurds in Iraq and Syria for example, not to mention Kemalist Turkey's branding of Kurds as "mountain Turks"), in the process of state-building and the assertion of centralized territorial control.

Throughout the region, the men of religion appeared momentarily to be "in full retreat before the forces of modern reform." But, to take Egypt as an example, the influence of the secular liberals on Egyptian society as a whole was not nearly as profound as it had been on the country's intellectual elite. The liberals had seriously "underestimated the political power inherent in the instinctive adherence of Egyptians to their Islamic heritage."[20]

Benedict Anderson has observed that in Western Europe, the eighteenth century marked "not only the dawn of the age of nationalism but the dusk of religious modes of thought," which were superseded by rationalist secularism.[21] In the Middle East, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were indeed an era of profound ideological ferment and Islamic reform, as Western ideas, such as secularism and nationalism, dominated the local intellectual discourse. Nonetheless, the dawn of nationalism was never quite the dusk of religious modes of thought; rather, the two continued to compete with each other, experiencing different periods of relative success in the marketplace of ideas.

Arab nationalism was commonly and correctly understood as a secular idea. But it was not only that, and as the idea penetrated deeper into Arab Muslim societies, it became more associated with Islam. Indeed, as James Gelvin persuasively argues, Arab nationalism always had a populist stream, which was able to mobilize networks of lower classes with simple anti-foreigner, anti-occupation themes deploying Islamic symbols, such as in Syria in 1920 during Faysal's struggle or in the 1925 rebellion there against French rule. 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam's activities in Palestine in the 1930s was another of these early populist expressions and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt also would make no clear divide between Arab nationalism and Islam.[22]

Secular Retreat and the Islamist Challenge to the State

Western theories of modernization regarding the newly emerging countries of the world tended to be linear, holding the expectation of the irrevocable decline of religion in society and politics as had been the case in the European experience of state formation and modernization. The idea of secularization as expounded upon in the works of the "trinity" of social theorists — Durkheim, Marx, and Weber — in which the decline of religious belief was "scientifically" forecasted, was widely accepted. State-sponsored secularism in the twentieth-century Middle East, however, failed to produce secular societies.[23] Though organized religion did decline, new religious movements with mass followings emerged. As ever, religion remained "a key marker of identity in Muslim societies."[24]

The decline of Arab nationalism was a momentous setback for the secularization process that had introduced nationalism in the first place. The post-1967 era witnessed two simultaneous but contradictory trends. On the one hand, the failing fortunes of pan-Arabism paved the way for the pragmatic acceptance of the colonially created Middle Eastern state order, the entrenchment of the territorial state and accompanying formulations of territorial nationalism, and the unapologetic pursuit of *raison d'état* by the various Arab states.

The conflict with Israel was all that was left to unite the Arab world and that did not last for very long, as Egypt departed from the Arab ranks in the late 1970s. The Iran-Iraq war dealt a further severe blow to tattered Arab norms, as Syria supported Iran against a fellow Arab state. Iraq's subsequent invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the alliance of most Arab states with the US against Iraq was nothing less than an earthquake for the Arab region.[25]

The last semblance of meaningful collective Arab action came in 2002 with the issuing of the Arab Peace Initiative. Although it was born out of disagreement and compromise, with no mechanism to promote its implementation, it nonetheless still serves as a reference point of sorts for Arab-Israeli peacemaking.[26] The other, contradictory post-1967 trend was the filling of the ideological vacuum left by Arabism by the Islamist movements that challenged the incumbent regimes and sought to Islamize their respective states and societies.

Arab societies in the post-1967 era therefore generally tended to share, in varying degrees and with different orders of priority, a multidimensional set of identities. Egyptians, Jordanians, Palestinians, and Iraqis were the proud possessors of their respective territorial identities as they were also, at one and the same time, Arabs and Muslims, Christians, Sunnis, or Shi'is, and so on. In the new circumstances, it was the more secularist purveyors of existing territorial identities who competed with the Islamists. As for the pan-Arabists, they were increasingly marginalized after the two or three decades in which they had dominated their ideological competitors.

