The Arab World between the Dilemma of Nationalism and Sectarian Conflicts

Abstract

With the advent of the Arab popular uprisings, many hidden ordeals have been uncovered in the region. Nationalism and sectarian (ethno-confessional) problems are among several issues, yet they constitute a source of ongoing turbulence. It is my contention that the Great War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire were at the root of all these problems. In an effort to draw conclusions and a working prognosis, this article focuses on two aspects of the impact and repercussions of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire: firstly the rise of nationalism, and secondly the emergence contemporary Islamic movements and sectarian calamity.

Introduction

In this article, the focus will be on the Arab world, as an identified entity, rather than the “Middle East” which continues to be a source of disagreement among scholars on its exact definition, components, borders and geography. Conversely, the term the “Arab world” has a specific geographical and political extent that geographically includes countries ranging from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian Ocean, i.e. Morocco to the West, the Arab Peninsula to the South, Iraq to the East and Northern Africa to the North, a range which politically encompasses all members of the League of Arab States. The Arab world has a special importance for the three monotheistic religions and from a geo-strategic perspective, the Arab world has been the center of attention for the various advantages it possesses: natural gas, oil, iron, phosphate and other natural resources; a strategic location (traditionally the Silk Road); being the center of main international naval routes and a huge market for consumer goods. As a result, the region has provided a major backdrop for numerous conflicts and has been an important target for irredentism and intervention, with major powers having tried to establish a foothold here since medieval times.

Fadi Elhusseini

* Associate Research Fellow at the Institute for Middle East Studies, Canada; Ph.D. candidate at the University of Sunderland, United Kingdom, e-mail: bg36zm@research.sunderland.ac.uk


With the advent of the so-called Arab Spring or Arab popular uprisings in December 2010, many buried ordeals in the Arab world were uncovered. The death toll has been mounting rapidly in an unprecedented way, with the ongoing turbulence in Iraq, chaos in Syria, civil war in Somalia, disorder in Libya, turmoil in Yemen and instability in Egypt. In addition to traditional problems rooted in Arab societies, such as weak state institutions, poverty, inequality and underdevelopment, two main issues appeared as a cornerstone for instability to the whole region: nationalism (two-level nationalism: individual state nationalism and “pan”-Arab nationalism) and Islamism (hence political Islam and ethno-confessional conflicts). In fact, both issues (nationalism and Islamism) are inversely connected in a causal relationship and constitute a major source of the ongoing turbulence that may lead to a complete change in the landscape of the Arab world.

In an effort to find solutions for such challenges, it would be erroneous to address these problems without considering their roots through a historical analysis. One may argue that the roots of these problems go back in history to the Great War (WWI) and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. This article elaborates and focuses on two variables: nationalism and Islamism as two main aspects of the repercussions and impact on the region of the Great War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The first part of the article briefly addresses the conditions pertaining to and brought about as a result of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The second part is dedicated to addressing the issue of nationalism in the Arab world on two levels: macro and micro “state nationalism and Arabism or Arab nationalism” in terms of developments and challenges. The third part of this article discusses the emergence of political Islam and Islamic movements and serves as a thorough introduction to the fourth part which tackles ethno-confessional problems in the Arab world. Against this backdrop, the article tries to draw relevant conclusions and a working prognosis of the course of events in the region.

The Great War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman Empire was the longest and the last surviving Islamic empire (1299–1922), spanned three continents at the end of the Mongol era and was “rooted in a universal belief: the faith of Islam.”3 It ruled the Arab world for more than four centuries and had an enormous impact on people, politics, culture, life, arts and even laws. The Ottoman Empire developed and gradually lead the whole Islamic world, with the Ottoman Sultan becoming the Caliph of all Muslims who subserviently followed his orders (basically religious); prayed for him in mosques; and came to have his name printed on coins in all Muslim territories.4 With the bombing of Russian Black Sea ports, the Ottoman Empire formally joined the Central Powers and entered the war on 28 October 1914. Five days after the Ottoman’s attack, the Allied Powers

(or the Triple Entente; France, Russia and Great Britain) declared war on the Ottoman Empire, who in return called for “military Jihad” against the Triple Entente in November 1914.\(^5\) The Empire lost the war, collapsed and was divided and its territories carved up among the victorious powers.

Thus, the identity of Arab states – as seen today – had never emerged before the Sykes-Picot agreement – the deal to divide the Arab world. British parliamentarian Sir Mark Sykes and French diplomat François Georges-Picot negotiated the division of the Arab provinces which still belonged to the Ottomans. The agreement was completed in 1916 and was incorporated into the treaty but subject to some revisions later in the war.\(^6\) The partitioning of the Ottoman Empire ran apace between 30 October 1918 and 1 November 1922 and the Ottoman regions were carved up between the British and the French; the eastern part of Greater Syria was partitioned between them and the international Zionist movement was encouraged to push for a Jewish homeland in Palestine after signing the Balfour Declaration. The League of Nations granted France mandates over Syria and Lebanon and granted the United Kingdom mandates over Mesopotamia and Palestine (which was later divided into two regions: Palestine and Transjordan).\(^7\) The Ottoman Empire’s possessions on the Arabian Peninsula became the Kingdom of Hejaz and the Sultanate of Nejd (today Saudi Arabia), the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen, and the Arab states of the Gulf. In North Africa, France had taken Algeria and Tunisia, Britain had taken Egypt, and Italy had taken what became Libya.

