

Identity and State Formation in multi-sectarian societies: between nationalism and sectarianism and the case of Syria

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This essay examines the interrelation between societal identity—specifically, the mix of sectarianism and nationalism—and state formation in the Middle East. The dominant political science view associates strong, inclusive states with nationalism; conversely, those excluded in weak or non-inclusive states may well embrace sub-state identities such as sectarianism (Wimmer 2002). These expectations are likely valid over the historical long run; yet they hardly exhaust the possibilities, and indeed the more complex and variable “actually existing” politics in MENA states is located “between” the two poles. This paper makes a start at uncovering these more complex dynamics.

The paper brings together literatures on identity and on state formation in order to identify the key variables necessary to understand their inter-relation. It first establishes the *structural* context in which state formation has taken place in MENA, namely the flawed export of Westphalian statehood to the region. The resulting permutations of identity, specifically the inter-relation of nationalism and sectarianism, and their impact on state formation are surveyed; the analysis is then reversed, examining state formation’s impact on identity. These findings are then summarised via a constructivist framework of analysis. Next, the framework is applied in a case study of Syria whose variation over time in both identity and state formation allows an exploration of their co-constitution. The analysis does not seek to demonstrate causal hypotheses, but rather to generate a selective preliminary narrative guided by the framework--arguably a necessary first step toward the former undertaking.

State Formation and Identity: the Context and Problematic

Constituting Statehood: Export of a Flawed States System

The structural context for state formation and identity in MENA was established by the attempted “export” of the Westphalian states system--i.e. Weberian states congruent with national communities (nation-states)—from the core to the non-Western world (Bull and Watson 1984). In a first movement, the region’s multi-ethnic empires were destroyed and new ‘states’ imposed by the Western imperial powers—initially territorial ‘shells’ and bureaucratic command posts, arbitrarily dividing up MENA as it suited their geo-political interests. Thereafter, nationalist movements fought for independence and, after de-colonization, indigenous state builders tried to fill these territorial ‘shells’ with political institutions and national identities. State leaders sought to forge a shared national identity among their populations (Smith 1981; Murphy 1996) since nation-states were perceived to be the most effective model of governance. Claiming to represent the nation was the key to legitimacy, and the nation-state, able to mobilize its people to fight and pay taxes, was so successful in international power struggles that pre-national states could not compete. The greater the congruence of national identity with statehood, the more robust the latter was thought likely to be; the less congruence the greater the levels of internal conflict and irredentism. Nationalism became an ideology of “defensive modernization” to catch up with the core while its ideals of national self-determination and, ‘one nation, one state’,

were widely embraced by MENA state builders and nationalist movements, as best exemplified in Atatürk's forging of a Turkish nation-state out of Ottoman ruins.

It was, however, by no means inevitable that Westphalia would effectively 'take' outside the West and indeed, for several reasons the MENA outcome 'deviated' from the nation-state model. First, conditions were different for *late* state builders as compared to those in the European core. In Europe state formation was initiated by indigenous agents as a function of war-making which gave rise to the centralization of power, modern bureaucracies and citizen mobilization forging national identifications with the state; by contrast, in MENA, the process was imposed from without, imported bureaucratic forms mixed with surviving patrimonial practices, giving rise to weaker neo-patrimonial forms of "hybrid" governance (Bacik 2008); also state builders were less dependent on citizen soldiers and tax-payers since resources and protection was often provided by international patrons. Secondly, late state builders were not able to "solve" the challenges of modernization in sequence, e.g. establishing political institutions well before participation demands deepened. Thirdly, the nation-state model was incongruent with the pre-existing identities, such that the new state sovereignties coexisted with and contradicted supra-state Arabism and Islam (Buzan and Gonzales-Palaez 2009) which diminished loyalty to the individual states; this was exacerbated by external imposition of arbitrary boundaries cutting across identities and external guarantees of these boundaries that deterred wars of expansion in which less viable political units would be absorbed by stronger states and national identities forged (Lustik 1997). Thus, the bases of state strength in the core—national identities and elite-mass co-dependence forged in war--were more tenuous in MENA. As such, what was 'exported' to the region were initially *quasi-states*, sustained by outside support but lacking robust statehood within (Jackson 1993; Clapham 1998).

MENA states were, in time, relatively stabilized, sometimes by nationalist mobilization against imperialism, or via war-making. But the circumstances of state formation left two enduring consequences: at the identity level, tension persisted between pre-existing sub and supra-state identities and the model of the national state being constituted in the region; this identity heterogeneity made it harder to generate consensus around an inclusive national identity within states yet also enabled political agents—regime builders and their opponents--to instrumentalize multiple identities, including *both* nationalism and sectarianism. There was also a tension between the supposedly inclusive Westphalian institutions and pre-existing patrimonial practices, including the instrumentalization of sub-state identities such as sectarianism in regime building, with the outcome often hybrid *neo-patrimonial* institutions with quite variable impacts on inclusiveness, hence on their capacity to generate national identities. Then, much later, under globalization driven neo-liberalism, declining inclusion provoked mobilization against the state by movements often deploying sub and supra-state identities (Delanty and O'Mahoney (2002: 169-87, Barber 1995).

Below, the paper further explores the consequences of Westphalian export on *identity* and *institutions*. First, however, the nationalism-sectarian nexus and its theoretical relation to state formation needs to be more closely examined.

The nationalism-sectarian problematic and state building

Owing to the conditions of Westphalian export to MENA, nationalism and sectarianism remain, in the region's multi-sectarian societies, viable competing identities bound to impact on state-building. In principle, they seem to have potentially quite different consequences for it: within the state, nationalism, particularly civic nationalism, is often seen to be universalistic and inclusive of those with citizenship, hence most compatible with state-building. Many scholars argue (Rustow 1970; Calhoun 1990) that a unifying national identity within the state is crucial to keeping political competition peaceful over

'who gets what' issues. Sectarianism, on the other hand, can be defined as identification with a sub or trans-state religious community that emphasizes boundaries with the 'other,' particularly when involving claims of monopoly over religious truth as the principle for organizing public life. It is associated with particularistic solidarity within the group and potential enmity toward the 'other,' hence may be politically divisive and lend itself to exclusionary governance practices within states (Toft 2007). Symptomatically, in MENA discourse, sectarianism is a pejorative label affixed to the "Other" and denied for oneself.