Secularism was in its origins a project of the state — first of the colonial state and then of its post-colonial successor. It was a Western import intended to support the ruling elites' long-term aim of modernization and development. Over the long run, the dislocations generated by rapid urbanization and changing cultural and socioeconomic relationships, coupled with increasing economic mismanagement and corruption, rising poverty, and income inequality undermined the legitimacy of Arab regimes, creating the impression that the modernization project was failing. These developments also reflected badly on secularism, as the post-colonial regimes were by and large openly secular-nationalist. The despotism and ruthless suppression instituted by these regimes were similarly associated with secularism — which increasingly began to appear as a handmaiden to repression.[27]

To be sure, the secularizing nationalist regimes of mid-century in countries like Egypt, Iraq, and Syria maintained the relevance of religion in public life by dabbling on occasion, for their own purposes, in Islamic politics. But overall, they effectively blocked the Islamists, who were crushed underfoot by military dictatorships. As Stephen Humphreys and others have contended, had "the nationalist regimes not bent every effort to controlling the resurgence of Islam ... it might well have swept the boards even by the mid-1950s."[28]

Indeed, for the Islamic fundamentalists, Arabism was not only the ultimate political oppressor but also an ideological adversary that had served as the "supreme manifestation of political secularism." The fundamentalists had pursued a tactical flirtation with pan-Arabism in its heyday, but when it met with ignominious defeat in the 1967 war with Israel, the final divorce from those who had thrust Islam onto the margins of politics and society was total.[29]

In Egypt, Islamists planned for the *jama'at Islamiyya* (the Islamist groups on campuses) to be the engine for the process whereby Egyptian society would be transformed from its *jahili* nature (that is, governed by unbelief) into a true Muslim society. In the eyes of *jama'at* ideologues, nationalism was but another form of Westernization through which infidels had penetrated the minds of the people. Thus, it was incumbent upon the *jama'at* to devote themselves to the revival of Islam and to fulfill their role as the "vanguard of the *umma*."[30]

But the Islamists had to contend with powerful regimes that fought to contain their impact. The Arab states were built top-down and in the Middle Eastern case the modern state was invariably ruled by some form of authoritarian regime that also guaranteed the cohesion of the institutional order through the use of varying degrees of force. As pan-Arabism waned from the 1960s onwards, more concerted and deliberate efforts were made by many of the Arab regimes to actively promote a sense of genuine territorial identity and consciousness, ostensibly overriding religious identities and bridging over longstanding sectarian, ethnic, or tribal fault lines. At long last, this seemed to be the entrenchment of Arab territorial states, enabling and legitimizing the unencumbered pursuit of their respective *raisons d'état*.

However, the decline of pan-Arabism and the loss of hope that it represented has left Arab regimes bereft of an important legitimizing tool. Arab nationalism as an expressive ideology[31] was not enough by itself. The regimes had to perform, and, as the Arab Human Development Reports (AHDR) have consistently shown, they have not delivered.[32] The reports highlighted many state shortcomings; the concept of "stalled" states and societies had already entered into the lexicon.[33] And when the spark was lit by a young, despairing unemployed Tunisian in December 2010, the resulting Arab Spring protests spread like wildfire.

