

Key issues that have shaped the middle east



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Events in the Middle East have been capturing worldwide attention since the 1970s. This was due to the dynamics in the region related to the increases in the petroleum prices, the rise of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Iran- Iraq war, and conflicts in Lebanon, the West Bank and the Persian (Arabian) Gulf which have attracted the attention of regional actors and the world as a whole. Just a couple of decades earlier the problems of the MENA region to many seemed to be only affecting the region itself. However, today the Middle East is properly regarded as crucial in world events, and it will be regarded as such in the foreseeable future. (Andersen, Roy, Robert Seibert and Jon Wagner, *Politics and Change in the Middle East Sources of Conflict and Accommodation*, 9th ed., US, Pearson Education Inc., 2009). This essay aims to draw upon the key political issues that have shaped the Modern Middle East and North Africa region. It will also seek to provide an understanding of these issues and their reflection on the Modern Middle Eastern international relations. I will aim to discuss the historical background of the region, the formation of the states and the role of the conflicts. In my conclusion I will try to decide which issue of those mentioned above was the most important in shaping the modern MENA region.

In order to develop a better understanding of how this particular region was shaped we need to create a broader image of how the states were formed. Also a theoretical analysis of these processes would be helpful in finding out the role of systems and states in MENA's formation. If we take for example Realism, an approach which focuses on security and the maximisation of power, we see that it treats states as unitary actors seeking to maximise their advantages within a competitive " anarchical", system, pursuing power

politics. (Halliday, 2005, p. 25). However, Realism has its limitations. For example, it neglects ideology and belief systems, it minimises internal factors to states and societies, and its attention to economics is inadequate. Another a factor of special importance to the Middle East is its view of inter-state relations as marked by timeless, recurrent patterns (Ibid). Nevertheless it may be argued that while Realism may not provide an adequate account of relations between developed states, it does offer an adequate account of the international relations of Middle Eastern states (Ibid). Nonetheless, faced with authoritarian states that do not trust each other, and where war is ever-present, a concern with power and security may appear predominant. According to Halliday, this would be classified as a qualified defence. Even so, critics may argue that it is most common in parts of the world where states, and societies, have been long subordinated to structures of global power that the limits of realism are most evident.

When talking about state-system formation in the MENA region omitting the role of religion in politics is impossible. Islam has had a decisive influence on state politics throughout the region since the death of Muhammad, and today the Islamic heritage is present in new ways. Islam is not immune to the influence of current political events and its present role is different from the one played in previous centuries. According to Anderson, Siebert and Wagner it is certain that the present restructuring of Middle Eastern Societies and their internal relations will continue to be based on a common Islamic cultural heritage (Anderson, Siebert and Wagner, 2009, p. 26). Muhammad's revelations introduced a new framework which allowed the resolution of the problems of social life. Its ministry had a dual character that was due to his

political roles as a diplomat, legislator and military general, also his role as a religious leader was quite influential as he was considered as the last prophet taught by the Qur'an. According to him Islam could be realised only by the creation of a religiously guided community called the Umma.

However, the question of who was going to be the leader of the Muslim community stayed unsolved at this point. It was at this point when two of Muhammad's closest associates decided to take initiative and represent the Prophet and become the first two caliphs to aggressively assert the unity of the Muslim community (Ibid, p. 27).

Thereafter, the region flourishes during the Golden Age of the Caliphate under the Umayyads (661-750 C. E.) and it is then when the Islam spreads across North Africa and Spain. Followed by the Mongol conquest and afterwards the Ottoman Empire from the mid-tenth to mid-thirteenth centuries we see the militarisation of political power in the region (Ibid, p. 27).

The Ottoman Empire added to its domains the Arab world – Mesopotamia, Egypt, Syria and the Arabian Peninsula in the sixteenth century. They kept control of it for four hundred years, however by the twentieth century the Ottoman Empire was known as the “ sick man of Europe” and its decline was already a fact due to many factors. (Gresh and Vidal, 2004, p. 230). It was World War I that ended the Ottoman existence and founded the modern state system in Middle East that was to endure from then onwards in the modern history of the region (Halliday, 2005, p. 80).

