No Size Fits All: Diversity, State and Politics in the Contemporary Middle East

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1 Introduction

Especially since 2001, the multiple crises inflaming the wider Middle East have dramatically altered the geopolitical equilibriums of a region that has always played a crucial role in the international arena. Affected by heightening levels of violence and widespread destabilization, the area became increasingly associated with processes of radicalization and socio-political fragmentation allegedly destined to redefine the very foundations of a system whose roots can be traced back to the end of the Great War.

The arch of crises that came to bisect the region largely contributed to projecting the image of a Middle Eastern region “endemically” marred by divisions and instability and destined for partition according to apparently undeniable ethno-sectarian fault lines. In this framework, Middle Eastern ethno-linguistic and religious diversity has become the focal point of two different and opposite arguments. On the one hand, diversity has been considered the victim of increasing polarization, manipulated and politicized in order to impose specific political agendas. On the other, it has been listed as one of the drivers or sources of present instability in a region experiencing its own Thirty Years War, as Europe did in the 16th century.

The chapter aims to take a distance from both understandings, reconsidering the contemporary history of the Middle East and of state- and nation-building in the region based on the image of multiple geographies. Instead of again proposing the idea of the Middle East as a mosaic, the chapter aims to offer an engaged account of the role of diversity in the region, analyzing the multiple features that have characterized and composed it. Through the idea of multiple geographies, the chapter will explain why diversity in the Middle East has always played a crucial role. The Middle East stands out not only for its diversity *per se*, but because the features that compose and define its diversity and multi-vocality often strongly intertwine and overlap, giving birth to social fabrics far more complex and branched than usually represented.

In this spirit, after delineating some of the main features defining the Middle East diverse socio-political fabric, the chapter focuses on contested visions of state and nation that have developed especially in the Arab world since the turn of the 20th century. It analyzes the most prominent features and elements of a debate waving across supra-national, trans-national and national visions and orientations of how to represent and organize diversity in accordance to a modern State framework. On these bases, the third part of the analysis places the above-mentioned dynamics in a historical continuum tracking its roots in the post first world war order. The chapter then concludes by showing how a more precise understanding of the Middle East's diversity, of its significance and role can help to demystify today's sectarian narratives and tackle instability and violence in the region.

By focusing on contested visions of State and nation and the role diversity plays within these fields, the analysis does not intend to downplay the influence exerted by geopolitics over the regional scenario. Especially since 2001, the wider Middle East has become the epicenter of a heightening competition between (and among) state and non-state actors able to project their influence well beyond the boundaries of their polities and to alter the equilibriums of the area in ways and modalities that would have been impossible even to conceive only a few years before. While geopolitical dynamics have always played a crucial role in the area, their incidence escalated dramatically during the course of the 21st century. Far from being confined to the mere security level, these phenomena invested the socio-political, economic and even cultural dimensions favoring a growing interplay among the international, regional, national and local domains that has become the specific focus of a significant part of the most recent academic literature. By stressing the role diversity, State and politics play in contemporary Middle East the current analysis aims also at reaffirming the necessity to recur to a holistic approach able to take in due consideration the multiple nuances of a region that has always had in its diversity one of its most defining features.

2 A Diverse Social Fabric Defined by Multiple (and Variable) Geographies

Widely perceived well before the beginning of the 21st century as a highly unstable area subject to cyclical outbursts of violence and lingering instability, the wider Middle East has witnessed in the past two decades one of the most critical phases of its history. From North Africa to the Persian Gulf and beyond, the region has been invested by a series of crises that impacted dramatically on its equilibriums.

The war on terror launched after the 9/11 attacks and Operation Iraqi Freedom in particular, came to be seen as the defining moment of a new historical phase marking the passage from a U.S. dominated world to an international system increasingly characterized by its multi-polarity. And it was in the Middle East that the unipolar moment emerged after the Cold War began to crumble: as described by several analysts and media pundits alike, it was as if a new Pandora's box had been opened, thus setting free evils ready to wreak havoc well beyond the region's disputed boundaries. Old prejudices combined with self-fulfilling prophecies foreseeing heightening East vs West confrontations and images of unending violence, brutality and gross violations of human rights contributed to surreptitiously transform the area in as a sort of "ontological Other" socio-politically (but –interestingly– not economically, militarily and geopolitically) detached from its most immediate neighbors, Europe and the West *in primis* (Tuastad, 2010).

The scale of the destabilization that invested the region and the consequences it had over the international system spurred an intense debate aimed at assessing the root causes of the phenomenon. Particularly important was in this sense the crisis that affected the Iraqi State from 2003 onwards and the analytical frameworks adopted to describe it. While several studies focused on the responsibilities of the U.S.-led international coalition, the shortcomings of the Iraqi reconstruction process and the disillusion stemming from the inability to cope with the huge expectations generated by the fall of the Ba'athist regime, other resorted to different interpretative paradigms focusing on the allegedly inherent weakness of the Iraqi State. According to such visions, the causes of the difficulties post-2003 Iraq had to cope with were to be found in a sort of "original sin" marring the history of the Iraqi State since its inception: the decision to create an artificial State in line with British imperial desiderata yet not in line with the aspirations of its diverse population. Accordingly, priority had not to be given to the deficiencies of the post 2003 reconstruction process but to the apparently unavoidable polarization of the Iraqi political system along sectarian¹ lines.

According to such visions, the deepening polarization of the Iraqi socio-political fabric represented the proof that alleged "primordial" identities, despite having been marginalized by the consolidation of the modern State, maintained the potential to mobilize significant strata of the population and to influence both State and regional politics. The emergence of non-state actors largely defined by overtly sectarian agendas, their ability to provide basic

1 While in studies related to the Middle Eastern region the term tends to refer to Sunni – Shia competition, the term is here employed in its broader sense, referring to ethnic, linguistic, religious and confessional related processes and features.

services to populations largely neglected by their governments coupled with the fragmentation of the Iraqi political spectrum and the inability of state institutions to reassert their primacy all contributed to threaten the very foundations of the Iraqi polity.

Even more important, the heightening destabilization of the wider Middle East registered from 2011 onwards and the emergence of similar phenomena all over the area increasingly questioned state-centered representations of the region making sectarian paradigms attractive well beyond the Iraqi borders.

Loyalties based on sect, kin and different forms of local particularisms gradually acquired an academic dignity of their own and were increasingly entrusted with a symbolic dimension far exceeding the contours of the debates between “primordialist” and “modernist” schools (Hinnebusch, 2016; Al-Qarawee, 2013).

Reimagined through such lenses, the wider Middle East came again to be increasingly represented as a mosaic of different communities defined by clear-cut fault-lines constrained in a regional framework dominated by “artificial states”. Sectarian conflicts in the region were then largely considered as manifestations of ancient ethnic hatreds and struggles symbolized by an archetypal approach of *We vs Others*.

The process reached its apex between 2014 and 2016 spurring a debate centered around the possible overcoming of an a-historical and often mythicized “Sykes-Picot” order accused of having been framed according to the needs of Western colonial powers and hence of being disconnected from the “natural” equilibriums of the area (Kamel, 2016a, 2016b). Curiously enough, some of these positions seemed to partially reflect the propaganda of the “Islamic State” organization that in June 2014, after extending its grip over most of the Jazira region, announced the erasing of the Syria-Iraq borders and the beginning of a new era destined to cancel the legacy of a century of humiliation.

It was 98 years ago that the Allies of WWI forged a secret agreement to carve up the territories of the Muslim lands. This arrangement, referred to since as the Sykes-Picot agreement, mapped out parts of the Middle East and designated them as being under the influence or control of either France or the United Kingdom in anticipation of the subsequent conquest of the region. (...) Years after the agreement, invisible borders would go on to separate between a Muslim and his brother, and pave the way for ruthless, nationalistic *tawaghit* (impious tyrant) to entrench the ummah's division rather than working to unite the Muslims under one imam carrying the banner of truth. (...) As the operation to capture Ninawa and advance towards Baghdad and the Radi strongholds to the south

was underway, the lions succeeded in taking control of the border region between Wilayat Al-Barakah in Sham, and Wilayat Ninawa in Iraq, and in demolishing the barriers set up to enforce the crusader partitions of the past century. (Islamic State Report, 2014: 2-4)

Jihadist proclaims apart, the calls for a complete redefinition of existing Middle East boundaries found a significant echo in the West albeit being met, expect for a few notable exceptions, by stiff local opposition (Plebani, 2018). Particularly interesting are, in this regard, the positions expressed by Robin Wright who proposed to replace the current regional order with a new one based on the creation of fourteen new States presenting a higher level of religious and ethno-linguistic homogeneity (Wright, 2013, 2016).

