

# Ethnic conflict and state-building in the Arab world

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## Introduction

All the world's armed conflicts since 1988, with the exception of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, have been over internal ethnic issues. Indeed since 1945, ethnic conflicts have claimed some 16 million lives, several times more than those dead in inter-state wars. At present, ethnic conflicts span three old continents – Asia, Africa and Europe. Typical examples are those in Burma and Sri Lanka in Asia; Somalia, Sudan and Rwanda in Africa, the former USSR and Yugoslavia in Europe.<sup>1</sup>

With only 8 per cent of the world's population, the Arab Middle East has seen some 25 per cent of all the world's armed conflicts since 1945. Most of these conflicts have been ethnically based. Table 1 shows the balance of inter-state and inter-ethnic armed conflicts in the region in terms of human and material cost. The Arab-Israeli conflict (some six wars and a continued Palestinian and Lebanese struggle against Israeli occupation) has claimed some 200,000 lives in forty years. In contrast, during the same period, ethnic conflicts have claimed several times as many lives. The Lebanese civil war (1975–1990) alone matched the same number of casualties as all the Arab-Israeli wars. The Sudanese civil war (on and off since 1956) has claimed at least five times as many lives as all Arab-

Israeli wars. The same relative costs apply in terms of population displacement, material devastation, and financial expenditure.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1990s, it is expected that the armed conflicts in the region will be more of the intra-state than of the inter-state variety. Militant Islamic activism is to be added to the current sources of armed civil strife in a score of Arab Middle Eastern countries. Algeria and Egypt are at present two prominent cases in point. Thus,

the greatest threat to security of the states in the region is likely to be internal.<sup>3</sup> The civil war in Yemen in 1994 was a possible preview of things to come. The ideological and regional dimensions of the conflict were entangled with sectarian ones – i.e. between a Sunni, Shafeie, allegedly socialist elite in the South *vis-à-vis* a Shia'a, Zaydi, tribal elite in the North. The manipulation or spill-over effects of each internal armed conflict

could, of course, lead to inter-state conflicts as well. This article, however, deals with only one type, the ethnically based internal conflicts.

The disproportionality of ethnic conflicts compared to inter-state ones is more surprising in view of the global socio-cultural demographics of the Arab world. With the broadest definition of 'ethnicity', as referring to contiguous or co-existing groups differing in race, religion, sect, language, culture or national ori-

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TABLE 1. The cost of armed conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region: 1948–1993

Type of conflict	Period	No. of casualties	Estimated cost in billions of US\$ (1991 value)	Population displacement
<b>Inter-state conflict</b>				
Arab-Israeli conflict	1948–1990	200,000	300.00	3,000,000
Iraq-Iran	1980–1988	600,000	300.00	1,000,000
Gulf War	1990–1991	120,000	650.00	1,000,000
Other inter-state conflicts	1945–1991	20,000	50.00	1,000,000
<b>Sub-total</b>		<b>940,000</b>	<b>1,300.00</b>	<b>6,000,000</b>
<b>Intra-state conflict</b>				
Sudan	1956–1991	900,000	30.00	4,500,000
Iraq	1960–1991	400,000	30.00	1,200,000
Lebanon	1958–1990	180,000	50.00	1,000,000
Yemen	1962–1972	100,000	5.00	500,000
Syria	1975–1985	30,000	0.50	150,000
Morocco (Sahara)	1976–1991	20,000	3.00	100,000
S. Yemen	1986–1987	10,000	0.20	50,000
Somalia	1989–1991	20,000	0.30	200,000
Other intra-state conflicts	1945–1991	30,000	1.00	300,000
<b>Sub-total</b>		<b>1,690,000</b>	<b>120.00</b>	<b>8,000,000</b>
<b>Grand total (all armed conflicts)</b>		<b>2,630,000</b>	<b>1,420.00</b>	<b>14,000,000</b>

Source: Files of the Arab Data Unit (ADU), Ibn Khaldoun Center for Development Studies.

gin,<sup>4</sup> the Arab world is ethnically one of the more homogeneous areas in the world today.

In 1993, the Arab world had a population of slightly over 236 million. The overwhelming majority (80 per cent, i.e. 190 million) share the same physical characteristics. Religiously, they are Muslims of the Sunni denomination and culturally and linguistically, they are Arabic-speaking (see Tables 2 and 3). In terms of national origin, they have been rooted for many centuries in the same 'Arab Homeland' (extending from Morocco on the Atlantic Ocean to Bahrain in the Arab Persian Gulf). This overwhelming majority gets even bigger as we add groups which differ in only one ethnic variable which is perceived by the respective group itself as being a marginal element in the definition of its identity. For example, most Shia'a Muslims and most Christians living in the Arab world consider their 'Arabism' as the primary axis of their identity, superseding their 'Shi'ism' or 'Christianity'. For them, the 'linguistic-cultural' variable is the more salient ethnic-divide. On this basis the Arab 'majority' jumps to over 86 per cent of the population in the Arab world. Table 4 shows the major ethnic groupings in the Arab world along four dimensions: cultural-linguistic, religious, denominational, and ethnic.