According to some, the Arab nationalist idea was actually rejuvenated by the new media, and the uprisings created a newly meaningful regional bond, constituting a second "Arab awakening." Marc Lynch observed that "a radically new Arab political space" had been created by "a new generation of Arabs." They had "come of age watching al-Jazeera…connecting with each other through social media; and internalizing a new kind of pan-Arabist identity," as they shared complaints about their authoritarian leaders, their stalled economies, and their stagnant politics.[34]

However, this excitement, dominated by ideological yearnings and no little wishful thinking, was off the mark. As Stephen Humphreys had already noted, Arab nationalism was "even in its heyday, a new plant…with very shallow roots in the political tradition of [the] region."[35] Bernard Lewis agreed with Fouad Ajami's earlier evaluation that *raison d'état* among Arab states was triumphing over pan-Arabism.[36] Martin Kramer's erudite analysis of the rise and decline of Arab nationalism went even further, speaking of a case of "mistaken identity."[37] Taking the middle ground, one could argue that "being" Arab remains a meaningful category of collective identity for a majority of Arabic speakers, and most Arab states will remain as self-defined Arab states. At the same time, it has become less of a tool in their foreign policies, and at best is an implicit and not an explicit focus of domestic debates, and is folded into the debates about the role of Islam in political life and in the shaping of collective identity. Arab nationalism, therefore, has lost its role both as a platform for secular politics and as a cohesive force overriding more traditional forms of collective identity.

Case Studies in Territorialist Cohesion and its Limitations

The retreat of secularism, the rise of Islamist politics, the resurgence of other neo-traditionalist forces, the advent of the Arab Spring, and the consequent erosion of authoritarianism have all had their varying effects on the cohesion of important Arab states.

In Egypt, after succeeding 'Abd al-Nasser in 1970, one of the first decisions made by Anwar Sadat was to change the name of the country from the "United Arab Republic" to the "Arab Republic of Egypt" (*Gumhuriyyat Misr al-'Arabiyya*). This was not about semantics, but a redirection of Egyptian politics. From its devotion to the Arab cause, so much so that under Nasser it had dropped "Egypt" from its name, Sadat was moving decisively towards an Egypt-first orientation. Indeed, in Arabic, "Egypt" (*Misr*) preceded the "Arab" in Egypt's new name. Clearly, it was in the service of Egypt's state interests that Sadat first went to war with Israel and then chose to make peace with it, without reference to the wishes of the Arab collective. Of all the Arab states, Egypt of the Nile was the most self-evident "natural" territorial state. Egypt was a separate, clearly defined political entity with a relatively homogeneous population and Egyptians had an authentic collective sense of belonging to the Egyptian state well before the advent of pan-Arabism.

But with the rise of Islamic politics, the regime made significant concessions to the Islamists. Especially under President Hosni Mubarak, the regime conceded much of the public space and public debate to the Islamists.

Moreover, in response to increasing popular religious sentiment, Mubarak resorted to religious legitimization considerably more than his predecessors, regularly seeking the endorsement of the religious establishment for his policies and actions.[38] Islamic sentiment in Egypt thus "eroded nationalism's secular expression." [39] More significantly, Islamic activists openly challenged Egyptian secular national solidarity and cohesion by assuming an ever more militant posture toward the country's Coptic Christian minority, some 10 percent of the population. The government invested little or no effort to deter the Islamists and the situation of the Coptic minority became steadily more precarious as they were exposed to increasing levels of intolerance and violence.[40]

With the advent of the Arab Spring and the overthrow of Mubarak in February 2011, the situation of the Copts deteriorated further. The rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood, the political prominence of the even more radical Salafis, and the general chaotic decline of law and order, exposed the Copts to rising sectarian violence against individuals, churches, and other institutions. It was therefore not surprising that politics assumed a more blatantly sectarian character. In the various referenda and elections after the fall of Mubarak, the Copts generally voted against the Islamists. In the mass demonstrations that preceded the military coup that unseated President Mohammed Morsi in July 2013, Copts were noticeably present. Moreover, Naguib Sawiris, the Copt multi-millionaire media mogul was, by his own admission, instrumental in financing the *Tamarrud* movement that led the struggle to bring Morsi down. After the coup, the dispossessed Islamists singled out the Copts as targets for their anger and frustration. Copts faced a new wave of violence amidst accusations that they had conspired with the secularists and the military to unseat the legitimate and freely-elected government of Egypt. The Copts felt yet again that they were not receiving adequate protection, irrespective of the regime in power.[41] If sectarianism at the expense of national cohesion was becoming a fact of life in Egypt, in other more heterogeneous Arab states it had long been so.