Questioning the validity of such schemes does not pertain to the scope of the present analysis. Much more significant is, instead, analyzing the theoretical assumptions underpinning them and, in particular, the essence of the sectarian boundaries claimed to define the groupings slated to become the constituent units of such a re-imagined Middle East.

While no shared socio-political taxonomy of the phenomenon exists – with the term itself being the focus on an intense debate (Haddad, 2017; Hinnebusch, 2016) – sectarian conflict and polarization are generally created out of imagined boundaries set at the linguistic and religious levels, with kinship, regionalisms and local particularisms playing lesser albeit important roles.

Broadly speaking, the primary marker of group identity tends to be set at the (ethno-)linguistic level. While the wider Middle East has always been characterized by the compresence of multiple groups, Arabic is by far the main regional language, with Turkish, Persian, Kurdish and Hebrew communities following suit. Yet, such groupings represent only part of the extremely diverse Middle Eastern linguistic spectrum. Other communities inhabiting the area include Amazighs, Circassians, Assyrians, Armenians, Turkmen, Azeris, Baluchis, and Pashtuns, just to mention some of the most demographically relevant. Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan represent typical examples of such linguistic “melting-pots”. Furthermore, the region is characterized by a high-level of intra-linguistic diversity with each key group presenting significant internal variety and marked differences. Such a situation is evident when considering Arabic dialects spoken in North Africa and the Levant but the same holds true even at country level. Iraq, for example, is the home of at least three Arabic dialects (Jaziran, Mesopotamian, and of the Marshes) and of three Kurdish vernaculars (Kurmanji, Sorani and Pehlewani).

A second fault-line is generally represented by religion. While Islam is undisputedly the most practiced faith, the region is home to a wide array of

non-Muslim groups of whom Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Sabians-Mandeans, Yazidis, Kalashas represent some of the most known examples. Such variety is further increased by the presence of different sects and denominations within the main religious communities. Beyond Sunni-Shia differentiation, Islam presents a significant internal diversity. Although today less relevant than in the past, Sunni Islam has traditionally encompassed a precise number of “schools” of interpretation (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi, Hanbali). At the same time, it has always been characterized by the presence of Sufi orders that played a crucial role in bridging the gap with realities characterized by extremely diverse socio-political, cultural and economic fabrics. In this regard, Naqshbandi Sufi order’s influence in both Iraq and Turkey is illuminating. Similarly, Sunni Islam is today strongly influenced by different orientations in the way of experiencing and practicing its message in private and public life. The role of Salafism at the local, regional and international levels explains not only a strict and puritanical approach toward Sunni Islam, but also how the same orientations can foster diverse attitudes distinguishing between quietists, politics-oriented, and militant-activists (Wiktorowitz, 2006).

Shia Islam is also internally diverse, with many sub-confessional groups such as Alevi in Turkey, Alawites and Ismailis in Syrian or Zaydis in Yemen. In this framework, Ibadites and Druze differently distance from such a picture. The former represents a sort of third path toward Islam, while Druze maintains a certain distance and autonomy, strongly defending their community boundaries, albeit being connected with the history of Islam in the region. With Christians, the situation further complicates, because in the Middle East, one can find multiple confessions and rites. The region is the homeland of Eastern and Oriental Christianity (for example, Orthodox, Syrians and Copt), but it also sees the presence of Catholics of different rites (such as Latin, Melkite, Maronite) and of different manifestations of Reformed Christianity (for instance: Anglican, Lutheran, Evangelists, Adventist). In all these cases, the religious factor can variably intertwine with the ethno-linguistic dimension producing a very nuanced image of the Middle Eastern socio-cultural fabric and of its multiple and variable geography. Religious diversity can enrich an ethno-linguistic sphere, dividing people speaking the same languages between different religion, confessions and rite. This is particularly evident within the Arab-Speaking domain where one can find Sunnis and Shiites (of different schools, orientations and sub-confessions) and Christians, equally diverse in their belonging and professions. But it also manifests with Kurds, predominantly belonging to Sunni Islam, but also to Shia Islam and Yezidism. Turks and Kurds also differentiate between Sunni Islam and Alevi, with the latter generally considered part of the Shia world. Furthermore, religious affiliations can become

a vector through which expressing a different (quasi)ethno-linguistic independent identity. It is the case of Assyrians in Iraq, but also of Druze in Israel.

Kinship and family ties too tend to be considered as factors further contributing to shape the *weltanschauung* and the realm of possibilities of single individuals and communities. Such a perception becomes particularly relevant when considering the influence exerted by tribal norms and power structures over different areas and in different times. The concept of tribe remains highly contested due to past tendencies to read a broad array of socio-political dynamics in exclusively tribal terms and to reify power dynamics inherently fluid and subject to changes (Dodge, 2003). Yet, tribal networks keep being considered important players contributing to determine local equilibriums and dynamics. Traditionally considered to be built along segmented structures largely (albeit not exclusively) defined in terms of kinship (Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Emanuel Marx, 1977; Khoury, Kostiner, 1991), tribes can be described as forms of mutual-aid association aimed at preserving internal order, defending the group from external threats and maximizing its resources. Competition among the different sub-units of the archetypal tribe (confederation, tribe, clan, segment, etc.) and with external opponents activate forms of in-bound solidarity that may expand up to the ladder of the tribal system or be mitigated by mediation processes rooted in forms of collective responsibility (Gellner, 1983; Gellner, 1990; Lindholm, 1986). Far from being limited to specific (and largely peripheral) areas and from being insulated from state apparatuses, tribal dynamics have tended to overlap with different layers of power and authority succeeding in exerting significant influence *vis-à-vis* the State.

This capacity and potential have endured state- and nation-buildings processes. Although attacked and subject to different pressures from the central power, tribalism has entertained a strict relationship with the state power. While tribes have certainly represented hindrances to the ambitions of central rule, they have also represented in time of need a resource to be exploited (through selected cooptation) to increase the legitimacy of a regime. At the same time, tribalism has distinguished itself for its resilience, especially when the centralizing logics of the States entered in phases of structural crisis losing its absolute monopoly over power. Paradigmatic, in this sense, are Saddam Hussein's tribal policies enacted after the Gulf War (Baram, 1997) as well as the case of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan that since the 1970s has promoted Bedouin traditions with the aim of consolidating the national identity fabric and the legitimacy of the its regime (Massad, 2011).

Regional identities and forms of local particularisms complete the set of fault-lines associated with the already-mentioned sectarian visions. Albeit less considered than other layers of differentiation, these factors played an

important role in articulating alternative visions of unity within the State (promoting autonomist and federal schemes), in supporting the redefinition of the existing order (projects advocating partitioning or union of different areas) or in inoculating local power dynamics within state institutions. The predominance of Tikritis within the upper echelons of the Iraqi administration during Saddam Hussein's tenure is a good example of the latter (Baram, 2003; Zeidel, 2007), while the former is well represented by Benghazi's longstanding pleas for autonomy within the Libyan system or Basra bids for self-government (Visser, 2005; Isakhan, Mulherin, 2018).

While the above-mentioned layers of differentiation unequivocally influence the equilibriums governing the Middle Eastern socio-political spectrum, they do not represent any sort of "prime movers" able to shape regional dynamics and equilibriums alone. Looking at the Middle East as a mosaic of "gated communities" largely autonomous, independent and based on a set of largely fixed (primordial) elements does not reflect the complexity and the fluidity of socio-political frameworks characterized by the overlapping of mutually influencing factors and by a constant competition (Roy, 2018). A feature, the latter, well represented by the old tribal saying "me against my brother. Me and my brother against my cousin. Me, my brother and my cousin against the outsider".

Even ethno-linguistic boundaries, while representing an important element of differentiation and one of the fault-lines more prone to be politicized, cannot be considered unsurmountable walls inevitably destined to separate different communities and to determine their political stances. Especially in times of crises, transversal ties tend to be rediscovered and differences put aside. The case of the alliances forged between the Kurdish peshmerga and tribal units of Arab Sunni descent to face the threat posed by the "Islamic State" organization in northern Iraq is a clear example. The same holds true at the religious level, as demonstrated by significant cases of interfaith solidarity taking place even at the apex of the Iraqi civil war, and at the tribal level, where it is still far from uncommon to find components of a single tribe belonging to different confessions and even religions.² The very fact that the term sectarian/sectarianism (today's *ta'ifiyya*) is largely perceived as derogatory in countries like Syria and Iraq (which used to be considered as the countries most characterized by the presence of mixed families) and that local populations

2 Significant, in this sense, are the case of the Iraqi Muntafiq confederation (led till the beginning of the 20th century by the Sunni al-Sadoun clan but mainly made of sub-units of Shia descent) and the tribal allegiances centered around al-Karak and al-Salt witnessing forms of Christian-Muslim solidarity (Maggiolini, 2010).

have been the most vocal in opposing to projects aimed at partitioning the region along sectarian lines (Plebani, 2018) largely attests to this stance.