Reality is, however, more complex. In practice, the two identities can overlap, as when versions of nationalism are constructed that reflect the outlook of dominant sectarian groups, such as Maronite versions of Lebanese nationalism; the Iraqi Shia's current appropriation of ownership of Iraqi identity (Haddad 2011); and the Sunni-inflected Bahraini nationalism in which Bahraini Shia are depicted as fifth columnists of the "national" enemy, Iran. Inevitably, however, other sects feel excluded from such versions of "nationalism." There are also often multiple nationalist narratives (Hutchinson 2012) and not all are inclusive: ethno-nationalism, including Arab nationalism, may be exclusionary toward ethnic minorities (such as Kurds) that refuse assimilation in a way similar to sectarian-infused nationalism (Rorbaek and Knudson 2015) and civil nationalism if, in principle, more inclusive, is in practice usually blended with elements of ethnic nationalism. And, as Haddad (2014) argues, secular civic nationalism can be exclusionary toward the religious-minded.

Moreover, sectarianism, like nationalism, far from being a uniform phenomenon (Haddad 2011) varies along a *continuum of intensity*, with variants having quite different relations to nationalism and different consequences for state formation. At the low intensity end of the spectrum, sectarian identities may be banal (taken for granted), non-politicized, and compatible with the simultaneous embrace of a broader nationalist identity. Sectarian identities can also be politicized and instrumentalized as a method of group competition that is very little about religious doctrine and chiefly over access to scarce resources or power but also utilized by governing elites to co-opt clients and or divide and rule; "instrumental sectarianism" can be held simultaneously with national identities, although each may compete with and weaken the other and while it is usually non-violent, it can become violent. At the high intensity pole is militant sectarianism which is highly politicized, asserting a monopoly of religious truth to be imposed in public life, keen to use violence against those denounced as infidels or apostates; and, often trans-national, hence likely to challenge loyalty to the national state (Brubaker 2015).¹ As such, while sectarianism and nationalism are inversely related in the last case, this is less or not at all so of the other kinds of sectarianism.

Given this, the nationalism-sectarian "balance" is best seen not as a dichotomy but a continuum of identity patterns possible in a society, ranging from more universalistic/inclusive at one end to particularistic/exclusivist ones at the other pole. At the former pole would be a state based on civic nationalism inclusive of all who have citizenship, with sectarian identities remaining non-politicized; at the latter end would be a society bi-polarized by militant sectarian movements which deny membership of the 'other' in the political community. Ranged between these would be middle cases such as one wherein actors simultaneously held instrumental sectarian identities and ethno-national identity, as in much of the Levant. Each country may have a particular nationalism-sectarian "balance."

Such variations in identity patterns have consequences for state formation. Arguably more inclusive identities enable more inclusive state institutions while exclusivist identities may make for non-inclusive state institutions and at the extremes, state failure. However, much of actually existing politics in MENA states falls into "middle cases," with multiple identities fostering hybrid state-building practices that instrumentalize *both*

sectarianism and nationalism. Before looking at state building, the following section examines more closely identity patterns in MENA and, specifically, the nationalism-sectarianism nexus.

The origins and variety of MENA identities

Multiple, often competing, identities co-exist in MENA: sub-state (tribe, sect, class); territorial (or state nationalism); and supra-state (Pan Arabism and Pan Islam) identities. These identities are very enduring: surveys over decades have found individuals' identifications to be roughly equally divided between state, Arab and Muslim, although their relative strength varies somewhat over time.² More recent polls show a surge in concern about sectarian animosity, which majorities oppose.³ What factors explain such identities and their variations? How do they affect state formation?

MENA's identity heritage

The inherited historical pattern of identity constrains (but does not determine) what identities can be constructed. Nationalism, while rooted in an 'ethnie' and empowered by the social communication enabled by shared language, corresponds to an imagined, not a face-to-face community (Anderson 1983), hence has to be deliberately 'constructed' but is most likely to be successful if the state corresponds to long historical memories of shared political community in a territory. Without a proto-nation, or if boundaries frustrate rather than satisfy it, nation-building can fail or result in irredentism (O'Leary 1998; Smith 1995: 29-50; Armstrong 1982). In MENA several, largely geo-political, factors obstructed a Westphalian congruence of nation and state that could potentially have marginalized competing sub and supra-state identities, particularly sectarianism.

First, in this arid region of trading cities and nomadic tribes, the strongest identifications historically attached to sub-state units—cities, tribe, religious sects—or the larger Islamic *umma*; Islamic empires built on these identities and since their boundaries fluctuated greatly as they rose and fell, identifications with territorial states were tepid (Weuleresse 1946: 79-83). Moreover, rule was exercised over religious communities rather than over territory, per se, with the rule of the caliph over the majority Islamic *umma* and autonomous minority communities allowed governance by their own religious leaders.

Arbitrary Western imposition of boundaries erected major additional obstacles to the nation-state model—while inflaming the grievances that fed Pan Arab nationalist mobilization. Insofar as there was an Arab proto-nation, as Arab nationalists insisted, it was egregiously frustrated through fragmentation of the Arabic-speaking world. The incongruence between the territorial states and pre-existing supra and sub-state identities, exacerbated by arbitrary boundary imposition cutting across identity fragmented societies, was especially marked in the Arab *mashreq* where, following the infamous WWI 'Sykes-Picot agreement,' the dismantling of historic Syria and the invention of Iraq led to a continuing contestation of the new states' legitimacy by competing supra- and sub-state identity movements. Yet this situation also allowed--and governing was seen to require--the colonial powers and later their independent successor states to instrumentalize sub-state identities such as sectarianism, as well as supra-state ones. Conversely, greater congruence of nation and state was more likely where statehood had a long history within borders accepted by colonial powers (e.g. Egypt), or where indigenous agency shaped borders in opposition to these powers (as in Atatürk's Turkey) (Maddy-Weizman 2006; Hinnebusch 2015a). National identities were more readily constructed around the cores of MENA empires (Ottoman, Safavid) compared to the imperial (Arab) peripheries, which enjoyed much less cohesion. MENA state builders have had to manipulate, enhance, dilute

or try to alter the identity mixes they inherit—particularly the pervasive variants of sectarianism and nationalism—as discussed below.

