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State Formation in the Mashrek Region.  
Historical Narratives of State-Building  
and National History  
Since the Sykes-Picot Agreement

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This article aims at exploring the simultaneous state-building and nation-building process in the Arab Mashrek region after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Historical narratives profoundly changed at the time of the emergence of the modern nation-state system, which was alien in a region where the premier element of ideology was religion. The nineteenth-century Nahda introduced a vibrant intellectual life to the region and marked the beginning of the so-called *liberal era*. Whereas in the first half of the twentieth century the region witnessed the birth of modern professional historiography, which (particularly in the case of Egypt) led to scientific enquiry based on national archives, the second half would see the radical phase of Arab nationalism produce a rather different historical narrative along socialist lines. However, the War of 1967, known also as the Setback

(*an-Naksah*), challenged pan-Arabism, and regimes discouraged professional history writing about the conflict.

**Keywords:** pan-Arabism – Arab nationalism – Sykes-Picot Agreement – Mashrek – Nahda – War of 1967

### *The political context of nation states and empires*

Historical narratives originating from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are often rooted in a so-called conspiracy trap, namely the myth that external factors determine all political developments without any genuine involvement of local/regional forces and dominate the historical landscape in the turbulent region. This is the case with the evolution of the modern nation-state system in the MENA region, the establishment of which coincides with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and Western colonialism. In 2016, the region marked the one-hundredth anniversary of the rather infamous Sykes-Picot Agreement, which various stakeholders largely blame for contemporary challenges within the society and economy.<sup>1</sup> The recently defeated Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) annulled the borders drawn by colonial powers between Iraq and Syria and called for the reestablishment of the bygone caliphate. However, ISIS was very much against the territorial logic of the Western colonizers, and at the same time global jihadists reinforced the image of spatially defined entities or envisioned maps in their publication called *Dabiq*. Furthermore, it has often been thought by Western scholars that the mainly artificial borders of the region caused the recent upheavals, the so-called Arab Uprisings. The aim of this article is to revisit state formation in the Mashrek region<sup>2</sup> together with narratives originating from the region while also examining how the authoritarian regimes built their own history.

The Mashrek is a region where not nation-states but empires and other forms of affiliations have been the norm since the beginning of time. Territorial demarcation and delineation of borders was seen as a new invention rather than an old tradition. The Treaty of Erzurum, signed between the Ottoman Empire and the Persian State, is the first written document of its kind, separating the two enti-

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1 Asli BÂLI, *Sykes-Picot and "Artificial" States*, AJIL Unbound, Vol. 110, 2016, pp. 115–119 (<https://doi.org/10.1017/S2398772300002919>).

2 Mashrek refers to the Eastern part of the Arab World and includes current states from Egypt to Iraq.

ties according to international law.<sup>3</sup> The notion of territoriality was alien to the communities of the Ottoman Empire, where religion played the most significant role in the formation of identity. The sultans of the Ottoman dynasty were empowered with the title of Caliph in 1517, when Selim I conquered Mamluk's Egypt. Therefore, belonging to an Islamic entity was a vital element of the identity of the state. Religion may be the most relevant source of identity, but belonging to a tribe is also a matter of pride. The Ottoman Empire itself was a multicultural socioreligious endeavour, where different ethnicities, religions, and tribes mixed under the umbrella of Islam, defined as *dar al-Islam* or the House of Islam. The opposite is *dar al-Harb*, the world of war, which was envisioned to be conquered by the Ottomans. Paradoxically, the Ottoman Empire had its own internal territorial division, however it did not mimic the Western logic of the Westphalian system; instead, it took a flexible and pragmatist approach aimed at accommodating an increasing heterogenous population.<sup>4</sup>

It was this Ottoman Empire, struggling with its own internal problems that would see the arrival of the Western concept of nationhood and nationalism. The notion of *qawmiyya*, a relatively recent word in Arabic, connotes ethnic nationalism and is mainly used for the pan-Arabic movement. The historical word *umma* mainly applies to a group of believers. As Bernard Lewis argues, there is a significant continuity in the Arab world; however, Western colonial aspirations brought in new ideas and ideologies.<sup>5</sup> In the Arab world, the idea of belonging to a territorial entity populated by a certain ethnic community could be seen as a radical challenge to existing norms, which were mainly built around religious affiliation. The Ottoman sultans had sovereign rights over all of the Sunni Muslim citizens in their territory, which was not so much a physical space as it was a collection of people as defined by the empire.<sup>6</sup>

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the consolidation of the mandatory system under the League of States after World War I resulted in the integration of the MENA region into the so-called Westphalian international system based on the logic of the nation-state with its coercive apparatus and territorial and personal

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3 Bertrand BADIE, *The Impoverished State. The Westernization of Political Order*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2000, p. 62.

