

NATION BUILDING

A KEY PARAMETER OF THE NEW POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC CONTEXT IN THE MAGHREB AND MIDDLE-EAST

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ABSTRACT

In the Maghreb and Middle-East – amid a strategically tense and unsteady regional context – nation building has either come back or emerged as a central and structuring factor of the functioning of States and societies. The phenomenon, which has been amplified by the uprisings of the last decade in the Arabic world and in Iran, is revealing the new precedence now given to the national framework when conducting domestic and foreign affairs as well as the rejection of both foreign interference and transnational utopias. This global return to the national level triggers enquiries as to what its dynamics are but also as to the contradictions and oppositions it encounters as events and crises stir the whole region. It brings out the tensions between state nationalism and international islamism, the hardships several countries face in the process of becoming viable Nation-States but also hints at a potential return to one or several regional hegemon.

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INTRODUCTION

The 2011 Arab Spring uprisings have revealed more than they have provoked the pre-eminence now granted to national identity by both States and populations in the Middle-East and North Africa. This concept combines a feeling of belonging to a natural community sharing a common future with a sovereign territory, that is to say a State marked out by borders. The period following the birth of new States proved ill-suited for the establishment of this concept – some major nuances aside – since the cultural and geographical area had known the yoke of Ottoman and Western imperialism, but also because of a powerful yet vague feeling of belonging to a supranational community characterised by its Arabic and Islamic identity.

The popular protest movements that have developed over the last decade in countries quite different from one another do not claim inspiration from any foreign ideology or model. On the contrary, they prioritise their national framework when conducting domestic and foreign affairs, while rejecting both foreign interference and transnational utopias.

A new nationalism is unquestionably on the rise in the North Africa-Middle East region,¹ one that is very much opposed to the Pan-Arabism of the 1950-60's and the revolutionary Shiism promoted by the Islamic Republic of Iran since 1979. This groundswell may also be interpreted as proof of a return or resilience of patriotism, at least where the foundations of the Nation-State are old and enduring enough to reach a relative consensus. Yet the movement, while turning its back on communitarian and ideology-driven creeds of a bygone era, also operates within the reality and evolutions of the current period, from regional and international issues or power relationships to the governance and growth expectations of the peoples.

This global return to the national level triggers enquiries as to what its dynamics are but also as to the contradictions and oppositions it encounters as events and crises stir the whole region.

Firstly, state nationalism – as fostered by ruling powers and now endorsed by large swathes of public opinions – has been confronted for several decades to the Islamic internationalism of the Muslim Brotherhood movement and their likes in the Arabic world, and that of the Iranian regime. Secondly many Nation-States in the region come across as unfinished and fragmentary constructions that are subject to centrifugal forces stemming from regional, ethnic or denominational grounds which weakens and slows the establishment of any viable and accepted state-national framework. Finally, is the primacy granted to state and patriotic nationalism, because of the precedence it confers to realism and pragmatism, liable to facilitate the establishment, beyond borders, of constructive power relationships and common security frameworks? Conversely, is it not at risk of amplifying confrontations as one or several regional hegemons attempt to emerge?

1. "Relocating Arab Nationalism", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 43, Cambridge University Press, May 2014.

STATE NATIONALISM VERSUS ISLAMIC INTERNATIONALISM

When Arabic countries gained independence in the second half of the 20th century, two conceptions of nationalism existed without necessarily being complete opposites.² The first, (its qualificative term being *qawmi*) referred to a communitarian yet also supranational conception of the nation. In the 1950-60's, Pan-Arabism, which ideologically dominated the region, was its main representation. The other, *watani*, literally meant: patriotic, that is to say referring to a particularist Nation-State. Despite the power wielded by Arabic nationalism – as a motto and *Weltanschauung* –, newly created States were soon faced with regional realities and their own singularities, defined – among other things – by recognised territorial borders inside which they enforced their sovereignty. So when crises, tensions or rivalry between neighbouring countries happened, national particularism prevailed over a transnational solidarity that was more of a facade than a concrete attitude. The collapse of the panarabic myth that followed the Six-Days war in June 1967 bolstered the *watani* sensitivity which prevailed both in the speech and in the governments' policies in the region.