Instead of looking at the region through sectarian lenses and mosaic-inspired analytic prisms that, despite their alleged theoretical purity, present multiple deficiencies and rigidities, the diverse socio-political fabric of the Middle East seems to be better served by an approach taking in consideration the strong interaction and the mutual influence characterizing the different souls of its societies. In doing so, it is impossible not to consider the crucial role played by state agencies in imaging, articulating and dealing with diversity in all its forms. Artificial or not, Middle Eastern modern States have contributed to shape regional dynamics and equilibriums in ways and modalities that cannot be ignored.

Building on such considerations, the regional socio-political spectrum could then be described as the result of multiple geographies of power that, while competing among each other, contribute to influence the environment they operate in and by doing so get influenced by it. It is in this framework that, as described in the second part of this chapter, the theories elaborated by Jean Pierre Bourdieu can represent a particularly useful asset.

3 Contested Visions of State and Nation

The study of the Middle East multiple and variable geographies holds an important double role for understanding how state- and nation-building processes have developed in this region since the turn of the 20th century. On the one hand, it delineates the features and elements out of which “State” and “nation” have been imagined, projected and transformed. On the other, it is the subject through which alternative visions of “State” and “nation” have been developed, inevitably becoming one of the arenas on which geopolitical and regional competitions took place and are still developing.

The analysis of the features and parabolas of state- and nation-building processes in the contemporary Middle East has been always a focal thread in studies of the region and in tracing the reconfiguration of its diverse socio-political fabrics from the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire until today, both from a theoretical perspective and from a historical one. This started from and has advanced according to different contextual conditions, political interests and ideological orientations, each providing important clues for reconsidering why the Middle East has witnessed the development of multiple, contested visions of State and nation.

Such a history still speaks out with the name that is employed to describe the area. Elaborated around the mid-19th century according to Western colonial projections within the Ottoman Empire and then imposed during the Mandate period, the term Middle East is a geographical notion intrinsically imbued with geopolitical meanings. It substantially conveys a specifically north-western European perspective of the role and position of the region in world geography. In fact, this definition historically depended on Europe's conceptualization of itself and others, where the others (the Middle East) are described as a region essentially contended by diverse and conflicting understandings of its borders and identities (Zubaida, 2011).

This kind of understanding continues to vehicle the conviction of a sort of inadequateness of the Middle Eastern social-political fabric to fully conform to the modern State ideal and to adopt categories such as that of nation, because historically imposed from above and outside. The Middle East becomes the region of "States without nations" (Vatikiotis, 2016) or a geographic mosaic of different minorities fluctuating in an Islamic continuum.

Accordingly, this analysis takes its distance from these orientations. In doing so, it does not question either the presence, saliency, and role of the manifold and diverse Middle East identity and community landscapes or the importance of Islam in politics and society or the complex political and security situation that has undermined and still challenges the condition of many minorities, communities and groups in the region. Rather, it proposes to focus on the politicization and reconfiguration of regional identity spheres for pursuing political projects, especially in the field of state- and nation-building processes. The question is not whether and why state- and nation-building processes developed or failed, but how they have been conceived out of regional diversity, affecting their conditions and roles. At the same time, exactly because the acritical imposition of the idea of nation according to a narrow Western understanding has been problematic, given the composite Middle Eastern landscapes, the historical exploration of its development still stands out as an important thread in regional politics.

In essence, the history of the Middle East shows that identity designations can be selectively manipulated and reconfigured either by a central regime to project its authority and legitimacy or by local communities to resist or establish solid relationships of cooperation with central powers, but also with external actors, to defend themselves or extract revenues. The colonial past has mattered, the role of Islam is grounded in history, diversity has always played an important role, and the competition between external and regional powers has always played a crucial role in orienting state- and nation-building processes.

All these elements need to be taken into consideration in exploring and understanding socio-political engagements and disengagements within and from the region. Nevertheless, the Middle East is much more than a mosaic composed of distinct tiles that dominate or are dominated. Politics in the region is not simply the result of linear and univocal behaviors, postures and strategies developed by homogenous, coherent and monolithic ethno-linguistic and religious communities or kin groups. As said above, this image needs to be reconsidered, looking at regional diversity according to the idea of variable geographies unevenly distributed over this wide territory. State and nation have been developed according to these variable geographies and through a complex matrix of contestation, cooperation and competition at the local, regional and international levels. Instability and turmoil, which affected the region well before the end of Great War, have not broken out because the concepts of “modern State” and “nation” have simply been refused *per se*. Rather, conflicts, unrest and wars need to be analyzed as the symptoms or manifestations of a deeper quest for meaning, legitimacy, authority and power. This process has been developing since the late 19th century. State and nation have been thus the arena and subject of this struggle, drawing new political contents out of regional diversity and inevitably pervading the realms of citizenship, community affiliation, the role of religion in public space and the political quest for identity. This is one of the reasons why the Middle East has witnessed the elaboration of a number of contested visions of it; a dynamic that today has entered into a new phase following the 9/11 attacks, the 2011 uprisings and the explosion of an all-out geopolitical regional competition. In this framework, diversity in all its attributes has been an actor and not just a scapegoat or victim.

4 State and Nation in the Middle East: an Analytical Assessment

Moving to the level of theories and approaches, State and nation in the Middle East have been analyzed according to different concerns and interests.

On the one hand, there are studies that have predominantly focused on exploring the origin of nations. In this regard, the central question that has substantiated such analyses is why ethnicity has become a dominant force in modern politics and a political fact in the life of States (Bengio, Ben-Dor, 1999). Primordialists espouse the idea that ethnic groups have an authentic existence that endures from generation to generation (Geertz, 1967). They are not simply ascriptive, but able to bypass and overcome other forms of belonging

and identification. Modernists take their distance from such an understanding, pointing out that the modernization process has transformed traditional societies. Modernization has exacerbated ethnic conflicts, but it has also laid the basis for the creation of new entities and, thus, new States beyond premodern identities (Gellner, 1990; Anderson, 1991). In this regard, mass communication, education and modern technologies are fundamental for understanding this process of “imagining” the nation. Ethno-symbolism seems positioned between these two poles, suggesting the importance of recognizing the ethnic origin of modern nations without ignoring the importance of the process of reconfiguring and transmitting ethnic symbols (Smith, 1989, 1999, 2003). Therefore, phenomena such as Political Islam and its relationship with national ideals in the Middle East can be understood in a totally different manner according to each perspective. Primordial approaches often point out that the Western ideal of nation is substantially undermined by the persistent and pervasive relationship between politics and religion (Vatikiotis, 2016). Accordingly, Islam would represent a dominant force inherently inclined to transcend boundaries and spheres of territorial modern States. Therefore, nations in the Western sense cannot fully emerge in the region. In this framework, non-Muslim communities are considered to be inevitably destined to remain minorities in the fullest meaning. Modernists and ethno-symbolists can variably consider Political Islam as one of the products of modernity. According to these visions, the phenomenon would not represent the most authentic expression of the traditional religious culture, but it would convey new understandings of its role in the public sphere through the construction or revival of symbols and meanings (Zubaida, 2001). Nevertheless, beyond their evident differences, all approaches subscribe to the conviction of the importance of analyzing ethnicity, its attributes and features for understanding Middle Eastern politics and the relationship between majorities and minorities in the region.

On the other hand, one can find studies more clearly focused on analyzing the history of the different ideologies and political systems that have developed in the Middle East since the end of the 20th century.

From an ideological standpoint, the main divide has been the contraposition between secularists/liberals and Islamists (the idea of a secular State *vs.* an Islamic State). These two orientations have also assumed different perspectives, dividing those supporting nationalist/patriotic orientations (e.g. Syrian, Egyptian, Lebanese nationalisms or manifestations of irredentism as in the case of the Kurds, but also Islamist activism focusing on the national level such as in Jordan) from those promoting supranational projects (e.g. the pan-Arab; pan-Iranian; pan-Turkish or pan-Islamic).

From this standpoint, it is interesting to point out that after the Arab uprisings these opposing poles tended to converge on the concept of “civil State” or

“civil government” (*dawla madaniyya*). Although it is widely considered to possess indubitably positive connotations, this notion is still subject to debate, lacking clear-cut definitions. *Dawla madaniyya* seems basically to convey the idea of the need for a democratic regime and the opportunity to avoid playing identity politics, prioritizing the development of an inclusive society despite the fact that it is not clear if the essence of society, State and nation that such a vision seeks to promote conforms to liberal/secular or Islamist ideals (Bahlul, 2018). While it is still premature to consider it an orientation, it is worth mentioning because it elucidates the state of the art of such a debate.