4 Burak KADERCAN, *Territorial Design and Grand Strategy in the Ottoman Empire*, Territory, Politics, Governance, Vol. 5, 2017, Issue 2, pp. 158–176.

5 Bernard LEWIS, *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East*, Phoenix Books, London 1998, p. 83.

6 William I. ZARTMAN, *States, boundaries, and sovereignty in the Middle East: unsteady but unchanging*, International Affairs, Vol. 93, 2017, Issue 4, pp. 937–948.

sovereignty. It is true that borders were artificially drawn and the new entities lacked the genuine, indigenous evolution of nationhood like in the Western world. In this amalgam of multiple identities, the newly established states of the Mashrek region had a different experience with bureaucratic developments. As Lisa Anderson points out, there is a difference between *strong states* and the so-called *weak states*, where government is incapable of controlling its entire population and territory.<sup>7</sup> Within those states, we find different tribal or kinship groups that possess a military force but lack any bureaucratic capability. This is the case of the Kurds and various tribal groups in the Mashrek. On the contrary, the Palestinian National Authority, with its certain bureaucratic function, lacks statehood and monopoly over the use of force in its territory.

With the exception of Egypt, most of the Middle Eastern states in the Mashrek are new entities and are not rooted in history. It is quite common for the names of the states to reflect the natural landscape (Jordan was named after a river, Lebanon after a mountain), whereas states bearing the name of their ruling dynasty, such as Saudi Arabia, which was named after the Saud dynasty, are rare. Iraq, which was established by the British in 1921 under the reign of the Hashemite dynasty, represents the merger of three provinces of the Ottoman Empire: Mosul, Basra, and Baghdad. It reflects a kind of continuity from the ancient civilization of Mesopotamia, as the country occupies nearly the same territory. Bilad al-Sham, the former name of Syria under previous empires, covers the territories of Jordan, Israel and Palestine, Lebanon, and parts of contemporary Iraq. As it was established under the French mandate during the San Remo conference in 1920, the current Syrian state reflects a smaller territory as compared with historical formations.

In that process of state formation, the Sykes-Picot Agreement can be seen not as the most important milestone but as a reflection of the desires of the colonial powers during the war. The final borders of the newly established states do not coincide entirely with the provisions of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, but in Arab historical narratives the agreement does represent colonial influences and the sense that foreign states could do whatever they wanted.

Although from the very beginning the state system established by Western powers showed relative stability, several protracted border conflicts in the Mashrek emerged as part of the consolidation. In the broader Middle Eastern region, the only exception is South Sudan, which seceded from the North in 2011 as part of

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7 Lisa ANDERSON, *The State in the Middle East*, Comparative Politics, Vol. 20, Oct. 1987, No. 1, pp. 1–18.

a national referendum. However, the principle of *uti possidetis juris*, i.e. the state should inherit the pre-independence border, has played an important role in the demarcation and delineation of borders. Most of the border conflicts are rooted in the state formation or revisionist strategies of newly established nation states. This is the case of Iraqi claims over Kuwait, as Baghdad did not recognize the sovereignty of the small oil monarchy after its independence, which led to the occupation and annexation of the territory by Saddam Hussein in 1990 and the so-called second Gulf War in 1991.

Another important feature of state formation in the Middle East is the fact that the French succeeded in introducing a republican system where they ruled, whereas the British favoured the monarchical system in the territories they controlled. This is how the Hashemite dynasty ruled Jordan and Iraq, and how Syria and Lebanon became republics. In some cases, Arab nationalism as a revolutionary ideology overthrew the monarchies, as happened with the Hashemites in Iraq in 1958 and with the Muhammad Ali dynasty in Egypt in 1953.

### *The Nahda and reinterpretation of Arab history*

In the independent states of the Mashrek, one of the fundamental challenges was to formulate a unique historical narrative to strengthen the identity of belonging to a territorial entity. Prior to the evolution of the nation-state system in the Mashrek region, Arab historians mainly focused on the history of the Islamic caliphates or dynasties. The whole periodization of historical events relied on the glorification of old Islamic empires, from the Abbasids to the Umayyads. In that history writing, the pre-Islamic period known as *jabiliyya* had an important place in narrating the arrival of Islam through the Seal of the Prophets, Muhammad.

