

NEW THREATS AND OLD CHALLENGES: THE FUTURE OF THE NATION STATE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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The Creation of Nation States in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

When the Ottoman Empire lost its bid during World War One it also lost its imperial possessions (primarily the Arab territories in the MENA region). The victorious European powers decided to colonize the Arab people instead of giving them their independence as had been promised to them during the war years in exchange for their assistance in defeating the Ottomans. The MENA region was divided among the British and French colonizing powers whereupon each of these European powers went ahead in reorganizing the territories they colonized in a manner that best served their political, administrative, and bureaucratic needs. These newly created British and French regional entities were created without any logic to them, in the sense that they did not correspond to any form of identity grouping (national, ethnic, or religious) or any form of recently shared historical experiences.¹ This form of irrational creation meant a lack of legitimacy to what was eventually to become the newly created independent nation states of the MENA region once colonialism came to an end. Groups of people found themselves lumped together within the same nation state and were now supposed to have the same sense of belonging when in fact they did not share a common national identity (let alone any sense of, religious, tribal, or even common ethnic identity).

Soon after its creation, the nation state in MENA faced existential and legitimizing challenges with the rise of Arab Nationalism as a political movement. Regardless of the form or shape that Arab Nationalism took (Nasserism, Ba'athist) it undermined the legitimacy of the newly created nation state in the Middle East painting it as an artificial creation of imperialist colonialist powers intended on dividing and weakening the Arabs by dividing them into a number of smaller weaker nation states as opposed to allowing them to unite as a one single powerful Arab Nation. For a number of decades the political discourse in MENA was dominated by this broad debate between nation state identity on the one hand, and the broader Arab Nationalist identity on the other. The challenge to the nation state reached a serious point when both Syria and Egypt decided to form a new common nation state named the United Arab Republic (UAR). Though the UAR was short lived it was proof that there was no sanctity afforded to the nation state in MENA.

¹ It is true the whole region was part of the Ottoman Empire but the historical experiences differed among these people during the last 400 years of Ottoman rule depending on the region (Wilayat or Sanjak) they belonged to.

Regime, Nation State, and Ideological Failure

Post colonialism, in addition to its perceived illegitimacy, the newly created and newly independent nation states of MENA soon faced many challenges and many problems. First was the creation of the state of Israel which gave rise to the Arab-Israeli conflict, that among many things, further fueled the challenge to the legitimacy of the nation state which was seen by Arab Nationalists as nothing but an attempt by the Western powers to divide the MENA region into small and weak nation states (as opposed to one unified strong Arab Nation) to further strengthen Israel at the expense of the other MENA players. Second was the corrupt and authoritarian nature of the regimes that came to power after independence. They could be broadly characterized as either authoritarian monarchical or authoritarian military regimes. These regimes were oppressive and in some instances dictatorial, they did not allow for any political participation or any expression of freedom. These regimes were also characterized by their reliance on single ethnic, tribal, or sectarian loyalties. The sectarian kin of the ruler controlled all the political and military power in the new nation state. This style of governing meant that for the most part, the benefits of state services, infrastructure, and social offerings were extended only to the groups that were loyal to the ruler and the regime to the exclusion of all others. This gave birth to internal divisions and grievances seeing as those who were pro-regime or from the ruler's region, tribe, or sectarian group gained all the benefits of citizenship and those who weren't received none. This meant that the nation state that is a new and questionable creation to begin with, was now after independence, seen not as a nation state for everyone but rather for some and not others. Over time this served to undermine the legitimacy not only of the regimes in power, but also of the nation state itself.

As time went by, the Arab Nationalist platform failed to deliver on all fronts. No Arab unity, no liberating of Palestine, no rule of law, no economic development or growth, no freedom of expression, no jobs, and certainly no future to look forward to. The response to this crisis came in the form of Islamist movements that offered a new ideological framework and also a new form of politically organized movements that not only challenged the existing regimes but also challenged the existence of the modern nation state system albeit from a pan Islamic perspective as opposed to a pan Arab perspective. So yet again, the mere existence of the nation state was challenged and yet again it was perceived to be an illegitimate concoction of the West aimed this time at dividing and weakening the Muslim Ummah or Muslim Nation.

New Threats and The Future of MENA Nation States

Any observer of current affairs cannot help but recognize the existential crisis facing the MENA nation states. This has already manifested itself in the disintegration of some of these states (Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen). This crisis is a factor of both old challenges that were never resolved (which we addressed in the two sections above) and newer challenges that have emerged. Among these newer challenges is a new regional-MENA political landscape that has been ushered by two things. First, the rise of regional non-state actors in the form of an experienced and savvy radical terroristic militant Islamic movement such as ISIS which is challenging the legitimacy and existence of nation states in MENA (just like older Islamic and Arab Nationalist movements did before it). Second, the United States' military withdrawal from Iraq and refusal to get involved with boots on the ground in Syria has left a power vacuum in the region which is being filled by Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. These regional players are now more willing to act regionally on behalf of their own interests. The conflicts in so many MENA countries have become proxy wars between the regional powers and are feeding into each other making it a lot harder to resolve any of these conflicts. The future of the nation state in the MENA region is very bleak.