Nationalism and sectarianism in MENA

The relative linguistic homogeneousness of the Middle East region does, however, provide essential ingredients for nation-building. Eighty-four per cent of states have a majority linguistic group and within the Arab world Arabic speakers vastly predominate, constituting the linguistic basis of Arab nationalism (Scarritt 2005). Ethnic nationalisms--Arab, Iranian and Turkish--have thus been promoted by states to assimilate sectarian minorities sharing the dominant language (albeit at the expense of linguistic minorities, most notably the Kurds). Yet, despite having long cultural roots, these national identities only became political salient because of structural conditions: Ottoman collapse left an identity vacuum while resistance to Western imperialism stimulated nationalisms that sought to fill the gap.

There were, however, multiple versions of nationalism. Independence movements against Western imperialism fostered state nationalism in the individual states (referred to as *watani* nationalism), Yet, particularly where the state was seen as an artificial creation of imperialism, state nationalisms in the Arab world were strongly contested or qualified by supra-state Pan-Arabism (referred to as *qaumi* nationalism), a movement seeking to overcome the “artificial” division of the Arab nation into multiple statelets and bring nation and state into congruence. In the 1940-80 period, it was the hegemonic identity in the Arab world, marginalizing sub-state identities such as sectarianism but also retarding consolidation of state nationalisms sharply distinguished from those of other Arab speaking states (2016 polling showed that 77% of respondents still thought the Arabs made up a nation, not multiple nations). Arabism over time did tend to become “banal,” appropriated by individual states as part of their somewhat distinct identities (Phillips 2013); this, however, meant Arab states had to retain Pan-Arabism as part of their identity discourse which helped reproduce it. Also, it tended to make the legitimacy of the individual Arab governments contingent on their being seen to defend the common Arab cause—not individual state sovereignty--in their foreign policies. But what most powerfully continually reproduced Arab nationalism was the on-going struggle over Palestine, the threat from Israel and regular Western intervention in the region.

The main basis of identity distinction *within* (and to some extent between) states in MENA is *religious*—i.e. what will appear within any given state as different *sectarian* communities (Wimmer 2015). The sectarian inheritance of multi-sectarian societies is a product of the *long duree* and sectarian identities have some advantage over state nationalism in MENA in that they are more ascriptive--transmitted by descent, and often constituted in face-to-face real (not imaginary) ‘little communities,’ hence readily reinforced by socialization via kin and peer groups. As such, variations in the demographic distribution of sectarian groups matters: studies by Scarritt (2005) and by Merkel and Weiffen (2012) found that it was not so much identity diversity as identity *polarization* that generated communal conflict and this was potentially more likely in societies where there were two or three groups divided by many criteria and evenly balanced in size, communal consciousness and mobilization (by contrast to societies fragmented into many small sub-state groups not sharply divided or those with a large majority and several smaller minorities in which assimilation into a larger shared national identity was more likely). Whether polarization actually results will be affected by the *kind*—intensity--of sectarianism: if sectarian differences are unpoliticized, it will likely be low; if instrumentalized, medium; and under militant sectarianism, high.

In summary, state builders were both constrained by and yet could often also instrumentalize several possible competing historic identities including sectarianism and various forms of nationalism. What determined which prevailed in a given time and place?

Modernization and Identity in MENA

Mass nationalism is a function of modernization, notably social mobilization (spread of mass education, literacy, media, etc.) which allows a broadening of identities beyond sub-state ones to become congruent with the state; an integrated market economy and infrastructure within state borders also facilitates the interactions that facilitate national identity (Hall 1998; Gellner 1983; Taylor 1998). As expected, MENA modernization has indeed been associated with nationalism and to the more it has become hegemonic, the more it has tended to subsume or de-politicize the particularistic/localistic identities that dominated in pre-modern times. Moreover, capitalist development fosters new class identities that cross cut, compete with and may dilute communal ones such as sectarianism and often reinforce nationalism (Delanty and O'Mahoney 2002: 14-15). Thus, in MENA, as the new middle and working classes became politicized in the 1940's-70s, *class* grievances were mixed with radical nationalism to become the dominant vehicle of their mobilization against ruling oligarchies seen as subservient to imperialism, subsuming and overshadowing sectarian differences among the middle and lower classes (Gershoni 1996).

Yet modernization can also increase the salience of sectarian identities since it increases competition over scarce resources and, in modernizing societies, as individuals leave their 'little communities' to compete in the wider social arena, sectarianism is often instrumentalized in group struggles over material resources. In MENA, this started happening from the 1970s as states, in receipt of large oil or aid revenues, distributed these resources via clientele networks, sometimes based on sect; in periods when falling oil prices decreased resource supply while, with continuing population growth, competition intensified, losers might attribute unequal outcomes to sectarian discrimination, raising sectarian consciousness.

Whether modernization leads to more inclusive national identities or reinforces particularistic ones such as sect depends how the interaction of class (horizontal) and communal (vertical) cleavages affects levels and axes of conflict. Thus, sectarian cleavages can retard class consciousness while if class and communal cleavages overlap and reinforce each other (e.g. one communal group constituting the upper class and another the lower class) violent sectarian conflict and high sectarian consciousness is more likely; if class and communal cleavages cross-cut and dilute each other, prospects for an inclusive nationalism able to subsume sectarian identities increase (Grove 1987); while if class subsumes sectarian identities, a cross-sectarian revolutionary nationalism may result (Tonnesson 2009). Several tendencies may be simultaneously operative or at particular junctures one or the other may dominate; and while explanations for which prevails when and where are beyond the scope of this article, the actions of political entrepreneurs are one decisive factor.

Political Entrepreneurship: the instrumentalization of identity in MENA

While structure constrains possibilities, actual outcomes depend on agency: identity change and reproduction are promoted by political entrepreneurs in power struggles. In periods of identity contestation, as is often typical of the Middle East, outcomes depend on the struggle of competing actors trying to tip the balance among identity possibilities.

