Chapter 7: Chapter exercises

Pan-Arabism and Islam, and the attempt to forge a new Middle Eastern identity

The notion of Pan-Arabism was first expressed by those states who wished to gain autonomy from the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century in favour of a unified state of Arabia. It was a strong movement led memorably by Nasser from the 1950s to the 1970s. Its secular focus on a unified Arab identity challenged its Islamic and state-centred rivals. However, with the 1967 defeat by Israel, and the 2003 Iraq war, among other humiliating evens, Arab identity and confidence took a palpable hit. Due to this, what can be observed is that the identification with the state and with Islam has risen strongly.

At the level of foreign policy, Arab and Islamic identities appear partly to have merged, in that they were associated with very similar foreign policy preferences, as symbolized by posters across the region depicting 'Nasser 1956' alongside 'Nasrallah 2006' during the Lebanon war, when Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah was the most popular leader in the region (Telhami 2006; Valjborn and Bank 2007). For example, in 2006, more Moroccans identified themselves as either Arab or Muslim than as Moroccan.

Almost as a reaction to earlier European-led colonialism and state creation in the region, the establishment of the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958 as a union between Egypt and Syria sought to create the first steps towards the realization of a legitimate Pan-Arabian union. Although the UAR was later abandoned following Syrian withdrawal, the concept of Pan-Arabism was the dominant ideological force throughout the region for much of the 1960s. However, following a humiliating defeat to Israel in the Six-Day War of 1967, coupled with an inability to generate long-term and stable economic growth amongst the Pan-Arab governments, the notion of a single unified voice throughout the Arab world lost much of its legitimacy (Doran 2002).

By the 1970s, regional notions of Pan-Arabism as a political ideology were beginning to be eclipsed by a more extremist Islamic vision of the Middle East's place in the world. This specific ideology placed less emphasis on the separation of state and religion and instead advocated that Muslims must return to the basic fundamentals of the Islamic religion and become more united as a coherent and viable political movement. This initiative gained momentum following the resurrection of the Muslim Brotherhood, a political force that re-emerged from Egypt in the early 1970s. The Brotherhood gained political traction in the Middle East by vehemently opposing the Egyptian government's passive attitude towards the 'Zionists' in Israel and the West (Ajami 1978).

The Iranian revolution of 1979 saw the emergence of the region's first truly Islamic state. The revolution had been led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and succeeded in overthrowing an oil-rich, militarily powerful, pro-western secular monarchy under the leadership of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The Ayatollah's ideology was grounded in the belief that the restoration of Sharia Law across Iran and the wider region was essential to the underlying values of Islam. The more secular, open, and westernized Muslims were regarded as 'agents' of the West who were participants in a long-term conspiracy by Zionists to undermine Muslim values and plunder the region of its resources. As a

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model for future potential Islamic States the Islamic Republic of Iran has been largely unsuccessful in delivering many of its goals such as raising living standards, literacy, health care, or ridding Iran of corruption, political oppression, and poverty (Cleveland et al. 2009). Regardless, throughout much of the 1970s a similar trend of state-led Islamification occurred throughout much of the Middle East and the wider world. This trend served to undermine the assumption that westernized influence in Muslim countries was an irreversible trend.

It can be argued that a history of European colonialism, anti-western movements, and the inability to found a legitimate and peaceful Islamic state have contributed to the region's incoherence when it comes to forming a stable identity for itself. Do you agree?

Do you feel that the 2003 Iraq war, and the events that have followed, serve to further complicate the creation of an Arab identity in the region?

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