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A Century of Identity-Based Resistance: The Evolution of Islamism as a Political Movement

Introduction

When one thinks of the most dramatic and destructive crises affecting the world today, the first thing to come to mind is very likely the scourge of Islamism, a movement based in Islamic fundamentalism that aims to impose a society based on Islamic laws and traditions. In an age increasingly defined by global terrorism and the national security crises it has prompted, Islamism has imposed itself as a force ostensibly motivated by religious purism and revivalism, whose mission is nothing more than *jihad*, or holy war, against religious dissidents. The reality, however, is not so straightforward: the movement we know today as Islamism is the latest incarnation of a string of political movements in the Middle East created to achieve the goals of reclaiming a lost sense of regional political unity, reasserting cultural autonomy, and resisting foreign political and social influence. This phenomenon evolved from the early independence movements of the late Ottoman period to Arab Nationalism to the current Islamist wave. Its Islamic character is not so much the result of deep-rooted religious conviction as it a political move, using the mantle of religion to create solidarity among Middle Easterners by appealing to their common identity. An examination of the history of the various political movements of the Middle East during the course of the last century reveals Islamism to be largely *political* at its base, the latest incarnation of a series of political movements based in a suspicion of Western culture as antithetical to the sovereignty and unity of the Middle East.

Western Colonialism: The Beginning of the Movement (1914-1920)

At the start of the First World War, the Middle East was under the control of the Ottoman Empire, which presided over numerous ethnic groups - most of them Arab - who were increasingly dissatisfied with the Turkish elite ruling over them and the empire's inefficient and ineffective bureaucracy. This outcry against the Turkish imperial elite gained the biggest foothold among the Arab residents of the empire, while the Turkish leadership remained "dedicated to an incipient Turkish nationalism which threatened to drive a wedge between the Turks who controlled the empire and the Arabs."¹ The aloofness and unrepresentative nature of the Ottoman government had thus set much of the rest of the empire against it, galvanizing resistance to it. Sensing internal instability and growing ethnic and ideological divisions within the empire, the European powers - Great Britain and France in particular - saw their chance to capitalize on the interests of the Ottoman people in order to further their own national interest. This came to fruition upon the outbreak of World War I, in which the Ottoman Empire had joined the Central Powers in the fight against the Triple Entente of Britain, France, and Russia. The interested European powers realized they needed to align themselves with discontented factions within the empire and present themselves as saviors from the corrupt Ottoman elite. Thus began a series of agreements with various parties within the Ottoman Empire conducted by the European powers with full knowledge that they would not be upheld. The first of these empty agreements was the Husain-McMahon Correspondence of 1915, in which Sir Henry McMahon, Britain's high commissioner in Egypt, promised the creation of an independent state for the Arab people stretching from the Levant to Iraq. In addition to this, McMahon conducted an agreement with a separate party

¹ Owen, Roger. *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 6.

pledging the “ultimate independence of Arabia,” based on the principle that governance should reflect the principle of self-determination and recognize the “complete and sovereign independence” of the promised state.²

Behind the scenes, however, ulterior plans took place between the European powers themselves. In 1916, British diplomat Mark Sykes and his French counterpart, Francois Georges-Picot, had hammered out the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which divided up the Ottoman Middle East into French and British spheres of influence: Britain was to receive Palestine, Iraq, and Jordan, while France would receive Syria and Lebanon - in direct contravention of the previous agreements guaranteeing an independent Arab state in those territories.³ The realization for the people of the former Ottoman Empire, having been defeated and dismantled at the end of the First World War, that their interests had been played upon for colonial gain, and that the agreements made were simply for political leverage, finally came in November of 1918 with the Anglo-French Declaration. This decreed that the former empire would be divided arbitrarily into individual *mandates* split between France and Britain, drawn up without regard for the ethnic identity of peoples within.⁴ This left the Middle East split between the colonial powers by hastily drawn-up borders. Their desire for independence had been *used* by European powers simply to gain a foothold in the Middle East.

² Owen, 66-67.

³ Hourani, Albert. *A History of the Arab Peoples*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010, pp. 241.

⁴ Hourani, 250-251.