Historically, whatever the content of the various political projects that have developed since the end of the 20th century, the ideological competition concerning State and nation has initially entailed a reconfiguration of the traditional ethno-linguistic and religious designations of the Ottoman epoch, transforming the manner of conceiving and understanding regional diversity and projecting it toward its modern and contemporary forms. This is one of the first elements that need to be taken into account for analyzing the transformation of regional identity spheres and boundaries through state- and nation-building processes.

In fact, it was between the late 19th and early 20th centuries that words such as “Turk” and “Arab” lost their past connotations. Previously referring to rough local communities and tribal peoples, they became honorable and patriotic expressions of nations in search of independence (Zubaida, 2001). The Kemalist State and its muscular secularism elevated the word “Turk”, to which was associated a Sunni Muslim character, to the key parameter for guiding state- and nation-building in the country, relegating non-Sunni Muslim and non-Turkish speaking communities to the margins because considered inherently alien. It is important to point out that the reference to Sunni Islam was interpreted as part of the cultural attribute of being Turk in a process of nation-building expressly secular in its stance. In the case of the “Arab” ideal, the dynamic has been much more contested, and still is, although regional competition has ceased to be predominantly played out on this kind of rhetorical discourse. It has constantly oscillated between approaches focused on stressing the existence of a single Arab nation, with a common language and culture but also with multiple religious manifestations (predominantly Islam and Christianity) and those supporting the intrinsic association of “Arabness” with Islam. In both cases, such orientations have varied, oscillating between different territorial configurations despite sharing the same conviction of the need to question the Mandate systematization. At the same time, other forms of nationalism have been developed with a clear patriotic stance, downsizing or refusing the saliency of Arabness, such as in the case of the Maronites in Lebanon or of Egypt during the inter-war period.

Similar developments also occurred in the Iranian context, culminating in the 1930s with Tehran's official request to avoid use of the word "Persian" in diplomacy, deeming the term "Iranian" more appropriate for communicating the "authentic" pluri-millennial culture and traditions of this territory and its populace.

This plurality of orientations and outlooks, even within the same identity field as in the case of Arabness, should not be considered peculiar or exceptional. The multiple forms and platforms through which nationalist ideals have been promoted is the clearest expression of the variable socio-cultural geographies that cut across this region, depicting many possible landscapes with shifting boundaries and spheres. Accordingly, the history of the Middle East and its countries offers further evidence that nationalism is never a unified and homogeneous phenomenon (Owen, 2013).

At the state-building level, such diverse ideological orientations have been variously elaborated and contextualized. Nevertheless, there have been two main models of political system that have been followed. These are monarchies (either centered on a family such as in Jordan and Morocco or dispersed and extended like in Saudi Arabia) and republics. These two models of political system implicitly differ in their approaches to diversity. For instance, the case of Jordan shows how monarchies have more frequently promoted a sort of "fuzzy" nationalism (Frisch, 2002), maintaining a certain ambiguity in their discourses in order to separate and selectively recompose or organize local diversity according to an idea of "nation" similar to that of one big family united around the ruling crown. At the same time, between the 1930s and the 1950s, the Hashemite crown of Iraq proved how such an image can also be instrumental to developing a more pronounced discourse based on Arab nationalism.

Republics have, instead, been more obvious and outspoken in their assimilatory ideals, directly entering the field of nation-building with the aim of making a "strong" nation the condition of their existence and the path through which to fulfil promises of independence and progress, due also to the discomfort that political elites have in the Middle East with the idea of federalism or identity plurality within the state structure. In essence, they have more frequently embarked on identity politics. This is not to say that monarchies have been distinctive for a gentler or softer approach than republics in their strategy to manage and deal with diversity or that they have shown less interest in nation-building, but to underline some basic, and very general, differences in their stances and struggles for legitimacy through state- and nation-building processes. At the same time, there is no intention here to over-simplify, ignoring that regimes changed over time, sometimes preserving nationalist rhetoric

while developing it in its essence and scope. An eloquent example is provided by Ba'athist Syria and how it transformed with Hafiz Al Assad and then after the ascendancy of his son, Bashar. While preserving the same rhetoric of Arabism, Al Assad's Ba'athist regime overcame part of its traditional secularist stance, reintroducing references to Islam in the constitution. In essence, he sought to promote his own idea of Arab nationalism, transitioning it from the role of ethnic kinship to a principle centered on cultural affinity, with the aim of quelling sub-national identities and manipulating minority issues. Bashar Al Assad then concentrated on promoting an idea of Syria as the "safe-haven" for minorities dwelling in the country. The regime and political system remained stable, but their ideological content structurally changed through manipulation of Syrian diversity (Rabo, 2012). This evolution elucidates how diversity can be both actor and subject in state- and nation-building processes, serving as the basis for developing new coalitions of power or becoming a victim of political projects.

Therefore, without the ambition of being exhaustive, this brief systematization offers some initial clues for looking at the complex political continuum within which Middle Eastern regimes positioned or transitioned since the defeat of the Ottoman Empire. Clearly, the intertwining between the various ideological orientations and their different forms of contextualization produced different forms of rulers, each proposing their specific understanding of State and nation, and how to create them out of local diversity.

In this regard, it is worth pointing out that differences and analogies between such experiences also depended on or were affected by other two factors, namely authoritarianism and rentierism. Both factors played and still play a fundamental role in defining rulers and regimes in the region and in influencing their contextual approach towards diversity in state- and nation-building processes. They should be taken as attributes that further complicate the intertwining between the ideological and systemic levels. For example, authoritarianism was manifest both in the case of Nasserist Egypt through its single party system and in the Hashemite monarchy of Jordan between the 1960s and the end of the 1980s, when parliamentary life in the country was suspended. Regarding such countries, it is still employed, albeit adding the attribute of "hybrid", to describe a regime that tolerates and somehow promotes procedural forms of democracy but does not fully subscribe to it. Therefore, authoritarianism should not be simply considered as equivalent to strong, severe or repressive regimes or political systems. In this field, authoritarianism can be viewed as a distinctive position and method of engaging and dealing with society and diversity via state- and nation-building processes. Its frequency and ubiquitousness have been widely explained according to culturalism.

Nevertheless, authoritarianism should be reconsidered according to a precise historical parabola. After the Second World War, state- and nation-building processes were widely launched and developed under the pressure of traumatic transformations, first with the aim of taking revenge on European colonial projections and then to forestall the effects of recurring political and military failures. On the one hand, the trauma of colonization was reprocessed considering it the result of internal fragmentation and weaknesses. According to such an understanding, colonization in the heart of the Middle East had been possible because of the inadequateness of political leaderships and the presence of internal fifth columns. On the other, with the exception of North African countries and the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Middle East region has frequently witnessed the foundation and emergence of new political systems and regimes more because of revolts, civil wars and coup d'états than as the culmination of popular revolutionary movements and popular national struggles for independence.

The intertwining between these factors has not only infused into state- and nation-building processes a sense of urgency and anxiety, but it has also engaged them in a sort of securitization syndrome, subjecting Middle Eastern society to the authoritarian dilemma. State and nation were essentially considered weak and authoritarianism became the posture to make them strong out of their fragility. In order to strengthen state foundations there has been a tendency to "overstate" state role and structures, as pointed out by Ayubi (Ayubi, 1996). Although Middle Eastern countries already existed on the map, the colonial legacy consolidated the idea of the need to establish "authentic" States and nations out of past manipulations and impositions. At the same time, such projects were considered in need of being defended against a number of different challenges and possible enemies at the local, regional and the international levels. This situation became the hotbed that fostered the emergence of the military against civil rule. In fact, already during the interwar period, two *coup d'état* took place in Iraq with Sidqi-Sulayman (1936) and later on with al-Kaylani and the officers of the "Golden Square" (1941) (Marr, al-Marashi, 2017). In this framework, shortly after defeat at the hands of Israel in 1948, Syria witnessed the first post-Mandate era military coup with Husni Al Za'im deposing Shukri Al Quwatli with the support of the population (Salibi, 1998) and a few years after, the Free Officers in Egypt (1952) became a model. The military entered regional politics, mobilizing their populaces and presenting itself as the only actor capable of taking the State and the nation to real independence. The role of the military and the constant tension between them and civilian rulers are factors determinant to understanding an important part of the history of state- and nation-building processes in the region.