Ba'thi Iraq (1968-2003) was the most extreme example of the phenomenon. In Saddam Hussein's "republic of fear," the ethnic or sectarian minorities, the Kurds and the Shi'is (the latter were a minority in the political, but not numerical sense), were crushed into submission by the "institutions of violence" of the Iraqi Ba'thi polity.[42] Cohesion in the name of Iraqi Arab nationalism and leadership of the Arab world with which neither Kurds (who were not Arabs) nor Shi'is (for whom Arab nationalism was just another version of Sunni domination) could identify, was no solution. Nor was Iraqiness, which was an illusory concoction thrust upon on the public from above. Neither of these could really become "the credo of all Iraqis."[43]

Saddam, through state sponsorship of historical theories, the arts and archaeology, endeavored "to foster a sense of national Iraqi uniqueness and

pride through the creation of an intimate relationship between the people and the territorial pre-Islamic history" of Iraq.[44] But these "Babylon-Iraq" manipulations could not erase or even paper over the predominant sectarian identities within Iraq.[45]

After all, as Hazim Saghiya, the Lebanese author, columnist and editor for the London-based Arab daily *al-Hayat*, has argued, all the modern trappings of the Ba'thi regime were a mere pretext for sectarian Sunni domination of Iraqi society. Indeed, from the outset, the Iraqi national project had been a Sunni Arab one, giving short shrift to the rest of society. Of course, Saddam's regime took this to a whole new level. It was founded on the kinship values of family, relatives, and blood ties as they prevailed in the so-called Sunni Triangle (the area in Iraq between Baghdad in the East, Ramadi in the West, and Tikrit in the North), especially within the "Tikrit group" (*majmu'at Tikrit*) — that is, people from Saddam's hometown.[46] The real political foundations of the regime had nothing to do with Saddam's "Babylon-Iraq" invented historical manipulations.

But the iron-fisted grip of *majmu'at Tikrit* on Iraq began to loosen after Iraq's expulsion from Kuwait in early 1991. The Kurdish and Shi'i uprisings of the spring of 1991 were suppressed. But the regime could not prevent the de facto autonomy that was established, with US support, in the Kurdish region. After the fall of Saddam in 2003, the Kurdish Regional Government, though part of the new Iraqi federal structure, developed into a quasi-independent state in all but name, and achieved a level of stability and prosperity far above the rest of the country.

The toppling of Saddam was in fact the overthrow of the Sunnis who had been in control of Iraq for more than a millennium, from the Abbasids to the Ottomans and then in the British-constructed state of Iraq. The new post-Ba'thi Iraq was no longer defined as an Arab state but as a more decentralized Arab–Kurdish federation. The Kurds took their separate course, but the Arabs of Iraq remained deeply divided between Sunnis and Shi'is.

The US invasion of Iraq had swept away the "comforting fantasy" of a nonsectarian society. "For the first time in the modern history of Iraq, the Sunni Arabs were forced to confront the loss of their ascendant power *as a community*."[47] The empowerment of the Shi'i majority was an insufferable defeat for the Sunnis, who have essentially refused ever since to acquiesce in the new reality. Sunni disaffection is at the root of the on-again, off-again violent struggle, if not to say civil war in Iraq, ever since the US invasion, which has claimed the lives of many thousands on both sides.

