

“The Citizen and The Space”: Fragility of the Middle Eastern Nation-State

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Abstract

For about a hundred years, the states of the Middle East have been struggling with coming to terms with their national identity. Throughout the 20th century, these states have shed blood, formed unsuccessful unions and tried out different leaders and political ideologies, yet not much progress has been made regarding this mission. Is it because there are some unknown external forces that wish to partition and rule the Middle East for their benefit (as some demagogues would agree) or is this fragility distinctive of how the Middle Eastern nation-state was inorganically formed and how the imposed identity of the people inherently clashed with their actual identities that relied on an opposing form of loyalty? This essay will argue for the latter. It will claim that the fragility of the Arab Middle Eastern nation-state stems from the underdeveloped forces of internal and external sovereignty which form the backbone of national imagination. After explicating the anthropological theoretical background of the argument, this essay will then proceed to compare the cases of Turkey, Iraq and Syria in how they struggled with these two modernising forces in their formative years.

Keywords: Nationalism, Nation-state, Middle East, Turkey, Iraq, Syria

1. Introduction

For about a hundred years, the states of the Middle East have been struggling with coming to terms with their national identity. Throughout the 20th century, these states have shed blood, formed unsuccessful unions and tried out different leaders and political ideologies, yet not much progress has been made regarding this mission. Is it because there are some unknown external forces that wish to partition and rule the Middle East for their benefit (as some demagogues would agree) or is this fragility distinctive of how the Middle Eastern nation-state was inorganically formed and how the imposed identity of the people inherently clashed with their actual identities that relied on an opposing form of loyalty? This essay will argue for the latter. It will claim that the fragility of the Arab Middle Eastern nation-state stems from the underdeveloped forces of internal and external sovereignty which form the backbone of national imagination. After explicating the anthropological theoretical background of the argument, this essay will then proceed to compare the cases of Turkey,

Iraq and Syria in how they struggled with these two modernising forces in their formative years.

2. The citizen and the space

In order to critically assess the relative durability of modern Middle Eastern nation-states in the 20th century, we first need to comprehend and contextualise what the term “modern nation-state” connotes, and within which socio-political context it comes to being. Nations – upon which nation states were built – cannot be considered as continuations of primordial structures that can be taken for granted and considered to have always existed. Instead, in order for that assumption of continuity to be constructed, there have to be the necessary conditions and the socio-historical foundation for “imagining” (Anderson, 1983) the nation.

Although some modern nation states are still relatively contingent on the memories and glories of pre-modern ethnic identities and communities, most nation states, specifically those born in the midst of the mandate system, rely on institutionalised modes of identity-making for the legitimacy and the imagination of their so-called nationalism. In its essence, the nation is “a sociocultural artefact that creates an ethnolinguistic community, imagining itself to be homogeneous” (Tibi, 1990, p.13) by the invention of tradition, commonality and fraternity. Therefore, for a nation to be considered durable or successful, this sense of common purpose and fraternity should be cultivated in such a manner that does not allow significant clashes of loyalty and confusion over the definition of the said nation.

The main prerequisite for the nation-state can be argued to be an emotionally-fuelled understanding of “sovereignty”. According to Bassam Tibi, “the underlying concept of the nation-state is sovereignty, which not only presupposes the capability of the central power to establish itself over the entire territory but also requires established citizenship and corresponding national identity and loyalty.” (Tibi, 1990, p.147) In regards to this assessment, we can assert that the idea of the nation-state boils down to a dual arrangement of “external sovereignty” – which realises itself in the idea of territoriality and spatiality, and of “internal sovereignty”- which is maintained through the idea of citizenship buttressed by feelings and imaginations of commonality and fraternity-. This essay will add a further point to Tibi’s assessment and argue that a simplistic imposition of these two tenets of nationalism would not suffice as long as there is a significant lack of emotional connection in their imagination. “There is a distinction between objective markers of identity and a consciousness of that identity.” (Cole & Kandiyoti, 2002, p.190) For the nation-state to be externally and internally sovereign, its imagining of the nation must be supported by the emotional bonds of fraternity and spatiality of its subjects which would transform the empty institutions of the state to a fully-fledged imagined polity.