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire coincided with the emergence of an enlightened middle class in the Mashrek region, and especially in Greater Syria, where the intellectual renaissance, i.e. the Nahda, took place in the mid-nineteenth century. At the centre of this Arab awakening were the Arab Christians of the Levante, who with their Western education and connections successfully imported mainstream Western books and translated them to Arabic. Although Arabic language publishing began in the eighteenth century (the early 1800s for Muhammad Ali's Cairo), Arab books appeared only occasionally. Large publishing companies established in Beirut in the nineteenth century resulted in a mushrooming of books

translated to Arabic as well as the creation of newspapers and weeklies. A creative atmosphere arose in which to engage in dialogue on issues related to Arab history and the present political situation. In Beirut, Khalil Sarkis (1842–1915) and Butros al-Bustani (1819–1883) are but two of the remarkable figures of the Nahda. For instance, Sarkis launched a biweekly newspaper entitled *Lisan al-Hal*, which focused on engaging the elite in discussions about their lives and politics.<sup>8</sup> Butros al-Bustani joined the American Protestant Mission in Beirut and helped translate the Bible to Arabic, among other things.

A rare exception in terms of early history writing in the Arab world was Muhammad Ali's Egypt. Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (1801–1873), for instance, having spent five years in Paris studying the Western Enlightenment, returned to Cairo in 1835 and established a language school with a promise of translating all relevant Western works to Arabic. Tahtawi is an important predecessor of the Nahda's flourishing publishing projects.<sup>9</sup> Muhammad Ali as a keen modernizer interested in learning from Western history in order to renew his military and further develop infrastructure in Egypt.

There was a mass migration from Lebanon to Egypt at the end of the nineteenth century, and it had a spillover effect on the Nahda. The Arab Awakening saw the rise of an urban middle class in the cities of the Mashrek with a belief in progress for their societies. Christian missionaries brought secular ideology and the belief of scientific inquiry. As Yoav Di-Capua argues, the Nahda gave birth to a new historiography, which restructured existing knowledge in three dimensions: time, subjectivity, and space.<sup>10</sup> The representatives of the Nahda, the *nahdawis*, used history in order to understand the present and achieve progress. The nahdawis played an important role in bringing Christians and Muslims closer to each other.<sup>11</sup>

In his famous book *Arabic Taught in the Liberal Age*, Albert Hourani distinguishes between three periods of Arab thinking regarding European modernity<sup>12</sup>:

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8 Ami AYALON, *Private Publishing in the Nahda*, International Journal of Middle East Studies, Vol. 40, 2008, No. 4, pp. 561–577.

9 Youssef M. CHOUËIRI, *Arab History and the Nation-State. A Study in Modern Arab Historiography* 1820–1980, Vol. I, Routledge, London – New York 2017, pp. 3–4.

10 Yoav DI-CAPUA, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past. Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt*, University of California Press, Berkeley – Los Angeles – New York 2009.

11 Feras KRIMSTI – John-Paul GHOBRIAL, *The Past and its Possibilities in Nahda Scholarship*, Philological Encounters, Vol. 6, 2021, Issue 3–4, pp. 265–287.

12 Albert HOURANI, *Arab Thought in the Liberal Age 1798–1939*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1963.

- between 1830 and 1870, a new generation of scholars encountered European modernity, and they transmitted this knowledge to their audience in the MENA region;
- between 1870 and 1900 a second generation of scholars realized the need for change, though reinterpretation of the Islamic tradition would be inevitable in order to handle the challenge emanating from Europe;
- between 1900 and 1939, a third generation of scholars moved in two directions, one group calling for Islam as a solution, and the other rejecting this and primarily advocating implementation of secular values.

Meanwhile, there were two important scholars in the Ottoman Empire who shaped the entire modernization process from an ideological point of view. One was Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), an Egyptian religious scholar who played a prominent role in the Nahda process. The other was Abduh’s former teacher, Jamaal al-din al-Afghani (1838–1897), who travelled extensively throughout the Ottoman Empire. Both lived in an age when the Ottoman Empire had started the modernization process and the Middle East was faced with an increasing European influence. The so-called Islamic modernism of al-Afghani and Abduh serves as a reconciliation between European modernity and the traditional religious corpus of Islam.<sup>13</sup>

The time of Tahtawi and Abduh’s and al-Afghani’s era differ significantly, since in the early nineteenth century Europe, with its physical appearance in the MENA region, was more a source of admiration rather than a colonial challenge. Abduh and al-Afghani had to cope with the ever-growing European influence and interest in the region. However, a point of departure for each era was the glorious Islamic past, which was to be reinterpreted so as to serve contemporary times.

### *The birth of the professional Arab historiography*

The Nahda brought a kind of consciousness to the Arab world regarding its history and identity. The division of the Arab-dominated Ottoman lands under the League of Nations at the San Remo conference in 1920 marked a significant change in the status quo. The introduction of the idea of belonging to a territorial state awakened

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13 Bassam TIBI, *Arab Nationalism. Between Islam and the Nation-State*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 1997, p. 90.

