



# Nationalism and the crisis of community in the Middle East

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## Introduction

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the twentieth century was chaotic and led to imperial control and incorporation of the Middle East into the world capitalist system. Except for Iran, Turkey, and much later Israel, national states in the region emerged by way of imperial bargains. After the Second World War, Arab states under colonial rule gained their independence and sought to build nations. However, rather than becoming fully consolidated national communities, many descended into authoritarianism and sectarian rule. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the region is once more in political turmoil, and several states such as Iraq, Libya, and Syria ceased to be functional. The Arab Spring of 2011 has not produced much-needed and much-anticipated democratization. Instead, after a brief period of opening up, descent into authoritarianism accelerated even in countries such as Turkey, which had been hailed as a model of democratic consolidation. It is in the wake of this tumultuous century that the five articles in this volume explore the sad reality that national consolidation in the Middle East is not only far from complete but further fragmenting along ethnic, religious, and sectarian lines.

Nationalism emerged in the Middle East during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. National identities and nation-building efforts, rather than developing over time as part of new class relations and social formations, became entangled with modernization, colonialism, and imperial redrawing of boundaries. The multicultural social fabric of the Ottoman Empire had led to the emergence of the millet, which recognized the legal and social autonomy of non-Muslim (i.e., Christian and Jewish) religious communities, and this loose structure was able to maintain the cultural, ethnic, and religious plurality of its provinces over four hundred years.

The same multicultural administrative ethos became more structured in the nineteenth century, once the age of nationalism emerged in Europe and reached Ottoman borders. Taking hold first in the Balkan provinces, nationalism eventually arrived in the empire's Middle Eastern provinces in the late nineteenth century. While Turkish, Iranian, and later Zionist

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nation building differs from Arab forms of nationalism, efforts at modernization shaped early nationalism throughout the region.

After the Balkan provinces separated in the late nineteenth century and the Ottoman Empire began to crumble, its governing elite finally grasped that it could no longer hold together ethnically and religiously diverse populations under the umbrella of an amorphous Ottoman identity. Turkish nationalism emerged in the wake of this painful realization that only a unified national identity could maintain what was left of the empire. As a reaction to the multicultural, multiethnic, and multireligious social fabric of the Ottoman Empire, Turkish nationalism combined elements of corporatism and communitarianism as it sought to create a homogeneous nation out of a highly heterogeneous population (Berkes 1959). The governing elite of the late Ottoman empire, unable to prevent Balkan nationalism and failing to promote “Ottomanism” as an identity to galvanize other Muslim populations, turned to Turkish ethnic identity to establish and maintain national community in Anatolia and what remained of Thrace (Hanioglu 2008).

Prior to the First World War, the Committee of Union and Progress (the CUP) advocated pan-Turkism, which emphasized ethnic unity of the Turkish people within and outside the empire. Yet it proved hard to consolidate large groups in Anatolia under a Turkish ethnic identity. The Ottomans never defined themselves as exclusively Turks, and Anatolia—the putative center of this new ethnic identity—has always had heterogeneous populations with multiple religious and ethnic identities. As a result, Turkish nation building became one of the region’s most radical seeking to create a single national identity out of diverse groups with no sense of national belonging.

Furthermore, the national project in Turkey, unique in the region, merged nation building with complete westernization. Turkish nationalism aimed for a homogeneous, secular, and western nation as it attempted not only to create a new national community but also to forge individual citizens as its agents (Mardin 2006). This new citizenship was antithetical to the traditional Ottoman identity, which reflected various religious and communal cultural codes, and the new “national” identity mostly excluded religious and ethnic minorities such as Armenians, Greeks, and Kurds.

Iranian nation building under the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979), though less radical than the Turkish version, followed the same path of secularization. Just as Turkish nationalism deployed pre-Islamic Turkish cultural codes as founding myths, the Shah Mohammad Reza invoked ancient, i.e., pre-Islamic, Persian civilization (Siavoshi 2014). However, his project had to reconcile Persian ethnic identity with Shi’i religious identity. While the Sunni Islamic forces in Turkey lacked organizational structure, making de-Islamization there easier, in Iran, the strong institutional foundations of Shi’i tradition undergirded its place in the public sphere and led to various clashes with Persian ethnic identity and culture in the struggle to define nationalist ideology.

