

René Klaff

PROBLEMS OF STATE-BUILDING IN THE MIDDLE EAST, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SYRIA

Abstract

The paper deals with the contradictory process of state-building in the Middle East. The state is held to be the key variable in order to understand the manifold conflicts in the Middle East, especially in the Arab world. It is argued that the mere concept of state is artificial and illegitimate in Arab political culture, which is mainly characterized by Islam and Arab nationalism. The indigenous concepts defining institutions and the political community are not compatible with the elements characterizing the modern, predominantly Western concept of state, which is actually equivalent with nation-state. The article focuses on the variables 'nation' and 'territoriality' in order to present the general argument; the case of Syria is chosen as a specific example.

1. The Concepts of 'State' and 'Nation-State' in the Middle Eastern Context

Although political analysis has rediscovered the importance of the concept of state¹, there is still a considerable lack of systematic studies dealing with the state in non-Western societies. This is also true for the Middle Eastern, and especially Arab, context.² Middle Eastern studies have primarily focused on the problems of the legitimacy of political systems established within Arab states. In many respects, however, the state itself should be treated as the key variable in order to understand political disorder and conflicts in the Arab world.

A stable regional order has not yet been established in the Arab Middle East; the existing political and social organisations are being questioned by an increasing number of segments within the population. The core unit in this respect is the state. The established Arab states are not "here to stay"³ under all circumstances, as we can see from the recent attempt to do away with one state, Kuwait, by another, Iraq. The positive enthusiasm among the Arab masses over Saddam Hussein's step is a good indicator of the unstable and illegitimate Arab state system in general.

In order to understand the reasons for this phenomenon, one has to remember that the mere concept of "state" is of European origin.⁴ The state can be defined as the "authoritative political institution that is sovereign over a recognized territory"⁵. Since the French Revolution, the state has also acquired importance as the principle form of collective identity in European and American political cultures. Therefore, it is also defined "... by a common national identity as well as a common political loyalty."⁶ In this context, the concept of state is equivalent with the concept of nation-state. As a result of the globalization of the European state system during the

last century, the nation-state has indeed become the core unit and principal actor in the international system.

In Islamic and Arabic political cultures, however, there is no tradition which sets the foundations for a *raison d'être* of a modern nation-state comparable to that which has been the result of the political evolution of Europe. There are other forms of collective identity which bind people together — or set them apart —, which are different from the concept of 'nation' in the Western sense of the word. Consequently, nation-states are theoretically separate from the indigenous political culture of the Arabs⁷, at least in the form that Syrian, Lebanese, Kuwaiti ... 'nation-states' have been established. Therefore, there is a considerable lack of legitimacy regarding not only the ruling elites or the political systems but also the established states in the Arab world themselves. This explains why regional conflicts and cleavages should not be analyzed in an isolated way but rather be seen in the wider context of the lacking regional state order.

In order to understand the specific problems of the legitimacy of Arab states, one has to analyze how the basic elements that constitute the modern concepts of state and nation-state are being referred to in the Arab context. In this paper, the focus will be primarily on the elements of territoriality and nation. After a general discussion of these elements, a closer look at the specific situation of one Arab state — Syria — will explain the contradictory process of state-building in the Arab world.

2. The Contradictions of Arab State and Arab Nation

2.1 *Ideal Concepts of Unity: The Role of Islam and Arabism*

In the Muslim world, of which the Arab region is the central part, political concepts have essentially been shaped by Islam. From its early beginnings, Islam has been a political religion, i.e. it has extended beyond the sphere of the mere spiritual, metaphysical aspects of human life. Unlike the modern, Western connotation of religion, there is no clearcut separation of a religious and a secular, a spiritual and a temporal world in Islam. The Prophet Mohammed founded a state in which God's revealed will was recognized as the only legitimate basis for the social and political organization of man. Norms and conduct in this Islamic state were to follow the religious law of Islam, the *shari'a*, which had to be deduced from God's revelations. Thus, in Islam, politics has always centered around religion and is actually a part of it. The history of the Muslim world, therefore, is a political history, which from its very beginnings has experienced statehood⁸.