Despite the apparent homogeneity on the pan-Arab level, we observe marked ethnic heterogeneities in several countries, e.g. Sudan, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Bahrain, and Yemen. In these nine countries, as many as 35 per cent or more of the population differ from the Arab/Muslim/Sunni/Caucasian majority in one or more of the four ethnic variables (language, religion, sect, or ethnic group). It is noted that nearly all nine countries are located at the outer rim of the Arab world, often intersecting a cultural borderland. In all nine countries, there has been some overt form of ethnic tension. In four of them – Sudan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen – such tensions have flared up in recent decades into a protracted armed conflict. The unity and territorial integrity of each has been seriously threatened.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the preponderance of ethnic conflicts in the Arab world, Arab social scientists and political activists alike have not given the phenomenon its due share of attention. The last book written by a contemporary Arab scholar, Albert Hourani, was in 1947 – i.e. some forty-eight years ago.<sup>6</sup> Marxists, Nationalists, and Islamists have tended to ignore the ethnic question or write it off as residual. The 'foreign

TABLE 2. Linguistic minorities in the Arab world at the beginning of the 1990s

Minority group	Total no. in the Arab world	Majority religion	Ethnic origin	Country of origin	Country of concentration
Kurds	5,000,000	Muslims	Hamitic/Semitic	Kurdistan	Iraq/Syria
Armenians	1,000,000	Christians	Hamitic/Semitic	Armenia (Turkey and ex-USSR)	Lebanon/Syria/ Iraq/Egypt
Aramites	125,000	Muslims	Hamitic/Semitic	Syria/Iraq/ Lebanon	Syria/Iraq/ Lebanon
Turkmans	125,000	Muslims	Hamitic/Semitic	South ex-USSR/ Turkey	Jordan/Syria
Turks	125,000	Muslims	Hamitic/Semitic	Turkey	Syria/Iraq
Iranians	350,000	Muslims	Hamitic/Semitic	Iran	Iraq/Gulf States
Western Jews	3,500,000	Jewish	Hamitic/Semitic	Europe + two Americas	Palestine/Israel
African Tribes	5,500,000	Pagan	Africa	S. Sudan/S. Morocco	S. Sudan/S. Morocco
Nubians	500,000	Muslims	Hamitic/Semitic	S. Egypt/N. Sudan	S. Egypt/N. Sudan
Berbers	15,000,000	Muslims	Hamitic/Semitic	Morocco/Algeria/ Tunisia/Libya	Morocco/Algeria/ Tunisia/Libya

Source: Saad Eddin Ibrahim, *Reflection on the Question of Minorities* (in Arabic), Cairo: Ibn Khaldoun Center, 1992. Most of these figures are approximations estimated or taken pro rata from the following sources:

A.W. Hourani, *Minorities in the Arab World*, London: Oxford University Press, 1974.

E. Gellner and C. Micaud (eds), *Arabs and Berbers*, London: Duckworth, 1973.

M.O. Beshir, *The Southern Sudan: Background to Conflict*. Khartoum: Khartoum University Press, 2nd Impression, 1970.

*World Tables*, Published for the World Bank by the Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1980.

R.D. Maclaurin (ed.), *The Political Role of Minority Groups in the Middle East*, New York: Praeger, 1979 (Appendix B, pp. 268–87).

TABLE 3. Non-Sunni Islamic sects at the beginning of 1990s

Non-Sunni Islamic sects in the Arab world	Total no.	Century in which the sect appeared	Country of concentration
Shiaa Twelvers	10,000,000	7th/9th	Iraq/Lebanon/Gulf States
Zaydies	3,500,000	8th	Yemen/Arabian Peninsula
Ismaelites	300,000	8th	Syria/Lebanon/Iraq/Gulf States
Druz	1,350,000	11th	Syria/Lebanon/Palestine/Israel
Alawites	3,000,000	9th	Syria/Lebanon
Abadhi Kharajites	1,500,000	7th	Oman/Algeria/Tunisia
Total	19,650,000		

Source: Saad Eddin Ibrahim, *Reflection on the Question of Minorities* (in Arabic), Cairo: Ibn Khaldoun Center, 1992. Most of these figures are approximations, reached by two methods: (1) the last official enumeration plus the percentage of natural increase that is similar to the natural increase of the total of inhabitants in the countries where those groups live, for the years following the last census; or (2) taking the average of the maximum and minimum estimates mentioned in trustworthy references dealing with the topic.

We mainly depended on the following references:

A. W. Hourani, *Minorities in the Arab World*, London: Oxford University Press, 1974.

Michael Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.

E. Gellner and C.M. Micaud (eds), *Arabs and Berbers*, London: Duckworth, 1973.

*World Tables*, published for the World Bank by the Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1980.

TABLE 4. Major ethnic divides of the Arab world in the early 1990s

Ethnic divide	Population (in millions)	Percentage	Country of concentration
1. The majority (Arabic-speaking, Muslims, Sunnis, Caucasians)	190.0	80.0	In all Arab countries except Lebanon, Iraq and Bahrain
2. Linguistic/cultural minorities (non-Arab)	32.3	13.7	Morocco, Sudan, Algeria, Iraq
3. Religious minorities (non-Muslims)	17.9	7.6	Sudan, Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine
4. Islamic minorities (non-Sunnis)	20.8	8.8	Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, The Gulf
5. Ethnic minorities (non-Semitic/Hamitic/Caucasians)	8.7*	3.7	Sudan

\*Also included in divides 2 and 3, above.

Source: Saad Eddin Ibrahim, *Sects, Ethnicity, and Minority Groups in the Arab World* (in Arabic), Cairo, Ibn Khaldoun Center, 1994, p. 86.

factor' (e.g. Imperialists and Zionists) has been offered as a common explanation underlying most ethnic conflicts in the Arab world. While such a factor is not to be dismissed, a new generation of Arab social scientists is now going far beyond such conspiratorial explanations of ethnic conflict.<sup>7</sup> The remainder of this paper offers an account of these new endeavours, discussed under the following four headings: competing loci of identity, dilemmas of modern state-building, socio-economic cleavages, and vulnerabilities to external factors.