The colonial powers set about creating power structures within each mandate designed to cement their power. They did this by implementing a strategy which came to be known as “divide and rule,” by which “the Europeans...favored minorities as a colonial strategy - to empower the minority, bind them to the imperial power and make them dependent at the expense of the majority.”⁵ This strategy was manifested by both Britain and France in their respective mandates: for example, “In Iraq, the British put the minority Sunnis in power over the majority Shiites. In Syria, the French removed the ruling Sunni elites...and replaced them with a coalition of minorities - including the Shiite Alawites.”⁶ The use of religion by the occupying powers as a means of quelling dissent among the occupied masses, effected by rendering a minority group wholly dependent upon colonial authority to keep their fragile power intact, was also undertaken in the increasing British sponsorship of Jewish settlement in Palestine at the expense of the Arab residents of the area, effected in order to settle the region with a group dependent upon the British administration for their protection from their Arab neighbors, as well as gain the support of notable Zionists.⁷ The native people of the Middle East, having borne the brunt of broken promises, were quickly coming to realize that their new European overlords were not, as they had claimed, seeking their democratic wishes. The exploitation by Western powers of the people’s desire for self-rule to colonize the region and of their religious differences to systemically subjugate them thus came to represent the inherent moral and political corruption of the West in the eyes of Mid

⁵ Jones, Toby Craig. *Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010, pp. 183.

⁶ *Global Issues: Selections From CQ Researcher*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2014, pp. 40.

⁷ Brenner, Lenni. *Zionism in the Age of the Dictators*. Atlanta, GA: Authority Publishing, 2014, pp. 71-72.

dle Easterners, driving political movements with the goal of dismantling colonial power structures.

It was defiance against this Western presence in the Middle East and the imperialist power structures that came with it which formed the backbone of the first instances of mass resistance to sweep the region. It was first manifested in disorganized revolts against colonial rule demanding an end to foreign occupation. Uprisings occurred in Iraq, where a series of revolts took place throughout the 1920's, and in Egypt, where a mass uprising took place in 1919 over the forced exile of nationalist leader Saad Zaghloul for seeking the reunification of Egypt with Sudan, which had been split by the British.⁸ In Mandatory Palestine, mass riots ensued over continued Jewish immigration to Arab lands sponsored by the ruling British. In 1920, independence-seeking Syrians mounted an all-out war against the French in the mandate, marking the largest uprising against colonial rule up to that time in the Middle East. This was to be followed by another Syrian rebellion five years later against French rule. Despite the failure of these uprisings, they “had the lasting effect of permanently drawing disparate regions together under the idea of an...Arab nation.”⁹

Arab Nationalist Phase: Reclaiming Arab Self-Determination (1920-1967)

With a series of revolts against imperialism uniting the once-disorganized peoples of the Middle East under the common mission of freedom from the yoke of imperialism, resistance to colonial authority came to reflect one ideology in particular: that of Arab Nationalism, which allowed

⁸ Botman, Selma. *Egypt: From Independence to Revolution, 1919-1952*. New York: Syracuse University press, 1991, pp. 7.

⁹ Provence, Michael. *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005, pp. 25.

transcendence of the artificial colonial boundaries meant to divide the people of the region under the common mantle of their Arab identity. This movement drew inspiration from such thinkers as Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, who argued that the Arab people were the successors to the legacy of the Prophet Muhammad, an Arab himself, and that as such, they had a rightful place as rulers of the Middle East.¹⁰ Inspired by these sentiments, groups of students and intellectuals gained prominence, with the stated purpose of reclaiming Arab greatness from the clutches of humiliating colonialism. These organizations included the Arab Nationalist Movement and *al-Fatat*, or the Young Arab Society, which, in turn, began influencing the establishment of political parties with Arab Nationalist creeds, such as the Arab Independence Party, “having at its aim the creation of a federation of all Arab countries.”¹¹ Arab Nationalism represented a secular outlook which lessened the distinction between *Sunni* and *Shi’a* the colonial powers had exploited as a means of control and manipulation, focusing on the Arab identity which united them, rather than the varying forms of Islam which divided them. This ideology, marked by inter-religious defiance of colonial rule, came to spread rapidly across Middle Eastern universities, influencing the next generation of leaders, and gained adherents among the powerful Arab elite.¹² Arab Nationalism thus gained appeal as a unifying force for the people of the Middle East, allowing them to overcome the internal divisions enabling colonialism.

¹⁰ Weismann, Itzchak. *Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi: Islamic Reform and Arab Revival*. London: Oneworld, 2015, pp. 59-60.

¹¹ Lebl, Ğeni. *The Mufti of Jerusalem: Haj-Amin el-Husseini and National Socialism*. Belgrade: Cigoja Stampa, 2007, pp. 16.

¹² Dawisha, A. I. *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016 , pp. 125.