Nationalism in MENA was, in the first place, a function of mobilization against the colonizer, when nationalist movements and parties arose across the region; the struggle with the imperialist "other" tended to subsume non-national identities and the more lengthy and intense the national struggle and the more imperialist-drawn borders, frustrated, rather than satisfied identities, the more powerful was anti-imperialist

nationalism. After independence, state elites widely promoted state nationalism--an identity coterminous with state borders they hoped would marginalize competing sub and trans-state identities. State elites have powerful incentives to inculcate a national identity within their states—the domestic legitimacy bonus from being seen to represent a national community, the economic modernization facilitated by enhanced integration, and the mobilization of power in international competition. Particularly if there is a pre-existing dominant ‘ethnie,’ they will try to assimilate minorities into it or else promote civic nationalism (Beissinger 1998; Taylor 1998). In the Arab world, even where there was often no historic proto-nation corresponding to individual states (e.g. Iraq), elites tried to foster one from above (Simon 1996). They have several advantages in doing so, notably sovereign governance of a territory, and the material accoutrements of statehood—bureaucracies, infrastructure, the means of communication, education, conscription etc. The creation of inclusionary political institutions that foster citizen identification with the state and mute loyalties to sub-state identities is pivotal to such nation-building from above. Nevertheless, events less under state elites’ control, such as wars, can strengthen nationalism but, if lost, as frequently in the Arab world, undermine regimes seeking legitimacy through it.

While the promotion of inclusive nationalism is rational for elites over the longer term, in short term power struggles in multi-communal societies, particularly where ascriptive identities appear ‘ready-made’ vehicles of political mobilization, ruling elites may seek to mobilize their own communal group and instrumentalize communal cleavages, notably sectarianism, to ‘divide and rule;’ while counter-elites representing excluded groups have incentives to counter-mobilize other sub/trans-state identities against regimes (Binder 1999; Peleg 2007). Such scenarios carry risks of civil war that may precipitate degrees of state failure (Hashemi 2015) in which sectarianism tends to flourish at the expense of nationalism.

Between these two poles, state elites may deploy hybrid strategies that mix more and less inclusive identities and practices. Indeed, because state territorial nationalism in the Arab world was never strong enough to marginalize supra and sub-state identities, state elites typically tried to exploit *all three levels* of identity. They might win the loyalty of their own sub-state identity group by according them privileges and foster supra-state Pan-Arabism to legitimize their regimes among the wider public. If there is no long history of statehood or proto-nation as a credible basis of state nationalism (as in ‘artificial’ states), they may seek to represent their states as champions of the supra-state identity hegemonic at a particular time and place, as when Syria claimed to be the champion of the Pan Arab national cause or Saudi Arabia the guardian of Islam.

Agents operate not just within states but also at the regional level and the identities they promote in their geo-political struggles readily penetrate other (highly permeable) MENA states. Supra-state identities have been constructed and instrumentalized by rival regional powers, with e.g. Nasser’s Egypt promoting secular Pan-Arabism in the 1950s-60s, and Islamic Iran seeking to export revolutionary Pan-Islam in the 1980s (Barnett 1998). The former de-legitimized the instrumentalization of ‘traditional’ divisive identities such as sectarianism and tribalism, but the 1967 defeat by Israel destroyed its hegemony; this precipitated a turn to Islam, accelerated by the Iran’s Islamic revolution that, although explicitly framed as anti-sectarian, nevertheless paved the way for sectarianism in that it put religion in the public sphere, such that political divisions would start to take a religious—sectarian--form. However, it was the instrumentalization by Saudi Arabia and Iran of Sunni-Shia differences that stimulated a powerful sectarian bi-polarization in the region, pushing aside more inclusive identities. That, in turn, was largely an outcome of the regional power struggles set off by multiple state failures across the region, beginning with the 2003 US deconstruction of Iraq and continuing in the Arab states where uprisings unleashed civil wars.

MENA State Building: Political institutions between nationalism and sectarianism

State formation is constituted by the interaction between the structure of the states system and the agency of state builders; thus, the flawed export of Westphalian statehood constituted the “hands’ dealt state builders in the political game; but how they played their hands mattered for the balance of nationalism and sectarianism. As argued by institutionalist approaches to understanding identity, political institutions can help produce, reproduce or transform identities, depending on their design.

The most general way in which states may vary in design, following historical sociologist such as Huntington (1968) and Mann (2008), are: 1) centralization of power and infrastructural penetration of society by state institutions (institutionalization); and 2) inclusion in political institutions of social forces (participation). At one end of a continuum, are located *strong* states high on both dimensions. They are more likely to give most identity groups representation, regulate their competition peacefully and provide the security and public goods that foster citizen loyalty to the nation, hence are fairly impermeable to trans-state identities manipulated from without. At the other end are weak states that lack both centralization of power and sufficient inclusion, hence lacking the capacity to satisfy citizen needs, with the result that their loyalties are more likely to take a sub-state (ethnic or sectarian) form, readily inflamed from without. Actually existing states in MENA tend to take up middle positions along a continuum between two ideal-typical poles, inclusionary national states and exclusionary ones based on a particular sub-state communal identity (Wimmer 2002; Coakley 2012: 219-39).

The way state power is built matters. State building involves several challenges or crises that are best addressed *in sequence*, as they were in Western state-building, namely, first the concentration of power at the centre, in which rival state builders are defeated, and the penetration of society and territory by state infrastructure; only later was the generation of national identities congruent with state boundaries achieved by expanding participation and social distribution. The problem for late developers is that demands for participation and welfare arise “prematurely” before power centralization is consolidated (Binder and LaPalombara 1971); hence state builders have to reconcile the contradiction between concentrating power at the inter-elite level and expanding it through inclusive mass participation and social redistribution. Since it is hard to get this right, various form of *imbalances* are typical.