Much of the debates on modern Middle East history are based on the effects of the contradictory promises made by France and Britain during World War I

and on the internal and external processes that have determined the course of events. Many of these promises made which the Arabs saw as an opportunity of a united Arab state were not accomplished, furthermore the Arab world was subject to external rule. This was the period when the state system, “ in the sense of the coercive and administrative apparatuses, and the delimitation of geographic entities that they ruled, was established” (Ibid p. 83).

This period was also seen as the creation of new administrative and military structures which developed new patterns for international relations.

To a big extent, the political, social and international formation of the region took place in the interwar period. Through these internal processes of change in the social, ideological and political dimensions the Middle East was shaped. Four of these processes are worth mentioning: Firstly, the creation of modern state institutions. These were administrative institutions which provided employment for a lot of people and encouraged education and economic development. Also the armed forces were seen as the defenders of the nation. Secondly, the MENA states started forming their national identity which rested upon the creation of a national history. While each state tried to form its individual identity and historical validity it also wanted to be part of wider communities-Pharaonic (Egypt), Mesopotamian (Iraq), Phoenician (Lebanon, Lybia, Tunisia), etc. Thirdly, this state-directed change in society promoted a certain form of secularism. The fourth process is represented by the revolts and uprising on local and national level, like the ones in Egypt (1907), Iran (the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-8) and Turkey (The young Turk revol of 1908). (Ibid, p. 87-88).

World War I is thought to have laid the foundations of the modern Middle East, however World War II, even though not so dramatic in its direct impact on the MENA region had played a major transformative role. (Ibid, p. 87-88). This event brought to an end the French and British occupation of the region and their imperial regimes were over. In the years after the World War II the majority of states like: Iran, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt achieved their independence.

During and after the Cold War, the Middle East has been at the centre of the International Relations stage. The Cold war competition for influence between the USSR and the United States over the Middle East had a significant impact on the regional diplomatic alignments and the distribution of money for military equipment. This competition being militarily dangerous managed to prevent either of both superpowers having an absolute dominance in the MENA region. Nevertheless, the end of the Cold war and the weakening of the USSR gave the United States the opportunity to achieve an unprecedented influence in the region (Cleveland and Bunton, 2009, p. 369).

Furthermore, the 9/11 2001 attacks against New York and Washington; al-Qaeda's jihadism; President Bush's crusade against "the axis of evil"; and the 2003 Anglo - American invasion of Iraq, have confirmed the region's centrality and its dubious distinction as an epitome of conflicts, old and new. As a result factors, shaping the Middle East have not changed, at least on the surface. (Fawset, Louise, International Relations of the Middle East, p. 60, UK, Oxford University Press, 2005). According to Baghat Korany, the reason for so many conflicts in the region is due to the increasing resource gap, not <https://assignbuster.com/key-issues-that-have-shaped-the-middle-east/>

only in capital, financial and social aspects but also in human resources and the availability of goods necessary for the everyday function of the region. According to the World Bank the yawning resource gaps are the new threat in the MENA region. Therefore, the Middle East's slow recovery is arguably tied to the so-called "curse of natural resources". Countries experiencing lack of natural resources appear to underperform in long-run GNP growth. (Yousef, T. M. (2004). Development, Growth and Policy Reform in the Middle East and North Africa since 1950. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*. 18 (3), 91-116.)p. 99. The lack of achievement in the GNP growth rates and the comparison with South Asia and East- Asia Pacific, where GNP rates are significantly bigger, makes the region's situation look pretty bad. It is extremely difficult for to attract FDI (Foreign Direct Investments) because of its negative risk assessment. As a consequence this capital is being shifted to other regions such as Latin America, Caribbean and even for South Asia-Pacific. The results for MENA are more difficulties as the region is not able to meet its infrastructural needs and societal daily management. Therefore, in Cordsman opinion, the region had failed to recover from its decline by raising its productivity. Even oil-producing countries from the region are no longer immune to negative societal effects of this deteriorating resource gap. This worsening economic situation increases societal stress and leads to a situation of overall insecurity - of both society and state. (*International Relations of the Middle East* , p. 71).

As Choukri and North state " the higher the rate of the population growth, the more salient a factor population increase appears to be in the

development of conflict and violence.” (International Relations of the Middle East, p. 70).

