

Change and Stability

State, Religion and Politics
in the Middle East
and North Africa

Edited by Krzysztof Kościelniak



Irina Kudryashova

Moscow State Institute of International Relations
University of the MFA of Russia

State-Building in the Arab Middle East: from *Ummah* to a Nation?

The international formula of a sovereign nation-state¹ was imported into the Middle East as a result of colonial pressure, culture diffusion and imitation. Moslem states had been experiencing numerous gravest state-ness and nation building problems for decades upon acquisition of independence. The problems are often explained by the authoritarian rule, resilience of the traditional structures and informal political mechanisms, islamicist activism, etc. largely determined by the fact that these countries belong to the center of the Islamic tradition zone.

Intensification of the globalization processes the state came under higher pressure to embark on the institutional reforms (democratization) both from the outside (international leaders) and the inside (population). Current systems crisis is an objective impediment to development of globalization but it increases the burden on the state yet again: it needs to maintain social balance and legitimacy of power in the environment of the world system instability.

¹ Martin Loughlin, a British lawyer, distinguishes the following components of the modern concept of sovereignty: sovereignty is a facet of the modern state; political relationships do not derive from property relationships; public power must be differentiated from private power; public power is not personal but official; public power is a product of a political relationship; sovereignty is an expression of public power; sovereignty is relational; rights are not antagonistic to sovereignty but are the product of its expression; the system of public law is an expression of sovereignty; public law is not solely a matter of positive law. M. Loughlin, *Ten tenets of sovereignty//Sovereignty in Transition*, N. Walker (ed.), Oxford, Portland Oregon: Hart Publishing 2006.

"Political essences" of the Arab states are different but, it would appear, they share the political process framework defined by competition of three principal identities: national (civil and political), confessional and ethnic (given the low modernization/demodernization level - tribal, etc.). We shall attempt to trace genesis and logics of this competition and to determine how the Moslem political tradition with its *ummah* principle impacted the nation building process.

Emergence of the *people* and *nation* concepts in the Ottoman Empire

Logic of the study determine the need for a definition of certain key political and historical milestones related to the attempts to modernize the Ottoman Empire and emergence of the *people* and *nation* concepts.

Prior to the 19th century, Moslem scientists and rulers conceptualized the political as *ummah* (a unified Moslems community), *caliphate* or *sultanate* (traditional Moslem rule systems characterized by relative dominance of the religious or political element respectively). *Davlat(un)* currently used in Arabic to denote the state is found both in the Koran and works by the medieval Moslem authors. Verbal form of this word initially meant to "alternate," to "change" and "to cease to exist." In the Abbasids era and later it was often used to describe the perpetual rotation of fortune, its ups and downs. Gradually, it came to mean "dynasty" and, only in the beginning of the 20th century - "state."²

In the 19th century, political status of the Arabic territories, same as of the non-Arabic was a *vilayet* of the Ottoman Empire where the sultan was the supreme embodiment of political power and head of the Moslem community. This situation generally corresponded to the ideas of the traditional Arab society.

By the late 18th, despite its decentralization, the Ottoman Empire generally retained its political legitimacy and principal institutional structure. Yet, political and economic pressure by the leading Western states that were in the process of transfer to constitutionalism and industrial economy, as well as growing strength of the periphery forced the Empire to consider reforms. During the rule of Selim HI (1789-1807) and Mahmud II (1808-1839) the reforms did not apply to the power structures.³ Gradual

² See: N. N. Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East*, London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 1996, p. 21.

³ See: E. Zurcher, *Modemlesen Tiirhye'nin Tarihi*, Istanbul: İletişim Yayınlan 2002, pp. 39-45.

segmentation of the Empire continued (it was largely related to its internal organization that can be generally characterized as based on the hub-and-spokes model). The ruling elite was of mixed ethnic and confessional origin and was united by a palace culture that was a composite of Byzantine, Muslim, Persian and Turkic elements.⁴ Muhammad Ali (1805-1849), the ruler of Egypt, was the first to attempt transformation of his country's territory into a political, military and economic core of a strong and independent state.⁵ Rapid strengthening of Egypt in the Middle East forced the major powers to block this process. The changes were conceptualized by Rifa'ah Badawi Rafi' Al-Tahtawi (1801-1873), Egypt, who cleared the way to understanding of the polity as not just an *ummah* but also a territory by introducing in the political discourse the concept of fatherland (*watan*): "The homeland is the nest of man, where he toddled and from which he emerged, the congregation of his family, and part of his inner self [...]. Nothing keeps away sane people from their homeland except the search for eminence, if it could not be achieved within."⁶

The next stage (1839-1876) - *tanzimat* targeted government modernization, including standardization and centralization. Sultan's rescript of 1839 announced (with reference to the law of *shari'a* law) the principle of equality and security of subjects of the Empire, personal security guarantees and equality before the law. *Tanzimat* ideas spread through Tunisia and Egypt where territorial representative institutes and constitutions appeared.