In essence, authoritarian regimes in the Middle East are distinctive for prioritizing the direct and constant mobilization of people, bypassing representative institutions and political participation. They are also characterized by their focus on political forms of control both of society and of the economy. The Middle Eastern authoritarian State has not simply governed society, but has claimed to control all spheres in the life of their States and societies, showing no tolerance for forms of autonomous organization (Zubaida, 1993). Civil society has thus become an extension of the regime-state and of its bureaucracy. In cases such as that of Kemalist Turkey and Pahlavi Iran (1920s) or Nasserist Egypt (1950s-1960s), nationalism combined with authoritarianism expressing the will to create both “State” and “nation” at the same time, reconfiguring society according to rigid categories imposed from above.

In this framework, rentierism helps to elucidate how authoritarianism has established its resilience in Middle Eastern politics and how the State has been developed as a mechanism of distribution and patronage. To a large extent, rentierism has been and still is more important for understanding the history of States and regimes in the region than the previous categories and orientations. In fact, rentierism explains important attributes of Middle Eastern authoritarian States and regimes. In particular, it describes why they have been essentially immanent, intrusive and invasive, but not capable of penetrating society as in the case of totalitarianism (Owen, 2013). These features are not simply useful for appreciating the scope of authoritarianism in the Middle East, but reveal the essence of the relationship between regimes and societies. Although forms of rentier State existed already during the inter-war period, such as, for example, the case of the Emirate of Transjordan and its dependence on the revenues provided by London, this model has been developed since the 1970s, during the oil crisis. Rentierism has been employed to explore and explain the role of patronage and distributive policies in modern Middle Eastern States and regimes (Beblawi, Luciani, 1987). Well described by the principle of “no taxation, no representation”, rentierism has allowed regimes to “buy” their legitimacy, imposing themselves on societies and cultivating their loyalty without the need to pervade them through taxation and other forms of extraction. Rentierism has thus been a critical resource for regimes seeking stability and legitimacy, but it has also been an endemic weakness for States and regimes in the region. Such a condition has amplified a State’s dependency on a distributive and exchange relationship. The State appeared to be strong, but this attribute was achieved to the detriment of society, intentionally weakening it (Migdal, 1988). At the same time, rentierism has provided the State with power and leverage, but has also precluded hegemony (Ayubi, 1996). Accordingly, authority, legitimacy and sovereignty are imposed from above and

depend on enduring acts of distribution and patronage. Beyond these, regimes intrinsically lack substantial recognition. This condition has undermined state- and nation-building processes in their essence. While the focus on ideological orientations and models of political system is fundamental for guiding the analysis, an excessive concentration on them can distract, losing sight of the transformation and dynamism of Middle Eastern politics over the decades. The State can be interpreted as a sort of coherent political architecture while the nation turns into the product of single actors and specific ideologies (Mitchel, 1991). In order to overcome such a risk, a more effective analytical approach seems the one looking at State and nation as a field. The State becomes a “national field” from which the nation can be imagined, “promoted” or represented according to the accumulation or exclusion of the diverse elements that compose a socio-cultural fabric within a given territory (Zubaida, 1993; Owen, 2013). This approach contemplates all previous remarks. But it also criticizes the notion of the State as a unified actor, distinctive from society. Therefore, the State *per se* becomes a field and an arena for re-orienting and re-directing all assumptions of power toward its political center as opposed to the traditional transboundary relationships of the pre-modern epoch. In its Middle Eastern articulation, the national political field determinates advantages and distributes resources on the basis of individuals, families and communities, whether village, religious or kin-group. The actors involved in the field compete for resources and influence through cooperation or contestation, inevitably infusing new political meanings. Therefore, it is through this matrix of relationships that the political field can transform and change. In essence, the analysis of state- and nation-building processes can become the study of this field and its evolution through the multiple relationships between its inhabitants. State, nation and society are thus integrated into one single field, which through its functioning can selectively vehicle either inclusion, participation and co-optation or exclusion, marginalization and even alienation. At the same time, it can be transformed in an arena within which external influences are projected in order to orienting its functioning, providing with extra support specific actors with the aim of making them prevail in the internal competition for recognition, legitimacy and authority.

5 The Struggle to Create State and Nation Out of Middle Eastern Diversity

The contemporary history of the Middle East shows that the above-mentioned orientations and models have not simply been contextualized in a number of

different manners, but have also been experienced with very ambiguous and contrasted stances. This seems particularly clear looking at Arab countries, the focus of this overview.

In the Middle East, state- and nation-building processes have been always developed under the pressure of overlapping solidarity-group, patriotic/national and supranational influences (Roy, 2007). Different forms of loyalties have not simply competed for leadership and for orienting and guiding these processes, but have often developed in synchrony, with strong overlapping. Such a dynamic placed diversity under contrasting tensions, making it actor and subject of continuous political interplays (Zubaida, 2002). Pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism (in both the Shiite and Sunni versions) have been the leading supranational ideologies that inspired a number of political platforms, groups and movements in the region. They have largely represented the main political utopias through which it has been dreamt to reconfigure the fragmented Middle Eastern geography and dissolve the international boundaries imposed in the 1920s (Roy, 2007). At the same time, each orientation has proposed a distinctive vision of regional diversity and of its political saliency.

While a supranational utopia has constantly provided a fundamental point of reference, concrete politics have been always developed according to a “national” framework. This was manifest in the uneasy relationship between Ba’thist Syria and Nasserist Egypt at the time of the United Arab Republic (1958–1961), which failed because perceived by Syrians as a form of assimilation and not the fulfilment of Arabism (Owen, 2013). The same could be said about the strained relationship between Syria and Iraq since the 1960s, with the two Ba’thist declinations competing for leadership in the region. Even the Muslim Brotherhood established its presence in the region through national chapters (Boulby, 1999). This soon proved to be far more than a simple functional strategy. Since the 1950s, and especially during the ban on the Brotherhood’s parent branch in Egypt, each chapter has taken root in its respective country, developing specific local orientations. This occurred without questioning any aspects of the supranational pan-Islamist vision promoted by the Brotherhood. In this regard, indicative is the different positioning of the Kuwaiti and Jordanian branches during the Gulf war in 1991, with the former supporting prompt intervention and the latter opposing the US’ coalition (Moadel, 2002). This episode also elucidates another aspect of the importance of the national dimension for actors usually considered inspired by a supranational vision. Their history shows that each chapter has most frequently looked at regional politics according to the perspective of their territory, country and regime, and not vice-versa. It was by associating with the national framework that they conveyed and articulated their utopic supranational vision (Roy,

2007). Another example is provided by the most recent events occurring after the Arab uprisings and, in particular, following the ousting of Muhammad Morsi in Egypt (Milton-Edwards, 2017). If one looks at the fragmentation process experienced by the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, it becomes clear how national visions and interests have taken the upper hand over supranational orientation. In Jordan, the Brotherhood's division into three different branches is neither solely the result of manipulation, co-optation and selective repression nor a consequence of their survival strategy, but confirms how the national dimension (the national political field) remains key in concrete politics.

Nevertheless, to complicate the situation, this "national" focus is not unchallenged. Quite the contrary, it is constantly undermined by multiple internal divisions (ethnic, religious and kin-group) which can either destabilize the country fabric or increase the ambiguity of concrete politics.

Ethnic divisions tend to be most significant "challengers" of the State and of its territorial dimensions and territorial space (such as the Kurds in Iraq or Turkey) (Bengio, Ben-Dor, 1999). At the same time, radical or existential forms of competition can develop also within the same ethnic dimension not simply for controlling the State and its resources, but for advancing contrasting visions of the identity of State and nation (e.g. Fatah and Hamas in their search for a Palestinian State) (Sayigh, 2011) to the point of breaking out into open conflict for control of the national political field. This is also the case of ethnic and religious rivalries that compete for their position within the State (e.g. the ethnic and religious rivalries in Lebanon and Iraq). At the same time, they can also transgress a State's international boundaries, reconnecting with supranational ideologies while still posing as a national actor (e.g. Hizb Allah and Iran) or they can associate with supranational utopianists to reinforce their political leverage, status and transboundary networks (e.g. the relationship that developed between the Islamic State organization and some tribes in the area of the Jazeera between Syria and Iraq) (Collombier, Roy, 2018).

This is the complex matrix of relationships and contrasting influences that describe the development of concrete politics in the region, fostering multiple visions of State and nation. As said before, the mechanics and grammar of this complex interplay are defined by variable regional geographies.

In this regard, history shows that such a matrix mainly due to a series of specific traumatic events (Roy, 2007) that contributed to reshuffling balances of power and alignments in the region. In literature, these have been traditionally described according to the following tripartition: the demise of a great Arab kingdom from the Mediterranean to Mesopotamia; the Arab States' defeats at the hand of Israel (1948, 1967, 1973), and the Iranian Revolution from which emerged the Islamic Republic of Iran (Roy, 2007). The present crisis and

conflicts in the Middle East can be understood on the basis of such a legacy, with most recent events being part of a process of transformation and reconfiguration that had begun at the end of the 20th century.