Both the Pahlavi dynasty and the later Islamic Republic used various forms of Persian and Shi’i identities to consolidate their regime. While the Shahs emphasized the greatness of the ancient Persian Empire and its pre-Islamic roots to consolidate their modern state and distance the national narrative from Islam, the Islamic Republic re-emphasized Shi’i culture and identity to re-Islamize the national imagination (Litvak 2017; Hourcade 2017). Just as Turkish nationalism excluded and marginalized ethnic minorities such as Kurds in the national narrative, this Persian–Shi’i tension excluded ethnic identities such as Kurds, Arabs, and Azeris from the national discourse. Iranian nation building, however, was not as anti-Islamic as Turkish.

The demise of Ottomanism as a unifying identity affected Arab elites in Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and other major urban centers as nationalism surfaced after 1900. Arab nationalism, unlike its Balkan counterparts, emerged not as an independence movement but calling for greater autonomy and self-governance (Tibi 1997). Breaking away from the Islamic empire seemed crucial for the predominantly Christian Balkan peoples. Arab populations, in contrast, were Muslim, like their Ottoman rulers, so saw themselves as among the privileged subjects. Yet the Turkish nationalists who were controlling the central Ottoman state began after 1905 to differentiate Turks from other Muslim peoples, systematically excluded Arabs from administration, and viewed them as inferior to Turks (Hanioglu 1995, pp. 44–9).

As Turkification intensified, Arab intellectuals in urban centers of the Middle East started to see their future separate from the Turks. Rashid Rida, an influential Arab nationalist thinker, proposed that, because Arab peoples were the earliest Muslims, Arab national identity was more inclusive than narrow Turkish nationalism and the only realistic ground for wider unification for Muslim peoples (Hourani 1983).

The chaotic collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War intensified Arab efforts to separate themselves from the Turks. But the new, formal British and French imperial presence in Arab lands complicated the consolidation of Arab nationalism, which began to oscillate between territorial national identities and pan-Arabism. Regional rivalries, sectarian divisions, and ethnic conflicts turned pan-Arabism as a unifying ideology into an unfulfilled dream (Muslih 1991). Britain and France's division of Arab lands with the Sykes–Picot agreement of 1916 and the arbitrary boundaries of League of Nations mandate agreements put the Arab Middle East under tutelage, denying the historical and cultural continuity of these societies and grouping populations into artificial, unstable nation-states—a process that still generates never-ending conflicts through much of the region. Yet, after the effective collapse of pan-Arabism in the 1960s, nation building went hand in hand with modernization.

Zionism was external to the national transformations taking place in the Middle East and developed largely as a response to anti-Semitism in Europe. While the World Zionist Organization (founded in Basel in 1897) claimed to represent all Jews in exile, central and eastern European Jews were the most enthusiastic supporters (Lacqueur 2003). Western European Jews, in contrast, at least until the rise of Nazism in Germany and rampant anti-Semitism through much of Europe, saw themselves as nationals of their countries, unlike their co-religionists to the east who had experienced frequent violence and pogroms.

Zionism was a nationalist movement, but it was far from unified, and cultural, religious, and secular versions had different visions of a possible Jewish homeland. However, after the Sixth Zionist Congress (Basel, 1903), a Jewish homeland in Palestine became a dominant outlook within Zionism. The movement set itself simultaneously to build Jewish presence in Ottoman Palestine and establish cultural, economic, and political infrastructure for a new Jewish national society there. Zionism, apart from its internal divisions between cultural, religious, and secular versions, had struggled to reconcile the idea of a Jewish homeland with building a civic nation; after Israel's independence in 1948, this tension resulted in discriminatory citizenship practices towards native Palestinians within its borders (Ben-Porat and Turner 2011; Rosenhek 2011). In addition, Zionism coped with forging a national Jewish community consisting of people from many countries possessing different cultural practices and languages. Zionists, like other modern nationalists, knew that they had to start *de novo*, creating new cultural symbols, institutions, and language (Vital 1982).

Despite notable differences, early forms of nation building in the Middle Eastern states reflected their integration into world capitalism and modernization. All were top-down

schemes to create modern, secular political communities, and most positioned themselves against traditional forces such as religion and communal ties. National consolidation, however, was slow and uneven and foundered in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a crisis in capital accumulation in the region threatened their patronage systems, which sought to balance various ethnic and religious divisions. Increasingly unable to distribute resources, and failing to establish a coherent narrative of modernity, most stopped trying to build a nation (Bromley 1994, pp. 172–84).