The precedence of the Umma

These nationalist concepts tinged with secularism have been, from the very beginning and up to the present day, combined with a dominant doctrine that holds the greatest sway in civil society: Islam. Besides the fact that during its Golden Age Pan-arabism has always considered Islam as a major civilisational component of the Arabic Nation, political figures referred – to various degrees – “to an orthodox Sunni past which resounded with the sensibility of the many, whom the State strived to rally to its own objectives”.³ Yet the intertwining between Islamic identity and the *watani* conception of the nation was contested by movements upholding political Islam and so even within the Nation-State framework.

In their conception of State and society, the *Umma* – the Muslim community – comes first and foremost for contemporary islamists who reject everything that could divide it and consider that no true border exists within the Nation of Islam.⁴ Hence a ceaseless tension

2. Emmanuel Sivan, “Mythes politiques arabes”, Fayard, 1995, 120-140.

3. On the crucial influence of the masses, alongside that of political powers and theologians on the defence of religious orthodoxy in Arab and Muslim countries, consult Yadh Ben Achour, “Aux fondements de l'orthodoxie sunnite”, PUF, Proche-Orient, 2008.

4. In 2000, Abdeslam Yassine, founder and leader of the most important Moroccan islamist association, Justice and Spirituality, voiced his opinion on the Western Sahar issue which has become the chief national cause of the Kingdom of Morocco: “As for us, our option is clear and unequivocal: unity of the muslim peoples beyond the vile borders we inherited from our old and recent history.” (Abdeslam Yassine, Mémorandum à qui de droit, 2000). During the first decade following the 1879 revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran led by ayatollah Khomeini tended to negate the idea of an iranian nation. Consult Clément Therme, “Iran, la nation à l'épreuve de la révolution islamique de 1978-1979”, in Oliver Da Large (dir.), *L'Essor des nationalismes religieux*, Démopolis, 2018. The Hamas Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement, states article 11 that “Palestine is sacred (*waqf*) [ed: according to Islamic law, it is a good of mortmain with a pious and benevolent dimension and as such declared inalienable as it belongs to God] for all Muslims for all time [...]” in *Les Voix du Soulèvement palestinien 1987-1988*, translated by

with unitarian nationalism, which advocates the primacy – if not the exclusivity – of the defence of the national interest, all the more so today since islamism remains the only coherent ideological project with internationalist views in the Arabic world. Concretely, this leaning for transnational perspectives and activism has led movements defending political Islam to play down if not oppose some symbols of regional Nation-States, or even favour the defence of supranational causes which are deemed islamic, to the detriment of national interest.

The caliphate, a paradigm confronted to *Realpolitik*

However, when Islamist parties came to power after the Arabic uprisings ten years ago, they slightly revised their aforementioned leaning. Indeed, the shift from being the opposition to the existing system to governing the modern Nation-State implies that these parties had to take some imperatives of *Realpolitik* into account, especially with diplomacy and – in a much more ambiguous fashion – national security. Hence rises the question of whether the Muslim Brotherhood and similar movements have become islamo-nationalist, taking on the strategical issues specific to each state⁵ like the ruling AKP party in Turkey has, or conversely, if they have not surrendered, beyond forced tactical modernisation, their internationalist agenda based on the political model of the caliphate.

In practice governing islamists have most of the time been torn between accepting realities and keeping their ideological creed, as shown during the brief interlude in power of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood movement, which was faced with the delicate issue of their relationship with Israel. The issue also embarasses the Justice and Development Party (JDP) in power in Morocco, as well as entangling even further the problematic ties between islamist parties and Iran or the Gulf monarchies. However, the attitude and discourse held by leaders of islamist parties outside of formal events imply that the internationalist and ideological dimension of their project has not disappeared as can be seen with the mention of the caliphate which remains the founding paradigm for these islamist movements across the spectrum.⁶ Yet, if there still exists a political closeness and natural solidarity between the various organisations of the Arabic world related to the movement, its internationalist dimension of organisation and representation formerly upheld by the Egyptian Brotherhood now seems to be on the wane. Only the Turkish AKP – which aims at positioning itself as inspirer and protector of legalistic islamist movements – remains a reference and ally for political parties such as the Tunisian Ennahdha movement, even if the Turkish islamism/nationalism equation differs quite significantly from the Arabic one for historical reasons.

