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INTRODUCTION: EXPLAINING REGIONAL ARAB POLITICS

The Conceptual Approach

This book is about regional Arab politics and the conflict with Israel. It examines the interplay between Arab multilateral, collective politics and the individual Arab state through the prism of the Arab-Israeli conflict as the ultimate sphere of interaction between state interests and all-Arab commitments. My main concern is with the impact of this interplay on shaping international rules and institutions prescribed to realize common goals and enhance regional order, i.e., regularized pattern of state behavior.

More specifically, the study is interested in answering the following questions: What was the role of the Arab states system and its collective institutions in regulating inter-state relations and managing the conflict with Israel? How did the Arab-Israeli conflict affect the tension between *raison d'état* and *raison de la nation,* that is, between individual state interests and collective Arab obligations? And finally, what were the strategies and means used by the individual Arab actors, states and non-states, to enhance their autonomous capabilities and authority in conjunction with, and at the expense of, other actors and the Arab regional system as a whole?

These questions are validated by the inconsistency between the expected roles and practical behaviors of each of these political institutions.[1] Imbued by the ideal of Arab unity, Arab collective institutions have been expected to enhance Arab regional solidarity and conformity, particularly on issues of common Arab concern, of which the Palestine conflict[2] is most prominent. Practically, however, these institutions were predominantly concerned with procedures protecting the regional multi-sovereign Arab states. On the other hand, collectivism along strictly Arab considerations collides with a central attribute of the state as a distinct political actor in international relations, namely, its claim for exclusive authority over its national decision making. Yet being a member of the regional Arab system also entails opportunities for the state to enlist external moral, political, and economic resources, ultimately

contributing to state formation. Indeed, inter-Arab politics often seem fraught with ambivalent, sometimes contradictory, political behavior. The interchangeably restrictive-distributive role of the regional Arab system, and the individual states' inherent quest for further capabilities and autonomous decision making constitute a guiding theme in this study.

Unlike the European state, the Arab state was, by and large, a juridical rather than empirical phenomenon, whose emergence expressed foreign will rather than a process of state formation from within. Many Arab states thus reached independence while lacking effective institutions, socio-political cohesion, and popular legitimacy. Furthermore, the Arab modern state inherited an extremely complicated social and economic structure marked by nomadic pastoralism, long distance trade, and semi-autonomous primordial groups—tribes, ethnic or religious minorities—concentrated in mountainous or arid areas where the premodern central administration was irregular.[3] These social structures have remained a major obstacle in the process of state formation in the Middle East as a whole, especially with regard to building centralized state capabilities. Moreover, like most of the new states, the political borders of many Arab states were in varying degrees incongruent with their social structure and political or economic orientations. In addition, however, state formation in the Arab world confronted an incomparable problem among Third World states, namely the blurred boundaries between state and collective, supra-state[4] identity inspired by common Arab-Islamic culture, history, and vision. Hence, post-colonial ruling elites in the Arab world had to confront, in addition to Third World conventional agonies of state building and social change, constant ideological challenges to their institutional legitimacy from both domestic and regional actors.

State formation in the Arab world was indeed inherently linked to inter-Arab, regional power politics, the origins of which were rooted in the colonial and early independence period. The phenomenon of Arab regional politics represented interrelated processes of state formation, quest for regional hegemony, rapid socio-political changes, and the emergence of Pan-Arab nationalism as a dominant regional discourse. Hence, internal as well as regional competition for power have been increasingly conducted in the name of all-embracing ideals—primarily Pan-Arab nationalism—in disregard of borders and state sovereignty. Pan-Arabism thus became both a curse and an asset for ruling elites, serving their quest for legitimacy and claims for regional power or solidarity and yet entangling them in a costly game of eroding each other's legitimacy and intensifying domestic and regional instability. Indeed, every actor could *speak* in the name of the Arab nation though none could claim to *be* the nation itself,[5] that is, to enforce his hegemony on the Arab region as a whole. Arab regional politics were further intensified by the elasticity and self-

interested interpretation that marked Pan-Arabism as well as the role of institutions established to fulfill its goals.