The four problematiques are generally interconnected in Arab countries; but their interplay is particularly acute in those countries with greater ethnic heterogeneity. The disintegration of traditional Islamic policies in the nineteenth century, the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire (1922), and the concomitant or subsequent Western colonial designs led to the fragmentation of the Arab world and the embryonic beginnings of modern 'territorial states' in the inter-war period (1918-1939).<sup>8</sup> As these states gained political independence in the 1940s to 1960s, they inherited equally fragmented ethnic minorities. The political space was replete with challenges that had to do with forging a national identity, state-building, consolidating independence, achieving socio-economic development, and ensuring reasonable measures of equity. Moreover, these challenges arose in an international system polarized by the ideological and geopolitical conflict of the Cold War (1945-1990).

Beyond the immediate scope of this paper, there is substantial relevance to other Middle Eastern countries – Turkey, Iran, Israel and Cyprus. In each of these the ethnic question has flared up periodically. The most recent and dramatic case in point is that of the armed conflict in Southern Turkey between government forces and the Kurdish rebels under the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK), starting in late 1994 and continuing well into 1995. Some 50,000 of the Turkish army and Air Forces have waged a campaign of search-and-destroy against the PKK in Turkey and a strategy of 'hot pursuit' in neighbouring Iraqi territory.<sup>9</sup>

The Turkish-Kurdish problem has all the stamp of the Iraqi-Kurdish, Iranian-Kurdish, and to a lesser extent, the Syrian-Kurdish counterparts. The roots and subsequent dynamics are nearly the same, i.e. the fragmentation of indigenous peoples and groups against their will to suit original colonial designs; and later on to suit the newly created territorial states. However, we will confine our treatment to the Arab world as a geopolitical cultural area, distinct from the rest of the Middle East though naturally overlapping with and similar to it in many ways.

## The question of identity

Briefly stated, the main competing ideological paradigms in the Arab world since the turn of the century tend to be exclusionary of certain

TABLE 5. Non-Islamic religious minorities in the Arab world in the late 1980s

Non-Islamic religious minorities	Total in the Arab world	Country of concentration
<b>1. Christians</b>	<b>12,588,000</b>	
Greek (Roman) Orthodox	1,900,000	Syria/Lebanon/Jordan/Palestine
Nestorians (Assyrians)	900,000	Syria/Iraq/Lebanon
Coptic Orthodox	5,600,000	Egypt/Sudan
Yacobian Orthodox	225,000	Syria/Lebanon/Iraq
Armenian Orthodox	600,000	Syria/Lebanon/Jordan/Iraq/Egypt
Western Latin Church	625,000	Sudan/Syria/Lebanon/Palestine/Egypt
Greek-Roman Catholics	500,000	Lebanon/Syria/Egypt
Catholic Syrians	8,000	Lebanon/Syria
Armenian Catholics	85,000	Lebanon/Syria
Copts (Roman Catholics)	170,000	Egypt/Sudan
Caledonians	625,000	Iraq/Syria/Lebanon
Maronites	1,150,000	Lebanon/Syria
Protestants	200,000	Sudan/Lebanon/Syria/Egypt
<b>2. Jews</b>	<b>4,700,000</b>	
Rabbinates Orthodox	4,400,000	Palestine/Israel/Western Territories
Qaraites	150,000	Palestine/Israel/Eastern Territories
Samaritans	150,000	Israel
<b>3. Heterodox religion sector</b>	<b>5,825,000</b>	
Sabians	150,000	Iraq
Yazidies	125,000	Iraq
Bohais	50,000	Palestine/Israel/Iraq
African tribal regions	4,500,000	Sudan
<b>Total of non-Islamic religious minorities</b>	<b>22,113,000</b>	

Source: Saad Eddin Ibrahim, *Reflection on the Question of Minorities* (in Arabic), Cairo: Ibn Khaldoun Center, 1992. Most of these figures are approximations, reached by the same two methods noted in Table 3: the last official enumeration plus the percentage of natural increase that is similar to the natural increase of the total of inhabitants in the countries where those groups live, for the years following the last census. Or taking the average of the maximum and minimum estimates mentioned in trustworthy references dealing with the topic.

We mainly depended on the following references:

Robert B. Betts, *Christians in the Arab East: A Political Study*, Athens: Layacabettus Press, 1975.

A.H. Hourani, *Minorities in the Arab World*, London: Oxford University Press, 1974.

M.O. Beshir, *The Southern Sudan, Background to Conflict*, Khartoum: Khartoum University Press, 1970.

*World Tables*, Published for the World Bank by the Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1980.

R.D. Maclaurin (ed.), *The Political Role of Minority Groups in the Middle East*, New York: Praeger, 1979 (Appendix B. pp. 268-287).

groups from full-fledged membership of the political community. At present, the Arab intellectual-political space is dominated by Islamic and secular nationalist ideologies. Each has its own locus of political identity.

### The Islamists' vision and ethnicity

The Islamists, naturally, base the political bond of culture, society, and state on religion. This would automatically exclude non-Muslims from the respective policies of the Arab world – i.e. some 18 million, mostly Christians together with a few hundred thousand Jews (see Table 5). In its extreme purist form, the exclusion

would entail some 21 million non-Sunni Muslims as well (i.e. various Shia'as and Kharajite sects). Mainstream Islamists would make that exclusion partial – i.e. confined to banning non-Muslims from assuming top commanding offices (e.g. heads of state, governors, and the judiciary).<sup>10</sup> Their rationale is that holders of such offices perform not only temporal roles but also carry out religious duties – i.e. leading the prayers, implementing the *Shari'a* (Islamic law), and commanding the faithful in the *Jihad* (holy religious war). The purist Islamists would make the exclusion of non-Muslims complete from any state or governmental role at any level. To them, non-Muslims are to exist as

'protected communities' (*ahl zimma*), run their own communal affairs, and pay the *jezia* (a poll tax).<sup>11</sup> So long as they respect the Muslim majority and recognize the sovereignty of the Islamic state, non-Muslim communities are to be treated with respect, compassion and religious tolerance.