Arab scholars to the challenge of European colonialism; these modernizers viewed Europe as both an opportunity and a threat. Opportunity came in the form of technological development – Europe offered a civilization that in the nineteenth century or even earlier had become superior to the Middle Eastern region. The birth of Arab nationalism coincides with the necessity to formulate a historical narrative of the newly established states. The question for those separate territorial entities was whether they could find continuity with the history of those lands or not. Two sources of historical narratives for Middle Eastern regimes are the pre-Islamic era and the various Islamic dynasties and empires.

The first type of encounter provides us with a number of examples from both Arab and non-Arab states. In the twentieth century, specifically October of 1971, the Pahlawi dynasty in Iran celebrated the 2,500 year anniversary of Persepolis, which together with the Shah embraced the pre-Islamic Achaemenid Empire. In the case of Syria, Bashar al-Assad has often referred to the ancient past, the Roman Empire embracing 6,000 years of Syrian history: ‘...We Syrians were, in effect, citizens of the Roman Empire...’<sup>14</sup> The term *Syrianism* or the *Syrianization* of history provides a parallel reference to the glorious Arab past and to the pre-Arab, pre-Islamic history of the region. However, where strong states exist, observers see a less significant role played by the pre-Islamic past in the historical narratives. As Michael Wood argues in the case of Egypt, reference to the ancient Pharaonic past has played only a marginal role in Egypt’s historical narratives.<sup>15</sup>

However, as Wood explains, in early twentieth-century Egypt so-called Pharaonism as a political movement praised Egypt’s ancient history and rejected the reference to the Arab/Islamic past as source of the state’s history. In the case of Syria, due to the Nahda’s catalysed vibrant intellectual culture, Arab history was at the centre of all narratives. In the Syrian case especially, the Umayyad dynasty was the main source of national pride, as it was headquartered in Damascus; for the Iraqis, on the other hand, the Kufa and later the Baghdad-based Abbasid caliphate were the root of historical narrations. Egyptian history-tellers have paid particular attention to the Fatimid and Mamluk dynasties.<sup>16</sup>

Egypt was one of the most developed parts of the Mashrek region, where modern Arab historiography had established itself in the early twentieth century.

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14 Eyal ZISSER, *Who’s Afraid of Syrian Nationalism? National and State Identity in Syria*, Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 42, 2006, No. 2, pp. 179–198.

15 Michael WOOD, *The Use of the Pharaonic Past in Modern Egyptian Nationalism*, Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt, Vol. 35, 1998, pp. 179–196.

16 Y. M. CHOUEIRI, *Arab History and the Nation-State*, p. 17.

In Egypt, the first generation of professional historians were mainly Western scholars conducting research on ancient Egypt as well as on the birth of the Egyptian state. It was an important task to send Egyptian scholars abroad to become familiar with modern European historiography, particularly its methodologies. During the reign of King Fouad I, the monarch set up a national archive in the royal palace of Abdeen in Cairo to serve as the most important source of information. The first generation of indigenous Egyptian historians were tasked with writing the history of Muhammad Ali and his descendants. The so-called royalists embraced the role of the royal family in Egypt's process of nation building. It must be emphasized that the period of European colonization and the monarchical era in Egypt have been regarded as part of a liberal experience, though historians in an authoritarian framing were to focus on the narratives of the royal family.<sup>17</sup>

The so-called royalist tradition in Egypt was preceded by a political development that arose from the process of de-Ottomanization and resulted in a distancing from the Ottoman past. At the same time, especially after the Urabi revolt of 1882, Egyptianization and Arabization took place simultaneously. The turn of the century is the period when Egyptian nationalism emerged with the establishment of political parties. Saad Zaghloul, the leader of the traditional *Wafd* (Delegation) Party, played a prominent role in the 1919 Egyptian revolution, which would result in independence for Egypt in 1922. In the 1920s, the country witnessed tremendous social change, namely the rise of a well-educated middle class, the so-called *effendis*, who had a keen interest in the discourse about the diverse identity of the Egyptian state.<sup>18</sup>

Another important part of Middle Eastern historical narratives is the establishment of modern area studies and Middle Eastern studies, particularly in the English-speaking world. In the beginning, it was mainly an American endeavour to deconstruct Middle Eastern politics aimed at containing Soviet expansion in the Third World. Two foundations, Rockefeller and Ford, as well as universities such as Harvard played a prominent role in providing scholarly activities in the field of Middle Eastern studies. It was mainly a second generation of American citizens of Middle Eastern descent who paid a pivotal role in establishing scientific research on the region. Another very important place for Middle Eastern studies was

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17 Anthony GORMAN, *Framing the Past. Historian, state and society*, in: Robert Springborg et al., *Routledge Handbook on Contemporary Egypt*, Routledge, London – New York 2021, pp. 67–78.