In the Ottoman Empire, there were four major millets (religio-political communities); the Muslims, the Greeks, the Armenians and the Jews. The Turks and Arabs did not define themselves as such until modern times,\(^8\) when a rising tide of nationalism made its way into the Ottoman Empire. During that period and before the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, multi-ethnic empires faced a severe dilemma: the issue of “nationalism”. With its roots dating back to the French Revolution in 1789, large multi-national empires of the past, such as the Holy Roman Empire or the Spanish Empire were seen as inherently weak because of the numerous nationalities and languages within the empire.\(^9\) Henceforth, one of the main outcomes of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire was the upsurge of nationalist feeling among the peoples of the region (Arabs, Turks, Kurds, etc.).

---


\(^7\) Ibidem.


In a nutshell, the two main outcomes of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire were: the abolishment of the last Islamic state – the sole reference to all Sunni Muslims and the disintegration of Arab territories, and thus the formation of the current Arab states.

The rise and fall of Arab nationalism

In general, Arab countries do not have severe national integration problems “with the exception of Lebanon, Iraq and Sudan,” as the Arab world is relatively ethnically and culturally homogenous and enjoyed a certain unity under the Ottoman Empire. With the emergence of the “Middle East” and the formation of Arab national states – after being ruled for 400 years by the Ottoman Empire – the issue of nationalism appeared as it had never existed before: a conflict between loyalty to individual states and loyalty to the whole “Arab” nation and thus reunification. A confluence of various factors is believed to have led to the emergence of nationalism in the Arab world.

Firstly, while Arabs lived for many years in the Ottoman Empire as an inherent component of that Empire, the latter years witnessed certain practices by the Sultan and the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) that changed the perception of Arabs towards the rule of the Empire in general, and the presence of the Ottomans in the Arab territories in particular. The Sultan paid less attention to Arab territories and was thus accused of a resulting underdevelopment in the Arab world in terms of intellect, health, agriculture, commerce and industry, while the Unionists were accused of endeavoring to “Turkify” the Arabs, factors that coincided with Arab’s frustration caused by death penalties enforced by Djemal Pasha “es-Seffah”. Thus, it would not be of any surprise to find the Ottomans being described as occupiers in Arabic books and literature.

Secondly, MacMillan remarks that the assumption of power in 1908 by the Young Turks in Istanbul stimulated this early Arab nationalism, which assumed that there would be a single large Arab state. In other words, as a reaction to the rise of Turkish nationalism, Arab thinkers began to formulate ideas of Arab nationalism, looking back at the Abbasid and Umayyad days when Arabs were the leaders of the Islamic empire. In their view, the Ottoman Turks had hampered the progress of the Arab world and stifled their development.

---

11 The term the “Middle East” appeared first in 1902 in an edition of the British journal National Review, in an article by Alfred Thayer Mahan entitled ‘The Persian Gulf and International Relations’, in an attempt to delineate a region from the Mediterranean to India. This term was first employed in World War I when Britain established the Middle East Command in Egypt, which had been known previously as the “Near East”. See: Elhusseini, ‘Post Arab Spring Thoughts…’, pp. 2–3.
14 ‘Lost Islamic History…’.
Thirdly, in tandem with a similar wave of nationalism in Europe, this approach was adopted and bolstered by the British who tried to determine a weakening of the Ottoman Empire from within.\textsuperscript{15} Thus, fuelling nationalistic fervor was deemed important in order to encourage Arabs to eradicate any other subordination, mainly Islamism, which inevitably meant uprooting any connection to the Ottoman Sultan and warding off of any yearnings for Ottoman heritage and tradition. The overriding reason behind this state of affairs was the concern, and hence the desire for trying to hinder any attempt of the ruler of the Ottomans as a spiritual leader of all Muslims to call for Jihad or Holy War against the British.\textsuperscript{16}

Fourthly, the First World War or what the Ottoman Sultan named “the Holy War” (\textit{Mukaddes Cihad}) revealed the weakness of the Empire, its institutions and policies. This was clearly reflected in the failure of Caliph’s army to recruit Muslim soldiers when his army was comprised of mainly Turkish militaries.\textsuperscript{17} In fact, the rebellion led by Sharif Hussein – the descendant of the Prophet – against the Ottoman Caliph weakened the religious attachment of Arabs to the Ottoman Empire, paving the way for nationalism in the Arab world. Fifthly, is the maturation of the consciousness of Arab nationalism. According to many scholars, such as Adeed Dawisha, the notion of Arab nationalism evolved as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the ideas that had been sown by the writings of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, his pupil Muhamad Abdu and later scholars like Rashid Rida and Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi bore fruit later in the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{18} Other scholars, like George Antonius, have surmised that the dawn of Arab nationalism could be tracked back to the political ambitions of Muhamad Ali, the Albanian born governor of Egypt, who tried to establish an Arab kingdom in Egypt and Syria, independent of the Ottoman Empire.\textsuperscript{19}

At this juncture one should concede that with looming dangers (Ottoman misrule and misguided policies, imperialism, colonial penetration, and fragmentation), finding a strong bond to gather and assemble Arabs in light of these challenges, would eventually lead Arabs to adopt nationalism, especially with the fading religious attachment to the Islamic state, represented by the Ottoman Empire – during that period. Margaret MacMillan points out that in much of the Arab world, nationalism was still dormant, except for in Egypt (when the British takeover of control in the 1880s had provoked large demonstrations and resistance). In large cities, such as Damascus, Beirut, and Baghdad, discussion groups and newspapers were important platforms where educated Arabs started to talk about freeing themselves from Ottoman rule.\textsuperscript{20} Arab forefront activists and staunch nationalists received their education in