In this vision, all Muslims are considered equal regardless of their ethnic origins, culture, or national origin. Accordingly, Muslim Kurds (in Iraq and Syria), Berbers (in Algeria and Morocco) and Black Muslims (in Mauritania and Sudan) are not considered 'minorities'. Together these Muslim (but non-Arab) groups number over 20 million. This Islamist vision of the 'political order' would naturally be welcomed by non-Arab but Muslim members of the community, in which 'citizenship' is based on religion. Obviously, in such a polity non-Muslims in the Arab world feel quite threatened, as well as alienated.

### **The Arab nationalist vision and ethnicity**

The Arab nationalist vision started to unfold in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire. It emerged as a reaction to both Ottoman rule and the Young Turks' Turanic or Pan-Turkic ideology. In its pure form, the Arab nationalist vision is predicated on 'culture' and 'language' as the pillars of political identity of state, society and citizenship. In this sense, Arab nationalism has been a secular ideology. Accordingly, all native speakers of Arabic, bearers of Arab culture, and who perceive themselves as 'Arabs' would be full-fledged members of the 'Arab nation', enjoying full rights of citizenship regardless of ethnic origin, religion or sect. The Arab nationalist vision would not recognize other non-Arab national or cultural groups living in the 'Arab Homeland' as autonomous communities or independent entities in their own right. However, their individual members would be treated as equal 'Arab' citizens under the law.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, while the Islamists would exclude 'non-Muslims', the Arab nationalists would exclude 'non-Arabs' from full-fledged membership of the polity. At present (1995), the size of the latter group is some 20 million. On the other hand, non-Muslim Arabs are to be fully

integrated in the national political community and these amount to some 18 million (mostly Christians).

Naturally non-Arabs would feel threatened by the Arab nationalist vision. This is particularly the case with sizeable non-Arab communities which have national aspirations of their own (e.g. the Kurds) or who are keen on preserving their cultural integrity and language (e.g. the Berbers). Also, some non-Muslim communities fear that despite its secular appearance, Arab nationalism has its Islamic underpinnings. This apprehension is to be found explicitly among the Maronite Christians of Lebanon, and implicitly among the Christian Copts of Egypt.<sup>13</sup>

Thus each of the competing paradigms of identity in the Arab world would exclude what the other would include in their respective definition of the political community. We will see how modern state-builders, in practice, have tried to cope with this dilemma by the subtle evolving of country nationalism referred to as *Wataniyya*.<sup>14</sup>

### **The intractable question of identity**

As it turns out in the Arab world, as elsewhere, the question of identity is one of the most vexing socio-political cleavages. It taps cultural, symbolic, and existential notions of individual and collective self. Unlike other cleavages (e.g. class, occupational, educational, ideological, political), ethnic identity and the conflicts it generates are 'intrinsically less amenable to compromise than those revolving around material issues'.<sup>15</sup>

Both the Islamic and nationalist visions have failed to take into account sub-identities within their own broad primordial frame of reference. Thus, Islamic visionaries have tended to play down sectarian cleavages within and between fellow Muslims. In the Lebanese civil war (1975-1989), more Shia'a and Sunni Muslims killed each other than they killed Christians. Indeed, more Shia'a Muslims killed each other than they killed Sunni and Druz Muslims, and than Christians of all sects. By the same token, more Christians were killed by other Christians than by Muslims in the Lebanese civil war.<sup>16</sup>

Nor would proponents of the Islamic vision of a political identity take much comfort from



the infighting among Afghani Muslim Mujahideen which claimed more Muslim casualties in three years (1990–1993) than the entire ten years war of resistance against the Soviet and Soviet-backed regime (1980–1990).<sup>17</sup> Equally, proponents of the pan-Arab nationalist vision have been seriously discredited by actions of regimes espousing that vision. The quarter of a century of rivalry between the two Baathist regimes in Iraq and Syria is a dramatic case in point. It just happens that the elite of each regime belongs to a different religious Muslim minority sect in their respective countries.<sup>18</sup>

Much of the tension in North Yemen (1970–1990) and then in unified Yemen (1990–1994), which escalated into a full-fledged civil war in mid-1994, has not been without its Muslim sectarian undertones. Despite official denials by all parties in the conflict, the hidden but persistent cleavage has been between the Shia'a Muslim Zaydis of the North and the Sunni Muslim Shawafi of the South.<sup>19</sup>

Thus elegant and neat as the two competing visions of identities in the Arab world may be, they have in practice failed to project a coherent or consistent political programme. They have failed to deal with sub-identities, let alone other socio-economic variables.

## The task of state-building

The modern state-building process in the Arab world is some seven decades old. The earliest one in Egypt (1922) tackled the issue of identity with a compromise. While Egypt's first constitution (1923) was clearly secular, basing full citizenship on birthright, regardless of religion, race, or creed, nevertheless one article stipulated that 'Islam is the state religion'. But this was understood, in Egypt and elsewhere in Arab countries with similar constitutions and stipulations, to mean only two things, which did not seriously impede the integration of non-Muslims into the polity. The first was that the head of state would be a Muslim; the second was that Islamic Shari'a would be a source (but not the only one) of legislation.<sup>20</sup>

In practice, nearly every Arab state today has avoided the clear dichotomies of choice – such as between religious vs. secular, or national vs. country (*Qawmiyya* vs. *Wataniyya*) – in forging their political-cultural

identities. Instead each Arab state (or regime) has attempted its own reconciliation, with greater emphasis on one particular dimension but never to the total exclusion of the other. Hence, it is possible to plot the Arab States on the two continua of 'religious-secular' and 'country (*watan*) – Arab nation (*Umma Arabiyya*)', as Figure 1 shows. Lebanon is the only exception among Arab states, where a constitutional tradition (since the 1940s) provides that the head of state is a Christian Maronite; the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim; and the Speaker of the House (Parliament) a Shiaa Muslim. The 1980 constitutional reform did not alter this tradition, though modified the powers invested in these respective offices and balanced the number of Muslim and Christian deputies in the Parliament.