In MENA such *imbalances* between institutionalization and inclusion are typical. Thus, a multi-sectarian state may be relatively inclusive but owing to deficient institutionalization, vulnerable to sectarian mobilization and highly permeable to trans-state sectarianism (Lebanon’s ‘consociationalism’). Authoritarian states low in inclusion may be sufficiently institutionalized to repress opposition for a time, but the grievances of excluded groups makes them susceptible to anti-regime mobilization if state capacity declines. Whether exclusion is on a communal or class basis will determine the form opposition takes: empirically, post-populist MENA states have increasingly excluded lower *classes*; yet the Middle East is also the region with the highest current levels of exclusion on the basis of *communal* identities, frequently sectarian ones (Bormann et. al. 2015).

Further complicating matters, the two dimensions of state formation need not be *either* high or low and states can, e.g. combine *medium* institutionalization and *medium* inclusion in various ways; in such cases, institutions’ impact on identity is likely to be *mixed*, possibly reproducing *both* nationalism and sectarianism. In MENA, in fact, such medium scenarios were typical in the first decades of post-colonial state-building, in particular, the use of hybrid *neo-patrimonial* practices.

With decolonization, MENA state-builders, unable to depend on sufficient legitimation from state-centred nationalism, widely instrumentalized sub-state identities,

such as tribalism and sectarianism, in the construction of patrimonial authority. This, typically combined with Weberian bureaucratic practices and structures, resulted in hybrid neo-patrimonial authoritarian regimes (Bacik 2008). However, *variations* in neo-patrimonial practices made for variations in inclusion, hence in identity. Specifically, the *relative balance* of patrimonial vs. bureaucratic authority in any given regime had bearing on institutionalization and inclusion: the more patrimonial the regime, the more likely elites would instrumentalize sectarianism (and other sub-state identities) at the expense of bureaucratic rationality and inclusiveness—for example by sectarian recruitment of military/security forces and encouraging inter-sectarian conflict among the public in order to divide, exclude, and rule. These practices enervated institutions that are needed to incorporate cross-class, cross-sectarian coalitions that could dilute sectarianism and make for more robust states. Conversely, the more the bureaucratic side of the regime is developed—with recruitment at least partly on merit grounds enhancing rationality in the bureaucracy; equal treatment before the law; and institutions such as political parties designed to organize participation and co-opt cross-class, cross-sectarian coalitions—the more inclusionary the regime and the more likely identities will focus on the state—in other words, *national* identity.

Variations in inclusion were shaped by the origins of Arab regimes: more inclusionary forms of *populist* authoritarianism (PA) rose out of nationalist movements and revolutionary coups against old oligarchies, which sought to mobilize and incorporate worker and peasant constituencies through single party and corporatist institutions, in order to exclude the old oligarchy and other political rivals. These regimes were explicitly legitimized by combinations of Arab nationalism and a populist social contract in which regimes traded political support for citizens' material entitlements, *regardless of their communal origins*. Such regimes tended to incorporate cross-sectarian middle-lower class coalitions that diluted the sectarian identifications that were simultaneously being reproduced by the patrimonial practices they used to consolidate power around the leader.

However, populism was an artefact of the neo-Keynesian Cold War global order when rival world (communist and capitalist) cores provided considerable material benefits to periphery states and global norms promoted egalitarian development strategies. In the subsequent neo-liberal post-Cold War era, regimes, facing declining patronage resources, became vulnerable to global neo-liberal pressures to renege on the social contract, elites absorbed the neo-liberal norms that encouraged self-enrichment, and also re-aligned their foreign policies and alliances toward the West, thus abandoning the Arab nationalist component of their legitimation. They typically evolved into *post-populist* regimes (PPA) that remained authoritarian but reversed their constituencies, incorporating new privileged crony capitalists and excluding the lower strata. Such redistribution of wealth upward typically affected sectarian communities unequally, stimulating a sense of sectarian discrimination and a withdrawal of loyalty to the state among the losers.

At the far end of the continuum from strong states is located the extreme nadir of state formation—*failed* states with at least partly collapsed institutions and loss of a monopoly of legitimate violence over territory. State weakening in multi-sectarian states can, under conditions of increased exclusion and instrumentalization of sectarianism, open the door to sectarian civil war and possible state failure. The collapse of order in failing states, according to Zartman (1995: 1), often brings about a '*retreat*' to *sub-state identities*: people may transfer their loyalties from the state to an armed sectarian group (Byman 2015). This may generate *security dilemmas*, (Posen 1993) wherein each communal group, seeing the other as a threat, acts pre-emptively to increase its own security—e.g. via militias and sectarian cleansing—in a way that makes all less secure, thereby increasing perceptions of existential threat from the 'other.' In parallel, external powers frequently intervene in failing states to empower friendly forces—often using groups sharing their

communal identity to conduct proxy wars—thus exacerbating the conflict. Failing states provide perfect breeding grounds for fostering the most militant exclusionary forms of sectarianism at the expense of inclusive national identity. Finally, in state failure scenarios ‘competitive regime re-formation’ is precipitated in which the rival contenders seek to mobilize constituencies on communal grounds to re-establish regimes, but with more coercive and exclusionary forms of governance (Heydemann 2013).

As the above suggests, state formation in MENA has described, not a linear increasing approximation of the Weberian state but rather a *bell-shaped curve*, increasing from a low point at independence, when states were highly vulnerable to trans-state penetration by Pan-Arab identity discourse and reaching a high point in the 1970-1980s as regimes instituted inclusive populist social contracts and built larger more penetrative bureaucracies, enabled in part by oil rent, allowing middle classes to be co-opted, boundaries made less permeable and state identities strengthened. However, they then declined under the impact of globalization, which drove a move toward post-populist exclusion. Periphery states were caught in a pincer between neo-liberalization promoted from above (McWorld) and resistance from below by identity movements (“jihad” for Barber [1999]). The Arab *mashreq* was, owing to its initial identity/territory incongruence and neo-patrimonial practices, especially vulnerable to these pressures.

Framework Of Analysis

The foregoing analysis can be summarized in the following model for understanding the balance of sectarianism and nationalism and its inter-relation with state formation in multi-sectarian states. The model reflects a thick version of constructivism that gives equal weight to structure and agency, material and ideational.