\textsuperscript{15} Cicek, ‘The Impact…’, p. 103.
\textsuperscript{17} Cicek, ‘The Impact…’, pp. 100–101.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 27.
\textsuperscript{20} MacMillan, \textit{Six Months…}, p. 44.
Western capitals, and were greatly affected by the values of the French Revolution and the widespread concept of nationalism.\textsuperscript{21}

This consciousness capitalized on the eruption of the Arab Revolt (the Great Arab Revolution) led by Sharif Hussein. Cicek cites one of the most prominent Arab nationalists, Sati al-Husri, depicting the “Arab Revolt” in that “the revolt which erupted in Mecca at the end of the second year of the war was not a Hejazi but an Arab Revolt in every sense of the term. It aimed at the independence of all Arab territory and the formation of a new Arab government that would prepare the nation for a genuine revival and restore its former glory. The flag devised by the leaders clearly symbolized this lofty purpose in that each of its four colors was emblematic of the successive eras of the Arab Empire during its past supremacy. Men from the various parts of the Arab World – Syria, Iraq, Palestine and the Hejaz – Christian and Muslim alike, participated in the Revolt and performed the tasks assigned to them.”\textsuperscript{22}

However, it was not until October 1915 when this trend was translated into practical steps. McMahon wrote Sharif Hussein a letter in which he declared Great Britain’s willingness to recognize and support the independence of Arabs within the territories in the limits and boundaries proposed by Hussein himself.\textsuperscript{23} A Kurdish population that stretched from Turkey across to Iran and Syria, were also promised an independent Kurdistan at the Paris Peace Conference, but this was reneged on by the time the final treaty was signed with Turkey at Lausanne in 1923.\textsuperscript{24} As McMahon was corresponding with Sharif Hussein, Britain and France were cementing their colonial presence in the region through the Sykes-Picot agreement, dividing the region into various states. Thus, instead of establishing one Arab state that congregated the Arabs “as Sharif Hussein was pinning his hopes upon,” the agreement ushered in a new colonial era and the birth of the current Arab countries, each with its own national identity. The division of Arab territories was widely seen by Arab nationalists as evidence of an imperialist divide, the borders and boundaries that separated them were portrayed as artificial and arbitrary and the states themselves lacked their legitimacy because of their origins.\textsuperscript{25} In the same context, Bernard Lewis refers to the new Arab states and governments as “installed and bequeathed by British and French empires.”\textsuperscript{26} Thereby, imperialism fragmented the region into a multitude of relatively weak and, to a certain extent, artificial states, at odds with each other.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{22} Cicek, ‘The Impact...’, p. 104.
\textsuperscript{24} MacMillan, \textit{Six Months...}, p. 47.
\textsuperscript{25} Drysdale, ‘National Integration Problems...’, pp. 87–88.
\textsuperscript{26} Lewis, ‘Rethinking...’, p. 25.
\textsuperscript{27} Philip Robins, ‘The Foreign Policy of Turkey’, in \textit{The Foreign Policies of Middle East States}, Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (eds), Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 2002, p. 3.
Although Arab nationalism evolved gradually taking in various terminologies in Arabic texts, e.g. al-Qawmiyya al-Arabiyya (Arab Nationalism), al-Uruba (Arabism) and al-Wahda al-Arabiyya (Arab Unity)\textsuperscript{28}, and later al-Nassiriyya (Nasserism – after Gamal Abdel Nasser), it was not reflected in real unity or solid steps beyond the establishment of the oldest functioning regional organization – the League of Arab States in March 1945 (the six founding states: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt).\textsuperscript{29} In the meantime, individual states continued to develop different identities and separate characteristics, based on interests, political affiliations and alliances, which triggered conflicts in the region in the aftermath of the demise of the Ottoman Empire. Political differences (e.g. Libya during the Gadhafi era and Egypt under Sadat’s rule), and various alliances (e.g. Syria during the reign of Hafiz al-Assad, allied with the Soviet Union, and Saudi Arabia allied with the USA) were cases in point. Thereafter, the region has been plagued by several conflicts. For instance, interstate and colonial wars since the 1948–1949 first Arab-Israeli War through to the 1990–1991 Gulf War, claimed at least 1.5 million casualties, and protracted civil wars and ethnic struggles have led to the deaths of at least two million and the displacement of millions more.\textsuperscript{30} According to Saad Eddin Ibrahim, with just 8% of the world population, the Arab world has borne witness to 25% of the entire world’s armed conflicts between 1945 and 1994. These conflicts have been mostly ethno-racially based, so when taking into account the Arab-Israeli conflict (“six wars and a continued Israeli occupation”) which has claimed almost 200,000 lives in 50 years, during the same period ethno-racial conflicts have claimed at least 12 times as many lives (e.g. the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990) alone matched the same number of casualties as all the Arab-Israeli wars, and the Sudanese civil war “on and off since 1956” has claimed at least eight times as many lives as all Arab-Israeli wars).\textsuperscript{31} Not to mention, the two Gulf wars and their repercussions which have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, from which statistics have failed to produce accurate numbers. Furthermore, the Arab region has witnessed various border disputes, like those between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, between Iraq and Kuwait, and between Morocco and Algeria.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{28} Dawisha, Arab Nationalism..., p. 11.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{32} ‘Nizaat al-hudud al-arabiyyah: irs al-isti’am wa hurub al-ikhwa’ [Arab Border Disputes: The Legacy of Colonialism and Brothers’ Wars], http://arabic.cnn.com/2010/middle_east/7/15/Arab.borders/ (accessed 17 November 2014). The Arab region has witnessed various border disputes: between Bahrain and Qatar, between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, between Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, between Saudi Arabia and Oman, between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, between Saudi
Arab nationalism evolved and the unanimous rejection by Arab states of the 1948 UN partition resolution represented a crucial point in its history, especially considering that on this occasion the will and the expectations of the Arab people were fulfilled with a political decision by their rulers. Another important factor in Arab nationalism was the arrival of the charismatic leader Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1952. Nasser succeeded in fanning the flames of Arab public opinion and in reviving the Arabs dream of one “united” Arab state from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian Ocean. His arrival also inspired others to follow suit in neighbouring countries, like the Ba’ath parties and governments in Syria and Iraq in 1963 and 1968 respectively. With the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict, Arabism appeared in the eyes of many Arabs as a natural reaction to counter Zionism. It is also remarkable that with the rise of Arabism, other nationalistic feelings and claims in the Arab world appeared like those of the Berbers, Afars and Kurds. The latters’ aspirations for an independent Kurdish state turned into an ongoing armed conflict, claiming thousands of lives right up to this day.

