POST-COLONIAL STATES AND THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST SINCE WORLD WAR TWO

By Samuel Helfont

Samuel Helfont is a Fox Fellow in FPRI's Program on the Middle East, and holds a *post-doctoral lectureship* in the University of Pennsylvania's interdisciplinary International Relations Program. In May 2015, he completed a PhD in Princeton University's Near Eastern Studies Department, where he wrote his dissertation on Saddam Hussein's use of religion to entrench his authoritarian regime, based on captured Ba'th Party and Iraqi state records. Helfont is the author of *Yusuf Al-Qaradawi: Islam and Modernity* (The Moshe Dayan Center/Tel Aviv University Press, 2009) and the FPRI monograph, *The Sunni Divide: Understanding Politics and Terrorism in the Arab Middle East*.

This article is based on Dr. Helfont's talk on the same subject at the FPRI Butcher History Institute on "Understanding the Modern Middle East: History, Identity, and Politics," held on October 17-18, 2015 in Philadelphia.

The term "post-colonial" has presented a seminal problem for historians of the 20th century Middle East. As this essay will detail, debates over the term have provided an important axis around which discussions of political identity revolve. Following World War Two European power in the Middle East crumbled and a number of post-colonial states emerged. These states often justified their existence in terms of ideologies that were tied to specific post-colonial, political identities. Endless debates have occurred over how much emphasis to put on the post-colonial nature of these states and their political identities. In this essay, I will discuss whether a state's status as post-colonial matters. If so, how? And what are the consequences? Following a general discussion of debates over post-colonialism, will look more closely at three case studies: Egypt, Iraq, and Iran.

Defining "Post-Colonial"

The first order of business is to define the term in question. The label post-colonial is applied in at least three distinct but related ways. First, and most basically, one can discuss the term as a temporal category. The Middle East was controlled by empires until the 20th century. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, these were often European colonial empires. Throughout the 20th century, colonial rule crumbled and various post-colonial states emerged. In that sense they are post-colonial simply because they emerged from colonial empires. This is not very controversial, but it is not the only way that post-colonialism is defined.

Next, the term post-colonial is sometimes used to describe a certain type of state and a certain type of politics. The states that emerged out of colonial empires in the Middle East often inherited the colonial institutions that were in place. Many of the leaders who emerged had been military officers who had served in armies that were run by the British, the French, or even the Ottomans. Many of the region's internal security services, such as Saddam Hussein's secret police, were formed by the colonial powers – in Iraq's case, the British. These institutions were designed by the colonial powers to control the populations from above. In other words, they were designed to protect the state from its own people rather than to protect it from outside militaries. And some have argued that these institutions continued to perform that function after the fall of colonial empires. Colonial rule was, therefore, a top down phenomenon. It was imposed. Thus, one could argue, it is not surprising that many of the states that emerged after the end of colonialism were non-democratic.

Because the post-colonial states were imposed from the top down, they were also weak in that they have had trouble carrying out their policies. Post-colonial societies, on the other hand, are said to be strong, in that people rely on social networks rather than the state to meet their needs. For example, they rely on tribes or villages notables. As a result it has been difficult for these states to carry out their policies and they have often had to resort to violence.[1]

These states have also been susceptible to coups, which have occurred in the range of two dozen times in the Middle East in the post-colonial period, depending on how one counts. These coups often came in waves. In the thirty years following World War Two, Syria experienced four coups and neighboring Iraq had three. These coups often compounded the problems of weak states and strong societies. In general, coups were carried out by a small group of military officers. Because of the nature of coups, the people who carried them out generally did not trust the institutions of the state which they took over. They did not want someone to do to them what they had just done to someone else. Yet they could not simply replace all the institutions and bureaucracies. As a result, they often had difficulty getting the state, let alone society, to act in the manner that they wished.

Some Middle Eastern states, such as Turkey or Iran, were never formally colonized, but they developed institutions similar to other post-colonial states. As will be discussed below in the case of Iran, they also faced many of the same challenges. As such, while they do not meet the first, temporal definition of post-colonial states, some people do consider them to be post-colonial in the structure of their states and politics.

It should be noted that this description of a post-colonial state is not universally accepted. In fact, it is hotly debated.[2] One could argue that the legacy of colonial empires has been over-emphasized and that these states are similar to other authoritarian states. Non-democratic states that were not colonies in large empires have often had difficulty getting their people to buy in to their policies – for example in the USSR.[3] And some states that were colonies fare much better than others. After all, places like Costa Rica, Israel, Ireland, and even the United States were colonies, but do not seem to fit into this model.

One could also argue that not only authoritarian states, but rather nation states in general have had to impose themselves on their societies. As such, some have attributed the problems that these Middle Eastern states have faced not to their post-colonial nature, but rather to bad governance, or political culture.

