

The Permanence of Middle Eastern Borders

Aaron Boehm argues that the pan-Arab project has failed, therefore solidifying the existence of distinct Middle Eastern states.

On 16 May 1916, the United Kingdom and France signed the Sykes-Picot agreement, defining their spheres of influence in the Middle East. This was the first of several agreements that would go on to shape the modern Middle Eastern state system (Del Sarto 2017, 769). Now, in the midst of enduring regional conflict, analysts such as Patrick Cockburn (2013), Robin Wright (2016), and Muhammed Hussein (2019) predict that the region's borders will collapse. Indeed, declaring the 'End of Sykes-Picot' was a critical aspect of the so-called Islamic State's (ISIS) narrative during their 2014-2015 expansion (Belfast Telegraph 2014). Furthermore, a de facto Kurdish state in Iraq emerged after a 2017 referendum demonstrated overwhelming support for independence (BBC 2017). Since the end of the Second World War, however, Middle Eastern borders have proved resilient despite predictions to the contrary. This article will argue that analysts have overlooked significant historical events and misread geopolitical trends which suggest that Middle Eastern states are here to stay. This resilience is most obviously seen in the failure of pan-Arabism – the ideology promoting the unification of Arab states – in the twentieth century, but is also closely related to the increase in state power, and the role that international players have had in maintaining Middle Eastern borders for their own interests.

Perhaps the greatest threat to the post-War Middle Eastern state system in the twentieth century was that of pan-Arabism. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the beginnings of a defined Middle Eastern state order emerged. Shaped by the American and European 'core' - the dominant western powers - being imposed on the Arab 'periphery', the dependent states possessed less-developed economies (Hinnesbusch 2015, 23). As a result, the borders of Arab states forwent the evolutionary processes of war and dynastic marriages which had shaped those of the core states, and the question of artificial boundaries became an immediate and important target for criticism in pan-Arab discourse. Three crucial events occurred in the development of pan-Arabism in quick succession: the creation of the Arab League in 1945, the foundation of the Ba'ath Party in 1947, and the rise of Nasserist Egypt following the Free Officers coup in 1952 (Manduchi 2017, 19). The ideologies of Nasser and the Ba'athists were similar in their calls for a united Arab nation. The Ba'ath Party's founding document begins, 'the Arabs are one nation and it is their natural right to live in one country' (Syrian History 2013). Under Nasser, calls for pan-Arab unity increased, culminating in the United Arab Republic (UAR), the political union between Egypt and Syria, in 1958.

Nonetheless, just as quickly as it rose, pan-Arabism began its decline following the collapse of the UAR in 1961 and the Arab defeat by Israel in 1967 (Del Sarto 2017, 777). Elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), less high-profile attempts at political union also failed, including the Federation of Arab Republics in 1971 and the Arab Islamic Republic in 1974 (Deeb 1989, 26). This decline in pan-Arabism was caused by increased state power and identity. National Role Conceptions (NRC) can be helpful in understanding this transition from a supranational to state identity. Cantir and Kaarbo (2012) explain that NRCs signal 'a country's identity, its priorities and policies, and how it relates to other states' (Kaarbo 2012, 19). In other words, a state's NRCs reveal how it views itself in the international community. In this case, the Arab States found themselves caught between contradictory roles: sovereignty and pan-Arabism. As Walt (1985) explains, while pan-Arabism was a useful shortcut to establish state legitimacy, in reality it threatened the survival of existing regimes (Walt 1985, 21). The resulting conflict became obvious when attempts at

political union developed into struggles for power 'in which the ideology was used to justify intervention' by a regime against its rivals (Ibid, 22). Thus, using pan-Arabism to legitimise the state created a paradox, whereby a fundamental tenant of legitimacy simultaneously invited foreign interference. Using Egypt as an example, Barnett (1993) illustrates how states 'learned' or adopted new meanings and interpretations of pan-Arabism (Barnett 1993, 275). In the Egyptian case, this meant a fluctuation in inter-state cooperation under Faisal, political unification under Nasser, and 'raison d'etat under Sadat' (Barnett 1993, 289). As the expectations of the pan-Arabist role diminished after the 1967 defeat, Nasser was able to reconcile with much of the Arab world, establishing an alliance with King Hussein of Jordan and making amends with Saudi Arabia (Hinnesbusch, 196). When Sadat came to power in 1970, he successfully merged the pan-Arabism and sovereign state roles, eliminating their conflicting demands. Although pan-Arabist discourse recognised the artificiality of Middle Eastern borders and Arab leaders utilised this discourse as the foundation of their legitimacy, talk of unity ultimately undermined the sovereignty of the state, creating a security paradox. Thus, in order to rectify this paradox, leaders were forced to reassess their adherence to pan-Arabism and instead reassert the sovereignty of their state and borders.