In the 40s of the 19th century, intensive European influence on formation of the cultural and political systems of the Empire also promoted the enlightenment movement in Egypt and historical Syria (mainly among the Christians) that became one of the Arab nationalism origins. Besides al-Tahtawi, its most prominent representatives were Butrus al-Bustani, Ibrahim Al-Yaziji et al.

In 1875 al-Yaziji (1847-1906) took the lead in organizing the first in Syria Arab secret society that called for liberation of the country from the Turkish oppression, abolition of censorship, freedom of speech and enlighten-

⁴ J. W. Esherick, H. Kayali, E. Van Young, *Introduction // Empire to nation: Historical perspectives on the making of the modern world*, Lanham, Boulder, N.Y., Toronto, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006, p. 12.

⁵ Development of Egypt was definitely impacted by Napoleon's expedition (1798-1801) who, in particular, introduced a system of representative consultative bodies with the garrison commanders in the provinces and the commander-in-chief in Cairo.

⁶ R. R. Al-Tahtawi, "The extraction of gold, or an overview of Paris and the honest guide for girls and boys," *Oxford Islamic Studies Online database* [Online]: <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article> (29.12.2007), p. 6.

ment. Later, in 1904, the program of the Arab Fatherland League founded in Paris by Nejjib Azuri (1873-1916), a Christian politician, stated that in the interests of Islam and Arab nation the organization strived to separate civil and religious power and to institute a constitutional monarchy based on freedom of all confessions and equality before the law.⁷ That monarchy was to cover all Arab countries in Asia other than Hejaz, Yemen and British protectorates on the Arabian Peninsula.

The modernization reforms generated dualism of the orientations. The Ottomanism proponents were the first to attempt to narrow the gap by proposing the idea of strengthening of the Sultan's power by introduction of the constitution, parliamentarism and establishment of the "Ottoman nation" on the basis of integration of hundreds of ethnic, confessional, regional and social groups. Moslem reformers (Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, Rashid Rida) who believed the Islam and modern age counteraction a key moment for Islamic communities attempted to find the points of tangency of the Islamic and Western political thought. They stressed that constitutionalism and parliamentarism correspond to the Islamic principles and institutes, such as *jama'at* (local community), *shura* (council), *ijma'a* (opinion of the community), *mushawara* (consultations for decision-making purposes). For instance, Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) wrote: "Since the conditions of nations depend on their collective stores of information, and the two are related in terms of cause and effect, each nation adopts rules for its activities and chooses laws for its circumstances in accordance with its power of theoretical investigation and its level of thought. At no time does it contradict the customs and traditional values that its natural disposition has established."⁸

In 1876, the Ottoman Empire accepted the constitution that established the principle rights and freedoms of the citizens of the Empire regardless of confession and established a bicameral parliament and restricted the Sultan's rights indirectly. It was the first to sanction existence of the community referred to as *people* as the source of power and recognized the Ottoman people (nation) as that consisting of numerous ethnic groups.

The Ottomanism that had no common organic basis for the entire population resulted in social changes that strengthened the common culture

⁷ See: A. V. Zhuravsky, *Christianity and Islam: social and cultural dialogue problems*, Moscow: Nauka 1990, Ch. III, Section 3. [Online:] http://www.sfi.ru/lib.asp?rubr_id=808 (10.03.2009).

⁸ M. 'Abduh, "Laws should change in accordance with the conditions of nations and the theology of unity," *Oxford Islamic Studies. Online database*, p. 3. [Online:] <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article> (17.01.2008).

perception by the Moslems (for instance, parliamentary debates were monopolized by the Moslems who stressed the Islamic nature of the state) and also caused ethnic and regional self-consciousness growth.

Limited effect of the Tanzimat period reforms, the threat of secessionism, discontent of the conservative clergy and certain other reasons resulted in the coup d'etat of 1878 and correction of the political course in favor of Pan-Islamism. Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1876-1909) disbanded the parliament and suspended the constitution. To preserve the state and his own position he acknowledges priority of the Moslem community as an equivalent of priority of the nation over state and established the principle of caliphate priority over sultanate in relations with the community. Actually, this was the first step in the direction of separation of the religious and state subsystems and emergence of the "ideal-rational" antimony.