There is even talk amongst Sunnis about the formation of a distinct region in Iraq that would be composed of the Sunni majority provinces, or alternatively of the possible secession of the western Sunni province of Anbar from Iraq.[48] Some in Jordan even speak of Anbar province being incorporated into the Hashemite

Kingdom. This may all be just so much empty conjecture, but the very fact that it takes place at all is indicative of a new reality in which the state order is being questioned as never before. Iraq's Christians, caught in the crossfire between Sunnis and Shi'is, have been harassed into massive flight. According to various reports, Iraq's Christian population of about one million has been depleted by more than half since the US invasion in 2003.[49] As Arab commentators constantly lamented, the ever-present "demon of sectarianism" (*ghul al-ta'ifiyya*) continued to bedevil Iraqi politics.[50]

Syria, like Iraq, has drifted towards fragmentation in recent years. Ba'thi Syria had always been deeply influenced by sectarian politics, and ever since the rise to power of the Ba'th in 1963, 'Alawi sectarian solidarity played an important role in regime stability — a fact never openly admitted by the men in power, but a fact just the same. As Hanna Batatu wrote many years ago about the regime in Syria: "[T]he ruling element consists at its core of a close kinship group which draws strength simultaneously, but in decreasing intensity, from a tribe, a sect-class, and an ecological-cultural division of the people." Ba'thi secularism was a vehicle for the sectarian domination of the 'Alawi minority, with the support of the countries' Christian and Druze communities, and for the political dispossession of the Sunni majority in the struggle for control of the modern Syrian state.[51]

The 'Alawis, who became "the lords of Syria,"[52] were from the most humble origins, constituting part of the downtrodden underclass of rural Syria for centuries. Service in the military, beginning from the time of the French Mandate, was their main avenue of social mobility, coupled with membership in the Ba'th party and the systematic marginalization of religion — a blessing for the 'Alawis, whose heterodoxical faith was a political and social liability.

Much like Ba'thi Baghdad, Damascus also remained committed in principle to pan-Arabism, but here too, a certain Syrian territorialism was fostered as of the mid-1970s, even if more slowly and less perceptibly than in Iraq. While Hafiz al-Asad officially remained faithful to the party's long-term vision of Arab unity, the Syrian leadership searched for a formula that would "muffle the cognitive dissonance between party ideals and political reality." As Egypt shifted away from the conflict with Israel, Syria was desperately in need of a new strategic alignment that would encompass Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinians. Thus, the old motif of Greater Syria was given a new lease on life by the Ba'thi regime, in service of Syria's *raison d'état*. In later years, it did not disappear and actually became part of Ba'thi political thinking, together with a more traditional pan-Arabism, coupled with notions of a more narrowly defined territorial nationalism based on Syria's existing borders.[53]

But as in Iraq, these formulations failed to overcome sectarian fault lines. Many in the Sunni majority community, particularly in the big cities, continued

to regard the 'Alawis as socially inferior heretics, whose political dominance was unbearable. The failure of the regime's efforts to secure religious legitimacy for the 'Alawis[54] eventually resulted in the revolt of the more militant factions of the Muslim Brotherhood from 1976 to 1982. They were finally and ruthlessly suppressed, with the destruction of the last redoubt of the rebels in the northern city of Hama in February 1982. Hafiz al-Asad was unflinching in battle but magnanimous in victory, and from the mid-1980s he offered the former rebels a reconciliation of sorts, albeit on tough terms set by the regime.[55]

Syrian domestic stability was thus secured for the next three decades. However, under Bashar al-Asad, beginning in June 2000, Syria was never as effectively governed as it had been by his father. And with the arrival of the Arab Spring protests in March 2011, Syria progressively spun out of control, with disastrous humanitarian consequences. What began as a minor protest by disgruntled peasants and workers in Syria's rural backwater soon mushroomed into a full-scale sectarian civil war, the end of which is presently nowhere in sight.

The opposition in Syria is, needless to say, composed mainly of representatives of the Sunni majority. But not all Sunnis are firmly allied with the opposition and the regime still enjoys support among urban Sunnis, who have largely remained neutral and uncommitted. A myriad of Sunni organizations make up the bulk of the opposition, from the defectors from the Syrian Army who have formed the Free Syrian Army to the more radical Islamist organizations that have some form of affiliation with al-Qa'ida, such as *Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham* or *al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-Iraq wal-Sham* (ISIS). The names of these groups, and others, suggest that they do not even recognize the legitimacy of the Syrian state, referring only to Greater Syria (*al-Sham*) which includes Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan.

