

Does the State Always Precede the Nation in the Middle East & North Africa?

Written by Julian Modiano

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JULIAN MODIANO, AUG 14 2014

One of the key questions in studying nationalism is whether the state precedes the nation or vice versa. This question is critical not only because answering it provides important information on the nature of a particular nation, but also because it highlights the debate central to the study of nationalism – that is, the debate between modernism and ethno-symbolism (it should be mentioned that the debate is by no means limited to these two approaches; however, they are the two most relevant to the topic). I would agree with John Breuilly that “one cannot develop a general understanding of nationalism by means of class or any other kind of socio-economic analysis. The enormous social diversity of modern nationalist movements rules out such approaches.”[1] Because every nation and state has its own completely unique history and culture, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for a general theory to be relevant and applicable to all cases. Therefore, in this essay I will attempt to draw from both modernist and perennialist theories in my analysis of Turkey and Egypt, to show how the state does not always precede the nation in the Middle East.

Before beginning an analysis of specific case studies, however, it is important to first establish some definitions. Anthony Smith, founding father of ethno-symbolism, defined nations as “a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members.”[2] It is clear that such a definition is applicable to populations throughout the ages and across the world. Contrasting the ethno-symbolist/perennialist view that nations have existed since time immemorial is modernism; “the conception that nations and nationalism are intrinsic to the nature of the modern world and to the revolution of modernity.”[3] Ethno-symbolists view the nation as a popular, organic community; modernists, as an elite-led construct that could only develop after the drastic changes caused by capitalism and the emergence of the mass media. The distinction between the two definitions, and, in fact, the theoretical frameworks themselves, is crucial in answering whether or not the state preceded the nation in the Middle East.

One of the main problems in the study of nationalism, perhaps best expressed by Benedict Anderson, is the paradox between “the objective modernity of nations to the historian’s eye vs. their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists.”[4] It is interesting that modernists and ethno-symbolists tend to see only one side of the paradox as important. Essentially, the issue is that modernists refuse to attribute any importance to the sense of national identity, imagined or not, that draws from ancient myths and pre-modern traditions that predate modernism, while ethno-symbolists do not always make a clear distinction between traditions that are fabricated in retrospect and those that are historical continuations. This distinction may seem superficial, but while traditions that are invented would support the modernist view that nationalism is a creation in reaction to modern events, those historical continuations demonstrate that nations have in fact existed even before a population gained the national consciousness to name it.

Thus a modernist may argue that the state always precedes the nation in the Middle East. Most nationalist movements in the region developed either as resistance to imperialist powers or to make themselves legitimate in an international environment that would only seriously consider nations worthy of attention, or a combination of both.[5] Turkish nationalism, for example “as a political movement, arrived only in the late 20th century”[6] and “the Ottoman military and bureaucratic elites became the main vehicle of Turkish national identity.”[7] The traditional account of Turkish nationalism is that it emerged only at the turn of the 20th century, in response to a weakening Ottoman

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Empire. Furthermore, after the Ottoman Empire was partitioned in the aftermath of World War I, “for patriotic Turkish nationalists, qualifying as a well-defined nation meant regaining access to the status of ‘being civilised’ and escaping the claws of European imperialism or mandate rule.”[8] Once Turkey had managed to establish its independence, elites had to create a sense of nationhood in order to maintain the state’s legitimacy – the state preceded the nation.

Yet there is evidence that the traditional account may be flawed. Although it was “during the Republican era ... that the founding narratives of Turkish national history were efficiently institutionalized, popularized, and canonized under the aegis of a Turkish nation-state,”[9] recent studies in the social and political history of the Ottoman empire “prove that popular presentations of Turkish nationalism favoured the identification of an ethno-cultural core well before the establishment of the Republican regime.”[10] Thus, although it was only clearly defined in the early 1900s, Turkish nationalism had its roots in a pre-modern past. According to Ziya Gökalp, one of the leaders of Turkish nationalism (and a major influence for Mustafa Kemal Atatürk), the movement “sprang from the researches of European Turcologists who showed the Turks that they belonged to a great and ancient nation with a cultural tradition which went back to centuries before Islam.”[11] As such, although the nationalist movement only emerged in modern times, the nation itself was already in existence well before the popular dissemination of nationalist sentiment. Ziya Gökalp was himself at first attempting to create new values with which to define the new nationalist movement. However, he realized “it was not possible to create new values” – “the object of Turkism was to ‘seek for the Turkish national culture’”, “to bring to light what was hidden in the soul of the nation.”[12]