18 Mona ARIF, *Constructing the National Past: History-Writing and Nation-Building in Nasser's Egypt*. Sharafat 1, Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Futuristic Studies Unit, 2017, p. 14.

Oxford, where the Lebanese scholar Albert Hourani trained a generation of specialists in the field. The third centre was the London-based School of Oriental Studies, where Bernard Lewis devoted himself primarily to the classical oriental approach in order to explain contemporary economic and political issues. With their formal and informal academic networks, these scholars established a tradition that has been continued by their students at the aforesaid centres. Nonetheless, the existence of authoritarian regimes in the MENA and suspicions that those regimes harbour towards Western scholarship have prevented the connection of Western-based Middle Eastern studies with scholars living in the region.<sup>19</sup>

Preceding the establishment of a more methodology-based history writing, Arab nationalist scholars published a number of books and pamphlets in the name of Arabism. Yet there was a fierce debate between those who did more to propagate a unified Arab state (pan-Arabism) and those who argued for the individual states. This was the direct consequence of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and a transition towards a modern state and society. I would argue that in the later phase of development, the two levels of nationalism complemented one another, however at the time of the birth of the mandatory system, the role of Hussein's two sons, Abdullah and Feisal, in state formation, was brought into question. In his book, Albert Hourani refers to the debate between the Syrian Sati' al-Husri (1880–1968), a founding father of pan-Arabism, and representatives of the Egyptian nationalist movement.<sup>20</sup> Al-Husri believed in the concept of the organic nation state, that is, the primordialist approach. He was familiar with European discourses, but with the arrival of French troops, he became critical of Western occupation. He was, however, influenced by German romanticism and nationalism. He criticized the doyen of Egyptian nationalist thinking, Taha Hussein, who according to al-Husri was a keen admirer of the West. From this perspective, it was not the Sykes-Picot Agreement itself which influenced the Arab nationalist thinkers but rather the concrete existence of the mandatory system after the San Remo conference in 1920.

This is the time of the birth of modern professional historiography in Egypt. As universities were established in Cairo and Alexandria, the two cities became the most important centres of teaching and research in both European and Arab his-

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19 Roger OWEN, *Albert Hourani and the Making of Modern Middle East Studies in the English-speaking World. A Personal Memoir*, in: Jens Hanssen – Max Weiss (eds.), *Arabic Thought Beyond the Liberal Age. Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2016, pp. 41–61.

20 A. HOURANI, *Arab Thought in the Liberal Age 1798–1939*, pp. 116–122.

tory. The first professional historian, appointed university professor in Cairo in 1935, was Muhammad Shafiq Ghurbal.<sup>21</sup>

Published in 1928, Ghurbal's most important book is entitled *The Beginnings of the Egyptian Question and the Rise of Mehemet Ali*. In it, the author narrates the history of Egypt since the invasion of Napoleon in 1798. The book glorifies the modernization process under Muhammad Ali, who fulfilled a pivotal role in establishing the modern Egyptian state. In the words of Youssef Choueiri, 'Ghurbal has a story to tell. It is dominated by a single hero, Muhammad Ali. All the others are either villains, ignorant, or simply unlucky. Even the indigenous people and their leaders are dismissed as a negligible quantity with no spirit, or imagination.'<sup>22</sup> Ghurbal's work is the first in the line of Egyptian historians that have tried to narrate the story of the Egyptian nation-state in which Muhammad Ali's dynasty played a fundamental role. But it is also the first instance in Egyptian historiography where a historian relied on original sources, archives, and unpublished documents. Previously, storytellers mainly built their narratives around personal memoirs and oral traditions. According to Di-Capua, Ghurbal's school mainly focused on Egypt and on Islamic history and rarely discussed contemporary issues of his time.<sup>23</sup>

Although Egypt remained the most developed centre of historical research in the early twentieth century, it is important to emphasize the traditions of other Mashrek countries as well. In Iraq, Ali al-Wardi (1913–1995), a sociologist trained at the American University in Beirut and at the University of Texas, has become one of the most important scientific sources on Iraqi history.<sup>24</sup> Regarded in Iraq as a liberal thinker, in the 1950s and 1960s, the height of Arab nationalism, he published an eight-volume work on Iraqi history. His books serve as a summary of Iraqi history and provide a depiction of the diversity of Iraqi society. A compilation book on al-Wardi's view on Iraqi society and history has been used by U.S. soldiers to gain an understanding of the context of the post-2003 'occupation'. Al-Wardi focuses on the Iraqi revolt against the British occupation in 1920 and introduces the meaning of foreign intervention for Iraqi society.<sup>25</sup>

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21 A. GORMAN, *Framing the Past. Historian, state and society*, p. 69.