In the meantime, Syria is no longer the unitary state it once was. It might recover if Asad wins in the end, and it could disintegrate if he does not, with a variety of partial and decentralized options in between. Presently the country is divided into a number of zones of control. The regime has lost control of the border area with Turkey, which is divided into two different zones, one in the northwest controlled by the rebels (in which Aleppo is still contested territory), and the other in the northeast controlled by Syria's long-marginalized, and newly assertive Kurds, much to the consternation of the Turks, who fear that the Syrian Kurdish region might soon merge with its Iraqi counterpart to create a larger, more powerful, de facto state.[56] The rebels also control much of the Jazira area in the east, including the towns of Raqqah and Dayr al-Zur. The regime still controls the capital Damascus (but not entirely), important sections of the border area with Lebanon, and the northwestern coastal area, which is predominantly 'Alawi territory.

With the regime challenged by a radical Islamist opposition, the other minorities, like the Druze and the Christians, have remained neutral. In the current circumstances, neutrality essentially meant siding with the regime, which seemed to be largely true of the Christians. Looking at the examples of Egypt and Iraq, they could only throw in their lot with the incumbent secular regime, considering their prospective fate with the possible advent of an Islamist regime and, in the meantime, growing Islamist influence in a country of declining law and order.

Chaos would mean less protection for the Christians and much greater exposure to the wrath of the Islamists. In the ongoing fighting, the Christians at times have felt they were being deliberately targeted by the opposition because of their ostensible support for the regime. This was true, for example, in the shelling by the rebels of Christian quarters in Damascus in November 2013,[57] or previously in the heavy fighting in Homs, when Christian quarters were reported to have been very badly damaged by the rebels and eventually evacuated.

In sum, the territorial identities that were cultivated by the regimes in Iraq and Syria have proved to have been very thin veneers. Behind the territorialist façade, the regimes in question were sectarian to the core. Just like *majmu'at Tikrit* in Iraq, the Syrian Ba'thi regime was dominated (though obviously not exclusively) by the Asads and their allies from the 'Alawi community, especially those of the Kalbiyya tribe to which the Asads belonged.[58] The intimate cohesion of these minorities in power was a source of great reliability and stability as long as they lasted, but once they lost their control, the sectarian genie was let out of the bottle. The oppressed and the oppressors changed places, as in Iraq, or fought it out, inconclusively so far, as in Syria.

By contrast, Jordan's relative cohesion in comparison to the other states of the Fertile Crescent has contributed to its surprisingly long-term stability. Its rather soft authoritarian regime has remained in power without change for nearly a century, effectively holding the country together despite major demographic transformations. No less an artificial creation than its neighbors, and many would argue even considerably more so, Jordan has had a much better political record.

Jordan is a homogenous society in religious terms, being more than 90 percent Sunni Muslim Arabs. Since 1948, it has become increasingly Palestinian, and Palestinians presently constitute a majority of just over 50 percent in Jordan of the East Bank alone, not taking into account the West Bank territory occupied by Israel since 1967. But as tense as relations are between Jordanians and Palestinians, the distinctions between them are latter day twentieth century ones: they are skin deep in comparison to the far more profound sectarian fault lines in the region that date back centuries.

Tribalism amongst Jordan's East Bankers is a strong and very relevant social marker, but tribalism in Jordan has been mobilized far more in the service of the state than against it. In fact, the Jordanian state has become their political patrimony. They have no other and they will fight to defend it. As in other countries in the region, the regime deliberately fostered a Jordanian territorial identity. As of the 1970s and 1980s, in the aftermath of the "Black September" civil war of 1970 between the Jordanian armed forces and the Palestine Liberation Organization, the regime consciously promoted a shared Jordanian historical heritage, especially as a counterweight to the Palestinian "Other."