Although the confusion of nation and state has been the watermark of Arab regional politics, it fluctuated along time and space in close interaction with decolonization, socio-political changes and domestic stability. Under the revolutionary regimes, assertive Arab nationalism, and anti-Western outcry, was elevated to a state religion, reflecting its central role in building their new authority and legitimacy. The result was inter-Arab turbulence and regional disorder through the 1950s and 1960s, typically marking the novelty of these states and their social incoherence. This was particularly evident in the Fertile Crescent, reflecting the weakness of state capabilities, socio-political turbulence, and direct involvement in the Palestine conflict. Indeed, nowhere else in the Arab world was the outcry for supra-state conformity as compelling as in the Fertile Crescent countries which, combined with Egypt's bold interference and efforts to coerce its all-Arab hegemony, constituted the core of the regional Arab system.

Despite strong centripetal forces advocating Arab collectivism, however, modern inter-Arab relations have been marked by a quest for stable regional order based on equality and mutual recognition among its member states. As the leading agent of social modernization and secularization, the Arab state was bound to contain, if not defeat, supra-state concepts of identity and establish its own space and status. Notwithstanding the absence of a hegemonic power, vast discrepancies among Arab states' capabilities and social structures, Arab regional politics have undergone a slow transition from one dominated by culture, identity, and symbols, to state-based formal institutions and negotiated order. This transformation was a result of interrelated intra- and extra-state processes: The Arab state's grown capability to enforce its authority over the society and defy external intrusion, and the Arab regional system's stipulation of mechanisms—such as balance of power, diplomacy, and interdependence—and formal institutions legitimizing individual states' power and enhancing inter-Arab coexistence. Struck by growing limits of power and resources as well as by domestic and mutual regional threats, Arab regimes manifested growing willingness to work together within a regional states system based on commonly accepted norms and institutions prescribed to protect actors' sovereignties, prevent hegemony, and reduce inter-Arab conflicts.[6]

Hence, the gulf between Arab nationalist vision and political reality has become increasingly a character trait of state-society relations in the Arab world, underlaid by traditional political cleavages and frustrated hopes for social and economic progress so typical among developing societies.[7] Still, the viability of the Arab state vis-à-vis Pan-Arab nationalism has remained de-

bated, with survey analyses pointing to a gap between elite groups identifying with the state, and the masses, among whom Pan-Arab identity appeared to be strong.[8] This underlines the need for a historical study examining the developing relationships between the Arab state and the supra-state centripetal symbols and ideas.

The comparative literature on Middle East politics[9] has been marked by a dichotomy between regionalist, focusing on the Arab states system, and state-centric, identifying the Arab state as an independent actor. Both approaches refer to the dialectic between Arab collectivism and state particularism as a conflict, disrupting domestic and regional stability.[10] By and large, this conflict has been tackled in the context of state formation, explaining the constraints confronting the legitimation of this process in terms of both state-society relations and external claims for Pan-Arab conformity. The discussion of Arab state formation focused on state-based strategies employed by ruling elites to insulate their societies and defy external ideological challenges to state sovereignty. However, little attention was given to the role of the Arab regional system as an institutional actor shaping inter-state relations and, in fact, playing a role in state formation.[11]

Concluding the European experience of state building, the main attributes of the state have been identified as control over a well-defined territory, centralized government, differentiation from other organizations, and claim for monopoly of the physical means of coercion within its territory. Yet in addition to these Weberian, state-centric attributes, theorists of state building and international relations also emphasize the international dimensions of state building, namely, the emergence and evolution of an international system of states, acknowledging, and to some extent guaranteeing, each other's existence as distinct and sovereign within recognized territorial boundaries.[12]

International recognition may depend on the state's capability to enforce its authority within a given territory and defend it against external challenges. Yet capability is neither a prerequisite for international recognition nor necessarily state-centered. Since most developing states do not possess the ability to defend themselves, the significance of international legitimacy for their sovereignty and territorial integrity is essential. This has been manifested in Africa, where states have "adopted institutional armor" to protect their independence and sovereignty, undertaking self-restrictions on state action externally.[13]