However, Arab nationalism started to fade year after year and incident after incident, until it received a deathblow in 1990 with Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait and the ensuing repercussions, including the 2003 US occupation of Iraq and the death of the staunch advocate of Arab nationalism, Saddam Hussein. Such a waning in Arabism fervor was not an overnight occurrence, but rather it was a process that devolved and diminished gradually. Two events ushered in the beginning of the decline of Arabism: the Cold War and the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement. While the former divided Arab states between two camps, Eastern and Western, using their media platforms to employ their public opinion in favor of their “strategic” choice, the latter sharply divided Arabs, and the eventual result was the removal of the headquarters of the Arab League from Cairo.

Bernard Lewis signifies the decline of pan Arabism noting that by 1982, when the Israelis had invaded an Arab capital, Beirut, the reaction in Arab countries was remarkably restrained, mainly because both governments and public opinion in the Arab world were divided by the Iraq-Iran war. In 1986, a similar – unexpected – reaction by Arab governments followed the American air raid on another Arab capital – Tripoli, especially in comparison to unfolding events in 1967 when a rumour that the United States had intervened in the June war, on Israel’s side, brought about attacks by Arab crowds on American interests in many Arab capitals. Lewis remarks that when Saddam Hussein invaded and annexed Kuwait in August 1990, he “formalized” a change that had been developing over a long period. That said, the

Arabia and Jordan, between Saudi Arabia and Iraq, between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, between Iraq and Kuwait, between Iraq and Iran, between Iran and Bahrain, between Oman and Yemen, between Yemen and Eritrea, between Syria and Jordan, between Syria and Lebanon, between Syria and Turkey, between Morocco and Spain, between Morocco and Algeria, between Algeria and Tunisia, between Sudan and South Sudan, between Egypt and Sudan, between Somalia and Somaliland, Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti.

Iraqi occupation of Kuwait was by itself a blow to all Arabs, not only because the Iraqi president violated the Arab League Charter, but he also dared to attack Arab brothers and occupy Arab lands. As a direct outcome of the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, Arabs were divided again and some accepted the presence of non-Arab troops on Arab lands, fighting Arab brothers (Iraqis), in order to liberate Kuwait.

At this juncture, it is noteworthy that the US occupation of Iraq bore witness to the early beginnings of the appearance and activism of al-Qaeda in the Arab world region. This coincided with the fact that the frustration that Arabs felt due to the eclipse of Arab nationalism (Arabism), rendered as an necessity an alternative that gathered all Arabs again, an inevitability that appeared as a logical choice in the face of mounting dangers and challenges.

Political Islam and the Arab world

According to Ali Bulac, Islamism is “an intellectual, moral, societal, economic, political and inter-state movement that is based on Islam as the main reference point and aims for a ‘new’ conception of the person, society, politics/state and thus a new model of social organization and universal Islamic union.” 35 There is disagreement among scholars and researchers on the conditions and reasons that caused the emergence of modern political Islam and Islamic movements in general. Some scholars found that the emergence of Islamic movements came about as a result of the fear of secularism which spread during the period that followed the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and the concern on having nationalism replacing religious links.

Abdel Azim Ramadan suggests that the roots of Islamic movements and contemporary Islamic thought were inspired by Sheikh Mohamed Abduh and Sheikh Ali Abd ar-Raziq and came as a response to the challenges of alienation, Westernization and modernization in society. 36 Other opinions opted to align the emergence of these movements to the Arab’s defeat in the 1967 war while others link it to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Prominent Islamic scholar Abd al-Monem Moneep, refuses all these explanations suggesting that the Islamic movement began as early as the prophecy of Mohammad (PUH). Moneep attributes his rejection of such explanations to the fact that the Islamic movement is not an exclusively “political” movement with regards to its political, economic, cultural and social aims. 37

However, I tend to disagree with Moneep for several reasons. First and foremost, the difference between religious advocacy and state affairs featured in the aftermath of the death of the fourth Caliph (Ali Ben Abi Talib). Numerous battles occurred and signified the clash between representatives of the two groups, e.g. Hussein

Ben Ali and Yezid Ben Muawiya. In modern times, several incidents also symbolize this clash, like the conflict between King Abd al-Aziz and the Wahabbis led by Faisal al-Daweesh. Similarly, in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, a clash between religion and politics featured following the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini when Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri, the sole candidate to succeed Khomeini, was disqualified.\(^{38}\)

Secondly, it is an unequivocal assumption that the Great War (and the collapse of the last Islamic state) had its impact and consequences on Islamism in general. One can argue that political Islam and contemporary Islamic movements are the foremost outcome. That said, when the new republic of Turkey officially declared on 29 October 1923, that the last Islamic state had ceased to exist after nearly 700 years, Islamic forces started seeking a new path to rebuild this state.