Jean François Legrain, CEDEJ, Cairo, 1991. In this document, Hamas is not described as a movement of national liberation but as a preaching organisation (*da'wa*).

5. Olivier Roy, "Islamisme et nationalisme", *Pouvoirs*, 104, 2003, 45-53.

6. Right after their electoral victory in 2012 Mohamed Badie, supreme leader of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood spoke about "a historical goal [...] which will find its fulfilment in a fair Islamic caliphate." These comments should be compared to those of Hamadi Jebali, Enahdha member and future Prime Minister, November, 13, 2011 after the success of his movement to the Tunisian constituent assembly elections: "We're in the midst of a divine moment, in a new State, in a sixth caliphate *Insh Allah*."

The singular case of Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran is the most emblematic yet most problematic example of the tension between nationalism and islamism. As soon as the Revolution succeeded, the ideological and revolutionary doctrine advocated by the new regime and destined to inspire others was confronted to “the burden of the nationalist blind-spot”⁷ which is particularly significant in a great country populated by an old civilisation. Mostly because of the international context the regime in Tehran later on adjusted its policy more pragmatically without necessarily renouncing the ideological framework that has served as cement for the ruling regime for 40 years. Indeed ever since the Revolution, the tensions that have shaken the system, the population and their relationship with each other have revolved around how important each of the three constituting features of the contemporary Iranian identity (Islam, the Nation seen through a historical perspective and the modernising opening on the outside world) should respectively be. Compared with Sunni Islamism, a more assumed promotion of a well-understood nationalism that is not in contradiction with the foundations of the Islamic Republic was possible, despite the vigilance of the revolutionary pole led by the Supreme leader, which safeguards the values of the regime.

The “Islamist-nationalist” understanding of the superior interests (*maslahat*) of the State, which overlaps in this instance with the regime, sometimes meets the interests of the Iranian nation.⁸ This “Islamist-nationalism” is then favourably received by the general public and has enabled the signing of the nuclear agreement of July, 2015. However, it falls behind the Islamist pole as soon as the regime projects itself regionally, particularly in the Middle-East where the ideological factors prevail: “With muslim countries, Tehran strives to exhibit the religious components of the regime rather than its national dimension”.⁹ Seemingly in contradiction with the feeling voiced by a majority of Iranians, the Islamist internationalism promoted by Tehran is simultaneously faced with the resilience of the secular nationalisms expressed elsewhere in the region by ruling powers or in the streets of Iraq and Lebanon. The comeback of a patriotic, economic and secular nationalism in Shia Iraqi and Lebanese communities is indeed the very hindrance jeopardising the upholding of Iranian influence in the Arabic world, which prevents Tehran from developing its soft power at the regional level.

The promotion of the particularistic Nation-State

The particularistic Nation-State (*dawla wataniya*) conception, which has been benefiting from a remarkable dynamism these past few years, has been opposed for several decades now to a conception favouring the primacy granted to the believers community. The case of Egypt is particularly revealing of the antagonism between the Muslim Brotherhood and what Tewfik Aclimandos names “Muslim nationalism” which serves as the ideological

7. Therme, “Iran, la nation à l’épreuve de la révolution islamique de 1978-1979”.

8. Mohammad Reza-Djalili, “L’Iran dans les crises du Moyen-Orient”, *Politique étrangère*, 2, 2016, 37-48.

9. Therme, “Iran, la nation à l’épreuve de la révolution islamique de 1978-1979”.

framework of the modern Egyptian Nation-State: “It can be said – if one greatly simplifies – that the conflict opposes people who believe that a good Muslim can and should love the Nation-State in which they live and people who believe that the said Nation-State triggers, induces and requires choices, practices and solidarities that are irreconcilable with the Umma of Islam.”¹⁰ Drawing from the Egyptian case, this vision, which is clearly claimed by the “deep State” and, stemming from it, the current ruling power, has sometimes been deemed militaristic or even “pharaonical”. It is undeniable that military forces in Egypt – like in other Arab countries and especially Algeria – claim their attachment to the very stato-national structures they profess to promote and protect. Yet, the foregrounding of eternal Egypt, with pride of place for its preislamic dimension, does not seem to correspond to what a majority of the general public and ruling establishment expresses, as they vigorously and firmly remain attached to both their Nation-State and Islamic identity.