The first continuum (religious-secular) is based on the salience of religious symbols and rules of legitimization in basic documents of the polity, e.g. Saudi Arabia's flag and state symbol is a drawing of the Holy Koran, flanked by two crossed swords. The second continuum is based on the salience and invocation of pan-Arab nationalist principles in its basic political charters.

The pragmatic reconciliation of secular and religious considerations was not the only issue in forging the identity of the new states. Early state-builders also had to contend with reconciling pan-Arab national considerations with those of sub-national identities (*Qawmmi* vs. *Qautry*). The leaders of the pan-Arab movement who had rallied around Sherif Hussein of Mecca in the Great Arab Revolt (1916) were frustrated and felt betrayed as Britain and France reneged on their promises of Arab independence and unification (as was later revealed by the secret Sykes-Picot agreement). Yet Arab nationalist hopes remained alive. With the successive independence of one country after another in mid-century, early state-builders made another pragmatic reconciliation. In their constitutions or declarations of independence, it was often stipulated that while their country was declared as an 'independent sovereign state', it nonetheless remained an integral part of the 'Arab Nation' or the 'Arab Homeland', waiting for the opportune moment to 'reunite with the other Arab parts'.<sup>21</sup> The establishment of the League of Arab States in 1945 was a formalization of this

**Religious (Islamic)****Secular**

Saudi-Arabia Gulf States Sudan Morocco Jordan Libya Egypt Algeria Yemen Tunisia Palestine Iraq Syria Lebanon

Morocco Tunisia Algeria Sudan Lebanon Saudi Arabia Gulf States Egypt Palestine Jordan Libya Iraq Syria Yemen

**Country Patriotism (Wataniyya)****Arab Nationalism (Qawmiyya)**

Figure 1. Arab states according to the continua religious/secular and country patriotism/Arab nationalism.

compromise. It ensured the separate independence of its member states but kept the door open for gradual measures of co-operation, integration, and unification.

Thus while Arab ideologists debated their competing visions, some of which were mutually exclusive, practical statesmen and politicians engaged in the 'art of the possible'. The above two compromises were cases in point and operated reasonably well during the early decades of independence in several Arab countries which adopted 'liberal' or quasi-liberal systems of governance – e.g. Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Morocco. Where sizeable subgroups existed they were accommodated politically under such 'liberal' systems. In some cases (e.g. Lebanon and Jordan), they were formally or explicitly recognized and allotted a proportional share in elected and ministerial councils. In others (e.g. Egypt, Syria, Iraq), similar, though implicit accommodations were practised. In fact, the first Syrian Prime Minister after independence, Faris Al-Khoury, was a Christian and Egypt had Coptic Christian Prime Ministers such as Boutros Ghali, and Youssef Wahba. Iraq had Shia'a and Kurdish Prime Ministers and Speakers of the Parliament, e.g. I. Koubba. In other words, socio-ethnic diversity was matched by a political pluralism of one sort or another.

The end of the first liberal experiment in those Arab states during the 1950s and 1960s led to potential problems for their minority communities. The military regimes which took over power in many of them adopted militant Arab nationalist ideologies and bold socio-economic reforms. On both counts, they were bound

to alienate this or that group in their respective countries. In Egypt, for example, Nasser's July 1952 Revolution alarmed non-Muslim communities on several grounds. None of the one hundred Free Officers who staged the Revolution was a Christian, whilst Copts alone (apart from other Christian denominations) represented some 8 per cent of the population. Nor were Egyptian Copts particularly enthusiastic about the new regime's Arab nationalist orientation. Worse still were the regime's socialist policies which in the aggregate hit the Christians harder, as they were disproportionately represented in the landed bourgeois classes of Egypt. Something similar occurred elsewhere in the Arab world where military or single-party regimes ruled for several years. In countries with marked heterogeneity, this lack of political pluralism was bound to create tension. Even when military single-party regimes attempted to accommodate minority groups, such accommodation was often either nominal or arbitrary, depending on the whims of the rulers; thus leading to further alienation of these groups.<sup>22</sup>

In two extreme cases, majority rule was replaced by the rule of a minority. Thus, under the ideological guise of the Arab Baath Socialist Party, an Alawite military rule has tightened its grip on the Arab Muslim Sunni majority (65 per cent) in Syria since 1970. Since 1968 Iraq's Arab Muslim Sunni minority (35 per cent) has had the upper hand over all other groups, some of which are numerically larger, e.g. the Shia'a Muslims who account for about 45 per cent of Iraq's total population.

In the Sudan, members of the ruling military elite have invariably come from one Arab



Shati', Gaza, March 1994. Fouad Elkhoury/Rapho

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Muslim northern province around the capital Khartoum. Under populist, socialist, and now Islamic guise the three military coups d'état (of 1958, 1969, and 1989) have been staged by Arab Muslim officers from the north. In none of them was there a single southern non-Muslim officer at the start. Later on, a few token southerners were added.

With the exception of Egypt, the alienation of minority groups *vis-à-vis* the ruling military-ideological single-party regimes has grown into overt unrest. In Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Algeria, Somalia, and Mauritania it has erupted into violent confrontations of varying degrees during the last three decades. At present, there is protracted armed conflict in the Sudan, Somalia, and Iraq. At times it is not only the legitimacy of the ruling regime which is challenged, but also the legitimacy of the state itself. Thus, the territorial integrity of Sudan, Somalia and Iraq is now in serious question. Several decades of a state-building process is giving way to a reverse process of state-deconstruction.