But in Jordan, this was not just a top-down exercise, but a bottom-up one too, whereby the tribes actively adopted the Jordanian identity as their own to the extent that they have actually become the main standard-bearers of what can be termed Jordanianism. Some tribesman have been said to believe that tribalism is commensurate with Jordanianism, and that the state has become the representative and aegis of the "tribe of the Jordanians" versus "the tribe of the Palestinians."[59] In the state bureaucracy, dominated by East Bankers, tribal mores lead to the appointment of ever more loyal East Bankers and thus, what has become known as the "bedoucracy" continues to perpetuate itself.[60]

In recent years, however, an unprecedented crack has appeared in the edifice of the traditionally loyalist East Banker elite and among the rank and file of the regime's tribal base. For decades, regime stability rested on an unwritten social contract between the monarchy and the East Bankers, according to which the regime has enjoyed the unswerving loyalty of East Bankers in exchange for jobs and salaries and other forms of government largesse. Since "Black September", there has been an institutionalized functional cleavage between original East Bank Jordanians and their less trusted compatriots of Palestinian extraction.

A process of Jordanization (*ardanna*) was initiated in the early 1970s whereby Palestinians were systematically removed from positions of influence in the government bureaucracy and the security establishment. Ever since, East Bankers have held the bulk of government jobs and almost exclusively run the security services and the military, while Palestinians dominate the country's private sector. Tensions between Palestinians and original Jordanians are ever-present, as the former resent their exclusion from positions of political influence while the latter resent Palestinian affluence, which they increasingly feel has been gained unfairly at their expense.

Ever since the late 1980s, when Jordan sank into deep economic crisis, Jordan has been urged by the IMF and the World Bank to engage in neoliberal economic reforms — including the extensive privatization of state enterprises — designed to reduce government spending. These measures, partially adopted, have mainly hurt the loyalist East Banker constituency who, having lost government jobs, are forced into the swelling ranks of the unemployed and are

generally in receipt of ever-decreasing government support. At the same time, the privatization of state enterprises has tended to further enrich Palestinian entrepreneurs, generating a sense among East Bankers that the regime is not holding up its end of their historical bargain. In recent years, condemnation of King 'Abdullah II (r. 2000–) has regularly been heard from within the inner sanctums of the East Banker elite.

While both the non-Islamist East Bankers and mainly Palestinian Islamists call for greater democratization, the East Bankers face a genuine dilemma on this issue. While they want more influence in determining how wealth and power are distributed in the kingdom, they are hardly interested in a democratization process that would almost certainly empower the Islamists and the Palestinians at their expense. Notwithstanding cracks in the edifice of the East Banker elite, the fractious opposition has yet to come up with a viable alternative to the status quo.

The Arab Spring had initially emboldened the Jordanian opposition, but the outcomes of the revolutions in countries like Egypt and Libya, and especially the bloodbath in Syria, were horrifying to most Jordanians. Even opponents of the monarchy tend to see "the Hashemite regime as the thing that holds [the country] all together."[61] The situation, therefore, remains manageable. As long as the unswerving loyalty of the security establishment lasts, the capacity of the regime to continue muddling through will depend more on its ability to deal effectively with the economy than on any other single factor, including the pace of political reform.

Concluding Thoughts

In many of the Arab states, even in those where the regime remained in power, e.g. Jordan and Morocco, the Arab Spring resulted in the diminution of the notorious *haybat al-sulta* (the fear of government) as Arab publics were said to have overcome the "barrier of fear." That however did not necessarily result in a transition to democracy, but rather in the weakening of the highly centralized state. As traditions and institutions of functioning democracies were not in place, Islamism, sectarianism, and tribalism contributed towards illiberal governance or conflict, or both combined. In June 2013, in a radical reversal, the Egyptian military, in what was nothing other than a counter-revolutionary coup, acted to bring about the deliberate restoration of the old-fashioned military regime, albeit a new version of it. With the use of virtually unbridled force, the army has consciously reestablished the former *haybat al-sulta*. The eventual endgame, like just about everything else is unpredictable. But it is most likely to look far more

authoritarian than the initial, rather fanciful, secular-liberal expectations of the so called Arab Spring.