However, the fact that the new nationalist movement was proclaiming to uphold traditional Turkish traditions is not the only evidence that the Turkish nation existed well before modernity. There is evidence that until Constantinople fell to Mehmet the conqueror in 1453, that there “existed a tradition of Turkism defending the merits of Turkish language and customs against Persian and Arabic influences,”[13] demonstrating that the Turkish nation existed before print capitalism revolutionized the written vernacular and enabled nationalism to form. Literacy in a common vernacular may be necessary for the widespread dissemination of nationalism, but it is no reason to assume that it is also necessary for a nation to exist – at least not according to Anthony Smith’s definition of nation. Contrary to the modernist interpretation, the foundations of Turkish nationalism “were built upon indigenous, albeit once forgotten, resources that were then framed by an amalgam of liberal European, Romantic, pan-slavic and Balkan notions of national identity.”[14] To understand nations, it is critical to realize that nationalism is but the expression of a nation gaining political consciousness. The nation exists in the form of shared collective memories and aspirations of an *ethnie*, but it is not necessary to the existence of a nation for all (or any) of its members to consciously realize they are part of it. Thus, when applying an ethno-symbolist methodology, the nation preceded the state. Yet one case is hardly enough to draw any conclusions about the nature of states in the entire Middle East; therefore, we will now consider the case of Egypt.

A modernist approach to the case of the Egyptian nation yields similar observations. Although nominally an Ottoman province until 1882 when it was occupied by the British, Egypt was largely independent since pre-modern times. Until the British occupation, however, there was no nationalist movement in Egypt. Only when occupied by a foreign power did nationalism emerge, in reaction to the colonial yoke being imposed. However, even this early nationalist sentiment was mostly a reaction to the British, and did not reflect a clear Egyptian national consciousness; “Beth Baron points out that until the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire ‘most Egyptians still felt attached to the Empire and favored Egyptian Ottomanism.’”[15] In fact, the majority of Egyptians felt an attachment to the Ottoman Empire and did not necessarily consider themselves Egyptian as much as they considered themselves Arabs or Muslims.[16] Once the Ottoman Empire was partitioned, however, Egyptian nationalism became more prevalent as British involvement in the country’s affairs continued even following its independence.

Egyptian nationalism is a complex movement to understand; the various nationalist movements that emerged through the course of the 19th and 20th centuries varied wildly in their beliefs. Nationalism prior to 1919 appears to have been “a movement of certain educated, urban elites, confined to the larger cities, building upon a largely political conception of the Egyptian nation.”[17] However, although the theoretical framework of Egyptian nationalism was developed by the intellectuals, “without the dissemination and the adoption of nationalist ideas by the masses, such politicized rhetoric remained an abstract notion without widespread resonance.”[18] In fact, the assimilation of nationalist ideas by the masses came after the 1919 revolution. Although the revolution may have been initiated more

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as a reaction to the exile of Wafd party leaders than popular nationalist sentiment, the elite nationalist movement managed to become effective leaders. Thus: “by 1919 Egyptian nationalism was able to co-ordinate elite political action to a fairly high degree, had a clear ideological case on the basis of western political principles, and seemed capable of leading mass action even if it could not initiate it.”[19] In fact, the revolution was “thoroughly Egyptianist in its goals and activities; as such, it neither had any links with, nor desired any connections with, the parallel Arab nationalist movement in Arab Asia.”[20]

In the 1930s, a new form of nationalism emerged, one that highlighted Egypt’s ancient glory during Pharaonic times. Since the introduction of Islam in Egypt, the ancient history of the country was generally viewed with indifference or scorn. The pharaoh, after all, was seen as a tyrant, famous for his oppression of Moses. However, “throughout the medieval and modern periods there was always at least some degree of popular veneration for the country’s ancient monuments; there was even an attempt to ‘Islamicize’ both these monuments and ancient history in general”[21]. Attempts to ‘Islamicize’ Pharaonic monuments should be understood as an Egyptian nation attempting to reconcile a glorious past with the doctrines of an incompatible religion.