### **The social question: mobilization and equity**

The twin process of westernization and the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire led, among other things, to the breakdown of the traditional organization of ethnic groups in the Arab world. Their residential and occupational patterns have become less segregated. With independence, their social mobilization and integration into the societal main-stream was greatly expedited, and their political consciousness markedly heightened. Modern education, urbanization, expanding means of communication and exposure to the mass media, have all been instrumental in this respect.<sup>23</sup>

As elsewhere in developing regions, this social mobilization was accompanied or followed by a steady rise in expectations on the part of ethnic groups in the Arab world. Those expectations included quests for a greater share in power, wealth, and prestige in their newly independent countries. The brief liberal experi-

ment in several Arab states satisfied the quest of ethnic groups for political participation, but not as much their quest for social justice – i.e. an equitable share in wealth. The early years of military-ideological populist regimes satisfied ethnic groups or promised to do so, as far as social equity was concerned. Such redistributive measures as land reform, nationalization of foreign and upper class assets, an open and free system of education, the provision of equal opportunities and the adoption of meritocratic systems of employment were put into effect. However, as the regimes consolidated and their tenure in power lasted, the reality and/or promise of greater equity began to erode for all non-ruling groups, including ethnic minorities.

Thus, with political participation long curtailed and social mobilization continuing unabated, progress in social equity coming to a halt or worsening, structural-relative deprivation has been steadily rising since the 1970s. Such deprivations have been felt more by ethnic groups than by other sectors in society. Consequently, they were the first and the loudest in expressing their resentment against what by now has become an authoritarian-bureaucratic ruling class, with ideological trappings fading into the background.

Instead of responding to such protestations by resuming the march of social equity or reopening the political system to more participation, most Arab regimes responded by greater coercion domestically and/or military adventures externally. Thus the Syrian regime became embroiled in the Lebanese civil war (since 1975); the Iraqi regime in two Gulf wars (with Iran 1980-88, and in Kuwait with an international coalition in 1990-91); the Libyan regime in Chad (1975-1988); the Algerian regime in a proxy war with Morocco in the Sahara (1976-1990); the Somali regime in the Ogden with Ethiopia (1977); and the Mauritanian regime in series of armed skirmishes with Senegal (1990-1991).

Mounting internal coercion and external military adventures have both had the effect of earmarking a greater share of state budgets for arms purchases with a dwindling share to social programmes. Thus social equity continued to worsen further for all non-ruling groups, but especially for ethnic minorities. In this way the

ethnic divide in several Arab countries has been intensified by a class divide.<sup>24</sup> The combination of class-ethnic deprivation needed one more factor to erupt into an open armed conflict – a foreign ally. This takes us to the external question.

## **External penetration and ethnicity in the Arab world**

Because of its unique strategic location as well as its resources, especially oil, the Arab Middle East has been a target of domination by rival foreign powers over the last two centuries. Meanwhile, several structural weaknesses in the Arab Middle East were accentuated by such powers to enhance their hegemonic designs. The ethnic question has been one of those weaknesses.

As early as the late eighteenth century, rival Western powers scrambled for a client-sponsorship of various ethnic groups that lived in the provinces of the declining Ottoman Empire, the ‘Sick Man of Europe’. This was to be a pretext for possible inheritance of such provinces on the final demise of the ‘Sick Man’. A case in point was France’s sponsorship of the Christian Maronites, Britain’s of the Druz Muslims, and Russia’s of the Christian Orthodox – all in one Arab-Ottoman province, Greater Syria (including Mount Lebanon). On the whole, ethnic groups in the Arab world remained long reluctant and sceptical of such unsolicited guardianship by foreign powers. But as corruption and despotism of the ailing Ottoman Empire reached its zenith, some of these groups accepted such guardianships for protection not only against the central authorities but also against real or perceived threats from other indigenous ethnic groups at home.

This nineteenth-century pattern of big powers meddling in the Arab world’s ethnic affairs continued into the twentieth century, both under direct colonial rule with fragmented Arab policies, and after formal independence. The big power actors varied during the two centuries but the pattern has remained essentially the same. After World War II, with more independent or new states in the Arab Middle East, several regional actors have also become involved, often by proxy, in the ethnic affairs

of one another. Notoriously among the latter were Israel (in Lebanon, Iraq, and the Sudan), Iran (in Iraq and Lebanon), Ethiopia (in the Sudan).<sup>25</sup> At times some Arab states also meddled in ethnic questions of neighbouring Arab and non-Arab states (e.g. Syria in Lebanon and Iraq; Iraq in Lebanon, Syria, and Iran; Sudan in Ethiopia).<sup>26</sup>

The big power rivalry during the Cold War (1945-1990) added to this meddling a further complicating dimension of an ideological nature. At times factions of the same ethnic group were as much in conflict with each other as were their external (regional or global) patrons. Rarely did the external factor alone trigger serious ethnic conflicts, caused primarily by indigenous factors of political, socio-economic, or cultural nature of the kind discussed above.

What the external factor did, if played out, was to intensify, complicate and protract such conflicts. This is especially the case with armed ethnic conflicts, which tend, over time, to create a political economy and a sub-political culture of their own – far beyond the original issues of the conflict. The civil wars in Lebanon, Sudan, and Iraq are dramatic cases in point.

## Ethnicity, civil society, and democratization

To recapitulate, the ethnic question is one of the most serious challenges facing the Arab world at large, and, in particular, those Arab states with a marked ethnic diversity. The nascent system of modern country-states as well as the Arab intelligentsia have both failed to comprehend or deal with the ethnic problem frontally. To begin with, the caesarean birth of many of the Arab states at the hands of colonial midwives brought to existence a number of seriously deformed Arab states. Had the liberal experiment been allowed to continue, or had it resumed, say a decade or two after its interruption, many of the early socio-economic deformities might have been corrected through a genuine process of participation.