1) *Identity Structure*, especially the balance of nationalism and sectarianism, the *context* in which state formation takes place, is constituted by two clusters of factors:

a) the *historical heritage*, constrains (but does not determine) what identities can be constructed. They cannot normally be arbitrarily invented (as naïve instrumentalism might think) since the mobilizing power of an identity is rooted in shared historical memories and cultural ingredients, such as language and the distribution of sectarian groups in a society, which are both constructed over the long *duree* (Armstrong 1982, Smith 1995); *once* constructed, they constitute “social facts” that shape individuals’ self-identities and ideas of their interests. In MENA, sectarianism and linguistic-based nationalism are two of the most powerful enduring identities.

Yet, far from fixed, identities must constantly be reproduced e.g. through socialization practices. Further contributing to contingency is that there are always multiple identities and interpretations of them (e.g., *watani* vs. *qaumi* nationalism, banal vs. militant sectarianism), some of which can be held simultaneously, with the balance between them altering over time, reinvented and differently combined in changing situations owing to traumatic events such as wars and collapse of states. *What, therefore, determines which identities prevail at a particular time?*

b) identities are profoundly affected in the *medium term* by modernization which both differentiates society into classes and functional groups, and also, via social mobilization, print, literacy, etc. facilitates integration via national identities; but even this is contingent since modernization also stimulates competition for resources that can take communal forms. The way class cleavages interact with sectarian cleavages (crosscutting or reinforcing them) will alter the balance between sectarianism and nationalism.

Differences in the nationalism-sectarian balance are shaped by the way permutations of the identity heritage and modernization interact. At one pole, the most vulnerable to sectarianism are multi-sectarian societies framed by an ‘artificial’ state (arbitrary borders, without long prior historical precedent) wherein identification with the

state is contested by sub and trans/supra state identities; with a polarizing distribution of sectarian groups lacking cross-cutting class identities. Conversely, national identities can prevail even in multi-sectarian societies if there is a shared language and memories of statehood; many small minorities likely to seek integration into the larger, dominant identity; and non-politicized sectarian communities cross-cut by class cleavages.

2) *Agency*: Political entrepreneurs constitute a shorter-term intervening variable between historical identity structure and state formation. They selectively exploit some and marginalize other available identities to mobilize support and seize or defend power. But since there are normally several rival entrepreneurs, outcomes depend on their relative mobilizing capacity (resources, organization, ideology), ability to take advantage of major events such as wars and revolution, as well as which identities are most compatible with both the historical inheritance and modernization. State builders normally have an upper hand in this competition by virtue of the resources they command. They promote nationalism legitimizing their rule, but perhaps combined with sectarianism while opposition movements typically promote a counter-identity. Whether rivals instrumentalize inclusive identities such as nationalism or exclusive ones such as sectarianism to mobilize support and design institutions will affect state formation.

3) *State institutional design*, in turn, has a *medium-term* impact on identity, with stronger—centralized, inclusive--institutions fostering nationalism; conversely, non-inclusive weak institutions tend to foster less inclusive identities—most likely sectarian ones in multi-sectarian societies. Hybrid (neo-patrimonial) institutions foster *both* nationalism and sectarianism, with the balance dependent on their patrimonial-bureaucratic mix, hence levels of centralization and inclusion. The extreme case, *state failure*, may foster militant sectarianism and the latter may produce more coercive and exclusionary forms of governance that, in turn, further marginalizes inclusive national identities.

The Syrian Case

The utility of the above framework can be illustrated by applying it to Syria, where state formation and identities have co-varied significantly over time: starting as a weak state, Syria underwent sufficient centralization and inclusion to reach medium levels of state formation (1970s) before declining into the current partial state failure; this was paralleled by variations in the nationalism-sectarian balance. In each of several phases there was a different permutation of identity and institutions.

1. The Identity Context and Initial State formation (1946-63)

In the post-independence period of nationalist mobilization that brought the Ba'ath party to power, secular Arab nationalism was constructed in a way to marginalize sectarianism. This was far from inevitable for an unfavourable structural context was most salient in this period: Syria was an extreme example of the arbitrary way in which Westphalia had been exported to the Levant such that the new Syrian state, widely seen as an artificial creation of imperialism, did not enjoy the strong loyalty of its citizens, with many attached to supra-state Pan-Arabism or Pan-Islam. Competing nationalisms tended to split the nationalist movement into Pan Arab, Syria-centric, and Islamic variants. Moreover, there was a multitude of sub-state identity communities, sometimes concentrated in particular areas (e.g., the Alawi and Druze mountains). Still, over 90 per cent of Syrians were Arabic speakers and 74 per cent Sunni Muslim, a distribution of sectarian groups that deterred polarization (in spite of French attempts to divide and rule) and was compatible with integration into a common national identity. In fact, resistance to imperialism, with its highly damaging impact on the country (dismemberment of *bilad ash-sham* --historic Syria-

- and the creation of Israel) made Arab nationalism the hegemonic identity. As such, most politicians framed their ideologies in inclusive nationalist terms and refrained from instrumentalization of sectarian identities, which were little politicized; rather, sectarian minorities sought integration into Arab national identity in parallel with modernization, hence their social mobilization, e.g. travel of rurals for education in the city.

Syria's liberal oligarchic institutions were weak (in institutionalization, centralization, penetration etc.) but not wholly exclusionary. Minority sectarian elites were represented in parliament but, in class terms, the landed-mercantile oligarchy dominated wealth and power, while middle class parties struggled to break into the political system. This institutional configuration—partially exclusionary on class but not sectarian lines meant that, as the new middle class and peasantry mobilized against the ruling oligarchy, *class politics* subsumed sectarian divisions. Additionally, anti-regime mobilization was advanced by a successful depiction of the oligarchy as linked to imperialism, fusing the class and national issues and promoting a revolutionary version of nationalism.

The Ba'th party was the most successful of several radical middle class parties that challenged the post-independence ruling oligarchy. It integrated the sectarian minorities while also mobilizing parts of the Sunni new middle class and peasantry on the basis of secular radical Arab nationalism and populism with a distinct element of class struggle. The military was politicized by middle class nationalist officers who made it an instrument to force open the oligarchic order and, as they were radicalized, to overthrow it.