Following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, the ultra-nationalist Turkish leader, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, took power in what is now known as Turkey, and eventually abolished the Caliphate. Some scholars saw that with the birth of the new republic of Turkey, the last Islamic state with its leading role disappeared and argued that its demise “was the removal of the final link between an existing Islamic state and the divine polity founded by the Prophet Muhammad,”\(^{39}\) while others believed that in both symbolic and practical terms, the Islamic state had died by 1924.\(^{40}\)

Islamic historians contend that the Ottoman Empire fell apart beginning in the nineteenth century, when rulers began to bypass the Ulama\(^{41}\) (members of a distinct social-political grouping known as the scholars) in adopting Western institutions and legal codes. Years before the eruption of the Great War, the weakness of the Empire and its Sultans prompted religious scholars and intellectuals to vociferously rise up and call for change – or reform, as they saw the Ottoman Empire going through a process of internal decay with a falling away from Islam and the real faith.\(^{42}\) Through their efforts to offer solutions, revival and reform, many Islamic scholars like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, Abd ar-Raziq al-Sanhuri and Muhammad al-Ghazali made remarkable contributions and an impact on contemporary Islamic thought that affected the Wahhabis\(^{43}\), who nowadays are


\(^{43}\) Wahhabism (Salafi) named after Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. It might have been inspired by the Naqshbandi (Sufi) and started in Saudi Arabia. Source: Lewis, \textit{The Middle East...}, p. 310.
represented in the ruling family in Saudi Arabia, and the Naqshbandi who has strong influence and presence in Turkey. Therefore, the evident decline and resulting cultural “backwardness”, corruption, the abandonment of Ijtihad (with its original interpretation of problems not being precisely covered by the Qur’an or Hadith – Prophet Mohammed’s traditions) for misinterpretations and malpractice by the Sultan, as well as Western interventions, caused the establishment of the Wahhabi movement, led by Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab in Saudi Arabia, followed by Muhammad al-Sanusi’s movement in North Africa and the Mahdiya movement in Egypt and Sudan. These movements did have nationalist objectives. However, the collapse of the last Caliphate ushered in the birth of new a wave of Islamic movements (later called political Islamic movements). Ali Bulac shares the same opinion and asserts that Islamists did not exist before the second half of the 19th century because with the existence of the Ottoman Empire (with Dar al-Islam as its founding ideology and legitimacy framework), there would be no reason to have Islamic movements. Bulac suggests three generation of Islamists; the first generation appeared during the period 1850–1924, the second in 1950–2000 and the third generation with the first years of the 21st century.

Only five years after the Turkish National Assembly declared Turkey a republic and abolished the Ottoman Empire, the Muslim Brotherhood, the oldest and most prominent Islamic organization, was founded in March 1928. The Brotherhood’s stated goal is to instill the Qur’an and Sunna as the “sole reference point for ordering the life of the Muslim family, individual, community and state.” According to the official website of the Muslim Brotherhood, the movement is dedicated to and “for the sake of reforming the society and the formation of Muslim individuals, families and the whole community, then the government and then the world.”

Initiated by the Islamic scholar Hassan al-Banna in Egypt, this Islamic movement had gained supporters throughout the Arab world and spread and influenced Islamist movements worldwide, in more than 72 countries, including all Arab nations, according to Muslim Brotherhood Wikipedia. As a matter of fact, there is an agreement among

---

44 Naqshbandi (Sufi) named after Shah Naqshband. It was introduced from India and spread across the Arab world. Source: Lewis, The Middle East..., p. 310.
47 Bulac, ‘On Islam...’, pp. 68–73.
49 ‘Al-harakat al-islamiyyah...’.
scholars that the Muslim Brotherhood is the source of all Islamic political movements in the Arab world. In a report presented to an American research centre in the 1980s, it documents the presence of 84 Islamic movements in eighteen Arab countries, with a membership of several million Arabs. In Egypt alone there are 26 movements, in Iraq 12, and in Syria 10.\textsuperscript{51}

According to their dogma (and hence sect), Islamic movements in the Arab world can be divided between Sunni and al-Firak, and the latter includes all groups who adopt ideologies and opinions different from those of the Sunnis; i.e. Shiite (e.g. Twelver, Ja’fari, Isma’ilism, Nizariyyah), Alawi, Druze, Baha’i and Zaidiyyah, and groups like al-Takfir wal-Hijra, al-Tawkof wal Tabayyon, al-Najoon menal Nar and al-Qutbyeen. Depending on the approach, contemporary Islamic movements in the Arab world can be divided as follows:

1) Reformists: they seek gradual, peaceful and may be partial, change; e.g. the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Nahda, al-Tahreer, etc.
2) Revolutionists: they seek swift, comprehensive, and if necessary coercive change; e.g. Islamic Jihad, al-Qaeda, al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, Islamic Movement, al-Nusra, ISIS, etc.