2a. In Consideration of Space

The idea of the space as an emotional component of nationalism plays a vital role in constructing the identities of the “self” and the “other”. Personal identities can be constructed

and maintained around how does an individual relates itself to a particular spatial configuration and build emotional and group ties around the imagination of that space. This affect is achieved by projecting the imagined fraternity of the subjects onto an objective physical space where the constructed community and its exteriority can be visualised. In the words of Akhil Gupta, national identity-making relies on cultivating “a naturalised association between identity and space.” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, p.7) Without a constant, naturalised, and institutionally and structurally established nexus of space and identity, forming a strong nationalism would be nearly impossible. “Nationalism is the subjective counterpart of the nation, a space of interiority in which the nation is conceived of as an aspect of the self, as well as an ideology wherein the nation is given a cobbled-together history, a distinctive cultural heritage, and a commonality of interest that all stop at the borders of the nation-state.” (Cole & Kandiyoti, 2002, p.190)

Such as in the cases of England and Australia, the criteria of common language, common ancestry, and common history are not sufficient enough to provide the basis for a unitary understanding of nation and nation-state. Despite sharing a language, a common ethnicity and even a shared past of heroisms and suffering (ex: the Gallipoli War), these two countries do not share a sense of imagined fraternity and commonality. They constitute different nations and are part of separate nation-states. This spatial disconnection between the countries is one of the ways in which a modern sense of nationalism cannot be born between the two. The integrity and the constancy of the territory form the backbone of the imaginations of a nation. One must not neglect the “importance of attaching causes to places and the ubiquity of place-making in collective political mobilization.” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, p.13) Creation of the border and its manifestation in the emotional imaginations of the civil society is, therefore, the first prerequisite for a successful and durable nationalism.

2b. In Consideration of Citizenship

The second condition of a sustainable nationalism was identified as the idea of “internal sovereignty” by Bassam Tibi. “A basic component of this internal sovereignty is the idea of citizenship, which presupposes transforming tribal and, in general, prenatal ties into a national identity and loyalty.” (Tibi, 1990, p.127) This sense of common loyalty and fraternity with the rest of a given community creates conditions for social functions that are required from a well-oiled nation-state such as industry, mobilisation and participation in the political process. “The modern nation is made up of citizens with an affective and imaginative commitment to identity with co-citizens.” (Cole & Kandiyoti, 2002, p.190) A distinction should be made that this concept of commonality is not synonymous with strict homogeneity. A successful nation-state making and diversity is not mutually exclusive. A perfect example of this phenomenon would be the example of Belgium; a nation-state comprised of different groups speaking different languages, yet can manage to sustain an idea of the nation and more importantly, an idea of co-citizenship. Heterogeneity in the structural make-up does not necessarily pose a stumbling block towards achieving identity-based homogeneity. Instead, constructing an emotional connection with one’s compatriots and

establishing the identity of “citizen” as the exclusive form of loyalty is adequate for the forming of an “internal sovereignty” in the nation-state.

With regards to these two criteria established for the durability of a modern understanding of the nation and the nation-state, this essay will now proceed to compare and contrast the examples of Turkey, Iraq and Syria in their respective applications of these prerequisites.