22 Y. M. CHOUERI, *Arab History and the Nation-State*, p. 71.

23 Y. DI-CAPUA, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past*, pp. 203–204.

24 Hamied G. M. Al HASHIMI, *Iraqi sociology and Al-Wardi's contribution*, *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, Vol. 6, 2013, No. 2, pp. 251–259.

25 Youssef H. ABOUL-ENEIN, *Iraq in Turmoil. Historical Perspectives of dr. Ali Al-Wardi, from the Ottoman Empire to King Feisal*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis 2012.

Al-Wardi combines the methodologies of sociology, history, and anthropology, and his writings reflect the discourse of Iraqi society in his time. One of his major contributions was to raise the issue of responsibility on the part of the writer in accepting or rejecting the patronage of the state. Oppression is also one of the central themes in al-Wardi's sociological analysis of Iraqi society. He offers a strong criticism of tribalism in Iraq, stressing that it does not serve the interests of society. He deconstructs the Quran from a sociological perspective and refrains from describing the holy script as a linguistic miracle, as was customary in the region, but he does emphasize the social and historical context together with the new ethical values it introduced.<sup>26</sup>

Kamal Salibi (1929–2011) is the founder of Lebanese historiography after independence. Upon graduating under the supervision of Bernard Lewis, he joined the American University in Beirut, where he was surrounded by a number of Arab historians conducting research on Lebanese history. An important task for historians in Greater Syria was to find a distinction between pan-Arabism, which believes in a single Arab state, and the nationalism(s) of individual countries, such as that of Lebanon. In the latter case, the author had to build the national narrative of Lebanon, which usually revolved around two distinct approaches: 1) Lebanon as a place of refuge for all sects and ethnicities (Maronite middle-class vision), whereby the country's history can be traced back to the Phoenicians; and 2) Lebanon as part of the larger Arab nation. Salibi's *Modern History of Lebanon* offers a full-fledged picture of Lebanese history built on oral traditions, documents, memoirs, and previously unprocessed sources.<sup>27</sup>

In the twentieth century, the establishment of territorial states coincided with the rise of radical Arab nationalism(s) in the region, leading to revolutions from above in Egypt (1952) and in Iraq (1958) and the eventual proclamation of republics (i.e. Egypt in 1953). An important message within Arab nationalism was that the countries involved were part of the larger Arab nation (*al-Watan al-Arabi*). From the perspective of historical narratives and knowledge, these revolutions brought about a fundamental change. Ghurbal built his entire professional career on the glorification of Muhammad Ali's role in the birth of the modern

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26 Orit BASHKIN, *Advice from the Past: 'Ali al-Wardi on Literature and Society*, in: Jordi Tejel – Peter Sluglett – Riccardo Bocco – Hamit Bozarslan (eds.), *The Modern History of Iraq. Historical and Modern Challenges*, World Scientific Publishing, Singapore 2012, pp. 13–30.

27 Y. M. CHOUERI, *Arab History and the Nation-State*, pp. 115–164.

Egyptian nation-state, yet Gamal Nasser and his comrades regarded the dynasty as foreign.

The Free Officers in Egypt and the Baathist in Iraq and Syria introduced a new phase in the evolution of the national consciousness. Formulating new historical knowledge was vital in the revolutionary political mobilization from above. In the case of Egypt, following the political consolidation of 1954, Nasser and the Free Officers relied on a narrative and history-making that strengthened the cause of the revolution. The narrative regards the 1952 revolution as having won the battle of liberation against all foreign occupiers, including the British. This is a break with the modern historiography of Ghurbal, who relied on sources and archives to narrate history. In the case of the Free Officers, a historical methodology was not important, as was shown by Di-Capua, who argued that the Nasserist narrative was historic rather than historical.<sup>28</sup> This meant that it focused on the present and only used the past for reconfirmation of revolutionary ideas.