Moneep adds two other categories of Islamic movements:

3) Political Islamists: they adopt Islam as a political reference, but without any deep involvement in Islam’s pure values and principles; e.g. Masr al-Fatah.
4) Faked Islamists: and he refers to those who use Islam and Islamic texts as a cover to seek certain popularity, giving Gamal Abdel Nasser as an example.\textsuperscript{52}

Although Moneep tried to differentiate between political and faked Islamists, I tend to put the two groups into a different category that is not part of Islamists per se. Proclaiming the adoption of Islam as a political reference without any deep involvement in Islam’s pure values and principles or using Islam and Islamic text as a cover to seek popularity does not make them Islamists. In other words, politicians in general tend to seek popularity through their emphasis on widely accepted values and issues as part of their soft power strategies. In a very similar context, Hafiz and Bashar al-Assad, Saddam Hussein and many other Arab leaders tried to use the Palestinian cause and fighting occupation in a similar attempt to seek popularity and at times legitimacy.

On his side, Alan Richards distinguishes between four different Islamic groups or concentric circles:

1) Jihadist Salafis – such as the followers of al-Qaeda.
2) Salafis – who believe that the imitation of the behavior of the Prophet’s closest companions should be the basis of the social order.
3) Islamists – a broader category, which includes anyone who thinks that the precepts of Islam – however interpreted – should be fundamental to political and social order.

\textsuperscript{51} Al-harakat al-islamiyyah…’.\textsuperscript{52} Moneep, Dalil al-harakat…, pp. 16–18.
4) Discontented Muslims – people who identify themselves as Muslims, and who are unhappy with their life prospects, with the justice of their societies, and/or with the state of the wider world. While one should commend Richards’ efforts to categorize Islamic groups, I believe it is becoming increasingly harder day by day to make such clear distinctions. Firstly, discontented Muslims cannot be classified as one circle or group; they are rather demonstrating the majority of the Muslim population. Secondly, Salafis either Jihadists or non-Jihadists fall into a broad Salafi category, which in turn is an offshoot of Wahhabi thought. Thirdly, there are numerous other groups, either identified like the Muslim Brotherhood or unidentified, not to mention Shiite groups, assemblies, circles, ‘splinter’ groups and offshoots.

Up until now, in parallel with the various existing multinational, Islamic organizations and platforms, such as the Muslim World League established in 1962 and the Organization of Islamic Conference – OIC established in 1972, numerous Islamic movements and parties have appeared in the Arab world: Shiite, Sunni, Wahhabi, Salafi (that include but are not limited to the Islamic Jihad), al-Qaeda, al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, Islamic Movement, al-Nusra, ISIS, the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Nahda, Islamic Action Front (IAF), Justice and Development Party, al-Wefaq (Concordance) Islamic Society, al-Tahreer, Ansar al-Sunnah al-Muhammadiyah, al-Qutbyeen, al-Shokyeen, al-Samawyeen, Salafist, Hezbollah, Amal, Quietists “Ali al-Sistani”, the al-Sadr Faction, Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the Dawa Party, the Islamic Action Organization “Jam’iyyat al-Amal al-Islami”, New Wahhabism and many others. It can be said that the presence of multi-Islamic political movements in the Arab world was an ultimate result for the failure to respond to the challenges and to meet the aspiration of their supporters.

In fact, the fading manifestation of nationalism (Arabism) along with the failed policies of “non-Islamist” rulers – whom were seen as Westernized – served to improve the chances of those of “otherness” thought: Islamists. With the dawn of the Arab Spring, those who were expelled, banned and disqualified from political life in most Arab countries appeared in the eyes of many Arabs as a third plausible choice; i.e. instead of being part of the existing (pro-West and mainly US dominant) order or a dreamer of a “waning” Arab nationalistic order (traditionally perceived as pro-East and socialist), political Islam appeared as a viable alternative. In due course, Arab populist revolts were translated into a democratic choice of Islamists to rule their countries, mainly in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco. However malpractice, lack

---


54 The year 1996, saw the emergence of New Wahhabism, led by Mohammed al-Masri. In May 1993, al-Masri formed a committee for the defense of Sharia law which attracted the attention of Western media and led to his arrest. He was released on November 1993 and moved his activities to London. Hadi, The Second Arab..., p. 24.
of political experience and the emergence of radical groups, swiftly weakened Islamists chances of succeeding in the Arab world.

Summing up, it should be conceded that, and despite all reservations, the final word in religious matters rested with the Ottoman Sultan who was the sole religious reference and no other entity could issue different Fatwas, “religious judgment and ordering”. Yet, with the collapse of the last Islamic state, various Islamic forces tried to seek a rejuvenation of the Islamic state and a return of the Caliphate; each with his own understanding and explanation of Islam. The skirmishes between the various sects are perhaps ushering in a looming, comprehensive, ethno-confessional conflict in the region. Even within the same sect, disagreements have appeared and at times developed into armed conflict. Tellingly, when the reference point was lost, extremism, fundamentalism, radicalism and sectarian conflict were all invited to visit the region.

**Sectarianism and radicalism**

In addition to the absence of one reference, the emergence of the tremendous number of contemporary Islamic schools and movements made radicalism and ethno-confessional conflicts in the Arab world inevitable. Some specialists afford socio-economic factors (poverty, unemployment, failed policies, oppression, etc.) important weight when offering reasoning behind the emergence of radicalism and hence ethno-confessional conflicts in the region. 55 Nonetheless, I believe that there are further reasons that have elicited this dilemma: the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Iranian Revolution and the US occupation of Iraq.