The effects for the political identity of Muslims are manifold. Everyone who makes Islam his religion, i.e. who shares the Islamic belief system and submits to Islamic law, belongs to the community of believers, the *umma*. The Islamic *umma* is both a religious and a political community since only the Muslims form the fully recognized political community in the Islamic state. Consequently, there can be no equality between Muslims and Non-Muslims in the Islamic State. Non-Muslims are socially and politically in a subordinate position. Other types of politically relevant forms of collective identities are alien to the norms of Islam. It is not the common language,

history and culture, or the free will based on shared values, as in the Western concepts of 'nation', but it is religion which forms the basis of collective identity. Thus, the concept of 'nation-state' is equally alien to Islamic political thought⁹. The idea of a specific Arab nation which came into being in the 19th century, for instance, is a clear result of the infiltration of Western political thought in the realm of Islam.

An important consequence of this notion concerns the question of sovereignty. In Islam, only God is sovereign. He delegates his sovereignty to authorities legitimized to exercise power according to the rules of the *shari'a*. No other source of legislation is legitimate. The *shari'a* has to be deduced mainly from God's revelation, the Koran. Ideally, politics is thus the interpretation of God's will oriented toward solving day-to-day problems¹⁰. Islam precludes the idea of impersonal public authority, or the sovereignty of the people, from which the title of a government to rule could be legitimately derived. There is no element in Islamic political thought according to which the concept of sovereign nation-states could be accepted. Such an idea ultimately rests upon the belief that man is sovereign, not God; but putting God's sovereignty into question is considered blasphemous in Islam. In Islamic political thought, the state as the necessary organization of political authority is always the Islamic State, never the nation-state.

Thus, the idea of several defined territories over which sovereignty could be exercised legitimately, is also unknown to Islamic political thought. Where man is ruled by Islam, there is the *dar al-Islam* (lit.: the house of Islam); where Islamic law, i.e. God's authority, has not yet been installed, there is the *dar al-harb* (lit.: the house of war). Ideally, the whole world will be ruled by Islam because there can be no reason why certain areas should not benefit from the rule of legitimate, i.e. Islamic, law and organization, and thus why certain peoples should not belong to the community of believers, the *umma*. *Dar al-Islam* and *umma* are universal concepts, which have no territorial aspects whatsoever¹¹.

We can conclude, then, that the central elements of the Western concepts of state and nation-state either have another connotation or no equivalent at all in Islam. The aspects of nation, sovereignty, and territoriality, which are all inextricably linked with one another and which all have a specific meaning when Westerners use the concepts of state and nation-state, have a different or no meaning in traditional Islamic political culture.

Nevertheless, the ideal of the world-embracing rule of Islam has been far from realisation throughout Islamic history. Although ideally Islam was a single state, which had to be ruled by a Caliph in the name of God's law, and in which the Muslims, bound together by faith, constituted the Islamic *umma* as the legitimate form of political organisation of mankind, reality was different. Since the 8th century, the *dar al-Islam* was divided into separate, distinctive entities, i.e. different states; "Muslim peoples had in fact ... created political institutions, and had organized themselves to take political action."¹² Moreover, Islam soon split into different sects, leaving what later became the Sunnis as the dominant orthodox branch of Islam, and several heterodox communities, with the Shiites as the largest in size. But despite these facts, Islamic theory has never been abandoned; the specific notions of only one legitimate Islamic State, of the *umma* and the *dar al-Islam* have never been replaced. Thus, loyalty could at best be confessed to a specific government which was able to construct the

fiction of exercising power according to the *shari'a*. Loyalty was not confessed to concepts such as the territorial state, the nation or the nation-state.

The concepts of modern, secular European political culture began to infiltrate the Islamic and the Arab world, respectively, only one and a half centuries ago. The notion of a distinctive Arab nation (*al-umma al-'arabiyya*) was developed in the context of the 'Arab Awakening', the struggle for independence against the Ottoman Empire and, later, against the colonial powers of Great Britain and France¹³. The political programs of Arab Nationalism reflected a considerable impact of secular, Western ideas. It received its contemporary significance as a dominant ideology in the Middle East in its pan-Arabic versions, as outlined by writers such as Sati' al-Husri¹⁴. Originally limited to the Fertile Crescent and the Arabian Peninsula, the idea of a single Arab nation later included Egypt and North Africa as well.