A central tenet of Arab Nationalism became ending the “occupation” of the Arab people of Palestine and the use of Arab land as a colonialist “project,” becoming “a major and basic component of the Arab cause, hardly separable from it even for the sake of argument.”¹³ Previously a disunited people inhabiting an insignificant part of what was considered Southern Syria, the Palestinian people began to take on a distinct identity in response to an influx of European Jewish settlers in the region as well as the stinging defeat of the Syrian rebellion in 1920: “No ‘Palestinian Arab’ people existed before 1920 but (after the Syrian rebellion) it took on a shape recognizable similar to today’s. One prominent Jerusalemite commented, ‘Southern Syria no longer exists. We must defend Palestine.’”¹⁴ The official adoption of the restoration of an Arab Palestine as a tenet of the Arab Nationalist cause came at the 1931 Pan-Islamic Conference in Jerusalem, condemning the presence of Jewish settlers in Arab territory preventing the establishment of a pan-Arab state.¹⁵ The Higher Arab Committee sprang up to demand a cessation to Jewish immigration and British withdrawal from Palestine, driving the so-called Arab Revolt in Palestine in 1936. The Palestinian problem was a driving force behind the establishment of the first transnational body among Arab states, the Arab League, in 1945, which included Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Syria.¹⁶ Upon the declaration of the state of Israel’s establishment as a Jewish homeland in 1948 with the backing of the ruling British, the

¹³ Saïgh, Anō. *Palestine and Arab Nationalism*. Beirut: P.L.O. Research Center, 1970, pp. 1

¹⁴ Pipes, Daniel. *Greater Syria: History of an Ambition*. Oxford: Oxford University Publishers, 1992, pp. 133.

¹⁵ Choueiri, Youssef M. *Arab Nationalism, a History: Nation and State in the Arab World*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2005, pp. 114.

¹⁶ Choueiri, 118-119.

Arab League launched an invasion of Israel, an incursion which resulted in failure. However, the Arab forces' defeat in the war was insignificant compared to the effect it had on the Arab Nationalist movement as a whole: "After the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, the main weight of the conflict shifted from the local or inter-communal level to the inter-state level."¹⁷

Arab Nationalism had entrenched itself as an influential movement in the Middle East, and it soon took on a political significance at the state level. By 1950, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan were independent of British rule, rising hopes that they would unite politically to form their pan-Arab state. The political face of Arab Nationalism became President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, who, in 1956, took the bold step of nationalizing the British-held Suez Canal in a move against "subservience to Zionism and Western imperialism" and repelling the invading Western coalition in the Suez War, becoming the unofficial leader of the Arab movement and establishing a reputation as a hero of the Arab people and fearless crusader against Western oppression across the Middle East.¹⁸ Nasser's example went on to inspire other Arab revolutions across the Middle East, manifesting itself in the leadership of Ahmed Ben Bella in Algeria, Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, and the Ba'athist Party in Iraq, an ideology which advocated an Arab "renaissance" through a pan-Arab state¹⁹ The Arab Nationalist leadership these men embodied took on a statist, authoritarian role: "This antipathy to Western imperialism translated into a hostility not only to the policies of the West but also to its institutions," such as

¹⁷ Woods, Ngaire. *Explaining International Relations since 1945*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 252.

¹⁸ Karen A. Rasler et al., *How Rivalries End*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013, pp. 40.

¹⁹ Osman, Tarek. *Egypt on the Brink: From Nasser to the Muslim Brotherhood*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013, pp. 249-254.

democracy.²⁰ This antipathy was also embodied in many Arab states' allying themselves with the Soviet Union in the Cold War, exemplified in a series of arms deals between the U.S.S.R. and Egypt under Nasser. Yet the presence of Israel - a Western-supported Jewish enclave in the middle of "rightful" Arab lands - remained in the eyes of Arab Nationalists the final remnant of imperialism and a constant reminder of the broken promises of World War I: "In Arab rhetoric Israel (was) cast...as an 'agent,' or tool, of Western imperialism."²¹ In 1967, Nasser, convinced that a military alliance of Arab nations could bring Palestine once again into the Arab fold, gathered a coalition with Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon and mounted a surprise invasion of Israel from all directions. The result was a shocking defeat of the coalition by Israeli forces and expansion of Israeli territory into Egyptian territory.