Throughout history, a schism between the two major Muslim sects “Sunni and Shiite” existed and at times developed into bloody conflicts that claimed thousands of lives and the last major conflict was manifested in a long war between the Ottoman Empire (representing Sunnis) and the Safavid dynasty in Iran (representing Shiites). 56 As stated earlier, following the demise of the Ottoman Empire Sunni Muslims lost their religious reference unlike Shiites who, to a major extent, are typically characterized by the central role of the clergy. 57 In modern times, the two sects managed to live together in this region and the rift was buried – with a few exceptions, e.g. the Lebanese civil war was fought along ethno-confessional lines from 1975 to 1991 when the role of the central government was weak enough not to be able to halt this conflict, unlike the case of Iraq. Nevertheless, the development of events provided solid grounds for reigniting sectarianism on a wider scale.

The Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was a turning point for Islamic religious movements in the Arab world. While most Arab regimes hunted down Islamists

---

in their countries, Afghanistan became a refuge and a foothold where they could gather themselves and recruit new members. In fact, with many Western powers turning a blind eye at times, and occasionally supporting and funding the Islamists presence in Afghanistan so as to counter and fight the Soviet presence and expansion plans, Islamists—basically “Sunni” Salafi Jihadists—found some sort of “legitimacy” for their existence. Thus, Afghanistan became a stronghold of Jihadist Islamic movements inspired by Ibn Taymiyyah, Sayyid Qutb, and Wahhabism. After a 10-year war, the Jihadists (also known as “Arab-Afghans” or “Afghan Arabs”) went back to their home countries (including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Yemen) and started their new struggle against other sects, Western interests and Arab regimes, who were regarded as being corruptible dictators and infidels. Between 1992 and 1997, Islamic movements carried out 1,200 operational killings, injuring hundreds. The presence of such “Sunni” Jihadist elements is considered to be the cornerstone of the ensuing radicalism and sectarianism in the region.

Not far away from Afghanistan, in the same year as when the Soviets launched their offensive, an earthshattering event occurred: the Iranian Revolution. The new republic of Iran ushered in the first Shiite state in the twentieth century. It officially represented the second largest Islamic sect – Shi’ite – and was considered a thorn in the side of already existing Sunni states like Saudi Arabia and Sudan. Less than two years later, the first Gulf War between Iraq and Iran erupted and lasted for eight years. Iraq started this war and was openly supported by Sunni Arab states. Some see Iraq’s decision to attack Iran as a reflection of President Saddam Hussein’s ambitions, others attribute it to Saddam’s fear of Arab nationalism and a resistance against the hegemonic aspirations of Iran, while a third group ascribes it to the concerns of Sunni states regarding the exportation of the “Shiite” Islamic Revolution. The conflict ended but Iraq’s authority was weakened, and two years after the end the war, Iraq was involved in another offensive after Saddam’s troops occupied Kuwait in 1990. The definitive result of two consecutive wars and international sanctions was a further weakening of the authority of Saddam Hussein in a country mired with ethno-confessional complications. Considering these two facts; a weakened central authority and the emergence of a religious Shiite reference outside the country “in Iran”, the environment became primed for the rise of Shiite groups and organizations after being marginalized for so many years.

The US occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the collapse of the Iraqi central government are considered the third pivotal factor in the gradual process of the rise of radicalism and sectarianism in the Arab world. The chaotic environment in the aftermath of the sudden collapse of the Iraqi army sewed fertile grounds for the nourishment of two major groups: Sunni Jihadists and radical Shiites. Graham E. Fuller writes: “With the

60 Karsh, ‘Geopolitical Determinism…’, p. 256.
fall of Saddam Hussein, the revolutionary new opportunities have galvanized the Shiite community and sparked an extraordinary and rapid wave of identity politics and political activism that was not anticipated by American policymakers or even by most Iraqi Sunnis. The significance of this political turning point cannot be overestimated, either for Iraq or for the region.\textsuperscript{61} Many groups used the slogan of “resistance” or “fighting US occupation” in order to gain more popularity and then recruit more elements.

Among the various Shiite groups that emerged are the “Quietists” – of Iranian origin and led by Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, which is the most important traditional group and has the largest number of followers, both inside and outside of Iraq; the al-Sadr Faction – represented by Muqtada al-Sadr, considered a second major clerical force with thousands of Sadrists members in Sadr’s guerrillas maintaining dominance among the large Shiite community in Baghdad’s massive “Sadr City”; the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) – founded in 1982 in Tehran by Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, which enjoys the support of the Iranian government that aided in establishing the Badr Brigade comprising of a 10,000-man Iraqi militia; the Dawa Party (Call to Islam) – founded by Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and others, which is the oldest Shiite Islamist movement in Iraq and calls for the establishment of an Islamic state; the Islamic Action Organization (Jam’iyyat al-’Amal al-Islami) – founded in the early 1980s under Tehran’s wing, which is a smaller Shiite organization headed by Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrisi and remains linked with the SCIRI and; the Shia Hezbollah Organization – led by Abu-Hatim al-Muhammadawi, who claimed responsibility for the first Shiite opposition group attacks against Saddam Hussein’s forces after the US military operation.\textsuperscript{62}

Conversely, many Sunni groups came to the fore after being out of the public and underground during the reign of Saddam Hussein. Various trends have re-emerged: the Muslim Brotherhood or MB (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun) – also known as the Iraqi Islamic Party, the leading Sunni Islamist force in Iraq and the most important Sunni mainstream Islamist movement in the Arab world as mentioned earlier, calling for an Islamic state; Hizb al-Tahrir (the Liberation Party), theologically radical but non-violent; the Iraqi Islamic Patriotic Front led by Shaykh Muhammad Nadim al-Taee; the Sunni Resistance led by Shaykh Ahmad al-Kubaysi; and various other Sunni Islamist groups who, according to Graham E. Fuller, are very difficult to gauge in terms of strength and are difficult to gain information about.\textsuperscript{63}

Fuller points out that Saudi Arabia severed ties with the Muslim Brotherhood in late 2002 and accused them – as opposed to Wahhabi Islam – of being the chief force behind international Islamic terrorism and growing fears from Shiite power in Iraq. As a result, the Saudis tried to strengthen Wahhabi forces without seeking to use violence against the United States. Fuller proffers, however, that uncontrolled Wahhabi elements in Iraq would eventually do so.\textsuperscript{64} In fact, the feeling of mistrust between the Sunni Wahhabi and the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood is mutual.