3. The case of Turkey as successful nation-making

“Turkey is never included among those states that observers often refer to as “artificial”, like Iraq, Syria or Jordan, which were forged in the aftermath of World War 1.” (Cook, 9 January 2016) Despite its deep vulnerabilities and structural problems of its own, The Republic of Turkey, until at least late 1970s, could be considered as a relatively more durable and successful example of nation-state making compared to other Middle Eastern states striving to form a nationality. As the official and spiritual successor of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey had a clear-cut high culture to base its identity on and as a nation formed through an independence war, rather than exogenously imposed through the mandate system, it had the chance to form the necessary emotional connection between the space and the people. Regardless of the many problems that the country had with its Kurdish minorities and its often violent and racist methods of identity-construction, it can nevertheless be asserted that its conception of the nation was more in line with the definition given by Tibi; a nationalism with a clear understanding of its internal and external sovereignty and a people with an emotional bond with its territory and its co-citizens.

3a. Once Upon a Time in Anatolia

Anatolia had always played a significant part in the imagining of the Turkish nation. It was a political space that belonged to the Turks for almost a thousand years; it was almost lost to the enemy forces, and was taken back through a bloody independence war. In the post-WWI period, “the real threat of losing Anatolia, the centre of the Empire, in 1918 when the Allied and Greek forces invaded it following World War I, presented an urgent need for the redefinition of both the geographic borders and *raison d’etre* of the state.” (Saatci, 2002, p.553) A naturalised association of the Anatolian political space and the developing Turkish people, and the potential of losing this political space became the catalyst for the nation-making function.

In this discourse of “protection”, the emotional connection that is necessary for the successful internalization of political space is constructed via reference to the acts of suffering, and of “taking back the homeland”. This narrative of sacrifice and heroism for the reclamation of the homeland has become the main force behind the imagination of the Turkish nation, and is still a powerful rhetoric for the Turkish statesmen to employ for political mobilization. Atatürk’s famous remark “sovereignty is not given, it is taken” (Ataturk, Quotes.net, 2017), in its construction of sovereignty (in this case external sovereignty) as a merit is emblematic of this nation-making function. Collective imagination of these past sufferings is frequently

invoked to create the aforementioned emotional connection to Anatolia and the sense of duty towards protecting the political space; and it is a central feature of what made Turkey, in its formative years, a relatively more coherent nation.

3b. “How Happy Is the One Who Says I’m A Turk”

Considering its history of structural multiculturalism and multilingualism, the successful creation of the “Turkish state” and “Turkey” as the loci of loyalty for a majority of the country was a commendable feat. Early in the 1900s, the Turanian movement and the rule of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) in the Ottoman Empire have started to distinguish the ethnically-defined character of the new Turkish nation. In order to prevent any potential clashes of loyalty and identity, a project of break-away from the Pan-Islamist and Ottomanist ideologies was initiated. “We Ottomans belong to a race sufficiently intelligent and practical to understand that the pursuit of the Pan-Islamic designs of the visionaries would be contrary to our dearest interests.” (Knight, 1909, p.64) The Turanian literary and political movement in Turkey “stirred the Turks for a national regeneration on ‘pure Turkish’ lines based on the natural affinities of all Turkish-speaking peoples.” (Zeine, 1981, p.77) Rejecting the overlapping identities prevalent in the Ottoman Empire, this new Turkish ideology set the path for the construction of a clear-cut understanding of Turkish citizenship.

Rather than embracing the traditional multicultural structure of the Ottoman Empire, the Kemalist regime, following the influence of the Young Turks’ ideology, through actions such as the population exchange between the Greeks and the Turks and the assimilation of groups such as the Circassians, the Lazs, Kurds and the Alevis strived to transform the heterogeneous Ottoman Empire into an ethnically-defined homogeneous nation-state. This project was partially successful. For instance, in the contemporary Alevi tradition, Atatürk (who was complicit in the execution of thousands of Alevis in the 1930s) plays as important a role as Ali ibn Ali Talib as a figure of loyalty. “Alongside the image of Ali, Alevi participants often wave Turkish flags and display photographs of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the leader of the nationalist forces under the early republican regime and its paradigmatic icon. The display of these images reverberates with a sense of loyalty to the statist project of secular nationalism.” (Tambar, 2014, p.4) Similarly, “the Circassians have also been comprehensively assimilated within Turkey.” (Armstrong, 7 May 2015) Barring the on-going problems with the Kurdish secessionist groups, it can be asserted that a comprehensive understanding of Turkish citizenship and of loyalty to the nation was already in place in the post-Ottoman Turkey. Through Atatürk’s discourse of “how happy is the one who says i’m a Turk”, the high culture of the Turkish nation was successfully disseminated to the marginal cultures of the once-Ottoman subjects and is now the foundation of the emotional bond of co-citizenship. It has become a heterogeneous country imagining itself to be homogeneous.