Ultimately the defence of the particularistic Nation-State in the current regional context, which does not exclude a more or less advanced form of chauvinism, is that of a national and civil State.¹¹ Civil should be understood as follows: the adhesion to a political and judicial system leaning towards secularism (but not altogether non-religious) that distinguishes the said system from a theocratic State. Besides, this system is credited with conducting foreign policy in the sole pursuit – in principle – of the national interest (*al maslahat al wataniya*), which includes if need be a system of alliances much less attached to ideological considerations than in the past. In that spirit, the stands taken this last decade by islamist organisations in favour of the overthrow of the Syrian regime have been deemed dangerous and anti-national by many people in Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria. Not because they supported the regime but because these stands ran against stability in the region and in turn against national interests. The power of home nationalism and, in the case of Egypt¹² and Tunisia, of the attachment to the state has worked against islamists, be they politicians or jihadists.

Towards a Saudian “hypernationalism”?

The unique case of Saudi Arabia is another example of the evolving dichotomy between state nationalism and islamist internationalism, even if the particular nature of the Saudian State inherently hinges on the alliance between the royal family and the wahhabi establishment. At the beginning the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia coincided with the *Umma*, which

10. Tewfik Aclimandos, “Idéologie et intérêt national : le cas égyptien”, *Dossier stratégique* “Le Poids des idéologies dans les enjeux stratégiques actuels”, *Lettre de l’IRSEM*, 1, 2016.

11. The discord that rose during the making of the new Tunisian Constitution in the years that followed the 2011 revolution really foregrounded the opposition between the vision of those defending a historically-rooted Nation-State and the internationalist vision of the Ennahdha islamists. Those have always opposed the notion of “Tunisian identity” which they associate with the notion of “Tunisian exception”, as they distinguish the country from its Arab and Muslim environment because of the modernity of its State and unprecedented societal advances.

12. Some diplomatic stances taken by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood during their short interlude in power, be it on their relationship with the Palestinian Hamas, Iran, Soudan or Ethiopia for Nile waters, were perceived in Egypt as ideology-driven decisions detrimental to national interests.

comprehended it, and any nationalist ideology was considered blasphemous. A gradual promotion of a national identity emerged however in the 1980's in response to threats menacing the Kingdom. But it is the impetus of the current crown prince, Mohamed Bin Salman, that truly gets the "construction of a Saudian nationalism"¹³ under way. Thanks to a voluntary, authoritarian and personal approach, religious authorities are being thwarted in their pretension to control the functioning of society while a proper Saudian national and cultural identity is being promoted.¹⁴

ON THE DIFFICULTY TO REACH A VIABLE NATION-STATE STATUS

The 2011 Arab uprisings and more recently the protest movements that took place in Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran foregrounded, through the slogans chanted by demonstrators, that national identity had become to various degrees a central and structuring factor of current political life. These demands, although expressing a feeling shared across the whole MENA region, occurred in contrasting states of affairs due to the unique history and foundations of each particular State in which they were voiced. By simplifying a little like Emmanuel Sivan, two or rather three types of States are distinguishable in the MENA region¹⁵:

-The first group being also the smallest which comprehends States with deep-rooted historical and geographical foundations like Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Iran.

-The second, composed of States that proceed from the colonial territorial breakdown in the Middle-East, like Lebanon, Syria and Jordan but also Iraq.

-Thirdly the Gulf Monarchies, where the process of achieving a modern Nation-State has been slowed down by their essentially tribal, dynastic and patrimonial nature.

