Comparing the Emergence of Nations and National Projects in the Middle East

Sahar Khan
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In spite of the pervasive European presence in both Egypt's and the Levant states' emergences and subsequent national projects, there was a difference of kind (rather than merely of degree) in the nature and extent of this colonial impact. This is because foreign agreements (e.g. Sykes-Picot, Husayn-McMahon, Balfour Memorandum 1919) *created* the Levant states whereas Egypt already existed as a national unit when it was granted conditional independence in 1922. Hence, the way in which the Levant states emerged rendered their subsequent national projects doubly demanding. Whereas Egypt only had to build a nation-state, the Levant states had to build a nation-state *and* simultaneously foster a supplementary national identity. Although both national projects were led by upper class intelligentsia/ruling elite and had their respective illiberal elements, the latter's more demanding national project necessitated greater discipline and rigor. Hence, there was a difference of degree whereby the Levant states' national projects developed with relatively more authoritarian and illiberal tendencies than Egypt.

Egypt, with a 5,000-year old political life and quasi-autonomous status within the Ottoman Empire was a nation-in-the-making even before it was officially recognized as a nation. However, the making of the Levant nations really only got underway after their national identities of Lebanon, Transjordan, Iraq and Syria were imposed upon them by European pow-ers. The politico-national unit of Egypt existed before the British declared Egypt a protectorate in 1914. Thereafter the anti-imperialist demonstrations and strikes of 1919 took place, which according to Gelvin, "spread from students and labor activists to artisans and civil servants and even the urban poor."[1] The cross-cutting nature of this demonstration indicates a nascent national cohesion in Egypt. This cohesion may not have necessarily existed by design but was how things naturally played out. Later in 1922, the British Milner Commission granted Egypt conditional independence. When Egypt emerged as conditionally independent, it already had a national precedent of anti-imperialist struggle that strongly anchored subsequent efforts to turn the conditional into substantive and unconditional independence. Not only this but Egypt developed some forerunners to national structures of economics, politics etc. One example of such a forerunner in the economic sphere is Talat Harb's establishment of Bank Misr in 1920. These kinds of pre-national structures and an already emergent anti-imperialist consciousness amounted to the kind of national groundwork/identity that eluded the Levantine states.

Not only this, but even the Arabist identity that was present in the Levant was abruptly disrupted by the strategic imperialist drawing of the fraction-ridden states of Lebanon, Transjordan, Syria and Iraq. The fractious nature of these states further undermined the kind of cohesive Egyptian identity that preceded Egypt's independence and made the transition to its national project more natural and less abrupt. Rashid Khalidi's chapter "Ottomanism and Arabism" explores the importance of Arabism in Syria/"bilad al-sham." Specifically, he talks about how Damascus became the "capital of Arab nationalism – 'qalb al-'uruba al-nabid' (the beating heart of Arabism)" and mentions Beirut as another major center of Arabism.[2] Hence, it is evident that an Arabist identity that was emergent did not experience continuity as the lines drawn by the mandatory European powers in the Levant did not coincide with the lines of this intellectual-cultural current. Damascus was promised to King Faysal as a part of his Arabian na-tion in the Husayn-McMahon Correspondence.[3] However, after Faysal was proclaimed King of Syria in 1920 due to his capture of Damascus, the French forcibly ousted him in the July Battle of Maysalun. There was little British opposition to this French takeover as the Sykes-Picot agreement[4] (1916) posited that Syria would be in the A-Zone, under French influence. This shows a complete disregard for local Arab nationalistic demands. Hence, from the outset these nations were divided in a way that undermined Arabist identity. The Arabist identity could have offered the kind of cohesive grounding that Egypt benefited from.

Flags at the Arab American Festival in Orlando, FL (photo by Flickr user 3ammo)

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[1] James L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East – A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 187.

[2] Rashid Khalidi, "Chapter Three: Ottomanism and Arabism in Syria Before 1914: A Reassessment," in Rashid Khalidi et al, eds., *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, pp. 50-69 (New York: Columbia University Press), 55.

[3] King Husayn and Henry McMahon, Husayn-McMahon Correspondence, first 4 items (1915-1916), from George Antonius' The Arab Awakening (1938) <http://www.mideastweb.org/mcmahon.htm> (accessed 25 April 2011).

[4] Sir Mark Sykes and François Picot, Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916), Yale Law School – Lillian Goldman Law Library, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/sykes.asp> (accessed 25 April 2011).

gans before its national independence, Lebanon, Transjordan, Syria, and Iraq's national projects were stunted by the fact that their boundaries were drawn in an economically, politically and socially debilitating way. Even though Balfour claims that "frontiers should be determined by economic and ethnographic considerations rather than strategic"[5] this was clearly not the case. Leaving aside the cultural connection of Arabism, Gelvin says that Greater Syria's cities of Damascus and Beirut also formed a "distinct economic unit"[6] and were joined by rail. These two cities went to two separate nation-states (Syria and Lebanon respectively). This economic unit that could have continued to flourish after 1922 was broken up by the Mandate system. Jordan was a country with virtually no economic resources, and Iraq was and still remains a highly sectarian state. The Assyrian massacre of 1933 in Iraq, which caused approximately 3,000 casualties is just one incident that exemplifies the sectarian nature of the Iraqi state.