A third manner in which the term post-colonial has been used is as a post-modern critique. Proponents of this type of post-colonial analysis argue that the pillars of what we think of as modernity (liberalism, free markets, secularism etc.…) are not rational concepts that resulted from logical or scientific deliberation; rather they are social constructions that developed out of a particular Western, often Christian, experience. Modernity, therefore, is Western, and imperial powers have imposed the Western ways of thought associated with it on the Middle East.

For example, secularism could be described as emerging out of Christianity. Jesus ordered his followers to "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." No similar concept exists in Islam. Thus, it is believed by some that secularism is inherently tied to Christianity and cannot be imposed globally as a universal norm. Those who claim to be spreading universal values are simply extending Western power in the Middle East, and whether they like it or not, this cultural and intellectual domination over Middle Eastern societies has been part of the Western colonial project.

Such post-colonial critiques of modernity have been controversial. One could argue that many of the problems that the Middle East faces existed in the pre-Enlightenment West as well. Enlightenment thought, and what we refer to as modernity usually developed out of long battles with traditional, patriarchal systems – the same type of patriarchal systems that exist today in the Middle East. Women's rights were only achieved after significant, sometimes century-long struggles. Feminism was certainly not a norm for most of Western history, so how can one argue that it is inherently Western? And isn't suppression of women's rights in the Middle East the same as suppression of women's rights in the West? One could make similar points about other aspects of modernity. The West was not secular for most of its history. The Christian church certainly did not promote secularism. So how can one argue that secularism is somehow inherent in, or tied to, Christian teachings? Again, these debates are hotly contested and remain largely unresolved.

---

[1] Joel Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).
[2] See, for example, Timur Kuran, "The Vulnerability of the Arab State: Reflections on the Ayubi Thesis," *The Independent Review*, Vol. 3, No.1 (Summer 1998): 111–123.
[3] See, for example, Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

Post-Colonialism and Political Identity

In most cases, colonial empires did not simply give up their territories.[4] Anti-imperial movements among the colonized peoples agitated for independence. Identity played a major role in these anti-imperial movements, and those identities were often self-consciously anti-imperial. In other words, they defined themselves against the imperial order. In many ways, this is quite logical. If one does not have a political identity that is different than the ruling empire, why be independent? Accordingly, leaders of independence movements often attempted to frame their struggle in terms of political identity. In the Middle East, these identities were often a cocktail of ethnic nationalism, territorial nationalism, and religion.

These identities manifested differently in different places. Sometimes different movements within the same state used the same cultural building blocks but put different emphasis on each. Egypt had the Muslim Brotherhood, which used Arabism, Islam, and Egyptian identities, but they placed Islam above the others. Nasser, as will be discussed below, also used all of these identities, but he placed Arabism above the others. There were also socialists who viewed identity through the prism of class. Similar cultural and historical cocktails of identity could be found in other countries. For example, Syria and Lebanon had a Mediterranean or even Phoenician identity that some attempted to instrumentalize. Iraqis could point to ancient Mesopotamia.

When anti-imperial movements came to power following the end of colonial empires, and the subsequent coups, they did so in the name of what they claimed to be an authentic, indigenous political identity, which in their depiction of history, had been suppressed by the colonial power. Thus they tied the legitimacy of the states that they ruled to particular identities.

Nevertheless, most post-colonial states in the Middle East were quite diverse. They contained people who did not share the state's supposedly authentic political identity. Often, the political identities that anti-imperial movements stressed were representative of the lower or lower middle classes. Thus, elites and minorities did not fit well into the post-colonial categorizations of identity. They had often held positions of authority in the old system or were tied in some way to the old imperial order.

Such people were seen as inconvenient. However, they did not simply disappear with independence. As such, post-colonial rulers often had to grapple with the problem of what it meant to be independent. Was it enough to be formally independent? Or did they need to rid themselves of the old colonial order, including the people who represented it, and then replace it with a new system based on their supposedly authentic political identity.

A closer look at three case studies should help to illustrate these problems.

Egypt

At the beginning of the 20th century, Egypt was controlled by the British. It was one of the most cosmopolitan countries in the Middle East. It had large populations of Turks, Greeks, Jews, Italians, and Arabs from the Levant. Some of these communities had existed in Egypt for centuries. There were classes of people who spoke only French or Italian and could barely get by in Arabic. Alexandria in particular was quite diverse, and it location on the Mediterranean coast had made it home to large and historic Greek, Italian, and Jewish populations. These non-Arabic speaking populations were referred to as "*mutamassirun*" or Egyptianized people. They often had ties to the ruling elites and to international business networks.