The fragile resilience of national identity confronted to centrifugal forces

In the first instance, a centre, the capital, inspires national unity and identity which are not questioned despite the potential existence of regional socio-cultural divides. Debates and confrontations revolve rather around the nature of the State and of its institutions. On the contrary, countries falling in the second group, unfinished and frail ever since their creation, have been faced this past decade with territorial fragmentation and reconfiguration phenomena. States that have collapsed fully even only partially because of internal processes or external military interventions have weaker, less rooted institutions and are subjected to very old communitarian practices. "The new Iraqi State" is emblematic of the

13. Fatiha Dazi-Héni, "Arabie saoudite : la nation selon Mohamed Bin Salman", in Da Lage (dir.), *L'Essor des nationalismes religieux*.

14. Eman Al Hussein, "Saoudi how hypernationalism is transforming Saoudi Arabia", *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations, June 2019.

15. Sivan, "Mythes politiques arabes".

group as it “was re-built in 2003, not on the grounds of individual citizenship but on ethnic and religious affiliations even if, unlike in Lebanon, this disposition is not mentioned in the constitution”.¹⁶ The new institutional construction, despite the Iraqi political class’ patriotic professions of faith, “embarks upon a path of never-ending divisions, for the sake of interests increasingly more regional, local, or even private.”¹⁷

Amid ISIS’s rise to power across swathes of Syrian and Iraqi national territories in June, 2014, its leaders claimed to have abolished the border between the two countries that had supposedly been created by the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement. From there on, some analysts concluded that a much broader contestation of state structures, deemed artificial and unsustainable, was at play. “Are we not witnessing History getting its revenge – with States collapsing, States that have the common feature of being colonial creations with little legitimacy and artificial borders.”¹⁸ This interpretation of moving centrifugal forces in several countries of the MENA region as a historical phase of its own, challenging States, borders and institutions through an ethnic, political and religious lense seems to be a dubious historical *doxa*. “In 2016, by granting it an importance it did not have, this reminder benefits the cause of the supporters advocating the reconfiguration of the East as a solution to the internal political tensions.”¹⁹

For about fifteen years, nationalist and identity feelings have flared up in fractured States, especially amongst Kurds of the Middle-East, which seems to reveal the population’s disaffection with their respective Nation-States or even their inherent non-viability. However – and the recent protest movements bear witness thereof – there does not *a priori* exist a rejection of a unitarian and coherent State or of nation as a space of sovereignty, but rather a difficulty to define what this nation should be. Besides, multi-community countries like Lebanon, Syria or Iraq remain unable to offer an interpretation of the past and a project for the future to which the whole nation could adhere. Regarding the State, it is not so much its structure and legitimacy that are questioned but rather its lack or misuse of public resources and duties for the benefit of ruling regimes and powers. All the more so that after several years characterised by processes of internal fragmentation and dislocation, an enduring national sentiment is still expressed in the countries most impacted by the phenomenon, like Iraq and Libya.

Many Iraqis struggle to look into a future where their country may be broken up, as they fear the consequences of a potential territorial break-up. Even if the sense of belonging to a given community has become since 2003 a reflexe and necessity in the public life of the country – which was not the case before – these same communities yet assert their Iraqi identity. During the autumn of 2019 large protests took place in Bagdad and in the south of the country, demanding through the two slogans “Iran out” and “We want a homeland”

16. Hélène Caylus, “Fédéralisme, partition : l’intégrité du territoire irakien moderne face à la montée des dynamiques communautaires nationales”, Laboratoire de l’IRSEM, “Fragmentations et recompositions territoriales dans le monde arabe et en Afrique subsaharienne”, 24, 2014.