Political Islam emerged in late 1970s as the strongest counter-narrative to nationalism and modernization. Middle Eastern states had long suppressed the development of civil society, particularly on the left, so as to eliminate alternative narratives to top-down national consolidation. Political Islam emerged as the only viable civil vehicle for expressing opposition to the existing regimes. Islamist forces were quick to challenge secular frameworks of national regimes with alternative narratives that emphasized traditional and Islamic values as key components of national identities. Rather than being pan-Islamist, Islamists, like most nationalists, mobilized their bases in local and national communities and defined their strategies in strictly national terms (Sadowski 2006, pp. 223–7).

Islamist organizations were effective at organizing in marginalized shantytowns of large cities inhabited by new migrants from the countryside and smaller towns who experienced alienation, discrimination, and exclusion and felt generally left behind by national consolidation. Islamic organizations quickly filled the crucial role of providing social services such as day care, food, and schooling in poor neighborhoods and provided a spiritual anchor to newcomers who felt lost in the pluralism of the big city and no connection to the newly forming national identity. In so many societies, their key message was very similar, and everywhere, they targeted the secular foundations of national regimes. In Turkey, for instance, Islamist parties and organizations were active in urban shantytowns and criticized the republic's strict secularism and its rejection of the Ottoman legacy, depicting that stance as a rejection of Turkey's traditional values (Dogan 2017). In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood had a similar organization in Cairo and Alexandria's poor neighborhoods while targeting modernity as a western ideology designed to weaken the traditional religious and cultural roots of Egyptian society.

By the late 1990s, national narratives had been punctured severely in the Middle East, and the social fabric of many societies started to disintegrate. In Iraq, after the US-led invasion in 2003, it proved impossible to bring together the Shi'i, Sunni, and Kurds, and the country quickly descended into segregated units. The Arab Spring of 2011 not only failed to fulfill latent expectations for democracy but also accelerated the disintegration of national narratives throughout the Middle East. The protracted civil war in Syria, beginning in March 2011, ruptured already fragile social ties between Sunnis, Alawites, and Kurds. In Egypt, since the military coup of July 2013 that removed the Muslim Brotherhood from power, the relative quiet has only masked the ever-growing tensions between secular and Islamist forces, and Coptic Christians have felt increasingly marginalized and fearful.

Similarly, in Turkey, initial optimism under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (JDP: Turkish AKP) beginning in 2002 evaporated as Recep Tayyip Erdogan's tight grip transformed a democracy into an authoritarian regime. Erdogan and the AKP created a counter-narrative that challenged the republican, secular, and modern Turkish national identity. The AKP not only reintroduced the Ottoman past to redefine Turkish national identity but also launched extensive educational and cultural campaigns to replace secular national identity with

a more traditional and religious one. As a result, Turkish society has divided in two, with roughly equal segments subscribing to their own respective national identities.

In Iran, the Islamic regime has been able to hold onto power, but strong reformist elements of civil society, particularly visible among student groups and women's organizations, demand more freedom. Demonstrations in 2017 revealed deep tensions between state and civil society, as well as cleavages among groups in civil society. The chasm between traditional Islamic and secular forces manifests itself in very different attitudes towards women's head coverings, women's place in public life, freedom of thought, and censorship of cultural products. The 2017 protests revealed the regime's inability to impose strict religious traditionalism on society. The regime tries hard to hold onto power but finds it increasingly difficult to impose its version of traditional religious identity.

Finally, Israel displays a similar divide between secular and religious forces. After 1948, Labor Zionism differentiated itself from other secular forms of Zionism and became a dominant, defining political force. It imagined a secular homeland that would blend Jewish cultural identity with socialist ideals. Religious groups never accepted that vision, but their de facto autonomy has allowed a certain calm in national politics. In order to keep this relative peace, Israel has never defined itself as and declared itself a secular state, but created a "consociation" that allows each sphere to function in its own area. However, since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, many of its non-leftist Jews have moved to Israel. In addition, ultra-religious forces have been increasingly assertive and have been able to fracture the hegemony of Labor Zionism. Everyday tensions between secular and religious groups have increased as the religious groups, no longer content with autonomy, challenge the secular foundations of the state.

The five articles in this volume trace this transformation in national identities and the fragmentation of national states in the Middle East in the last decade. In each case, there are different forces at play, but the underlying narrative is the crisis of nationalism and modernity in the region.

Faedah Totah's chapter examines the evolution of Syrian nationalism as it evolved from pan-Arab nationalism into a territorial form. It is very timely, as it focuses on the failure of Syrian nationalism to form a coherent national identity as it moved away from pan-Arabism. Its observations are highly relevant to the situations in Iraq and Libya, where national identity also disintegrated. Totah focuses on how the Palestinian cause united Syria's otherwise-diverse population, becoming a narrative that allowed groups to relate to each other in a uniting moment of national consciousness. Totah's conclusion, even the Palestinians' plight was not enough to transcend the divisions among Syria's ethnic and sectarian groups.