Islamist Phase: Religious Heritage as the Rallying Cry of Resistance (1967-present)

This stunning defeat dashed any hopes of an Arab state by cementing Israeli power in the Middle East, rendering any regional pan-Arab state unfeasible. The Arab Nationalist institutions and power structures, it occurred to Middle Easterners, had come to resemble the Western imperial institutions they had fought so hard to break from. They were secular in their outlook and failed to embrace what united them above any political level: their Islamic identity. For this reason, "the 1967 'setback' was instrumental in driving home the Islamist message to ever wider populations of...Middle Easterners."²² Many turned to the writings of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani,

²⁰ Dawisha, 173.

²¹ Halliday, Fred. *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology*. Cambridge: Cambridge Publishers, 2012, pp. 201.

²² Calvert, John. *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 269.

who appealed for the unity of Islam and its use as an effective tool for mobilizing the Middle Eastern people against the foreign domination which still lingered.²³ It had become clear that the solution for uniting the peoples of the Middle East against the imperialist holdover which Israel represented was a rediscovery of Islam, the most definitive facet of Middle Eastern identity, at whose base was not just the Arab peoples, but the entire Muslim *ummah*, or faith community - something unique to them which would serve as not only a political front against Western imperialism, but a cultural and religious one. Furthermore, it represented a mass movement of common people rather than the authoritarian structure of Arab Nationalism. Across the Middle East, the female head covering, or *hijab*, and beards on men saw a resurgence in popularity as a backlash to the emphasis on cultural “progress” of Arab Nationalism: “The problem of imperialism...was essentially cultural. Its evil lay in the propagation of such moral and ethical evils as women’s emancipation, secularism, and nationalism.”²⁴ Islamism was rooted in finding unity not as part of state, as Arab Nationalism had, but rather *replaced* the state as the primary source of allegiance with a more inclusive outlook encompassing not only Arabs, but all Muslims, and eschewing the state-level allegiance which represented the “alternative ‘civilizational order’” of the West.²⁵

Soon, the Islamist movement that started among the masses acquired a political presence in the Middle East. Nasser’s successor in Egypt, Anwar Sadat, reversed his predecessor’s ban on

²³ Abrahamian, Ervand. *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1983, pp. 62-64.

²⁴ Nasr, Seyyed Vali Reza. *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 49.

²⁵ Fuller, Graham E. *The Future of Political Islam*. Boulder: NetLibrary, Incorporated, 2004, pp. 149.

Islamist organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood and reinstated traditionally Muslim practices in government, such as the observance of the call to prayer.²⁶ The most decisive victory for political Islam, however, came in the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, backed by the U.S., was forced to abdicate in the wake of mass protests against his rule as an “American puppet” and policies of forced Westernization and secularization, with protesters chanting, “Victory or martyrdom.”²⁷ He was replaced, by popular demand, with the exiled Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, an Islamic cleric who blamed Iranian suffering on American imperialism, dubbing it the “Great Satan” and advocating the cultural Islamization of Iran as a means of throwing off American foreign domination. Iranian voters overwhelmingly voted in favor of the creation of an “Islamic Republic” with Khomeini as leader.²⁸ Iran’s example seemed to affirm that the solution to Western imperialism lay with the popular masses themselves, rediscovering the fundamentals of the Muslim faith which had brought them greatness centuries before. The new status of Islam as an anti-colonial force was demonstrated on an even larger scale upon the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. This seemingly imperialist incursion, undertaken to prop up a Soviet-friendly national government, sparked a movement based on Islam which transcended national borders, eschewing the state-based outlook dividing the Muslim world and preventing its unity, attracted “a pool of outraged Muslims from the Middle East and else

²⁶ Mortimer, Edward. *Faith and Power: the Politics of Islam*. New York: Vintage Books, 1982, pp. 187.

²⁷ Chehabi, H. E. *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism: The Liberation Movement of Iran under the Shah and Khomeini*. London: I. B. Tauris, 1990, pp. 235.

²⁸ Chehabi, 280.

where...who want(ed) to resist (foreign) onslaught on their coreligionists.”²⁹ Under the banner of religious *jihad*, or holy war, foreign and local fighters formed an alliance known as the *mujahideen*, which proved successful in forcing Soviet withdrawal in 1989.