Ergo, one can observe that the Turkish nation of the 20th century was more or less compatible with what Tibi described as conditions for a modern nation-state. With the role of Anatolia in the political imagination of the Turks, the project of disassociation from Pan-Islamism and Ottomanism in the CUP era, and the impact of Kemalist assimilation policies and its

discourse of a “so-called” all-inclusive nationalism, the Turkish nation firmly established the emotional linkage of space and citizenship in the collective imaginations of its people.

4. The cases of Syria and Iraq and the fragility of Middle Eastern nation-making

Although by now an academic cliché, the sheer impact of the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 and the subsequent mandate rules of England and France in Iraq and Syria respectively should not be disregarded in how they are complicit for most of the region’s troubles with identity and nationalism. Nation-building in the region, rather than an organic process with a unifying story of “heroism”, was “the consequence of ‘mandated nationhood’ imposed on a colonially dominated Syria and Iraq.” (Budeiri, 1997, p.194) The exogenous imposition of national identity and the consequent insincerity of loyalty hindered the development of a national imagination corresponding to the standards proposed by Bassam Tibi. Instead, what transpired in Iraq and Syria can be aptly summarised as “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous” (Bloch, 1993, p.317); a term first used by German sociologist Ernst Bloch. Syria and Iraq of the 20th century were faced with the modernising forces of national institutions and colonialism but were still comprised of a people and a political tradition stuck in the emotional arrangements of loyalty from a century earlier. The persistency of the Ottoman Arab world, and its fragile replacement for an unwilling people became the source of the region’s problems. Insincere territorial arrangements that did not resonate with the people emotionally, and overlapping and clashing identities of peoples ruled by ideologically confused leaders were to leave the “nations” of Iraq and Syria with an on-going state of fragility.

4a. “Given, Not Taken”

Dissimilar to the nation-building in India and Turkey, the external sovereignty of Iraq and Syria were “given, not taken”. Furthermore, the giving of the political space was not subject to considerations of loyalty and identity, but rather arranged with political interests of the colonial forces in mind. Therefore, it wouldn’t be surprising to find out that an emotional connection between the space and the people was not constructed successfully. Paraphrasing Abbas Kelidar, “the political lexicon of the Arab East was clearly unable to produce an equivalent notion to the European concept of “state” with its dual associations of territory and sovereignty.” (Kelidar, 1993, p.317)

Territoriality and regional borders, in the Ottoman times, were not of much significance. “Though the empire was sub-divided into provinces, the names, borders, dimensions and every other possible variable kept changing over time and though the Ottomans were fully aware of the terms “Iraq” and “Syria”, none ever matched the borders of a province.” (Gerber, 2004, pp.264-265) The provincial arrangements of the people were essentially of no meaning, and consequently, an emotional linkage to the space was practically non-existent. This legacy of non-territoriality (or trans-territoriality), when faced with an imperial imposition of strict borders, logically, backlashed. “Rulers were imposed on territorially

demarcated populations as was the institutional framework by which they were to be governed. The source of public law was not popular sovereignty. Power and authority emanated from and belonged to the mandatory powers, namely Britain and France.” (Kelidar, 1993, p.321)