The Arab nation is foremost defined by language. Anyone whose native language is Arabic belongs to *al-umma al-'arabiyya*; the secondary determinants are a common culture and mentality, and the memory of the history of the Arabs, who in pre-Islamic times inhabited the Peninsula and, since the rise of Islam, live in the region between the Atlantic Ocean in the West and the Arabian Gulf in the East, the Taurus and Amanus mountains in the North and the Sahara in the South. Thus, the concept of *al-umma al-'arabiyya* is connected with a specific territory. In Arab political discourse, the defined territory is referred to as the Arab Homeland, *al-watan al-'arabi*¹⁵.

It cannot be our task to analyze the evolution of Arabism or the impact of Islamic political thought on the concepts of Arabism, especially concerning the concept of sovereignty. It suffices to state here that Arabism is embedded in an interpretation of the concepts of territoriality and 'nationness', which is structurally different from Islamic political thought. However, the political development of the Arab world contradicts the political visions of the two dominant strings that shape its contemporary political concepts and aspirations. As a result of two world wars and the influence of European powers, the Arab world became fragmented into 21 different states, thus preventing the unitary concepts of Islamic political thought and Arabism from materializing.

2.2 The Fragmented Reality: The Contemporary Arab States and Regimes

As a consequence of the implantation of the European-styled inter-state system in the Arab world the contemporary Arab state faces two structural sources of conflicts: internal pressures within the polity since the time of the system's institutionalization; and external pressures from other actors in the system over territorial disputes or the distribution of power in the system¹⁶. Both sources of conflicts are a result of the fact that the new states within the Arab world are artificial in the sense that they have no historical precedents. Thus, the internal and external conflicts are to a considerable degree about their very nature and legitimacy. Let us first deal with the internal conflicts.

Generalizations are difficult to establish, since the actual causes of internal conflicts in the modern Arab states, in this respect vary considerably. Many of the new countries had had a discontinuous or no experience at all with state or bureau-

cratic development. In addition, the social forces out of which states and bureaucratic apparatuses had to be built were, and still are, quite different in the Arab world. In the cases of Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, a national bureaucracy with control over its territory had already been established by the time of independence. In cases such as Lebanon, Libya, or Yemen, "... administrative penetration was not extensive, the national military establishment did not enjoy a monopoly of force, and the government was unable to collect significant revenues domestically."¹⁷ Moreover, state-like organizations have developed within the Arab system such as the PLO and POLISARIO, which have established much of the institutional framework necessary for running a state, but which have no control over territory.

Apart from the question of who was to rule in the new states and on what basis of legitimacy, their territories were set up through colonial action, and the population within its boundaries had no feeling of what might be called national solidarity or integration. The only exception is Egypt, since this country has a specific Egyptian cultural and historical tradition, including a history of state-building, or at least of quasi-autonomy as a distinct province of Islamic Empires¹⁸. But especially in the Fertile Crescent and, to various degrees, in the rest of the Arab world, the new states had no historical or cultural roots among the population. Neither the political concepts of Islam (the universal Islamic *umma*; *dar al-Islam*), nor those of Arabism (*al-umma al-'arabiyya*; *al-watan al-'arabi*) were reflected in the new political reality. This is one of the fundamental reasons for the various identity crises the Arab world has experienced over the last decades.

In addition, "... just as the boundaries of the economic formations of (the new states) are often incongruent with the political borders, ... (their) social structure and ideological reflections are not necessarily congruent with the political systems. ... The notions of citizenship, patriotism, and love of country which undergird loyalty to the modern state frequently face competing conceptions of identity, loyalty, and legitimacy."¹⁹

These competing conceptions challenge the nature and legitimacy of the new states most severely. The different notions of loyalty may be called 'local' or subnational since they refer to smaller units within the specific states defined by primordial affiliations. One of the fundamental characteristics of the Arab world, and indeed the whole Middle East, is the fragmentation along ethnic and religious lines. The pattern of the Arab states' social structure, in this respect, can be interpreted as a 'mosaic' composed of a variety of different ethno-religious — or sectarian — groups²⁰. The mosaic structure varies from state to state concerning the size of different groups and the degree of fragmentation; but there is no Arab state that escapes the challenges to its internal stability caused by the different aspirations of specific ethno-religious groups which are incompatible with the established central state's authority and legitimacy. This kind of fragmentation usually leads to cleavages between majority and minority groups. They bear the potential of leading to antagonistic conflicts, if minority groups perceive a politically or socially subordinate position within the state's society, or if majority groups feel subdued by minority groups. The processes of state formation and bureaucratic development have indeed worked in this direction. Certain ethnic groups, such as the Kurds or the Berbers, were divided among different states, other groups did not benefit equally from the distributive capacities of the new political

systems, such as the Shiites in Lebanon and Iraq. Social and economic cleavages of this kind subsequently lead to a reinforcement of sectarian cleavages.