\textsuperscript{61} Fuller, ‘Islamist Politics…’, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., pp. 3–6.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., pp. 8–12.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., p. 12.
The Muslim Brotherhood has never seen the rule of the Saudis (or Wahhabis, named after Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab, who formed an alliance with Muhammad Ibn Saud and founded the first Saudi state), as anything but colonialists who eradicated an Ottoman Muslim ruler. Among several books and articles published by Muslim Brotherhood scholars and writers, the *Wahhabi: Deformation of Islam* book criticizes Wahhabis advocacy, claiming that it rests on three key pillars to discredit Islam; religious extremism to demolish religion, falsified Hadiths and, tampering with the interpretation of the Qur’an.65

One can argue that Syria remains the consolidated divisive dilemma between the two Sunni camps. While both seek the toppling of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (who fought both Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood), they do however disagree on the means. On the one hand, the Muslim Brotherhood supports Turkey’s approach and its allies on the ground (the Free Syrian Army – FSA); on the other hand signs and Western sources suggest that Saudi Arabia and several other Gulf states support the Salafist groups in Syria.66

**Sectarianism**

On the whole, the downfall of Saddam’s regime was a watershed event that ushered in many changes in the Arab world. For Shiites, this event has a major geopolitical impact across the Arab world, clearly affecting the Shias of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the Lebanon and Syria.67 The latter was felt stronger as their axis with Iran (also with Hezbollah, one of the two Shiite political organizations in Lebanon) expanded to include Iraq (now by Shiites, unlike Sunni Saddam Hussein).

As stated earlier, Salafi Jihadists found a new refuge in Iraq, after being chased and hunted in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing Afghan military campaign. They grew rapidly in Iraq following the 2003 US invasion and started to rebuild their bases and recruit new elements, but now in the Arab world – operating mainly in Iraq under the slogan of “fighting US occupation”. Armed confrontations, attacks and bombings became a regular sight in Iraq. Many facilities were targeted, including Shiite markets, mosques and residential areas. Shiite “killing squads” became widespread and committed similar attacks against Sunnis. Thus, it should not be to anyone’s surprise to see a similar scenario enveloping Syria which shares a similar demographic structure to Iraq. These events have left a mark on all observers as has the rapid, subsequent rise of ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and al-

---


67 In Syria, the Alawi minority rules over a Sunni majority – the Alawis are not part of the Shiite Twelver mainstream; the post-revolution Iranian republic took the political decision to recognize the Alawis as Shia. See: Fuller, ‘Islamist Politics…’, p. 6.
Sham “Levant” – later known as IS or the Islamic State), who now control a large swath and chunk of Iraq and Syria, which has been seen of such severe gravity as to the extent that some have suggested: “it would reshape the whole region.”

Conclusion

While Arabs were enjoying stability under Ottoman (Islamic) rule, their divisions and weaknesses pushed them to look for another bond that would gather them in the face of looming challenges. Nationalism appeared as their first choice, but with weak states and rulers, Arab nationalism – as an ideology – has soon waned and proved to be inapplicable. The ultimate result was the rise of “state nationalism” where each country had its own interests, alliances, ambitions and plans. These states, regimes and rulers were seen in the eyes of many Arabs as US stooges and their strength was only displayed inwardly against their own people through oppression and unjust practices. With continued weakness and backwardness, Arabs continued to look for another alternative to gather and unite them in face of these new challenges. The next choice was Islamism; where this time it comes from an absolutely different background from the one implemented in the Ottoman Empire. This time, Islamism or political Islam (Islamic movements) developed within nationalistic boundaries and emerged as an outcome of oppression by the ruling elites, and thus the aspirations and tools are completely different from those of the Ottoman Empire, which was already exiting from practising Islam and ruling.

As a result, the implementation of Islam (rule and practice) was not only the sole objective of new Islamists, but also the removal of barriers represented by the rulers and their supporters, and the establishment of a new Islamic state. With the absence of one reference point, each movement tried to achieve such goals through their own understanding of religion, which in return led to conflicts, either ethnic or ethno-confessional. Negative socio-economic conditions, including poverty, poor education, unemployment, frustration, oppression and a lack of freedom, played a crucial role and a fertile environment for an increasingly prevalent radicalism. In other words, without the widespread ignorance among the Arab population – due to decades of malevolent policies by corrupt regimes that were allied with the US – such groups would not have found grounds to propagate an austere interpretation of Islam and such violent acts.

This, with no doubt, reflects the danger of using religion for political or social goals. As a result, until new Arab regimes fight the roots of this dilemma (stemming from a lack of credible religious reference, the use of religion for political purposes, and socio-economic predicaments), the whole region is susceptible to further chaos and ubiquitous, wide-scale ethno-confessional conflicts.

---