At the turn of the 20th century, the Ottoman Vilayets and later Iraqi provinces of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul were the main referents of loyalty for the Iraqi people. These were “more or less self-sufficient communities ruled by their own forces, authorities and hierarchies” (Zubaida, 2002, p.205). When the new state of Iraq was set up in 1920 out of these three provinces, therefore, they failed in forming a uniform political identity. “The local allegiances and political aspirations that existed in these provinces did not disappear with the lines drawn in Cairo.” (Simon, 1997, p.90) “They feared the domination of one by the others and their rivalry was manifested in the adoption of provincial candidates for the kingship of Iraq under the British mandatory.” (Kelidar, 1993, p.323) This fragmented nature of the Iraqi spatial arrangement naturally led to confusion over loyalties of the people and crippled the chances for a genuine emotional connection between the space and the people.

In the French mandated Syria, a similar crisis of the space was afoot. Under the French Mandate, Syria was divided into four states; Damascus, Aleppo, Alawites and Jabal Druze. “The truncation of Syria by the French mandatory administration has left a deep impact on its political consciousness. The memory of its territorial diminution provided the grounds for bitterness and the impetus for change in the status quo.” (Kelidar, 1993, p.327) Identical to the Iraqi experience, the partition of the national territory by the colonial powers left the nation in a perplexed state of clashing identities. The semi-independent status of these provinces eventually prompted rivalry and an overlap of identities between the centralised nation and the divided sub-territories. This confusion was exacerbated by the irredentist sentiments of the Syrian and Iraqi leaders whose cries for Pan-Arabism added another dimension to the complex multi-territorial loyalty arrangements of the region. By expanding the territory, these nations thought they could circumvent the identity questions posed by the partitioned state. However, this plan proved to be unsuccessful as well. “While the Syrians may be discontented with the territorial delimitation of their country, the size of the state has proved too large for any particular community to dominate it to the total exclusion of the others.” (Kelidar, 1993, pp.327-328)

Ergo, in regard to imaginations of external sovereignty in Iraq and Syria, one can observe that the lack of emotional connection between the space and the people arose out of a confusion over the definition of the borders and its manifestation in the people’s imagination. As the people of Iraq and Syria did not have a historical connection to the colonially-imposed borders due to the non-territorial structural arrangement of the Ottoman Empire, and as the new rulers of the states rather than providing a unitary and constant understanding of territoriality, delivered a divided and constantly-shifting understanding of political space that were negatively effected by their irredentist or unionist projects, the first prerequisite of Bassam Tibi’s conditions for nation-state formation can not be said to be fully implemented.

4b. A “Tribe” Called Quest

The understanding of citizenship in Syria and Iraq, akin to their territorial imaginations, was problematic due to the simultaneous existence of subnational and supranational loci of loyalty. The tribal history of the Arab Middle East on one hand and the universalist “Ummah” tradition on the other, the necessary socio-historical conditions for a focused identity-making on the national-level were barely there in the first place. With regards to this, Bassam Tibi employs the concept of simultaneity of the non-simultaneous “for conceptualizing the parallel existence of two social and political patterns with their social origins in crucially different historical periods: the old tribes and the modern nation-state.” (Tibi, 1990, p.127) The co-existence of these two referents of loyalty has become the source of the Middle Eastern nation-state crisis.