Memoir literature covering this period often gives colorful details of this cosmopolitanism. In *Out of Egypt*, Andre Aciman describes his uncle as a "Turko-Italian-Anglophile-gentrified-fascist Jew who started his professional life peddling Turkish fezzes in Berlin and Vienna and was to end up the sole auctioneer of deposed [Egyptian] King Farouk's property."[5] Even within Egypt, one could live a very cosmopolitan life. Lucette Lagnado's father had never been outside the Arab world, yet, as she describes in her book, *The Man in the White Shark Skinned Suit*, "He began each day praying with fellow Jews. He did business with French Colonial merchants and Greek entrepreneurs. He gambled with wealthy Egyptians, including, on occasion, the king. [And he] socialized with British officers stationed in Cairo."[6]

When Egypt became independent in 1922, this cosmopolitan crowd did not initially suffer. The monarchy that ruled Egypt remained in place, and it had close ties to the British and international networks. However, anti-Imperialist movements in

---

[4] There are exceptions. The Gulf Arab emirates did not agitate for the British to leave. Nevertheless, by the 1960s and 1970s, the United Kingdom had lost the will and the means to continue its colonial project in the Persian Gulf.

[5] Aciman, pp. 7.

[6] Lagnado, p. 3.

Egypt soon began to form and to call not only for formal independence, but also for cutting ties with Britain and removing the remnants of the colonial order in Egypt. Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood wished to build and Islamic state. Nationalists wanted a republic.

The nationalists eventually won, and under the leadership of Gamal abd al-Nasser, they overthrew the monarchy in 1952. Over the next half decade, they expelled the British and created a republic. Nasser had initially articulated an ideology based on three circles of identity (Arab, African, and Islamic), but Arabism quickly became dominant.

He quickly suppressed the Islamists, who had collaborated with him in overthrowing the monarchy, but were rivals based on their different political identities. In the name of Arabism, his regime passed laws restricting the rights of the *mutamassirun* and other elites who had been tied to the old, colonial order in Egypt. He forced state institutions, such as schools and the bureaucracy to use Arabic as their sole language. Previously these institutions had been multilingual, and many of Egypt's elites had difficulty functioning at a high level in Arabic. He also nationalized many of the businesses that Egypt's elites and *mutamassirun* owned. During the colonial period, many non-Arabs had received citizenship from various European powers as a means of achieving protection from local authorities and advancing their financial interests. However, most of those who had received citizenship were native Egyptians, and sometimes had never even visited the country that had issued them a passport. While foreign citizenship was beneficial during the colonial period, it became a serious problem under Nasser's Arab nationalist regime. Eventually Nasser expelled or forced out most non-Arab Egyptians (i.e. Jews, Greeks, Italians, etc.) The largest of these expulsions occurred in response to the Suez Crisis on 1956, when Nasser nationalized the canal, and then the British, French, and Israelis invaded the Sinai. Nasser portrayed the non-Arab speaking Egyptians as foreign agents, and thus not Egyptian. They were forced to leave. As a result, Egypt over the past 60 years has become more and more Arab, and less cosmopolitan.

Iraq

The second case is Iraq. Iraq was an Ottoman territory, and then became a British mandate following World War One. When the British took over after the war, they appointed Sunni Arab nationalist Faisal as king of Iraq. He was from the Hejaz (the area around Mecca and Medina in what is now Saudi Arabia) and thus not an Iraqi. However, he had fought alongside the British officer "Lawrence of Arabia" during the war and Iraq was given to him as compensation. Thus, although he was an Arab nationalist, he owed his position in Iraq to the British.

In the early 20th century, Iraq was not as cosmopolitan as Egypt, in that it did not have as many international connections. However, it was much more diverse. It contained Arab Sunnis and Shi'is, Kurdish Sunnis and Shi'is, Turkmen, various Christians (Assyrians, Chaldeans, Roman Catholics, Armenians, Greek Orthodox, and even Protestants), Jews, Baha'is, Yazidis and others. In many regions of Iraq, these groups made up significant portions of the population. For example, while it may be difficult to believe today, the largest community in Baghdad during the interwar period was Jewish.

Like in Egypt, many of the linguistic and religious minorities looked to the ruling empires for support. They had done so under the Ottomans, and then again under the British. This aligned the interests of these groups with the colonial rulers, and caused trouble for them when the colonial powers departed.

The Assyrians, for instance, had served as soldiers for the British. This fact was resented by many Muslims and when Iraq became independent in 1932, some of the Muslim populations settled scores. In 1933 they massacred large numbers of Assyrians in Northern Iraq and destroyed their villages.