### Participatory politics

Participatory political systems have proven to be the most effective modality for peaceful management of social cleavages in general,

and ethnic conflicts in particular. Primordial loyalties are often moderated, reduced, or even eliminated as modern socio-economic formations (e.g. classes and occupational groups) freely evolve. The latter offer members of ethnic groups a substitute or at least a partial alternative for collective protection, and enhancement of legitimate rights and needs. They allow for the kind of criss-crossing modern associational networks which have come to be lumped under the concept of civil society. In its broad sense, 'civil society' would include political parties, trade unions, professional associations and other non-governmental organizations on the community and national levels. This kind of associational network has proven to be the nerve of participatory political systems even when some of them are avowedly 'apolitical'.<sup>27</sup>

Participatory politics may contribute, in some Arab countries, to initial political instability or lead to various forms of demagoguery. Rival ethnic leaders may engage in 'upmanship politics', but in the medium or long term, responsible democratic politics is bound to prevail. In countries with sizeable ethnic groups concentrated in one province or geographic area, separatist tendencies may also be expected, once the political system is opened to free expression and free balloting – as is vividly, and sometimes tragically, witnessed in the former USSR and Yugoslavia. While such a right must be conceded in principle, it could in practice result in chaos.

### Federalism

To avoid the negative effects of such an eventuality, 'federalism' or even 'confederalism' should be real options. The flexible and imaginative application of 'federalism' could make a modern functional equivalent of the Millet system of the Ottoman Empire. Federalism would reconcile the legitimate impulse of Arab states to preserve their territorial integrity with the legitimate right of ethnic groups to preserve their culture, human dignity and political autonomy.

It goes without saying that legitimate human and political rights of minorities and ethnic groups can be respected only if they are also respected for the majority. In fact, as the

Lebanese social scientist Antoine Messarra once observed, 'no political Arab regime has had a serious problem with an ethnic minority without also having a serious problem with the majority in the same country'.<sup>28</sup> The Kurds and the Southern Sudanese who have long risen up in arms against their central governments have recently come to the same conclusion: their problem will not be resolved without changing the entire political system to one that is responsive and accountable to both the majority and the ethnic minorities. This proposition has been summed up by the Kurdish national movement in the phrase, 'democracy for all Iraqis and autonomy for the Kurds'. The Sudanese Liberation Army (mostly Southerners) has adopted a similar slogan, 'democracy for all of the Sudan and federalism for the South'.

Despite some serious and protracted armed ethnic conflicts in the Arab world, there are instances where such conflicts were better managed or averted altogether. Again, it was a combination of participatory politics and decentralization or federalism. Of special note here is the case of Berbers in Morocco and Algeria, who constitute roughly the same percentage in the total population 25 to 35 per cent. Although a cultural and linguistic minority, the Berbers in both countries are Sunni Muslims, like the Arab majority. The Berbers have been an integral and important part of Maghreb history since the seventh century AD. They took part in the Arab-Muslim conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, as also Saharan and Sub-Saharan Africa. Equally, in modern times, they were subjected to French colonial rule, resisted its policy of 'divide and rule', and struggled for their countries' independence in the 1950s (Morocco) and 1960s (Algeria). In the post-

independence decade, Berbers in both countries evolved their own cultural aspirations as a distinct group. The Moroccan king accommodated those aspirations; while the Algerian ruling single party FLN stunted them. In the 1990s, the Moroccan Berbers seem far more integrated in the national politics of their country than their Algerian counterparts. The latter have increasingly been agitating for cultural recognition. The threat of Islamic militancy, with its 'over-Arabization' tendencies, is quickly turning the Algerian Berbers' cultural quest into an equally militant political protest.<sup>29</sup> At the time of writing (1995), the Algerian state is under severe cross-pressure from both Islamic and Berber militants.<sup>30</sup> Thus, while Morocco is sailing towards steady democratization with its Arabs and Berbers alike, Algeria is disintegrating under the militancy of some Arab and Berber groups.

Sudan is another case in point. In thirty-nine years of independence (1956–1995), the country had only ten years of relative calm between the south and the north (1972–1982). Those ten peaceful years were due to the Addis Ababa Agreement (AAAs) which provided for southern self-rule. When the Numairy military regime reneged on the AAAs in 1983 by restoring Khartoum's direct rule and imposing Islamic Shari'a on non-Muslims, the south flared up in armed insurrection again. The situation has not improved despite the succession of three different regimes since then (1985, 1986, 1989).<sup>31</sup>

Thus, while Morocco and Algeria represent two contrasting simultaneous cases of governance and ethnic management, Sudan represents a diachronic case. The conclusion is basically the same: nowadays, societies that are ethnically pluralistic, must also be politically so.

## Notes

1. For a recent overview of worldwide ethnic conflicts, see L. Diamond and M. F. Plattner (eds), *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Democracy*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.

2. For details and documentation see Saad Eddin Ibrahim, *Sects*,

*Ethnicity, and Minority Groups in the Arab World* (1994) (in Arabic), Cairo: Ibn Khaldoun Center, pp. 15–18, and pp. 225–290, pp. 323–69, and pp. 601–29.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 725–49.

4. See also Diamond and Plattner's definition in *Nationalism, Ethnic*

*Conflict*, op.cit, p. xvii; F. Fukuyama, 'The End of History', *The National Interest*, no. 16 (summer 1989), pp. 3–18, and *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press, 1992, p. 201.