If the Egyptian nation preceded the state, it was only as a vague set of customs and behaviors that set them apart from their neighbors. Egyptians viewed themselves as primarily Arabic and/or Muslim, and attempts at reawakening a consciousness for the past simply did not take hold; “Language determines a community’s identity: Egyptians are Arabs because they speak Arabic. Remote Pharaonic descent is not relevant: Egypt can in the end only be a chapter in the book of Arab glory.”[22] Thus, in the case of Egypt, I would argue that the state preceded the nation, as any sort of nationalist sentiment in the population stemmed from the Ottoman Empire, Arabism, or Islamicism.

The cases of Turkey and Egypt should suffice to illustrate why one can’t make generalizations about the Middle East in terms of nations preceding states, or states preceding nations. Nations and nationalism are complex sociological and political phenomena that cannot be neatly stacked into different categories. Ultimately, the question is largely one of interpretation. The case of Turkey in particular demonstrates that simply switching from a modernist to an ethno-symbolist lens yields vastly different conclusions. To make matters worse, what conclusions one can draw about the nature of nations and states are largely dependent on what definition of nation is adopted. These problems are compounded by historiographical issues that often make it difficult to piece together a cohesive narrative about the historical events surrounding nationalist movements.

However, I would agree with Anthony Smith’s definition of nation, which can be applied to explain nations universally, as opposed to the modernist view that makes nations a modern phenomenon by definition and is therefore significantly less applicable. Taking Anthony Smith’s definition, it becomes clear that the state does not by any means always precede the nation in the Middle East and North Africa. In such a unique region of the world some nation-states, such as Egypt, never fully developed into nations until after the state had already been established as the population preferred to identify with wider Arabic or Islamic currents than with a sense of Egyptianness. However, the Turkish example should suffice to stifle claims that the state *always* precedes the nation. Although Turkish nationalism did not emerge until modern times, the nation existed well before, and it is imperative to make the distinction between nationalism (the political consciousness of a nation) and the nation itself. Thus, although the state can precede the nation, it does not always precede it.

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[1] *Nationalism and the State*, John Breuilly, p. 19

[2] *National Identity*, Anthony Smith, p. 14

[3] *Nationalism and Modernism*, Anthony Smith, p. 3

[4] *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson, p. 5

[5] *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*, James Jankowski

[6] *From Empire to Republic*, Taner Akçam, p. 52

[7] *ibid*, p. 53

[8] *Turkish Nationalism and Ethno-symbolic Analysis*, Nergis Canefe, p. 149

[9] *Turkish Nationalism and Ethno-symbolic Analysis*, Nergis Canefe, p. 137

[10] *ibid*, p. 137

[11] *Foundations of Turkish Nationalism*, Uriel Heyd, p. 105

[12] *ibid*, p. 110

[13] *Turkish Nationalism and Ethno-symbolic Analysis*, Nergis Canefe, p. 141

[14] *ibid*

[15] *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, Rashid Khalidi, p. xvii

[16] *The Use of the Pharaonic Past in Modern Egyptian Nationalism*, Michael Wood

[17] *Nationalism and the State*, John Breuilly, p. 153

[18] *Popularizing Egyptian Nationalism*, Ziad Fahmy, p. 19

[19] *Nationalism and the State*, John Breuilly, p. 154

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[20] *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, Rashid Khalidi, p. 254

[21] *The Use of the Pharaonic Past in Modern Egyptian Nationalism*, Michael Wood, p. 187

[22] *ibid*, p. 194

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