Conflict is present in all societies and is caused by competing demands for limited resources. The demand for resources may include different things such as land, money, water, etc. The human desire to demand such things in greater quantity than the supply allows leads to conflict over distribution or consumption. Therefore, conflict arises from the competition for scarce resources. (Politics and Change in the Middle East Sources of Conflict and Accommodation, p. xvi).

Baghat Korany claims that almost every MENA country has a border dispute with one or more of its neighbours. There are plenty of examples of Arab-Arab conflicts, for example the one between Morocco and Algeria in 1963 – a year after Algeria’s independence, was about the tracing of their borders.

This conflict is thought to be the reason for their contemporary conflict over the Western Sahara. Another example is the Iran- Iraq war which continued for eight years and it was also about tracing borders, but this time on the Shatt al-Arab waterway (International Relations of the Middle East, p. 68).

Looking back through the historical events and drawing on the facts it seems, in my opinion, difficult to deny that conflicts in the Middle East region have shaped more or less the contemporary political environment. It seems as if conflict has always been present and the countries in the region have somewhat developed through it. Although this region has a lot more to offer in terms of cultural heritage and traditions for example, the most common association is that with conflict unfortunately.

Conflict in the Middle East is a recurring feature in international politics, academic literature, and current news coverage. (Sorli, Miriam, E, (Feb. 2005),” Why Is There so Much Conflict in the Middle East?”, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 49, 1, p. 141-165). In the words of Janice Gross Stein, its history shows that the prevention and management of conflict remains a major political as well as military challenge. While other states have moved beyond traditional security concerns to embrace a wider agenda to include human development and security, the Middle East still faces this fundamental dilemma. (Fawset, 2005, p. 195).

The Arab-Israeli conflict is thought to be a central factor in the shaping of the MENA regional dynamics. The six regional wars that punctuated the modern history of the Middle East with full-scale war in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1969-70, 1973 and 1982, have shaped the region’s overall process of negotiations and governance; also they have played an important role in the state formation, collective psychology and the regime patterns. Therefore, the authors state that these events have also created the balance between the two superpowers in the Cold War, respectively the US and USSR. (Ibid, p. 64). Through lobby politics the Arab-Israeli conflict is believed to have influenced elections to top political positions in the United States. This conflict is also considered at the basis of the region’s militarisation and the rise of the national security state. As a consequence of the factors mentioned above, military costs are absolutely staggering for the governments of some individual states.

After the end of the Cold War there was the initiative towards a collective peace process with the Madrid Conference in October 1991, which

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unfortunately failed to achieve any results. However, the secret Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in Oslo in 1993, being the result of the Syrian-Israeli negotiations in Washington, proved more successful. Few of the most important outcomes were that the two entities announced mutual formal recognition and reached an agreement on Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and most of the West Bank within a certain timeframe. Also the emergence of a Formal Palestinian authority was recognised on the international stage. (Ibid, p. 64). The next four economic conferences that convened were indeed controversial: Casablanca 1994, Amman 1995, Cairo 1996 and Doha 1997. However, these conferences show that the Arab- Israeli political problems would have to be solved and until then there can be no economic integration. According to Baghat Korany, the aim of these conferences was primarily to integrate Israel in the region by building economic cooperation and attracting international investment. This emphasis on regional economic cooperation was a reflection of functionalist thinking of “ peace through trade”, the origin of present European integration. (Ibid, p. 65).

The reasons for such a violence in the region are not at all random and do not constitute some exclusive form of Middle Eastern irrationality. They can be understood within the context of the historical patterns that have been crucial for the shaping of the region and as a response to the clash of nationalism and the competition for dominance within a regional state system. However, in modern times the Middle East has been not more conflict-centric than other parts of the world such as Africa and East Asia, and in the past century, much less than its neighbouring continent to the northeast, Europe (Halliday, 2005, 153).

However, it is important to mention that conflicts are a lot less important nowadays and border disputes are not as significant as a few decades ago.

What is important for the region though is that only through regional cooperation peace and prosperity may be achieved. Unless the states within the Middle East reach a fundamental political accommodation with each other, the region will continue being shaken by internal conflicts.

Nonetheless, political development, growing environmental protection and socio-cultural achievements clearly demonstrate the gradual stabilization of the region.