Unlike Egypt, Iraq did not have a national identity. National identity started to be molded in terms of opposition to religious minorities which in Kanan Makiya's words meant that "Killing Assyrians, however nonexistent their threat might have been, was perceived as enhancing the prospects of Iraqi unity."[7] Because of the creation of these unnatural nations, very perverse forms of unity-creation emerged whereby illiberal and militaristic practices became deeply rooted in the Iraqi political culture. Hence this is just one example of how the extremely demanding national project of Iraq (to build a nation-state and a national

entity) that was imposed by mandatory boundaries lead to a militaristic and inhumane treatment of minorities in the name of their national projects.

One possible reason why Egypt's national project was less illiberal was the political heterogeneity that developed before Egypt emerged as a substantively independent nation. Gelvin discusses that the narrow upper class interest of the mainstream Egyptian national movement "failed to encompass or even control the totality of the Egyptian public sphere" and so it "left the door open to a host of other political movements that posed alternatives to the mainstream nationalist movement."[8] Liberal/progressive political alternatives to the ruling elite were also present in Iraq in the form of the Al-Ahali group and the Communists. However, these groups were not able to gain traction. Al-Ahali did not become an opposition force that could guide the Iraqi political culture in a progressive direction because it was co-opted in the military coups of Bakr Sidqi (1936) and Kaylani (1941). In doing so, the Al-Ahali group "drew attention to the need to strengthen the army and foster patriotism among the soldiers" and they claimed, "Iraq had reached a state of tyranny that allowed no other option but violence."[9] Hence, it can be seen that the exigent conditions of the national project eclipsed even the democratic fervor of this liberal group. The reason why they did not gain traction is that the urgency of the national project that Iraq had to undertake in order to ensure its security negated the kind of pluralistic political culture that would be needed for oppositional groups to effect the national project.

Whereas Egypt's pluralistic forces took root before independence, Iraqi pluralism emerged at a time when there was a greater

perceived need of strong leadership that lead to a more top-down national project. Orit Bashkin discusses at length the Iraqi elite's preoccupation with cultivating an Iraqi cultural and national consciousness. The fact that Iraq's national project was relatively more top-down and less people-based than the Egyptian one is evident in Husri's explanation of how the "Iraqi people" were ignorant of collective consciousness:

> "Husri explained that many Iraqis remained indifferent to the activities of such organization as a result of being unaccustomed to a social life and to communal projects. The Iraqis' compassion and sense of solidarity thus remained individualized, limited to their own families and local settings……..Iraqis, in other words…had not become modern in the sense that they could not overcome anonymity through a sense of belonging to a larger unit, such as a city and a nation."[10]

In the Iraqi national project, there was definitely a greater break between the ruling elite and peasant, working class, and other sections of Iraqi society. This break can be attributed to the lack of a binding force that would be a nationalistic culture. On the contrary, the peasants and workers in Egypt had developed allegiance to the Egyptian nation through involvement in the national economic activity of cotton-growing, the beginnings of which can be tracked as far back as the 1860s. Whereas for the Iraqis part of the national project was creating a national consciousness, this consciousness had already evolved organically for Egypt, so Egypt only had to focus on building the nation-state and completely freeing itself of imperial influence.

In Lebanon, the French policy of divide and rule undermined the national cohesiveness needed to build a nation-state. The French

declared themselves the protectors of the Christian minorities, specifically the Maronites of Mount Lebanon. They empowered these minorities at the expense of the Muslim majority, hence emphasizing and stoking religious identities that were at odds with a prospective Lebanese national identity. The sowing of these kinds of divisions were also what enabled the French to justify their prolonged mandate. Other than the difficulties that the mandate system had beset for the Levant nations, in the event that there were revolts like the Iraqi revolt of 1921 and the Syrian Revolt, the British and French respectively suppressed them. On the other hand, the response to the widespread Egyptian revolt in 1919 was a British concession (even though half-hearted) of conditional independence to Egypt in 1922.

In conclusion, it is evident that in the case of both Egypt and the Levant states, the role of foreign powers is undeniable. However there is a major difference in how these foreign powers influenced these two entities. In the Levant, the foreign powers carved out nations that did not have underpinning national cohesion, which made the national project far more difficult. This, coupled with the de-unifying and debilitating elements foreign powers had sown into the make-up of Lebanon, Transjordan, Iraq and Syria, rendered some of these nations (especially Iraq) susceptible to militaristic and illiberal means to deal with the difficult demands of their national project. On the other hand, Egyptian national identity had developed over the years due to gradual interaction with Ottoman and Western imperialist forces, which set up the nation for a more natural transition to independence. Hence, although the national projects of all the countries discussed were heavily led by urban intelligentsia/elite, Egypt was less authoritarian and top-down because the ease of this transition did not require the harsh discipline necessitated in the Levant states. ◈

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[5] Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939, *Balfour Memorandum on Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia* (London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1952), 346.

[6] Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East*, 200.

[7] Kanan Makiya, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq*, 166-175 (California: UC Press, 1998), 171.

[8] Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East*, 188.

[9] Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq*, 52-86 (California: Stanford University Press, 2008), 70.

[10] Ibid., 57.