Jews also had close ties to the British, and many Iraqi Jews used the global nature of the British Empire to create large and very successful businesses, stretching from Baghdad to Manchester England to India. The well-known Sassoon family, for example, was Iraqi and Jewish. Again, after the British left, Iraqi nationalists saw the Jews as tied to or remnants of the old colonial order. They were depicted as foreigners, despite the fact that they had been in Iraq for over 2000 years – since the Babylonian exile described in the Bible. The Jews eventually left *en masse* in the early 1950s. Today there are none left.

Iraq was plagued by numerous coups throughout the middle decades of the 20th century. Eventually the Ba'th Party came to power in 1968. Saddam Hussein was the power behind the scene in the Ba'thist regime and eventually became president in 1979. The Ba'thist were radical Arab nationalists and they saw Iraq as an Arab state. However, this brought them into conflict with Iraq's diverse social fabric. The minority communities in Iraq adopted different strategies to deal with the Ba'thists based on their particular circumstances. Shi'is were not persecuted for being Shi'is but for having perceived ties to Iran and the

Persians. Thus Shi'is who aligned with the Ba'th Party could advance to the high levels. The Assyrians, which are a religio-ethnic-linguistic group, could emphasize their religious identity. They encountered less problems with the Ba'thist regime if they depicted themselves as Assyrian Christian Arabs rather than as a separate ethnic group. Kurds had more trouble. Although there were some Kurds who became Ba'thists, Kurds clearly were not Arabs. The Ba'thists, particularly under Saddam Hussein's rule, were skeptical of all Kurds and dealt with them harshly. He transferred Arabs into strategic Kurdish areas in an attempt to alter the demographics. The most radical tactic the Ba'thist employed was gassing the Kurds, which occurred in the late 1980s around the Iraqi region of Halabja.

As one might expect, over the years, Iraq has become much less diverse. There are no longer any Jews. The Christian populations are dwindling and may disappear. More recently, groups like the Yazidis are have a very difficult time. So like in Egypt, a process of homogenization is occurring in Iraq.

Iran

The final case study looks at Iran. One could question the appropriateness of including Iran here. It is clearly as not post-colonial as the other two cases in that it was never colonized. In the first half of the 20th century, the British and the Russians divided Iran into spheres of influence, but it was never formally part of a European empire.

Despite this, many of the same antagonisms toward colonialism and imperialism emerged in Iran as in other Middle Eastern states. The Pahlavi Shahs, who ruled as the monarchs of Iran through most of the 20th century, were supported by Western powers. The most controversial episode with regard to this support occurred in 1953, when Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossedeq threatened Western interests in Iran by nationalizing the Iranian oil industry. The United States and the British supported his ouster and then restored the pro-Western Shah, who had fled the country during the crisis.

Within Iran, political and religious movements formed in opposition to Western influence in Iran. Much like their post-colonial counterparts, they framed Western policies as a type of neo-imperialism. These movements came together in 1979 during the Iranian revolution to overthrow the Shah. Like in Egypt, the various nationalists, socialists, and Islamists were able to cooperate based on this anti-imperial framing. In Egypt, the nationalists succeeded and then suppressed the socialists and Islamists. In Iran, the Islamists succeeded and then suppressed the socialists and nationalists. But one can see a similar pattern.

After taking over, Ayatollah Khomeini ruled Iran in the name of Shi'i Islam. However, he also mixed in Persian nationalism. Another name for the Persian Gulf is the Arabian Gulf, which is the name preferred not only by Arabs, but also by the United States. The name has been hotly disputed by nationalists on all sides. When Khomeini was presented with the option of transcending these nationalistic debates and simply calling it the Islamic Gulf, he refused, and insisted that it was the Persian Gulf. This Persian chauvinism has created problems in Iran. Persian and Iranian are sometimes used synonymously; however, they are not the same. Persian is an ethno-linguistic group. Iran is a state in which 50-60 percent of the people are Persians. Islamic Iran, like post-colonial states, has championed what its supporters consider to be an authentic, indigenous political identity (in this case, Persian Shi'ism) as an alternative to what they see as the old colonial order. As such, Islamic Iran attempted to impose Persian Shi'ism on a heterogeneous society. In the process it has marginalized other languages and restricted the rights of other religious groups. In that way, though Iran was never formally colonized, it has faced many of the same issues as states that emerged out of colonial empires.

Conclusion

As the Iran case demonstrates, not all states that demonstrate post-colonial tendencies were actually colonized. Furthermore, as was mentioned above, some states that were colonized do not demonstrate these features. So the debate will continue as to how useful the term post-colonialism is. Nevertheless, arguments about post-colonialism and post-colonial states are very prominent in the history of the Middle East. I hope that, if nothing else, this essay has provided a better understanding of what those debates are about.