The subsuming of sub-state identities in a common nationalist identity might have fostered loyalty to the territorial state. However, because the version of nationalist identity most embraced was supra-state Pan-Arabism, loyalty to the Syrian state was diluted, irredentism (dissatisfaction with the truncation of Syria by the Imperial powers) stimulated, and intervention in Syrian politics encouraged by rival regional powers, resulting in destabilizing coups (Hinnebusch 1990: 49-119; Hinnebusch 2001: 15-24; Van Dusen 1975). The combination of internal class struggle, overlapping with anti-imperialist mobilization, weak institutions, the politicization of the military, and regional intervention made for a weak, highly unstable penetrated state that opened the door to the Ba'thist seizure of power. The Ba'thist mobilization of revolutionary nationalism would, however, serve as the social foundation on which this regime would stabilize itself.

2. Ba'thist State Building and Identity (1963-2000)

The Ba'th's struggle for power started to politicize sectarian identities. Inside the new Ba'th regime (1963-6) the struggle was over degrees of revolutionary ideology, but rivals sought support by relying on sectarian ties (as well as other sub-state affinities such as regional origins). Within the small intra-elite regime arena, the closer-knit sectarian minorities (Alawis, Druze) were better able to instrumentalize sectarian ties than the regionally-divided Sunni Muslim Ba'thists, who tended to lose out in power struggles, increasing the minority composition of the Ba'thist regime elite. The conflict between the Ba'th and leading Sunni-dominated opposition groups, the Nasserites and the Muslim Brotherhood, aroused public opposition to the disproportionate role of minorities in the Ba'th leadership (Van Dam 1981; Seymour 1970; Van Dusen 1975).

In spite of this, the Ba'th regime was institutionalized under Hafiz al-Asad as a populist version of neo-patrimonialism that instrumentalized multiple identities, deploying sectarianism in power concentration but diluting it via inclusive institutions and the promotion of Arab national identity, a formula that incorporated a significant social base. The patrimonial president appointed trusted Alawi officers to command of elite army units and the security forces. Also, however, senior Sunni politicians and military officers in his inner circle incorporated their own clientele networks; Alawi officers had Sunni business partners--a 'military-mercantile complex' centred on Damascus. 'Sectarian arithmetic'

ensured representation of all sectarian groups in the party politburo and government council of ministers. At the base, the cross-sectarian rural constituency that the Ba'th party had mobilized in the 1950s was incorporated and expanded, with the party penetrating and co-opting Sunni as well as minority villages, particularly where land reform redistributed land to peasants. The rhetoric of revolution fostered anti-oligarchic class identities. A populist social contract traded political loyalty for benefits, regardless of sectarian affiliation: free higher education and government jobs for the salaried middle class; job security for industrial workers; land for peasants; subsidized food for the urban masses and considerable upward mobility for rurals of all sects. The regime base came to incorporate about half the population.

From the time of the Ba'th's power seizure, its most durable opposition was the Muslim Brotherhood, allied with elements of the merchant class, old oligarchy and politicized Muslim clergy. The half of society that felt excluded from the regime sympathized with the Brotherhood. The salience of sectarianism increased during the periodic anti-regime mobilizations led by the Brotherhood but especially during its attempted insurgency of 1978-82, which was framed as a Sunni movement against heretical ruling minorities. The Brotherhood could only hope to win by a sectarian arousal of the Sunni majority, but its message remained largely urban in appeal—e.g. its call for reversal of the land reform was sure to alienate peasants. The Sunni population was split (e.g. secular-Islamist; urban-rural), the party and army did not unravel along sectarian lines when called upon to use massive repression against the Brotherhood (e.g. the siege of Hama) and the Sunni peasants and Damascene bourgeoisie stayed co-opted. Institutions were inclusive enough that party and nationalist identities held against sectarian ones. The period, however, left a permanent mark on society: resentment in the repressed northern Sunni cities and towns, and, among the Alawis, a feeling of vulnerability to Sunni revanchism--a latent security dilemma.

However, the construction of an inclusive identity helped counter this potential sectarian fragmentation. In Ba'thist ideology, sub-state identities, both sectarian and ethnic (e.g. Kurdish), were to be assimilated into a common Arab nationalist identity. Under Hafiz, a Syro-centric version of Arab nationalism developed, presenting Syria as the most Arab of the Arab countries and as the most steadfast defender of the Arabs against Zionism and imperialism. Indeed, the construction of a virtual national security state able to hold its own in several wars against Israel as well as on-going war preparation endowed the regime with Arab nationalist legitimacy as well as fostering a Syrian territorial nationalism (focused on recovery of the lost Golan Heights). Sectarianism was seen as illegitimate, operating covertly in the form of *wasta* in accessing privilege or in resentment against such privilege. The regime thus exploited both supra-state (Pan-Arabism) state (Syrian civic nationalism), class, and sectarian identities to legitimize itself. This helped both to attach loyalties to the Syrian state and also to reproduce sub and supra-state identities that potentially diluted identification with it (Hinnebusch 2001: 65-88; Hinnebusch 1990: 144-275). In parallel, Syria became a stronger more integrated state, materially penetrated from the centre. Hafiz al-Asad's state building turned Syria from a victim into a player in regional politics and the champion of the Arab nationalist cause against Israel. Thus nationalism diluted sectarianism, even as patrimonial practices reproduced it.

3. State Decline: debilitation of the cross-sectarian coalition (2000-2010):

Hafiz's regime had depended on the availability of rent for patronage and when, under Bashar al-Asad, it declined, the regime sought to attract investors through neo-liberal policies. In the process, the regime evolved into a post-populist version of authoritarianism based on an alliance with crony capitalists that was vulnerable to sectarian conflict. First, concentrating power in Bashar's hands meant pushing his father's old Sunni barons out of

power, losing with them their clientele networks among Sunni sub-elites. Second, the concentration of the new business opportunities from the neo-liberal opening to private/Arab capital in the hands of the presidential family, especially the president's cousin, Rami Makhlouf, alienated many of the former Sunni business clients of the regime (Hinnebusch 2010). Third, the running down of the welfare state and cutting of food and fuel subsidies and agricultural prices, combined with population growth on fixed land and devastating drought, cost the regime the support of its peasant and lower class constituencies. Thus, the patrimonial core of the regime became both more sectarian and more upper-class. In parallel, the societal penetration of regime institutions, such as the ruling party, contracted and the over-concentration of patronage shrunk its co-optative capacity. As resources became sharply skewed in the hands of a few regime insiders and clients, while others experienced downward pressure on their living standards, the losers saw themselves as victims of sectarian discrimination. At the same time, the regime's encouragement of non-political Islam, first began under Hafiz, enabled the spread of Islamism beyond its former urban concentration into the suburbs and countryside where it prepared the ideological ground for rural-based Islamist insurrection (Hinnebusch and Zintl 2014). Thus, even a state long relatively immune to globalization was squeezed between the pincers of global finance capital and resistance by the victims of neo-liberalism.