Lebanon is the best example where antagonistic conflicts on a sectarian basis led to a total disruption of an established state. Kurdish nationalism is a challenge for the states of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and possibly Syria.

On the other hand, there are minorities which have been able to achieve a dominant position in their respective states. The Alawite rule in Syria, the Sunni/Takriti rule in Iraq, the Hashemite rule in Jordan are but a few examples for Arab states in which certain groups defined by sectarian and/or tribal affiliations managed to dominate the political system. As a matter of fact, thorough analysis reveals that most of the political elites in Arab states are minority elites determined by sectarian, tribal, and/or regional affiliation²¹. "Such situations do not arise from a sudden decision by (a certain minority group) to get together and establish their domination ... But in a time of crumbling institutions and faltering loyalties, those who happen to seize power in one way or another soon begin to feel threatened and seek the support and help of those whom they trust and on whom they can rely. And what is more natural than for them to call their old friends of the same region, of the same family, of the same tribe or sect?"²²

Thus, altogether, the internal situation in most of the Arab states is one in which subnational groups dominate the state apparatus. In other words: the state often functions as the organizational basis of particular social groups. This constitutes the prime impediment for the creation of an integrated national political culture within the boundaries of the individual states. Consequently, although the states in the Arab world have on the whole proven to be remarkably consistent, they are not nation-states. National identity is still expressed through upholding the ideal of belonging to the greater Arab nation. With the exception of mere ethnic minorities, such as the Berbers of North Africa, the non-Arab southerners of Sudan, the Kurds of Iraq and Syria, and some small ethno-linguistic minorities in the Fertile Crescent, all other sectarian groups in the Arab world accept this notion. There is no political system in the Arab world which could neglect building its legitimacy at least partially on its specific interpretation of Arab nationalism²³.

Thus, in the Arab Middle East, there are three competing indigenous concepts of primordial affiliation: the Islamic *umma*, "the broadest, most inclusive, (but) least elaborated category"²⁴; *al-umma al-'arabi*, the Arab nation; and the 'local', primarily sectarian reference groups, which most accurately define the actual patterns of solidarity. None of them, however, is equivalent with the nation — and thus the nation-state concept — which represents the ideational basis for the contemporary Arab state system.

This situation is closely linked with external pressures on Arab states. The sense of all-Arab identity; the existing arbitrary state order; and the lack of individual regimes' legitimacy have led to consequences specific to the Arab state system. First, there is a strong urge for overcoming the fragmentation of the system by creating a political union of the Arab world. This has led to periodic attempts at merging various Arab states as a first step toward achieving overall Arab unity. Interestingly enough, most of these attempts were forced by states dominated by minority groups²⁵.

Secondly, because of the sense of overall Arab identity, there is a tendency of the Arab population at large to identify with those Arab leaders or movements whom they see fit, for whatever reason, to establish the political unity of the Arab world. The Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasir is the classic example; Saddam Hussein's strategy of legitimacy building in the Kuwait-affair is based on this phenomenon as well. The structural effect of this pan-Arab appeal, however, is the vulnerability it creates for the single Arab regime. It creates trans-state alliances of pan-Arab movements, such as the Nasserites or the Ba'thists; even worse in this respect are alliances between parts of the population of one state with the popular pan-Arab leader of another state²⁶. The danger of manipulation and a further erosion of the respective regime's basis of legitimacy are the feared consequences. Moreover, cross-frontier alliances and linkages of this kind are not restricted to the pan-Arab appeal but are valid for the pan-Islamic appeal as well.

Thirdly, the ideal of pan-Arab identity means that the Arab regimes have to stick to all-Arab core concerns, of which the quest for Arab unity is only one aspect. Others refer to the Palestinian issue and the Arab-Israeli conflict in general, or to the behaviour towards the super-powers. A common interest of the whole Arab community is presumed regarding all these issues. Differences over basic political strategies can be treated as violations of the general interests of the Arab community, thus further threatening the basis of legitimacy of single regimes.