The first trauma explains the conditions and rationales on which national political fields have been developed. The aftermath of the First World War produced different effects on Middle Eastern geographies.

At the regional systemic level, the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire opened this space to the contextualization and imposition of the modern state ideal according to the Western vision. From then on, this became the “compulsory model” inspiring all debates and confrontations beyond specific orientations and ideals. At the political level, the expulsion of Faysal from Damascus in 1920 attested to the drastic failure of the war strategy espoused by part of Arab nationalist leaderships, namely those who had decided to fight against Istanbul, supporting London and Paris. Instead of a united Arab State at the heart of the Middle East, as the Sharif of Mecca had tentatively negotiated with London in exchange for its support against Istanbul, the two European countries (backed in a second moment by Russia and Italy) opted for partitioning the region according to the (in)famous Sykes-Picot agreement (1916). The foundation of modern Middle Eastern States was realized on the basis of a selective re-interpretation of the Ottoman past and according to French and British geopolitical interests (Rogan, 2012).

London supervised the organization of the Mandate in Palestine, making sure that the Balfour Declaration guaranteeing a “Jewish Homeland” was included in the texts. It created the Emirate of Transjordan from a remote periphery of the old provinces of Damascus and it offered its administration to one of the sons of its ally, Sherif Husayn of Hijaz. At the same time, London promoted the foundation of the Kingdom of Iraq merging the three Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Basra and (eventually) Mosul, and recognizing its crown to Faysal, another son of Sherif Husayn. Such a systematization was considered perfectly suited to London’s geopolitical interests in the area and its colonial empire.

In turn, Paris obtained control of the rest of the Ottoman Sham, promoting the foundation of a “smaller Syria” and of a “wider Lebanon”. Syria was formed by the unification of the Aleppo and Damascus areas plus the Jabal Druze and the plain of Latakia. The Sanjak of Alexandretta was instead detached and recognized as part of modern Turkey. “Greater Lebanon” was created by merging the Mountain with the Ottoman districts of Tripoli, Sidon and the Bekaa Valley.

This picture of the configuration of the contemporary Middle East was completed by Turkish and Iranian stabilization of their State boundaries and regimes (both of which adopted the secularization process of their societies as a

path to consolidate the state structure) in the early 1920s and by the Al Saud triumph in their struggle to form a State, fulfilled with the conquest of Medina and Mecca that allowed them to found today's Saudi Arabia.

In the short term, the price of this process was essentially paid by the Armenians, Kurds and Assyrians who saw their independence ambitions totally frustrated. The new inter-war regional outlook developed according to a precise politicization of ethno-linguistic distribution and minority status. In essence, at a macro level, the regional balances of power were defined according to the tripartition between the Arab (divided into distinct countries), Turkish and Iranian dimensions. Non-Arab/Turkish/Iranian groups were thus ignored as well as heterodox Muslim groups, while non-Muslims were integrated as religious minorities. Regarding the heterodox Muslims, their position was essentially fragile (such the Alevi in Turkey or Bahá'is in Iran) and this is still the case today since they have no access to concrete politics. The foundation of the colonial State was decisive in framing national political fields. It fostered the organization of (supra)national camps.

At the national systemic level, each country was involved in direct "negotiation" with the Mandate power for establishing local balances of power and the new political centers of authority (Khoury, 2003, 2014). In essence, London and Paris were able to capitalize the support of a part of local leaderships establishing precise *modus vivendi*, exploiting variable local geographies. Generally, both powers designed the national political field through the combination of a selective political discourse centered on patriotic and ethno-national features (being Syrian, but also Arab) and the re-interpretation of the traditional Ottoman instruments for dealing with non-Muslim communities, now understood according the framework of the protection of religious minorities. This occurred explicitly, for example in Iraq with the Declaration of Guarantees (1932) (Müller-Sommerfeld, 2016), or indirectly, such as in Transjordan's institutionalizing the role of the Church in the field of education and personal status (Maggiolini, 2015). In Mandate Palestine, Britain's strategy was clearly ambiguous in its stance, also giving contrasting ambitions to the impracticability of harmonizing Jews and Arabs. Divide and rule selectively played with ethno-linguistic and religious designations. It avoided giving political or legal content to terms such as Palestinian or Arab-speaking in favor of the adoption of religious categories, Muslims and Christians. In substance, Palestinians were not recognized as a nation and they were classified in Mandate administration according to their religious affiliations (Robson, 2011).

In the post-war period, London's strategy to define State and nation in the Middle East thus followed the model of the Treaty of Lausanne signed by Turkey. Non-Arab ethno-linguistic groups were ignored, being considered

fragments to be assimilated within the three above-mentioned majoritarian designations. Religious factors were taken into account in the name of the Ottoman past.

In the area under French control, the reconfiguration of variable local geographies was much more strident, at least apparently. While the Maronites' ambitions were welcomed, establishing their leadership in the newly founded "Greater Lebanon", the fusion of Ottoman districts with a considerable Muslim presence assured Paris the role of arbiter in national politics. In Syria, Paris was more "creative" (Dueck, 2010). While France consolidated the external international borders according to the Mandate treaty, internally the country was recurrently divided. Initially, the Mandate administration recognized three mini-states (Aleppo, Damascus and that of the Alawites), followed by a fourth, the Jabal Druze. In 1925, Damascus and Aleppo were then merged, becoming the backbone of the future "united" State of Syria. This subdivision was inspired by an ambiguous understanding of Syrian diversity, promoting a political accommodation based on local distinctiveness (Aleppo and Damascus) and quasi ethnic-religious designations (Druze and Alawite that never before had been recognized as such within the Ottoman Empire) (White, 2007). At the same time, Christians were granted specific protection status as non-Muslim minorities. This divide and rule strategy endured until the 1940s. Although in use for less than a couple of decades, its effects produced a controversial legacy, politicizing and spatializing identities in the country.

Inevitably, the demiurgic Mandate policy did not develop unchallenged. Rebellions and protests recurrently broke out, especially in Palestine as a consequence of the rising tension between Jews and Arabs. At the same time, it is also important to point out that the Mandate vision was substantially considered acceptable by a large part of the local political leaderships. Patriotic orientations concentrated on the territorial State recently founded. They contested or collaborated on the basis of achieving the independence of their newly founded countries. Nationalists inspired by supranational ideals opposed foreign presences and their visions, but they also found a part of such systematization acceptable because inherently subscribing to Arabism (White, 2012). Accordingly, the issue was overcoming the international boundaries dividing the Arab nation, not conveying a different vision of the identity of the region. On the basis of such understanding, the interwar period became a hotbed for nationalist/patriotic platforms (e.g. the Lebanese nationalist movement inspired by the Maronite intellectuals of the *Revue Phénicienne*; the Egyptian Wafd party of Saad Zaghloul Wassef Boutros Ghali, pan-nationalist movements such as the 1932 Syrian Social Nationalist Party of the Greek-Orthodox Antoun Saadeh and the 1947 Ba'th Party of Michel Aflaq and Muhammad Al

Bitar). But during the same decades also emerged the first modern pan-Islamist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, in Egypt in 1928. The Brotherhood was the sole actor taking a distance from the ideal of the secular national State and that of "Arabness", focusing on the need to promote an Islamic approach towards the state- and nation-building processes in the region. At the same time, it is also interesting to point out the manifestation of another form of pan-Islamist orientation. In early 1931, following the first congresses of Mecca and Cairo dedicated to discussing the necessity to re-establish the Caliphate in the Arab world, the Muslim Supreme Council in Palestine organized the first Islamic Congress with the aim of conveying in the same place representative from all Muslim countries. Although the Congress was widely ostracized by official authorities, such as those of Turkey and Egypt, it expressed this desire of unity and solidarity beyond the imposed categories and boundaries. It is also indicative because the Congress, predominantly attended by Sunni, was opened by a Shiite Imam. Today, this can sound strange giving the predominance of the Sunni-Shi'a sectarian predicament, but it was perfectly fitting the search for unity of those decades.

The second trauma pertains to the Arab States' defeats at the hand of Israel (1948, 1967 and 1973), thus embracing the phase of independence, the secular nationalist movement in the region and the reconfiguration of regional balances of power and national political orientations that culminated in the separate peace between Egypt and Israel (Camp David 1978) and the revolution in Iran (1979). This was a very intense and dynamic period in the history of the region, characterized by transformations and transitions at the local, regional and international levels. While immersed in a world shaped by Cold War logic, the Middle East embarked on a complex struggle for defining State and nation, regional balances of power and its role at the international level. In this struggle for power, leadership and meanings, the Middle East's variable geographies played a crucial role.