Nasser ordered the rewriting of history according to the National Charter of 1962, which aimed at accelerating the nation-building process along socialist lines. In 1963, Nasser established a project for the revision of modern historical writing, which mainly resulted in a new type of schoolbook for students as well as new films intended to enhance the national consciousness of the citizens. A limited debate was launched on historical findings, but those who were critical and not in conformity with the regime's approach were marginalized. The new schoolbook was built around the idea of national liberation and Arab nationalism.<sup>29</sup> The latter encompassed Egyptian nationalism, as Nasserism propagated a pan-Arab ideology that put Cairo in the leading role. According to the Nasserist concept, the entire history of Egypt was based on citizens' struggle for independence and national liberation, and revolution of 1952 is seen as the most important milestone in the development of the history of Egyptian socialism.

As in Nasser's Egypt, in Baathist Iraq, original methodology-based historical research was not encouraged by the regimes. It was mainly Iraqis among the diaspora in Western countries who devoted themselves to modern Iraqi history, and in doing so they could rely only on Western archives, oral histories, and official sources. In Iraq, historians typically narrate 'official' events from the point of view of the regime, since any scientific inquiry should be based on the socialist ideology

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28 Y. DI-CAPUA, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past*, p. 259.

29 M. ARIF, *Constructing the National Past: History-Writing and Nation-Building in Nasser's Egypt*, pp. 18–21.

of Baathism. One of the main topics for historians is how much Iraqi society was transformed by the 1958 revolution.<sup>30</sup>

The historical narrative of the unifying force of pan-Arabism was broken by the military defeat of the Six-Day War in 1967, which according to Arab historiography represented a setback (*an-Naksah*).

### *An-Naksah in modern Arab historiography*

In the aftermath of the military catastrophe, Nasser offered his resignation, but it was not well received, and he remained president until his death. Not only was the an-Naksa a military defeat, but it also showed the decreasing attraction of the ideology of Nasserism and pan-Arabism as most of the Arab world, especially the socialist republics, grappled with the crisis of modernization. This is when political Islam began gaining momentum, and popular organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood and its splinter groups mushroomed in Egypt, and similar processes could be observed in other Mashrek countries. These developments led to the emergence of two types of historical narratives: 1) the 1967 defeat and Nasserism should somehow be explained to the citizens; 2) the popular Islamic organizations began to propagate their own historical narratives.

In 1971, Anwar Sadat launched the so-called Corrective Movement, followed by the Infitah, a set of policies designed to open the economy to Western investment. He found the Nasserists to be the main political rivals to his presidency, thus certain criticism of the past occurred in Egyptian society, which was reflected in history writing as well. While others were busy criticizing the previous era, a famous twentieth-century journalist, Mohammed Hassanen Heikal (1923–2016), defended Nasser's ideology and acts in the political milieu.<sup>31</sup> In October of 1975, a committee headed by vice-president Hosni Mubarak was established by Sadat and charged with writing the history of the history of the previous era, including the War of 1967. Mubarak called for the use of national archives and historical inquiry aimed at deconstructing the history of the aftermath of the revolu-

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30 Marion FAROUK-SLUGLETT – Peter SLUGLETT, *The Historiography of Modern Iraq*, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 96, Dec. 1991, No. 5, pp. 1408–1421.

31 Y.DI-CAPUA, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past*, p. 312.

tion and the era of Nasser, but many historians were left out of the committee. Mubarak would later step, and the group was dissolved.<sup>32</sup>

Because the military defeat of 1967 had a significant impact on the Arab psyche, there was a proliferation of different materials, though most of them were published in Israel or by Western scholars. The absence of national archives and official documents in the Arab world meant that the production of books on Nasserism or the 1967 defeat lacks official sources and is instead based mainly on interviews with former military leaders and members of the regime.<sup>33</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The Mashrek region witnessed a long transformation process beginning with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The dissolution of the empire at the end of the World War I resulted in the establishment of independent states in the name of nationalism, but it was an alien construction to belong to a territorial entity that was not defined by religion. Two levels of 'imported' nationalism developed, one at the pan-Arab level and the other at the level of independent nations states. These two forms of nationalism were in direct competition at the beginning of the twentieth century, but they would begin to complement one another following the rise of the radical Arab nationalism of Nasser and Baathism. Although delineating the borders artificially by Western powers did not result in an organic process of nation-building, despite lengthy border conflicts, the regional order based on the Sykes-Picot Agreement was relatively stable. Only in a few cases (Sudan, Yemen, and the United Arab Emirates) was there a merger or secession of states due to certain historical circumstances.

This process was supported by the authoritarian narratives of the given regimes in the region as well as by transnational revolutionary ideologies such as pan-Arabism. Though the regimes in the Mashrek differed in many ways, the historical narratives served to strengthen the parallel state-building and nation-building processes. In order to find a continuity with the history of the land, where the newly established regimes had a monopoly on violence, they used history writing not as

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32 Osman EL-SHARNOUBI, *Historiographical Frustrations: Writing the History of the 1967 Defeat*, Mada, June 8, 2017, <https://www.madamast.com/en/2017/06/08/feature/politics/historiographical-frustrations-writing-the-history-of-the-1967-defeat/> (4. 1. 2023).