5. For full account of civil armed conflicts in Iraq, Sudan, and

- Lebanon, see Saad Eddin Ibrahim, *Sects, Ethnicity and Minority Groups*, op.cit, pp. 225–90, pp. 323–60, and pp. 601–29.
6. Ibid. pp. 14–15; and A.H. Hourani, *Minorities in the Arab World*, London: Oxford University Press, 1947.
7. A full debate has raged among Arab intellectuals over a proposed conference on the ‘UN Declaration on Minorities’ Rights and Peoples of the Arab World and the Middle East’ that was to be held in Cairo, 12–14 May, 1994. The prominent Egyptian writer and journalist, M.H. Haikal led the charge against the conference in an article ‘The Copts are an Integral Part of the National Mass’, *Al-Ahram*, 20 April 1994. Some 240 Arab intellectuals joined the debate between April and September 1994. Two-thirds of the debaters denied the existence of, or belittled, the minorities issue in the Arab world. See Civil Society and Democratic Transformation in the Arab World (CSDTAW) Newsletter, April–October 1994. See also a full documentation in *Religious and Ethnic Groups in the Arab World, Second Annual Report* (Arabic–English), (Cairo: Ibn Khaldoun Center for Development Studies), 1995.
8. For an account of socio-political developments see, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, *The Future of Society and State in the Arab World* (in Arabic), Amman: The Arab Thought Forum, 1988; M. Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980; G. Luciani (ed.), *The Arab State*, Berkeley: University Press, 1990.
9. See an account of the Turkish-Kurdish issue in R.D. Macburin, *The Political Role of Minorities in the Middle East*, New York: Praeger, 1979; and on more recent events in southern Turkey and northern Iraq, see *Time*, 24 April 1995, pp. 50, 51 and *Newsweek*, 27 March 1995, p. 12.
10. G. Corm, *Variety of Religions and Regimes: A Comparative Sociological and Legal Study* (in Arabic), Beirut: El Nahar Publishing Center, 1979, pp. 196–261; F. Howeidy, *Citizens Not Protected* (in Arabic), Cairo: Dar El Sherouk, 1990; see also a debate between Howeidy and this author on this issue in *Al-Ahram* (Cairo Arabic daily), 14, 21, 28 March, and 4 April 1995.
11. J. Megezil, ‘Islam and Arab Christianity, Arab Nationalism and Secularism’, in *The Seminar of Arab Nationalism and Islam*, pp. 361–84 (in Arabic); C. Zuraique in his comment on W. Kawthray, ‘The Christians from the System of Sects to the Modern State’, in his book *The Debate of Arab Christians*, p. 75; G. El Shair, ‘What are the Reasons of Susceptibility and What are their Ranges?’ in *The Debate of Minorities in the Arab East and the Attempts of Israel to Use Them*, Amman 12–15/9/1981 (in Arabic).
12. See the proceedings of the Constituent Conference of the Al Baath Party as they were narrated in M. Aflaq, *For the Cause of Baath*, Beirut: El Tali’a Publishing Center, 1978, first part p. 121 (in Arabic); for more information about the Baath’s attitude towards Minorities, see M. Dandeshly, *The Arab Socialist Baath Party, Part I: Ideology and Political History*, Beirut: El Talia Publishing Center, 1979, pp. 92–95; A. Al-Duri, ‘The Historical Roots of Arab Nationalism’, in N. Hopkins and Saad Eddin Ibrahim (eds), *Arab Society*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2nd edn, 1985, pp. 20–35.
13. See El Sayed Yassin and others, *Content Analysis of the National Arab Thought*, Beirut: the Center of Arab Unity Studies, 1980, p. 52 (in Arabic).
14. See Sati Al Hosary, *What is Nationalism?*, Beirut: The Center of Arab Unity Studies, 1985 (originally published in 1958), p. 175 (in Arabic).
15. Diamond and Plattner, op.cit, p. xviii.
16. K. Packradoni, ‘Toward Ethnically Egalitarian Arab Societies’, paper submitted to the conference on The UN Declaration on Minorities’ Rights and Peoples of the Arab World and the Middle East, Limassol, Cyprus, 12–14 May 1994.
17. *1993 Arab Strategic Report* (in Arabic), Cairo: Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 1994.
18. The Iraqi elite led by Saddam Hussain’s clan since 1968, comes from the Arab Sunni Muslim town of Takrit. The Sunni Muslims of Iraq do not exceed 35 per cent of Iraq’s total population – compared to over 45 per cent Arab Shi’ite Muslims, and 15 per cent Kurdish Muslims. The Syrian elite led by Hafez al-Assad’s clan since the 1970s, comes from a small Alawite Shia’a sect (town of Querdaha) which constitutes no more than 16 per cent of Syria’s total population (see tables).
19. See an analysis of recent events in *Civil Society and Democratic Transformation in the Arab World* (CSDTAW), Newsletter, April – August issues of 1994.
20. Review of constitutional texts and similar documents of Arab Countries in A. Sarhal, *Political and Constitutional Systems in Lebanon and the Arab Countries* (Beirut: El Baath Publishing Center), 1980 (in Arabic).
21. Ibid.
22. S.E. Ibrahim, *Future of Society and State in the Arab World*, pp. 400–450.
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24. S.E. Ibrahim, *Sects, Ethnicity and Minority Groups*, op.cit, pp. 735–40.
25. Ibid., pp. 840–60.
26. Ibid., pp. 840–60.
27. See S.E. Ibrahim, 'Civil Society and Prospects of Democratization in the Arab World', in A.R. Norton, *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995, pp. 27–54.
28. A. Messarra, 'Minority Rights in the Arab Mashriq', in A.A. Naim (ed.), *The Cultural Dimensions of Human Rights in the Arab World* (in Arabic), Cairo: Ibn Khaldoun Center and S. Al-Sabah, 1993, pp. 427–52.
29. 'The Berbers Demand a Voice', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 20 October 1994, p. 5.
30. Ibid.
31. *Minorities Concerns in the Arab World, the 1993 Annual Report*, Cairo: Ibn Khaldoun Center, 1994.