The dimension of international legitimacy is especially complex in the case of Arab states where legitimacy of authority draws on both local constituency and regional collective acquiescence. If sovereignty means "an ultimate and exclusive political authority within a given territory" to "decide for itself how it will cope with its internal and external problems,"[14] the Arab state suffers from an inherent weakness. Indeed, nowhere else was sovereign policy-

making of states challenged by external actors as strongly as in the case of Arab states, facing delegitimation, military threats, and diplomatic sanctions that demonstrated the weakness of the state (*dawla*) and claim for its deference to the all-Arab nation (*umma*). Hence, Arab states' foreign policy on issues of common Arab concern had been inherently restricted by interactive forces both regional and within society.

Furthermore, one's assertion of Pan-Arab nationalism could, by virtue of its threat to other actors' sovereignty, serve as a source of state capability. Still, state power was a significant factor in determining sovereignty in inter-Arab dynamics. Military capability, especially when combined with determination to employ it against adversaries, including Arabs, enabled governments to monopolize violence and enforce control over society. In addition, it could serve as a coercive means to extract economic resources and obtain political influence on the regional level in the name of collective Arab interest. In time, however, given the price of turbulent inter-Arab relations, Arab ruling elites were obliged to seek ways of mutual accommodation.

Just as the European modern nation-state was a product of prolonged violent intra- and inter-state struggles, so was it a product of routinized relationships between states in peacetime, allied by common institutions. Such cooperation was essential for generating stability and mutuality in inter-Arab relations, representing common interests such as stable regional order—hence, control of societal and non-state actors—and advancement of common goals.[15] Precisely because Arab ruling elites shared both a quest for bolstering their sovereignty and defying threats of non-state actors and supra-state symbolism, it was necessary to create a normative regional order.

Charles Tilly's "War made the state, and the state made war," is especially appropriate in the case of those Arab states immediately concerned with the Palestine conflict. The state of war with Israel legitimized claims for sharing or redistribution of "collective Arab resources," namely oil—crucial, given the poor taxation in most of the Arab states—as well as claims for regional leadership. Prolonged involvement in external military threats such as the state of war with Israel or the Gulf war justified a considerable growth of the armed forces as well as the expenditures for their maintenance and armament. Conditions of war also justified sustaining the military in power, enabling the state to deepen its penetration into society and to repress dissidents and rebels.[16] Yet the Palestine conflict, by virtue of its symbolic significance, was also bound to enhance inter-Arab competition, disrupting regional order and mutual recognition. It was in this context that the Arab states sought to regularize their multilateral relations through regional institutions whose all-Arab status lent legitimacy to incremental departure from Arab common obligations toward the Palestine conflict through recurrent redefinition of Arab collective strategy in the conflict with Israel. Indeed, if state sovereignty is

ultimately measured by its capacity to make war and peace, the shifting rela-
tionships between Arab states and Israel from war to contractual peace during
the period under discussion manifests a triumph of the state over supra-state
commitments.

This book presents a systemic scrutiny of more than three decades of
Middle East international history, demonstrating the changing patterns of state
behavior, primarily on the regional level. My approach is both comparative—
discussing real inter-state relations—and region-centered, in terms of the Arab
world's specific commonality of history and culture. The study considers the
regional Arab system as an independent causal factor explaining state behavior
in international relations. Apart from inter-state relations, this study focuses on
collective institutions as the common ground where Arab states' interests and
shared obligations converge to produce collective policies and disagreements
on core issues. It is the arena where supra-state allegiances and commitments,
reflecting the region's common Arab-Muslim history, culture, and vision, play
an important role in generating both opportunities and constraints for state
building. This leads to the assumption that the relation between the regional
system and the individual state is complementary, not merely antagonistic,
with routinizing impact on state formation and regional order. Focusing on the
Arab-Israeli conflict enables me to examine the degree to which Arab states
grew stronger in terms of their ability to withstand external supra-state sym-
bolic pressures, to keep their societies at bay from such influences and conduct
autonomous foreign policy, particularly on Arab core issues.