33 Idem.

a scientific inquiry as part of the larger Western social sciences but rather as a tool for reinforcing the ideology and narratives of the ruling elite. The relatively liberal period of the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century resulted in the emergence of a professional historiography in the Levante and in Egypt as well. It coincided with the establishment of universities and the influence of Europe. This relatively liberal period was authoritarian too, however, and certain narrative were encouraged by the various regimes.

The pan-Arabism of Nasser and Baathism produced several new historical books reinterpreting the entire history of the countries in the Mashrek region. This is the case of Egypt, where national liberation is a key concern within the historical narrative. This led to the so-called an-Naksah, the Setback, which discouraged any real Arab inquiry on the military defeat. It coincides with an Islamization process as well, which in a way reproduced the old historical narratives of the pre-nation state period.

Very recently, the Arab Uprising of 2011 and its aftermath again raises the issue of history writing. In Egypt, the Revolution's Documentation Committee was established by the head of the National Archives of Egypt to focus on collecting material sources from all stakeholders in society.<sup>34</sup> In the case of Iraq, the U.S. intervention in 2003, which toppled the Saddam regime, marked the beginning of a new era of historiography. Although there is a divergence in the political evolution of states in the Mashrek, historical narratives about regional developments converge in many ways. The Arab Uprising is another milestone, one that will be reflected in historical narratives depending on the types of transformation experienced by political regimes.

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34 A.GORMAN, *Framing the Past. Historian, state and society*, pp. 75–76.

## Vznik států v Mašreku. Historické narativy o budování státu a národních dějinách od Sykes-Picotovy dohody

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Tento článek zkoumá vývoj historických narativů v regionu Mašrek od vzniku nezávislých států po rozpadu Osmanské říše. Pocit příslušnosti k územně vymezenému celku byl regionu, kde identitu definovalo především náboženství, spíše cizí. V regionu Mašrek nikoli národní stát, nýbrž jiné sdílené identity – jako kmenová nebo náboženská příslušnost – jsou tím, co určuje místo komunity ve společnosti. Zavedení západního konceptu národního státu znamenalo v této části světa radikální rozchod s minulostí.

V době první světové války, kdy zanikla Osmanská říše, se souběžně objevily jak panarabský, tak dílčí státní nacionalismus, které spolu navzájem často soupeřily. V tomto období se prosadila živá intelektuální tvorba, jejímž výsledkem byl vznik nových publikací, inspirovaných západními myšlenkami. Pro jejich autory – *nahdawí* (myslitele nahda, arabské renesance) – bylo poměrně obtížným úkolem vysvětlit nutnost modernizace ve společnosti, která se soustřeďovala především na náboženskou víru.

Arabští historici Mašreku se ovšem také zabývali hledáním kontinuity se starými dějinami země, kde vznikly nové státy. Takto byly vyprávěny libanonské, irácké, palestinské či jakékoli jiné příběhy. Kupříkladu v Sýrii současný prezident Bašár al-Asad prohlásil, že Sýrie má 6000 let starou historii.

Zrod moderní arabské historiografie se odehrál v kvasi-liberální éře západního kolonialismu, v jejímž rámci bylo založeno vědecké bádání a národní archivy. To je případ Egypta, kde byli tzv. royalisté na počátku 20. století povzbuzováni k oslavě vládnoucí dynastie v zemi. Dělo se to v ostrém kontrastu s pozdějším vrcholným obdobím Násirova radikálního arabského nacionalismu, který se od roajalistických narativů odtrhl, neboť tehdejší režim považoval Muhammada Alího za součást cizí dynastie. Za Násira se národní osvobození a socialismus staly základním kamenem nově vzniklého dějepisectví, které se neopíralo o archivní výzkum, ale soustředilo se na revoluční ideologii své doby.

Porážka v roce 1967 znamenala začátek nové éry v celém Mašreku, kde autoritářské režimy odrazovaly od historizace tohoto neúspěchu. Většina arabských

knih vznikla na základě rozhovorů a memoárů, nebyla však založena na dokumentech a původních pramenech. Kontrola historických narativů byla vždy nástrojem v rukou vládnoucích režimů v celém regionu.

Nedávná arabská povstání podpořila shromažďování původních materiálů z různých zainteresovaných stran společnosti. Nicméně kontrola narativu o nedávné transformaci zůstává nadále součástí strategie přežití režimu.