17. Pierre-Jean Luizard, “Conflits et religions : le cas de l’Irak et de la Syrie”, *Les Champs de Mars*, 26, 2015.

18. Ibid.

19. Michel Foucher, “L’Orient un siècle après Sykes-Picot : mythes et réalités”, *Le Retour des frontières*, CNRS éditions, Débats, 2016.

the departure of the Iranian military as demonstrators blame the *Hashd Chaabi* Shia militias of being Tehran's armed wing. The fact that during these demonstrations the Iraqi Shia population also expressed its patriotic fervour, just like Sunnis, adds to the feeling of national resilience, especially as Shias defied both a government supposedly favouring them since 2015, and its Iranian semi-protector. One noteworthy development following these events, which led to the Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi to step down from office, were the protest movements that simultaneously took place in Iran and which were just as violently repressed. These protests denounced the regional diplomacy and interventionist policy of the Islamic Republic, considered economically and diplomatically too costly.

This adherence to the idea of a national community superseding tribal and regional identities finds an echo in Libya. The results of consultations conducted for the Libyan National Dialogue Conference in 2018 with all groups making up the Libyan society pointed to the primacy of the attachment to sovereignty and citizenship over nine other cardinal points that should achieve consensus. Ultimately feeling Libyan predominated, followed by demands for a strong State.²⁰

The limitations of federalism in the region

The recent emergence due to civil wars of “grey zones”, which the central authority cannot control and which ultimately take the shape of “proto-States”, like the Iraqi Kurdistan or Rojava in Syria²¹, questions more acutely the relevance and sustainability of federalism in the region. Even as the idea of a unitarian and coherent State is broadly supported (just like the rejection of a break-up), it is yet to be determined whether or not a Nation-State system, at least in its European version, is possible and desirable for countries shaped by multiple identities and centrifugal forces. Firstly, a federal system – the only functioning example in the region being the United Arab Emirates – supposes the existence of a centre (in the aforementioned case the city of Abu Dhabi, governed by the strong-man of the Federation, Mohamed Bin Zayed). Secondly, in order to sustainably build – or rather re-build – a nation, there needs to be a preexisting state structure. Finally, a federal system needs to be inclusive and representative of all the regions and populations making up the country. However such criterias cannot be met in the countries most affected by a process of territorial fragmentation.

20. Patrick Haimzadeh, presentation of the results of the consultation conducted by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) of Geneva in order to prepare the Libyan National Dialogue Conference, IRSEM, November 23, 2018.

21. Michel Foucher gives an «infra-neo-national (or micro-infra-national)” dimension to this type of territory with a strong linguistic or historical identity, 2017, *Vers un monde néo-national* (with Bertrand Badie), CNRS éditions.

BOLSTERING THE BUILDING OF NATIONS: HINDRANCE OR ENABLER OF REGIONAL PEACE?

Despite the repeated unitarian professions of faith of the ruling Arabic leaders in the second half of the 20th century, which called for pooling resources, policies, and even merging existing States, the MENA region has lived up to this day in fear a regional power with hegemonic ambitions emerging from its ranks. Candidates have ranged from Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt, then Saddam Hussein's Iraq and finally Saudi Arabia, although the country has never, except financially, quite had the capacity to assert its regional leadership beyond, and even there limitedly, the smaller Gulf monarchies. In Iran, where nationalism has always been claimed loud and clear, just as its ambition to become a non-Arabic yet dominating regional power in the Middle-East, the regional threats already concerning the Shah kept growing after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Hence a generalised feeling of mistrust and vulnerability worsened by the fact that, in a region where conflicts are mostly violently dealt with, national players bolster their potential regional ambition by finding allies or even external protectors.

A lack of regional hegemon

No regional organisation, starting with the most important one, the League of Arab States, or the Arab Maghreb League have managed to create at least a collective security framework or to overcome inter-states antagonisms and disputes. Even the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which aspires to be a multilateral organisation of cooperation with a military dimension, has not managed to become a structure providing collective security. The States of the region – drawing from this acknowledgment – progressively abandon their unitarian mottos and with the support of a majority of their populations overtly promote the defence of national interests which now prevails over any other consideration.

Hence, the fact that diplomatic relationships open up in the region between some States like the UAE and Bahreïn as well as Sudan and Morocco – although the two have not yet finished their respective process – is radically new in that the Palestinian question is not one of the prerequisites. It sets it apart from the 1979 Camp David agreement between Egypt and Israel, which included a framework agreement concerning the occupied territories and peace in the Middle-East. It marks the end of the “Arab consensus” which hinged on the peace plan suggested by the Saudian King Abdallah during the 2002 Beirut Arab Summit, which granted Israel its full recognition in exchange for the creation of a viable Palestinian State delimited by the 1967 borderlines.