4. Partial State failure and Sectarianization of the Syrian Conflict (2010-)

The Syrian uprising was initially not overtly about sectarianism although it later became 'sectarianized' (Abboud 2016: 183-86); Rather, its roots were in the class disparities generated under the retreat from populism to crony capitalism (Donati 2013). Moreover, initial protests, spearheaded by secular educated urban youth, often of rural cross-sectarian origins, were non-violent, calling for a democratic civic state that could have marginalized sectarianism.

Far from inevitable, several factors had to converge to drive the sectarianization of the conflict. First, amidst an existential struggle for power, rival actors deployed sectarian discourse, the regime to solidify its core support and the opposition to mobilize its putative constituency. Given the weakening of Ba'thism as an ideology and an organization with mass roots, the regime had no ability to counter-mobilize a broad-based defence (as it had in the 1980s Muslim Brotherhood insurgency) against the mass protests that erupted in 2011. Therefore, it saw its best chance to survive by rallying the minorities and reinforcing the cohesiveness of its Alawi base by painting the opposition as Islamist terrorists. As the regime also inflicted violence on unarmed protestors, the opposition increasingly adopted anti-Alawi and Sunni sectarian discourse and as it also militarized, sectarian Islamist ideologies became the most effective recruitment tools; as anti-regime mobilization deepened, the plebeian losers of neo-liberal policies, who were more likely to interpret their plight as sectarian discrimination, assumed greater weight in the opposition. As Alawis, disproportionately making up the security services, suffered a large proportion of casualties, their in-group solidarity around the regime was reinforced. Rival intervening external powers—Sunni powers on one side, Shia Iran on the other--in instrumentalizing, sectarianism, exacerbated it. As jihadists poured into Syria to fight the regime, funded and armed by anti-Asad regional powers, while secular armed opposition groups were marginalized or Islamized, especially as secular urban middle class protestors exited Syria and were replaced by Islamized rural youth as the foot-soldiers of the uprising. The country was moving toward sectarian bi-polarization (Phillips 2015; Balanche 2018; Bartolomei 2018).

Second, as order broke down, the 'security dilemma' strengthened people's identification with and reliance for protection on sectarian communities/neighbourhoods

in which each side, in defending itself—forming armed militias, sectarian cleansing in some areas--made the other more insecure. This facilitated receptivity to sectarianism at the grassroots level. As a war economy grew up, the more radical opposition Islamists, having superior resources (both arms and money), attracted people deprived of their livelihoods by the civil war and were, thus, enabled to spread their jihadist sectarian discourse. Many Syrians started to identify with non-Syrian fellow sectarians intervening in the Syrian conflict rather than with citizens of the other sectarian identity (Rifai 2018; Abboud 2016: 97-108, 162-87)

Even as the *state* was debilitated, the core of the *regime* showed remarkable resilience. The regime adapted to civil war by adopting a more violent, exclusivist and decentralized form of neo-patrimonialism (Khaddour 2015). The most effective counters to the regime were the armed Islamists movements, recruiting through jihadist ideology and extreme sectarian discourse (Lund 2013). The very notion of the nation was being reconstructed in sectarian terms, with regime and jihadists both depicting the other as outside the nation or *umma*. Nevertheless, a Syrian state identity survived, manifested in the opposition to the partition of the country across the political spectrum, except for extreme jihadists. And the regime remained standing, determined to restore territorial sovereignty.

Conclusions: Implications of the Syrian Case for Understanding the Nationalism-Sectarian Balance and State Formation in MENA

The Syrian record is not inconsistent with the view that over the long run, strong inclusive states and national identities co-constitute each other, as do weak states and sectarianism. But in the shorter term there are multiple permutations between these poles.

The export of the states system to the region, creating multi-sectarian states with arbitrary borders, as in Syria, established a context in which state nationalism struggled to subsume alternative identities such as sectarianism. Sectarian identities have deep historical roots, but their intensity and politicization varied and they were usually diluted by alternative national identities. The nationalism-sectarianism balance varied, in good part depending on the strategies of actors and the inclusiveness of institutions, as well as contextual factors such as class formation, war, revolution, globalization, etc.

Such identity variation and state formation, in turn, co-constituted each other over time. In the pre-Ba'ath period, the struggle against imperialism and class conflict generated an inclusive and revolutionary form of *nationalism that marginalized sectarianism, but destabilized the state*. Remarkably, Syria reached its state formation highpoint under Hafiz al-Asad when *both nationalism and sectarianism were instrumentalized* to create a populist neo-patrimonial regime with institutions incorporating a cross-sectarian coalition and designed for the struggle with Israel. Under Bashar al-Asad, reversal of the populist social contract, debilitating this coalition, paved the way for the Uprising wherein the instrumentalization of sectarianism by the rival sides opened the door to partial state failure that *spread militant sectarianism at the expense of nationalism. State debilitation and high intensity sectarianism co-constituted each other*.

Endnotes:

¹ These variations are ideal types that in practice may overlap.

² See the surveys of identity by Shibley Telhami's yearly Arab public Opinion polls undertaken with Zogby international: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/2010-arab-public-opinion-poll-results-of-arab-opinion-survey-conducted-june-29-july-20-2010/>

³ Arab Opinion Index 2017-18, Washington D.C. Arab Center, <http://arabcenterdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Arab-Opinion-Index-2017-2018-1.pdf>

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