Jonathan Viger analyses the failure of Syrian nation building in terms of class relations. His essay examines the formation and disintegration of a national narrative from the late Ottoman period through to the late 1960s. He explains that, just as with the Palestinian cause in Totah's analysis, mobilization of the middle classes pitted them against the traditional ruling classes and prepared the ground for national mobilization. The state-dependent middle classes helped form a short-lived populist alliance with the lower classes against the notables and create a nationalist ideology. An urban industrial class developed under the state's tutelage and became the principal nation builder. Because of the symbiotic relationship between this industrial bourgeoisie and the state bureaucracy, "development, state formation, and nation building represented combined process."

Essays by Sedef Arat-Koc and by Secil Dagtas explore recent developments in nationalism in Turkey, which emerged during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and was suspicious of

difference and multiplicity. The nationalist elite concluded that the empire's multiethnic and multireligious social fabric was the main reason for its disintegration and aimed to create a unified, secular national identity for its remaining populations. This unitary national identity was the only one visible in the public realm, and the state suppressed any claims of recognition for other identities such as Kurdish, Arab, Christian, or Muslim.

Secil Dagtas' case study of Turkey's multiethnic and multireligious Hatay region tracks a shift in this rigid representation of national identity. Annexed into the republic in 1939 from Syria, the region has never fitted properly into the homogeneous national narrative. Hatay, with its Arab, Turkish, Jewish, Christian, Sunni, and Alawite groups and its deep cultural and historical connections with Syria, has always been an oddity in Turkey. Dagtas' analysis reveals that, despite Turkey's rigid discourse of national unity, Hatay's ethno-religious identities constantly shift and change. Focusing on two key moments—the turn to democratization and pluralism in mid-2000 and the arrival of Syrian refugees beginning in 2011—the article reveals constant reconfigurations and daily manifestations of various identities in relation to national citizenship.

Sedef Arat-Koc examines the fragmentation of national discourse and the recent extreme polarization of national politics in Turkey. Since the Justice and Development Party (JDP) took power in 2002, it has claimed to represent excluded and marginalized Turks. These people—mostly migrants from small towns to the margins of big cities, conservative, and not entirely comfortable with secular nationalism—identified the JDP and Erdoğan as their representative against the secular elites of the major centers. Arat-Koc examines the idea of “white” Turks and “black” Turks to show how national identity fragmented and redefined itself in the 1990s. Emerging first as a critique of the middle classes while the Turkish economy was integrating into global neoliberalism, the two labels have evolved into identity positions—the authentic “self” and the “other” of national identity. Arat-Koc depicts both terms as self-declared identities claiming authentic Turkish identity and grounding an extremely polarized national politics. “Black” evolved from being a demand for greater inclusion to forming the JDP's justification for its increasingly authoritarian and populist governance.

Finally, Michael Vicente Perez examines everyday reproduction of Palestinian nationalism in Jordan. Palestinians' nationalism, like Kurds', lacks a corresponding nation state. Furthermore, it has historically shaped itself in terms of two powerful forces: resistance to Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza and a desire to differentiate itself from the national discourses of the countries where Palestinians have been living as refugees. As in any other occupied national community uprooted from its historical land, memory plays a central role in maintaining and reproducing national consciousness. Perez discusses how the use of material objects, including food, in Palestinian homes and institutions in Jordan abets this process. In a land where Jordanian nationalism is the dominant discourse, their own material objects, such as bracelets or specially decorated notebooks, reproduce Palestinians' national identity and consciousness in everyday living. Palestinians' vexed relations with the host country, as Perez explains, make many Jordanians see their nationalism as a threat to their own national culture, so the state discourages its public display. Instead, Palestinians turn to material objects as act of defiance.

While each article in this collection focuses on specific circumstances of national crises/transformations in various parts of the Middle East, they have an underlying theme: in the early twenty-first century, nationalism is no longer a unifying ideology in the region. Instead, states face challenges from the demands of ethnic identities, the rise of political Islam, persisting authoritarianism, and recurring economic crisis. All these challenges have created

a crisis in governance that exacerbates authoritarian tendencies and chips away at states' popular legitimacy. The twentieth century started with a period of transformation in the national communities of the Middle East and continued with various political and economic crises, as well as periodic regional wars. So far, the twenty-first century does not seem to promise a better future.

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