This primacy of national identity in the Arabic world – which is not so much rediscovered as it is newer, more deeply-rooted and integrated to worldwide dynamics – questions nonetheless a potential advent of an aggressive state nationalism with hegemonic aspirations.

A comeback to “strong” Nation-States, that is to say structured and resilient, is not necessarily considered as desirable by internal and external players to the region as the Iraqi case shows once again. For some, like neo-conservatives and other American political movements²² but also for Tehran, a decentralised and weakened Iraqi State is better than a solid and structured Nation-State. Although Arab countries remember Sadam Hussein’s two wars of aggression against his neighbours, most do not share such a vision, no matter what their fears are regarding the potential or actual regional ambitions of other States. Indeed, they now tend to consider that the weak and/or collapsed States that are undergoing the pressure of centrifugal forces are the most likely to jeopardise their national safety.

Broadly speaking, the Middle-East is devoid of countries capable of wielding much influence over the region given the context while simultaneously harbouring a national ambition²³. Such an approach would require autonomous military, diplomatic and economic capabilities which every player lacks, despite appearances and some display of voluntarism. Despite its display of nationalism, Egypt is too reliant on foreign trade to hope to regain its former rank. Saudi Arabia does not seem capable of shouldering the role of leader of the Arabic world – maybe over the GCC but even so limitedly – despite the lack of rivals competing for the leadership and the strongly nationalist project on which hinges Mohamed Bin Salman’s personal power. Finally, Iran’s old national ambition to become a regional power appears to be fundamentally thwarted by the ideological and revolutionary nature of its regime.

This want of a hegemonic player thwarts however any attempt to look at the MENA region through Henri Kissinger’s perspective on international relations, which is based on a balance of powers whereby national security is best ensured when no country has the upper hand on the others. Indeed this is the prevailing situation from North Africa to the Persian Gulf and yet the arms race continues to be driven on and on by the unabated sentiment of distrust and vulnerability. In the end, Arabic countries now need each other to try and resolve endless regional crises as it corresponds to their rational national interests. The precedence given to the national dimension in regal domains does not appear in this case inconsistent with a strengthening of cooperation and multilateral approaches.

CONCLUSION

The comeback of a “neo-national world”²⁴ did not spare the MENA region where the question of national identity and State building has resurfaced in the last fifteen years, sometimes violently. The Arab uprisings have undeniably consecrated the Nation-State as a central and structuring element of the functioning of countries and their inhabitants.

22. In 2006, the future POTUS Joe Biden, when leading the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations had advocated the division of Iraq in three with a “Sunnistan” in the centre, a southern “Shiistan” and a Kurdish province in the North. He took up the same theme as vice-president when visiting Baghdad on April, 24 2016. Under Donald Trump’s presidency the idea of fostering an ethnic fragmentation was again supported, in Iran this time to undermine the country.

23. Raymond Hinnebush, “Failed Regional Hegemons: the case of the Middle East’s Regional Powers”, Seton Hall of Diplomacy and international relations, 14/2, 2013.

24. Foucher, “L’Orient un siècle après Sykes-Picot”.

Hence some may fear the tensions aroused by national selfishnesses but, in the end and despite appearances, these have always prevailed in this part of the world. Drawing from the events of the last years it can be said that the major risk which countries and societies of the region equally face is the development of “Nation-States” void of national identity and undermined by new ethnic, religious and communitarian solidarities. In order to prevail, it is crucial to foster the development of a national narrative and consciousness of the past where it is needed, so as to make the feeling of belonging to a nation prevail over other identities. Yet it is just as important that the ruling elites, whose ability to defend the economical interests of their respective countries becomes more and more challenged by their populations, can meet the increasingly pressing demands of the said populations for transparency and improvement of their daily lives.

Translation by Théo Ainley

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