The Young Turks revolution of 1908 that targeted return to the constitutional norms and preservation of the Empire announced a new version of the Ottomanism that proposed formation of the Turkish nation as the title nation on the polyethnic basis. The new version of the Ottoman state gradually came into a contradiction with the developing ethno-national self-determination of the Arabs. In 1910, Arab culture and literature clubs were closed by the Young Turks and Arab nationalists strive for decentralization of the Empire and broad autonomy of the Arab lands. For instance, in 1913 the First Arab Congress was held in Paris that openly demanded autonomy for Syria; secret societies emerged that called for armed struggle for independence.

The caliphate issue was extremely important for establishment of the Arab self-consciousness. The UK, in its attempts to separate the Turks and the Arabs through publications in the press and its emissaries in the Arabian Peninsula started to contrapose the Ottomanism to the "ethical and national" approach that called for the sheriff of Mecca, an Arab of the Kureish tribe, becoming the caliph.

When the Ottoman Empire entered World War I as an ally of Germany, the UK government tried to implement the plan of armed rebellion by the Arabs against the Sultan by promising support in establishment of an independent Arab state in exchange for organization of the Bedouins upraising. Of particular interest is that it was only then that the term *davlat(un)* was used in the sense of the Western state.

Development of the *country national discourses* and Islam in the Arab world

Capitulation by the Ottoman Empire in October 1918 signified the end of the Young Turks. The superpowers' fight for the Turkish heritage at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919-1920 occurred on the background of the intensifying anti-colonial struggle (Egypt, Iraq, Syria, etc.). Yet, countries of the region became dependencies of Great Britain and France with various political control systems (direct rule, high commissioner and adviser institute, special relations) and arbitrary borders. Despite the fact that at the time Arab communities in general opposed the Turkish sultan rule, collapse of the caliphate meant disintegration of the administrative system that for the Moslems has remained the symbol of political integrity and spiritual shield over many centuries. Thus, only the Saudi Arabia and Yemen became independent.

In terms of institution aspects the mandate system had a key impact on the Arab world as this period accounted for creation of "artificial" territorial polities - artificial in the sense that emergence thereof was not determined by natural development of the societies but rather by will and interests of the superpowers. It took the Arabic public consciousness a while to accept such territorial polities as states. For a long time those were defined as *kutr* (country, land, district). At the time, Syria-Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq and other relatively developed societies viewed the anti-intervention movements as either local patriotic or Arabic movements.

In the 20-30s of 20th Faisal I of Iraq (1921-1933) dreamt of uniting Arabia with the Iraq-Syria junction; the idea of Great Syria and of Iraq joining Syria was advocated by Abdallah, Emir of Trans-Jordan (1921-1946, King of Jordan, 1946-1951). Popularity of the Arabic unity idea is evidenced by the Arabic Congresses of 1931 in Jerusalem and of 1938 in Brussels. "Arab sovereign state" appeared the key to establishment of effective political management system, modernization of economy and human resources development.

Secular concept of Arabic unity of Sati' al-Husri (1879-1968) was widely recognized in the intellectual circles by the mid 30s. The philosopher, who interpreted the Arabic nationalism spiritually, emphasized such nation forming factors as language and history commonality. As the historical and linguistic commonality thesis required separation of the Arabs' history from that of Islam, he separated the arabization and islamization processes. In his opinion, significance of Islam primarily was to maintain

uniqueness of the Arabic nation as "the strongest and most effective tie is the national tie, which derives from a common language and history."⁹

Yet, development of the "country national discourses" did not exclude the trend of establishment of the Pan-Islamic association. In May 1926, at the congress in Cairo delegates of 11 Moslem countries adopted an appeal to establishment of a new caliphate. During the same year, the First World Islamic Congress was held in Mecca and the second was held in 1931 in Jerusalem.

The first Islamic political organization, The Society of the Moslem Brothers was established in the late 20s in Egypt. The initial concept was that of the Pan-Arabic organization. Its founder, Hassan al-Banna' (1906-1949), revised the concepts of nationalism, patriotism, nation-state and constitutionalism that became an integral part of the Islamic theory. Islam, in his opinion, must become the moral basis of struggle against colonialism, for national revival and radical reform of the political, economic and social systems, including establishment of the corporate state, nationalization of the industry, implementation of social programs, etc. He wrote: "The point of contention between us and them [Egyptian nationalists - author's note] is that we define the limits of patriotism in terms of creed, while they define it according to territorial borders and geographical boundaries."¹⁰ Essentially, this program continued along the Moslem reformers line of merging rationality with the antinomic roots of Islam. This was promoted by the nature of Islam as a religious and social system.