The 1950s and 1960s were the decades of Arab nationalist triumph, which became the leading ideal in state- and nation-building processes. It was during this period that the tension between patriotic and supranational orientations were clearer. At the same time, becoming progressively more evident during those years was the above-mentioned ambiguity in the relationship between utopian and concrete politics in the Arab nationalist sphere. In this regard, the Mandate legacy and the 1948 defeat of the Arab front against Zionism and the newly founded State of Israel were determinant.

The nationalist movement had multiple voices. While all shared the same conviction about the need to promote development and progress from above and about State intervention in society and the economy, they promoted

different visions and strategies. Arabism became a contested ideal disputed between different nationalist currents (e.g. Ba'thist vs. Nasserites) as well as between national parties subscribing to the same ideology (Syrian Ba'thists vs. Iraqi Ba'thists). However, competition also developed through the rivalry between monarchies and republics, with the two branches of the Hashemite family in Iraq and Jordan proposing a path toward Arabism through the fulfillment of the united Arab State promised by London, and Nasserists promoting the pan-Arabist vision as the solution to Arab weaknesses (Rogan, 2012).

At the country level, post-war nationalism produced contrasting effects. For those subscribing to the Arabist ideal, the nationalist movement offered inclusion and participation in national fields. On the other hand, the non-Arab ethnic groups were further marginalized, being forced to surrender to assimilation by the various nationalist regimes ruling in the region. But secular nationalism imposed a price also on non-Muslim Arab-speaking communities. In fact, in the spirit of national unity and equality, they were asked to renounce most of the guaranties and autonomies recognized by Mandate authorities, proving their loyalty to the State and nation. In the early 1950s in Syria, for example, Colonel Shishakli publicly championed the need to eliminate religious minorities' reserved seats in parliament (Picard, 2012). In Iraq, the military coup in 1958–1959 by Qasim and his second-in-command 'Arif was only rhetorically presented as a solution to “national” minority issues (Rassam, 2006; Donabed, 2015). The promises of integrating Iraqi diversity were subordinated to the primary concern of defending the State and the regime in power. While containing or quelling any attempts requesting recognition of non-Arab identities, the Ba'th party in Syria and Iraq concentrated on depoliticizing the role of religious affiliations.

State and nation were recomposed in the image of the ruling party that imposed itself as the sole reference in charge of representing the people, mobilizing them and managing national, political and economic life in the country. It is not a coincidence that, in these countries, the Christian establishments (charities and schools) were generally nationalized, thus reducing the maneuver space of Christian leaderships.

But such dirigisme in state- and nation-building processes not only put pressure on ethnic and religious designations through the imposition of a majoritarian perspective, but also sought to create political identity in the image of the ruling power. An indicative example in this regard was in Jordan between 1950 and 1967, when the Hashemite rulers sought to develop a totally new expression of “national” identity (Massad, 2008). The “Jordanian” designation was created with the objective of legitimizing Hashemite rule over the East and West Banks. Therefore, it was initially created from the Trans-Jordanian

and Palestinian outlooks. This strategy was very ambiguous in its stance, also because the Hashemite sought to develop it within the broader framework of Arabism. In fact, it was opposed and contested by both the left leaning supporters of pan-Arabism and the Palestinians involved in organizing their national resistance movement.

In essence, with the independence of the Arab countries, the struggle for State and nation put great pressure on Middle Eastern diversity. The variable regional geographies were substantially overshadowed in the name of the ideal of the “strong State” and “homogenous nation”, ambiguously declined by different combinations of supranational ideologies and concrete politics (Mahmood, 2015).

In the early 1970s, Middle Eastern politics began to change. Pan-Arabism movements and leaderships were suffering a crisis of legitimacy and political credibility. The defeats by Israel and intra-Arab competition for regional leadership was exposing their internal ambiguities and weaknesses. This opened the space for elaborating new political projects and reconfiguring previous balances of power. It was in this context that progressively developed the so-called “return of religion in politics”, namely the re-introduction of Islam into constitutions and States (where before it had been either given a marginal position, such as in Syria, or subjected to the modernizing political ambition of the regime, like in Nasser’s Egypt), the co-optation of religion by political leadership to find new legitimacy and, finally, the (re)emergence of different Islamic actors in the public arena, from Islamist political activists and radical militants to the first currents of the contemporary Salafist vision under the inspiration of personalities such as Al Albani. In this framework, the most representative event was surely the revolution in Iran and the triumph of Khomeini – as it will be explained below, the third trauma in the history of defining “Arabness” in state – and nation-building processes. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that the “return of religion” was also expressed in the non-Muslim dimension with reconfiguration of the role of the Church and its ecclesiastical institutions in the community and public spheres (McCalloum, 2012). Nevertheless, at a closer glance, this decade represented a much more complex historical intersection than a simple phase of transition towards the revival of Islam in politics, in its multiple manifestations. In this regard, the civil war in Lebanon of 1975 is indicative, coalescing in a single conflict multiple polarizing factors, at the religious (e.g. Christian-Muslim), national/supranational (e.g. Maronite nationalism-pan-Arabism and Palestinian nationalism) and geopolitical levels (e.g. Syrian and Israeli interventions). The Lebanese civil war has been a real crucible of Middle East fault-lines, anticipating their future political developments. The foundation of Hizb Allah provides the clearest evidence of the

newly developing configuration of the intertwining between solidarity-group, patriotic/national and supranational levels. Hizb Allah emerged in the midst of the civil war as a militant Islamist movement equally dedicated to a plurality of goals: defending the Lebanese Shiite community in the country; advancing the ideal of direct involvement of the Shiite clergy in politics (the *al-wilayat al-faqih* doctrine), while informally serving the interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the region; and striking back at Israel and Zionism for the sake of the Palestinians and Islam.

Therefore, the 1970s can be described as a decade of different political temporalities in the search for establishing State and nation on a solid new basis, with traditional secular orientations fighting to defend their role and authority in the attempt to recover from the failures of the 1960s, and new forms of political engagement emerging on the basis of different visions of identities and boundaries in the region. These dynamics developed according to multiple contextual configurations, transforming regional balances of power and logics of alignment in the whole Middle East. On the one hand, the so-called “return of religion to politics” did not entail making polity and society more “religious” (Mahmood, 2015), but described a potent mechanism of politicizing community identities that progressively appeared at the local and regional levels, also through the re-ethnicization and re-activation of religious boundaries. On the other, nationalism and ethno-nationalism continued to play a central role. The 1970s also saw the revival of traditional forms of ethnic-irredentism, such as with the case of the Kurds and Assyrians in Iraq, and continuation of the Arab nationalist struggle for State and nation.

In this framework, the Iraq-Iran war well represents the complexity of this period of transformation. At the contextual level, the ascendancy of Saddam Hussein in Iraq fostered a new phase of muscular state- and nation-building processes. Diversity was confined and contained (Sassoon, 2012). Arabization and Ba’thification were the main objectives to be pursued on the basis of Saddam Hussein’s personality cult (Donabed, 2015). Diversity was only tolerated if conforming to such a vision. It was not opposed *per se*, but it was subject to functional considerations of its contribution to achieving the regime’s objectives. More generally, diversity was considered something to be kept private if not to be fully assimilated through acculturation, political negation and indoctrination. The rhetoric of the unity and indivisibility of the State predominated over any group or community’s distinct perspective. It was in this framework that the Kurdish struggle for autonomy gained new momentum.

At the regional level, the war between Ba’thist Iraq and Khomeini’s Iran was much more than an inter-state conflict for leadership in the region or control of the contested border of the Shatt Al-Arab. It can be considered as the

muscular reaction to the third traumatic event in the history of defining the political meaning of “Arabness”, namely the revolution in Iran and the foundation of the first Islamic Republic in the history of the region.