Supranational identity continues to be important in the modern Arab states, however, there are clear differences in the way that this identity is now used by the state. From 1973-2012 the Syrian Constitution still called for 'the Arab revolution' in order to achieve the 'unity' of an Arab nation (Carnegie Middle East Center 2012). There are only three mentions of Syria as a state within this constitution, instead referring to the 'Syrian Arab Region' (Carnegie Middle East Center 2012) as a part of the wider Arab World. In comparison, the Syrian draft resolution of 2017 refers to Syria as a state 55 times, only alluding to its identity as an Arab state through its name: the 'Syrian Arab Republic' (Constitution Project n.d.). Similarly, the Iraqi constitution of 1990 identifies Iraq as a member of 'the Arab Nation' whose 'basic objective is the realisation of one Arab State' (International Constitutional Law 2004), yet the current constitution from 2005 never identifies Iraq as Arab, instead beginning the preamble with 'We, the people of Mesopotamia...' (Constitution Project n.d.). Furthermore, of the twenty-two members of the Arab League, only thirteen states ascribe themselves a primarily Arab identity (Table 1). Instead, the common bond between them is Islam, as all twenty-two members of the Arab League are also members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (Table 1). The founding charter of the OIC is quick to recognise the sovereignty of its member states, calling on members 'to respect, safeguard and defend the national sovereignty...of all Member States' (OIC n.d.). Hence, state sovereignty in the Middle East has seemingly prevailed over the threat that supranational identity presented to it.

The fact that the state system has survived, however, does not guarantee the stability of the state itself. Noting that the pace of war over the past 100 years in the Middle East has not changed from that of the nineteenth century, Steven Cook (2016) contends that 'the conflicts unfolding in the Middle East today...are not really about the legitimacy of borders or the validity of [these] places. Instead, the origin of the struggles within these countries is over who has the right to rule them.' For example, the Syrian Civil War began as a protest against the legitimacy of their autocratic dictator, similar to protests in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere across the Arab world (Hinnesbusch 2015, 20). Protests against Arab governments again rocked the MENA in 2019, and just as in 2011, the symbols and slogans of the protest fell within a national discourse. In Lebanon for instance, far from questioning the legitimacy of the state, protests contain a sea of flags and chants of, 'the people want the downfall of the regime' (Al Jazeera 2019). Dictators have risen and fallen over the past decade, but all within the state system. The fight is not then about the legitimacy of the state, but rather over the legitimacy of the ruling government.

Although these conflicts often begin as crises of domestic legitimacy, maintaining the integrity of state borders is necessary to uphold the complex balance of national and international interests within the regional system. For Iran, the idea of a disunited Syria is unacceptable, and they have made an extensive effort to keep Bashar al-Assad in power and maintain the so-called Axis of Resistance (IISS 2019, 15). Equally important for Iranian regional interests is the building of a land corridor stretching from Iran to the Mediterranean Sea, to facilitate the arming of Hezbollah and other proxy forces (Melamed 2018). Similarly, Russia insists on Syrian territorial unity, while recognising the possibility of a Kurdish autonomous region (Trenin 2017). This has not only provided Syria an ally in a region once dominated by the interests of the United States (US), but it has also acted as a springboard to develop other relationships within the region. Now, nine years since the

beginning of the Civil War, Bashar al-Assad has claimed a victory; hollow as it may be, the state has been maintained (Khatib 2020).

International interest in maintaining territorial unity is also illustrated in Iraq, where a strong independence movement exists in Kurdistan. Iranian interests in a united Iraq are twofold, the first reason being that an independent Iraqi Kurdistan would place a potential US and Israeli ally on its doorstep (IISS 2019, 13). Iranian objectives since the US invasion of 2003 have been to deny the US an outpost in the region (IISS 2019, 13). However, a supra-federated Iraq aids Iranian interests as it would mean that an old enemy could no longer offer a united response to any Iranian aggression, while further allowing Iran to consolidate their influence in the Shi'a south (Aljboury 2020). Secondly, both Iran and Turkey have a significant Kurdish population within their borders. Turkish and Iranian nationalists therefore view Kurdish independence movements, inside or outside their borders, as a threat to national identity. While instability may plague the Middle East, states are not permitted to collapse because of the geopolitical interests of other states.

To conclude, despite predictions by some Middle East analysts, Middle Eastern states are here to stay. The mid twentieth century presented the biggest ideological threat to the existence of Middle Eastern states, yet the interests of the state emerged victorious. While pan-Arabism questioned the legitimacy of each state, it was ultimately untenable, and rather than being a uniting factor, it caused a conflict between the roles that the states had constructed for themselves and was consequently used as a weapon to undermine their adversaries. As pan-Arabism declined and the state increased its power, the roles and identity of the Arab States also changed, resulting in state sovereignty no longer being called into question. Instead, conflict takes place within the existing system, and the chants and slogans used by protesters, from the 2011 Arab Spring to current protests, fall within a national discourse rather than that of supranational identity. Furthermore, regional and international players who have a vested interest in maintaining the unity of Middle Eastern states have proven crucial to their survival, ensuring the stability of the region in order to assert and maintain their own influence. The roles and interests of Middle Eastern States may change over the decades, but their borders are here to stay.

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