The Moslem nationalism concept was formulated in the 20-30s. Given specific conditions of the British India affected by the Hindu-Moslem differences, Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) identified the confessional community notion with that of the nation and subsequently linked the nation concept with a certain territory.

Arab states mainly became independent after World War II. As the basis of their sovereignty they received numerous Western power organization principles (excluding the absolute monarchies of the Persian Gulf) in their constitutions, although those were far from the nation-state principles.

It is difficult to register the ratio of the Islamic and the nationalistic in various interpretations during the period between the wars and further on. For instance, in the 50s - early 60s a number of Arab countries attempted to restrict the role of religion in public life and to foster various

⁹ Quoted in: B. Tibi, *Arab nationalism: Between Islam and the nation-state*, Basingstoke, London: Macmillan Press Ltd. 1997, p. 145.

¹⁰ Quoted in: I. Gershoni J. P. Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian nation. 1930-1945*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, p. 82.

forms of civic nationalism, both local (Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, Algeria) and regional (Arabism and Baathism), which was largely determined by the European influence. The nationalism priority "locked" the Islam within the spiritual and popular spheres resulting in broad opposition. However, the state as such could not implement modernization in the absence of "politization" of Islam, sanctioning political and economic changes explicitly expressed in Islam through the egalitarianism and fairness principles. Thus, this stage of independent development also presented various forms of development of the referenced antinomic principles. For instance, justifying the need for Arabic unity Gamal Abdel Nasser (1956-1970) also referred to Islam: "Actual order of things [unification of Syria and Egypt - author's note] confirmed: forejudged by Allah is inevitable."¹¹

Failure of the attempts at the Arabic unity, determined by the political regimes variety, uneven social and economic development, competition of the elites and the external factor strengthened the orientation to the "country" nationalism. Thus, it was transformed into loyalty to the state; loyalty determined by not only the Eastern tradition (service to the state as service to everyone, the collective) but also by the fact that given the political and economic conditions only the state could ensure unity and relative stability, accumulate the resources for commencement of modernization. As in the absence of "citizens," individuals that are a party to legal relations with each other and the state (emergence of such citizens and awareness type require a certain political and economic development level) stable democratic rule is impossible, such countries were governed by the military (initially provided with the means of enforcement) or civil (associated with the state in general) bureaucracy. An attempt at establishment of the consociative democracy regime as a mechanism of manageable political participation in the Lebanon proved inefficient and resulted in conservation of particular interests and overt conflicts.

Arab states in the bi-polar world era

The most pressing need for economic, military, culture resources required for prevention of disintegration for the ethnic and ideological (political) reasons objectively forces the Arab countries to seek allies (sponsors) that during the bi-polar world era could be (and were) only the superpow-

¹¹ *Kalimatu al-ra'is Gamal Abdel Nasser ft majlis al-Ummah bimunasabati i'alyan usas al-wah-dati beyna Masrwa Suria*, 05.02.1958. [Online:] <http://nasser.bibalex.org/Speeches/browser.aspx?SID=578> (6.03.2009), p. 2.

ers: USSR and USA. Ingress of the superpowers in the region had a significant effect on the political structures and nature of the political exchange of their satellites. Variability of the institutional models was extremely broad: from the absolute and limited dynastic monarchies (states of the Persian Gulf, Morocco, Jordan) and quazi-liberal multiparty systems (Tunisia, Lebanon, Egypt after Nasser) to the governing popular parties, including those within the fronts (Nasser's Egypt, Sudan during the periods in between the military dictatorship terms, Iraq, Syria, Algeria, Yemen and «direct popular rule» through the system of primary popular assemblies (Libya). Yet, in all cases (possibly with the exception of Lebanon prior to commencement of the civil war of 1975) stability and relative unity of such developing political communities were guaranteed by the authoritarian rule that resolves numerous conflicts by "manual controls."

Patrimonial communities of the Persian Gulf are a separate issue. Among these only Kuwait acquired formal attributes of a constitutional monarchy while acquiring its independence. Here in the late 50s - early 60s the external factor, i.e. regular intensive political and economic contacts with the West, broke the natural evolution of the traditional society and forced the weak central power to build up the resources accelerating the development process, i.e. institutionalization of the political organizations and procedures. Availability of strategic oil resources determined the absence of strong external political pressure thereon and allowed a certain "public conservation" through development of the "welfare state" mechanisms.