Although the Iraqi-Iranian border is one of the most vivid expressions of the variable geographies in the Middle East, with Arabs, Turkmen and Kurds, either Sunni or Shiite, on both sides, it has always served as a sort of psychological political frontier dividing the visions of two Empires –in one of their last historical manifestations, the Ottoman and the Safavid– and their heirs. In the course of the centuries, this political division also acquired a political-religious implication, beyond strict demographic facts, defining the separation between a field where Sunni Islam was undoubtedly ruling, no matter the faith of its subjects, and a context where Shiism was dominating, according to the same understanding. This psychological frontier was then essentially interiorized, remaining latent (Roy, 2007). The post-Empire configuration of the Middle East substantially respected such an understanding, as the tripartition between Turkish, Arab and Iranian spheres explains. Without subscribing to perennialism, after 1979, this cultural specialization became open to contestation especially within the so-called Arab world, with the possibility of negating – in essence– the ideal of State and nation as it had been developed until then. The reason lay in the above-mentioned tensions between national and supra-national. Although explicitly advocating pan-Islamism, the Islamic Republic of Iran adopted instead a clear nationalistic posture, and it openly called into question not only the continued existence of such a psychological border (the separation between the realm of Sunnism and that of Shiism, according to a sectarian understanding), but also the very existence of an Arab Iraq, implicitly Sunni (an Iraq defined according to the Ba’thist ideal of Arabness). The Islamic Republic of Iran was perceived as inherently predisposed to entertaining a strong relationship with Middle Eastern Shiite communities, menacing Arab solidarity in the region, overstating the real importance of relations of those ties for Tehran (which always subordinated them to its geopolitical interests). In essence, the Islamic Republic of Iran was considered a challenge to the very fabric of Iraq, a menace that could have subverted “national” hierarchies by negating the “Arab” character of Shiism in the country. With this in mind, and considering the predominance of Shiism on a demographic level, such subversion could have threatened the very foundations of the Iraqi socio-political field.

Accordingly, the Iraq-Iran war (which on the contrary demonstrated the weakness of the sectarian paradigm, as well demonstrated by the loyalty shown to Baghdad by Iraqi soldiers of Shiite descent) was not simply a conflict between two regional rivals representing structurally different identities and

orientations, but also a struggle for State and nation in both countries. In fact, in the midst of the war and throughout it, both regimes were fully dedicated to state- and/or nation-building processes, Iran to establishing the Islamic Republic over an already solid “national State” frame and Iraq to securitizing and welding “national borders” of its political field. Moreover, beyond concerns and fears, the Iraqi “national” political field fought compactly against Iran, without showing signs of internal fragmentation. The same occurred in the opposite camp.

With this in mind, the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Iraqi-Iran war offer important clues for understanding part of present conflicts’ logics and root-causes because it provides a field in which to explore the impact of politicization processes outside of variable regional geographies. In fact, the Iraq-Iran war, in all its implications, cannot be understood only according to one analytical lens. This is also the case for the conflicts and crises in today’s Middle East. It requires an appreciation of the tensions between national, supranational and local-contextual levels; geopolitical rivalries; the potential of ethnic and religious factors as well as the protracted contraposition between secular and Islamist orientations (and within them). The use of multiple interpretative lenses helps us understand the function of variable geographies, subjects and actors in this political struggle for State and nation. It also suggests taking a distance from essentialist and monolithic interpretations of the issues and challenges at stake, reconsidering engagement and disengagement in the region as the result of the intertwining of multiple factors and not simply the implementations of decisions taken by individual united and coherent actors.

Therefore, the Iraq-Iran war is an important episode for looking at how regional politics progressively began to change and transform during the last two decades of the 20th century, with multiple dynamics of politicization and revival of political content in the broader field of identities. In fact, if one looks at the Middle East between the 2003 military operations in Iraq that signaled the end of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the recent uprisings, it clarifies the manifold features and multiple pull-factors that are fueling present turmoil, severely testing diversity. Without suggesting any connections between them or offering reductionist explanations of dynamics essentially having multiple significances, these two events put into the spotlight the development of an intricate dynamic of contestation and construction of new meanings of State and nation, intertwining concrete politics, geopolitics and utopian orientations. On the one hand, the fall of Saddam’s regime and the uneven path of the Iraqi reconstruction process mobilized Iraq’s variable geographies in the campaign to define the logics, contents and balances of power in the “new” national

political field (Zubaida, 2012). In essence, the military operation drastically opened room for making a new political field, redrawing boundaries both internally and internationally as well as exposing the Iraqi system to multiple external influences. It also destabilized the capacity of the Iraqi State to resist external influences. In fact, preservation of the territorial scope of the Iraqi State has been subject to multiple pressures and tensions regarding its regime, political system and the very existence of the country as such. The image of variable ideologies helps again to elucidate the situation. The fall of Saddam's regime inherently weakened the psychological frontier between (Arab) Shiism and (Iranian) Shiism (Roy, 2007). Obviously such a divide did not disappear, but somehow moved within the Iraqi polity, questioning both the concept of being "Arab" and "Iraqi", ascribing new meanings to Sunni and Shi'a designations, and making the state- and nation-building process acquire a geopolitical role in its fullest meaning, for the country and the region. Such a process becomes particularly evident when considering the different positions have emerged at the political level within the Iraqi Arab Shia community, with actors maintaining extremely close relations with Iran and other focused on a more Iraq-centric vision. In this sense, even the civil war that reached its peak between 2006 and 2008, usually labelled as a sectarian struggle between Arab Sunnis and Shiites, can speak in favor of such an understanding if considered as a fight for supremacy over State and nation (namely the Iraqi national political field).

At the same time, the post-Saddam state- and nation-building process created enough maneuver room for Kurds, and somehow for the Assyrians, to project their own idea of the Iraqi political system, oscillating between the demand for full independence and that for pronounced autonomy. Moreover, the Kurds' autonomist or separatist ambitions have not only challenged the traditional territorial configuration of Iraq, but have also potentially created the possibility of setting a new frontier between a Kurdish and a non-Kurdish world well beyond Iraq and across other countries in the region, namely Syria and Turkey. In fact, it is now perceived as running into Syria, where Turkey is engaged to neutralize it.

On the other hand, by overthrowing regimes that had been ruling for decades in countries such as Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, the Arab uprisings opened a new chapter in the history of state- and nation-building processes in the region. The final results are still contended. It is exactly this state of affairs that is fueling the present turmoil. In Syria, the uprisings quickly turned into a civil war and a geopolitical confrontation that now is approaching a tentative solution that seems to be working in favor of the Assad regime. In a country like Egypt, the balance of power suddenly changed, triggering a phase of strong

confrontation between military and civil rule, liberalists-secularists and Islamists, inevitably involving the spheres of community identity in complex dynamics of negotiating places and roles within a newly developing configuration of the national political field. In the case of Libya, the national political field essentially collapsed under the pressures of contrasting parochial and tribal interests and solidarities, despite the fact that the territorial configuration is not questioned in its international boundaries.

It is in the heart of such complex dynamics of polarization and politicization that the Islamic State (IS) developed and expanded, unilaterally proclaiming itself a caliphate in Mosul (2014). Beyond the specific features of this organization, its code of conduct and strategy, IS most vividly evidences the political potential of the Middle East's variable geographies and the multiple possible configurations of the intertwining between solidarity-group, patriotic/national and supranational influences. IS has positioned itself in the midst of Iraqi-Syrian geographies, politicizing them on the basis of its utopic vision (Hughes, 2017). It has exploited the rhetoric of the psychological frontier between an Arab Sunni and Iranian Shiite world, ambiguously playing with "national" and sectarian polarizations and tensions on the ground. At the same time, it has sought to co-opt local kin-group solidarities and their transboundary potential to challenge existing international boundaries and consolidate in rural and remote contexts (Collombier, Roy, 2018). This operation was not simply imposed from above, but worked out by developing an alternative path through the intertwining between local, national and supranational concerns. This has made its utopian vision resound in the region and internationally. The historical vicissitudes of IS can also be considered a testament to the controversial consequences produced by using diversity and variable regional geographies as strategic military resources at the disposal of political agendas for the state- and nation-building process.

6 Conclusion

The entropic spread of violence that destabilizes today's Middle East, threatening the survival of its populations beyond religious or ethnic affiliations, can be clearly understood without the need for subscribing to a culturalist approach. The protracted instability in Iraq, the civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen, the political crises that Egypt experienced from the uprising until the election of Al Sisi as president and, finally, the emergence of the Islamic State organization between Syria and Iraq are not demonstrations of an intrinsically anarchic Middle East shaped by primordial identities. They are the most recent

developments of a matrix, established at the turn of the 20th century, which has fostered a struggle for authority and legitimacy taking place at intra- and inter-state levels. In this framework, the controversial spread of sectarian violence and its destructive effects over the wider Middle East have to be considered as an integral part of an historical continuum whose roots cannot be tracked to the beginning of the 21st century alone and that have further been exacerbated by competing geopolitical agendas. Accordingly, the “new Middle Eastern Cold war” apparently centered around the Sunni-Shia divide and the development, the imposition and the exploitation of sectarian forms of violence represent other forms of the struggle for supremacy within national and supranational political fields, where the religious, along with other features, as seen before, have become particularly manipulated for developing new political meaning out of the regional multiple geographies.