Years before the Arab Spring, Egyptian political scientist Amr Hamzawy observed that Islamists did well in elections in various parts of the Arab world, from Egypt to Iraq, because they were "well embedded in the social fabric" of Arab societies. This ought to dampen, he wrote, "the dangerous illusion" that political openness in the region "will ultimately replace authoritarian regimes with secular forces" committed to Western-style liberal democracy. To invest hope in secularists, he argued, was to be completely detached from the realities of the current situation.[62]

Also long before the Arab Spring, Hassan Nafaa [Naf'a], a professor of political science at Cairo University, expressed his undisguised, but prescient, concern that throughout the Arab countries,

> a common denominator prevail[s]: overwhelming anxiety over the future of the Arab world... [over the danger that] the Arab order will collapse entirely and the whole region will fall into protracted chaos and bloodshed...[There was] the risk of comprehensive chaos and the fragmentation of the Arab world into rival sectarian entities... [Therefore] the most urgent task is to keep the existing states from shattering into even smaller entities founded upon narrow sectarian, ethnic or tribal affiliations... [and] to steer the Arab world out of its present era of darkness...[63]

What was previously suppressed by authoritarian regimes was now out in the open, with manifestations from tribal, ethnic, and sectarian competition and conflict to all-out civil war. It would therefore seem that for the foreseeable future a degree of authoritarianism would be necessary to maintain stability, and that a lack of stability could result in a further weakening of overall societal cohesion, which was never very strong in the first place. Fashioning genuine, durable cohesion in a situation of economic distress and chaotic efforts to democratize and build institutions was a herculean, and probably impossible task.

But democratization did not necessarily have to subvert the very existence of the state. In cases where there was a cohesive and determined minority movement that had reached a critical mass, and possessed a territorial core, like the Kurds in Iraq or the people of Southern Sudan, this was more likely. But, in fact, in both places the breakup was much more a function of war than of democracy, and so is the case elsewhere. Although ethno-national reassertion among North Africa's Berber populations is very much part of the picture in Morocco, Algeria, and Libya (and, further afield, in fragmented Mali), the Berber/Amazigh challenge in both Morocco and Algeria is peaceful, and

thus not threatening to the existence of either state, while in Libya, Amazigh militancy can have only a limited impact in certain areas, owing to the small size of the community.[64]

Yemen and Libya are extreme cases of countries that might break up. Yemen is presently no more than a shell of a state, surviving, like Lebanon, and one might eventually witness the reconstitution of South Yemen as it had existed before the unification of 1990. Libya is very low in components of statehood. It has ineffective state institutions and is torn asunder by tribal identities and regional divisions between Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan that were thrust together in the creation of Libya by the Western allies in 1951. Its oil wealth is unequally distributed between the three provinces, very much in Cyrenaica's favor, another factor which may precipitate the dissolution of the state, as warring tribes and factions compete for control of the country's resources.

Syria's breakup, if it happens, will also be more a function of the war and the resultant collapse of a "fierce" state, than of democratization. The longer the war goes on, the more damage is done to the social fabric, although even in the worst case, Syria will probably survive in some form, with a Syrian Arab identity, heavily Sunni, with some formula for including Christians, Druze, anti-Asad 'Alawis, and perhaps Kurds (a less likely prospect as time passes). Interestingly, in June 2011 the Antalya Declaration of opposition groups declared their intent to establish a multi-ethnic state, not an Arab state, thus acknowledging the difficulties in holding the country together under the current formula.[65]

The picture is thus extraordinarily varied and fluid. But overall, state and societal cohesion appear to be an increasingly dear resource throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

Notes

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