Across the Middle East, political Islam had established itself as the ideology which could finally bring about long-sought reunification in the name of their common religious tradition. Islamist movements were seen in the Intifadas in the Palestinian territories, both religious-inspired uprisings against the “imperialist power” of Israel which asserted Palestine’s belonging “to the entire Islamic nation” and that “giving up even a bit of the land means giving up part of religion.”³⁰ In Lebanon, Hezbollah, or “Party of God,” sprang up with the goal of creating a Muslim caliphate and wiping out the presence of “America, its Atlantic Pact allies, and the Zionist entity in Palestine, (who) attacked us and continue to do so without respite,” the objective of its 1983 attack on a marine barracks in Beirut which killed hundreds of American servicemen.³¹

The Islamist movement was given fuel by the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan by U.S.-led Western coalitions in the Persian Gulf War and the global War on Terror in the aftermath of 9/11, reigniting the call for resistance in the face of increasing U.S. presence. This foreign presence further consolidated the Islamist creed and made Islamist parties into increasingly viable options in the face of a renewed external threat.³² In the wake of renewed Western presence, Islam’s val

²⁹ Gerges, Fawaz A. *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 265.

³⁰ Litvak, Meir. *The Islamization of Palestinian Identity: The Case of Hamas*. Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 1998, pp. 155.

³¹ Azani, Eitan. *Hezbollah: the Story of the Party of God*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 58.

³² Kepel, Gilles. *Jihad: the Trail of Political Islam*. London: Tauris, 2014, pp. 155.

ue as a political force grew in virtually all the Middle East. This was nowhere seen more prominently than in the Arab Spring of 2011. Mass popular movements rose across Middle Eastern states against repressive regimes, and in many cases their “pro-Western policies and subservience to the United States.”³³ It was clear that “Washington’s longstanding support for autocracy and dictatorship in the Middle East, a core principle of American foreign policy for decades, had helped stoke a deep-seated political malaise in the region,” and that the autocratic governments in the region had become seen as extensions of Western powers in the region.³⁴ These regimes’ prioritization of their Western alliances above their duty to their citizens, as they saw it, had caused economic stagnation and poverty. The driving force Islam played in the Arab Spring was demonstrated in the role of the *hijab* as a sign of solidarity and unity amongst female participants.³⁵ In countries in which the uprisings succeeded in ousting their respective regimes, Islamist forces usually came to power, further consolidating the status of Islamism as a force for self-sufficiency and cultural autonomy. In Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, for example, elections resulted in victories for Islamist parties. Islamic identity continued to play an integral role as a force against imperialist power structures in the civil uprisings in Syria and Iraq, in which *Sunni* militants flocked to reclaim power from the minority *Shi’a* Alawites³⁶ in power as a result of the

³³ Hamid, Shadi. *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 214.

³⁴ Al-Khalil, Kanan. *Republic of Fear: the Politics of Modern Iraq*. Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1998, pp. 201.

³⁵ Bradley, John R. *After the Arab Spring: How Islamists Hijacked the Middle East Revolts*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 44.

³⁶ Caldwell, Dan, and Robert E. Williams. *Seeking Security in an Insecure World*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, pp. 196.

“divide and conquer” approach employed by the Western powers years earlier, and the U.S.-installed *Shi’a*-led Iraqi government. Today, Islamism remains the most dominant single ideology in the Middle East, having succeeded Arab Nationalism as the primary banner for fighting imperialism with its transnational message and emphasis on Islamic identity as the foundation of Middle Eastern culture and a uniting force against imperialism and its effects.³⁷

Conclusion

Though many outside observers have been baffled by the rise of Islamism in the Middle East during the last century, searching desperately for any cultural aspect or theological underpinnings accounting for its rise, an examination of the history of the region during the last century reveals this ideology, despite appearing purely religious in nature, to be the end result of imperialistic policies at the hands of Western powers throughout the 20th and 21st centuries combined with the failure of Arab Nationalism as an effective political movement. Islamism has at its core the same main end as all other resistance-driven ideologies in the region: to escape foreign domination by uniting under a common identity. It is often neglected that the ever-present force of Islamism on the world stage today is largely *political* beneath the facade of religiosity. As Amin Maalouf notes, “Too much emphasis is often laid on the influence of religions on people, and not enough influence of peoples and their history on religions. You could read a dozen large tomes on the history of Islam from its very beginnings and you still wouldn’t what is going on...but read 30 pages on colonialism...and then you’ll understand quite a lot.”³⁸ Considering that Middle

³⁷ Rubin, Barry M. *The Tragedy of the Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 210.

³⁸ Maalouf, Amin. *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 2012, pp. 212.

Eastern politics have largely been shaped by the outside world, the question remains over whether this fact will influence policymakers on the international stage to abandon the interventionist approach which effectively shaped the preceding century in the region and resulted in many of the most pressing crises of our time.

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