“For different Iraqi groups, at the turn of the 20th century, there were a number of overlapping theoretical and actual entities in terms which they could imagine their inclusion.” (Zubaida, 2002, p.205) Besides the Sunni head of the state, the Shi’I Iraq was divided into the ulama class, urban merchants and tribesmen each with a different political agenda and with overlapping spheres of influence. “The tribes of the south, mostly Shi’I, were organised in loose confederations headed by shaykhs who led these self-governing units that interacted with other tribes over control of trade routes and land.” (Simon, 1997, p.91) These self-governing units, in defiance of the centralised government’s wish for a unified loyalty, maintained their role as economic and administrative bases for many Iraqis, and subsequently their function as a referent of loyalty in the country with their traditional kinship ties trumping over the artificially-imposed fraternity of the nation-state. In the words of C.J. Edmonds in his report to the British Office in 1931; “The government was inevitably in the hands of a limited oligarchy composed of essentially Sunni townsmen representing only a small minority of country. It was easy for any agitator to play upon the religious, racial or personal prejudices of anyone who is not an Arab, a Muslim or is a Muslim but not a Sunni.” (Edmonds, 1931) The state mechanism, in the modern nation-state, has a responsibility to create a unified identity of “citizenship” for the imagination of its “internal sovereignty”. According to Elie Kedourie, “the nation state is distinguished by one crucial factor, namely that of popular sovereignty which serves as the source of all political authority in a specific territory where the totality of the citizens constitutes the sovereign people.” (Kedourie, 1987, pp.1-9) When the state fails to become the source of popular sovereignty and simultaneously coexists with an ancient form of polity acting as a clashing locus of loyalty, a nationalist conception of “internal sovereignty” naturally becomes a problematic issue.

Similarly, in Syria, efforts of establishing an ethnically-defined Arab nation-state faced a tremendous amount of resistance from the persisting tribal structures of Alawites. In the formative days of the Syrian nation-state, Alawites were subdivided into four main tribes; Matawira, Haddadin, Khayyatin and Kalbiyya. When the kinsmen of Matawira advanced to the ruling elite and started recruiting exclusively their tribesmen, a disconnection between the elite and the people occurred. (Tibi, 1990, p.139) In this crisis of legitimacy, tribes emerged as the primary referent of identity. According to Bassam Tibi, autonomy was the major trait

of the tribal structure “which explains why tribes stood in opposition to the state as a central monopoliser of power and why they resisted being subdued by it.” (Tibi, 1990, p.140) When the state turned into a mechanism exclusively favouring the Matawira tribe, the people’s loyalties logically followed their respective tribes. Consequently, the state-imposed nationalism did not resonate with the people and tribal kinship became a more powerful source of loyalty than the imagined identity of “citizen.” State’s failure to disseminate a high culture led to the restoration of an old form of loyalty, that of tribalism. In this sense, corresponding to Ernst Bloch’s theory, a simultaneity of the non-simultaneous occurred.

Then, compared to Turkish nationalism’s successful assimilation of various loci of loyalty, we observe in Iraq and Syria, in their formative years, a simultaneity of multiple structures belonging to separate historical eras. The persistence of tribal structures in becoming people’s primary source of identity, exacerbated by the failed assimilation policies of the state leaders (whose loyalties lied elsewhere) resulted in an inadequate adoption of the Tibian understanding of “internal sovereignty.” A focused and inclusive concept of the “citizen” supported by emotional kinship ties, unfortunately, did not transpire.

Conclusion

The fragility of the Iraqi and Syrian nationalisms in the 20th century stem from a distinct failure to adopt the two necessary conditions for a successful nationalism; a naturalised association of the people and the national space, and a focused sense of commonality and loyalty. In countries such as Turkey, the socio-historical foundation of the nation (such as the emotional and historical ties with the Anatolian space) and state policies adopted by the nationalist elite (disassociation from Pan-Islamism and assimilation of ethnic minorities) produced the conditions for a relatively favourable imagination of a nation. The Iraqi-Syrian nation-state making, on the other hand, encountered two distinctive impediments for their national imagination. First, the underdeveloped emotional ties with the political space which was exogenously imposed on these nations by the mandate powers precluded a naturalised association of the people and the national space. Secondly, the persistence of tribal loyalty arrangements in the region, combined with the favouritism of the state institutions, resulted in overlapping and clashing loci of loyalty travelling back and forth between the state and the tribe. In consideration of this inadequacy in implementing the aforementioned prerequisites for imagining a nation, perhaps one should ask; will the idea of the nation-state ever be applicable in the Arab Middle East?

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