Thus, during the bi-polar era the Arab states traveled a long road in the sense of establishment of territoriality, centralized government institutes and identity by strengthening its international political positions and internal security considerably. Meanwhile, it was impossible to resolve the underdevelopment problem over this relatively short period. Institutionally, political organizations and procedure failed to acquire real autonomy and remained instruments of various social groups being a symbiosis of modern and traditional forms. Preservation of political manageability on the background of rapid social and economic changes objectively required restriction of the opposition, especially «from below»: religious-form mass movements have always accompanied modernization while Islam provides unique opportunities for articulation of the social and political and culture interests.

Political reform in the neoliberal globalization period

Under similar circumstances but in the absence of rigorous nationalistic dictatorship (as in Iraq, Syria and, to a certain extent, Libya), Islam is turning into the government's instrument of the societal balance support, on the one hand, and an instrument for mobilization of the opposition - on the other. Nevertheless, a visible trend towards recognition of the "national stage of development" by the Islamist public figures also became manifest. Currently, the majority of mass Islamic political organizations recognize the national stage of the struggle and national objectives. In Egypt, for instance, the main lines of confrontation between the government and The Society of the Moslem Brothers are not the struggle for the caliphate but for expansion of the *shari'a* application scope, primarily in mass media, education, culture, democratization of political institutions and support of the intellectuals. Even militants from *Al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya* are now committed to the relatively nonviolent vision of their struggle and their primary target is not Egyptian *jahiliyyah*¹² but the Jewish state. Islamism has succeeded in imposing aspects of its frame, language and institutions on the state, and it began to selectively acquire and interiorize them; at the same time its success in changing certain social and cultural codes and institutions deprived the core of the movement of mass popular support.¹³

Globalization processes pressure on the state to undertake institutional reforms and establish non-personified power structures, i.e. an impersonal and sovereign political regime increased both externally (by the international leaders) and internally. Legitimacy of the regimes nowadays does not depend so much on dedication to the nationalist cause and confidence in the leaders but on the ruling structures' level of commitment to the equality and participation principles, intensified by the information traffic and trans-border migration of the population.

It is no surprise that the 90s opened the era of political reform in the Middle East. Such reforms targeted higher legitimacy of the ruling regimes and, thus, political participation. Even in the Gulf monarchies that still ban political parties are seeking forms of involvement of the citizens in political life. For instance, in 2003 the permanent constitution which stipulated

¹² The state of ignorance of the guidance from God - author's note.

¹³ A. Bayat, *Making Islam democratic. Social movements and the post-Islamist turn*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2007, p. 142, pp. 145-147.

the establishment of a parliament¹⁴ was adopted in Qatar; in 2006 the first elections, though very limited, were held to the Federal National Council in United Arab Emirates. In Saudi Arabia this involvement is being promoted through the system of municipal elections and organization of the National Dialogue forums (a series initiated by then Crown Prince Abdullah in June 2003, that brings together different members of society to discuss different issues: extremism and moderation, national unity, women's rights, issues affecting youths, the relationship with non-Saudis and non-Muslims, the education system in the Kingdom, and labour issues). As King Abdul Aziz Centre for National Dialogue Secretary-General Faisal Bin Muammer said, "the National Dialogue has a vision regarding renewing religious speech to be in line with modern times, without changing the basics."¹⁵

Yet, elections, expansion of representation in the parliament and establishment of non-governmental organizations largely target support of national consolidation in the absence of pluralization.

Conclusion

Summarizing analysis of the nation and state building in the Arabic East we can state that the changes in the institutional and legal spheres were significant but failed to result in formation of sovereign authority of the Western type. This did not result from "incompatibility" of Islam with democracy and "authoritarianism" of the elites but, rather, from the dualism of the Moslem political system basics determined by the modernization specifics in the absence of autonomous, autochthonous industrial capitalism. A new *point* of "equilibrium" is gradual formation of a representative system with participation of both of the ruling parties that perform the social welfare and stabilizing functions and "Islamic nationalists" who express essentially democratic interests of the wide circles of the Moslems and support Islamic identity as the most important form of cognition and identity during the period of rapid social and cultural changes. Indications of such changes mean that establishment of civil society and political reforms will be concurrent while the "antinomies competition" will not involve violence.

¹⁴ Two-thirds of its members are elected *vis-a-vis* free direct elections whereas the remaining members are appointed by the Emir - author's note.

¹⁵ R. Qusti, *National dialogue chief says no boundaries in forums*. [Online:] <http://www.saudi-us-relations.org/articles/2007/oi/070426-national-dialogue.html> (14.03.2009).