Apart from the pan-Arabic aspect, numerous territorial conflicts put external pressures on single states as well. In most cases, they refer to the demarcation of an actual boundary over a limited disputed area; especially in the desert areas of the Arab Peninsula there exists a long history of conflicts of this kind. But there are also more substantial disputes challenging the legitimacy of whole states. The Iraqi claim to Kuwait, e.g., is a point in question. The Fertile Crescent is a subregion of the Middle East where the arbitrariness and artificiality of the established states pose the severest challenges to existing state boundaries and states themselves. The various plans to unite the whole Fertile Crescent or parts of it were the most visible consequences of this situation in the past²⁷.

On the whole, then, the peculiar situation of the indigenous political culture, the processes of state formation and the development of state bureaucracies, as well as the actual fragmentation of the population in the Arab world, have created a complex network of different cleavages with ramifications for the whole social and political context of the region. At the bottom of these conflicts, however, lies the contradictory process of state-building in the region.

3. The Case of Syria

3.1 *The Syrian Territory*

The classical geographical concept of Syria describes a region which stretches from the Mediterranean coast in the West to the Arabian desert in the East, from the Taurus and Amanus mountains in the North to the Sinai-Peninsula and the Gulf of Aqaba in the South. Thus defined, 'Syria' has been used since ancient Greek times

to define the whole Eastern Levant. The Arabs who conquered this territory after 634 a.d. called it *bilad al-sham*, but this term is in geographical terms equivalent to the older concept of Syria. In terms of contemporary states, therefore, 'Syria' is today split into several states. It comprises the Arab Republic of Syria, sometimes called 'Lesser Syria', Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, the Gaza-Strip, the Sinai, which today is a part of Egypt, the Turkish province of Hatay (formerly the district of Alexandretta) and other parts of what today is Southern Turkey²⁸.

This notion of Syria not only is of historical importance but also has strongly influenced Middle Eastern politics since the establishment of its modern state system after World War I. In socio-economic and cultural terms, the Syrian lands represented a traditional sub-region of the Middle East, like Mesopotamia, Egypt, or the Peninsula, the neighbouring Arab regions. When Arab nationalists of the 19th and early 20th century dreamt of establishing an Arab state in Syria, they were referring to this concept of Natural, or Greater Syria. Pan-Syrianism, the quest for creating Greater Syria, has been a political strategy and, for some groups, even a viable political ideology ever since²⁹.

The creation of modern Syria as only a fragment of what the Arabs considered to be natural Syria was a result of the political and military situation after World War I. The Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, which had lost the war together with the German and Austrian Empires, fell under British and French authority, respectively. At the San Remo Conference of April 1920, the League of Nations formally handed the Arab territories over to Great Britain and France as so-called 'mandates'. France received the mandate over Syria and Lebanon, Great Britain over Palestine and Mesopotamia. The practical results of the mandate system were, however, that the Fertile Crescent came under colonial rule, thus preventing the indigenous concepts of political development from materializing. The establishment of an Arab Kingdom under the Hashemites, for instance, which would include the Peninsula and the former Ottoman provinces, had no chance of realization³⁰.

In Syria, a short-lived Arab government had been established after the war under the rule of Faisal ibn Husain who resided in Damascus. The Syrian National Congress even proclaimed him, in March 1920, King of Syria, which was explicitly understood as comprising Lebanon and Palestine as well. But France enforced its power as a mandatory and terminated the Syrian Arab Kingdom in July 1920. The further development of Syria was determined by France³¹.

In order to establish as much direct control as possible, the French authorities' first step was to create several territorial administrative districts³². The only newly created entity which survived until this day is Grand Liban, the modern Lebanese State. Despite the heterogeneous character of its population and despite significant Lebanese movements of the pan-Arab or pan-Syrian type, the state of Lebanon did not cease to exist, although torn apart in the civil war since 1975, and today — through the developments of the Gulf war 1990/91 — practically under Syrian control³³. For the rest of Syria, the existence of a separate Lebanon meant the loss not only of mere territory but also of traditional commercial and social links, and of connections with the rest of the Mediterranean world.

The French established four other administrative entities which were not as viable. The core unit was the Syrian State (*Etat Syrie*) founded in 1925. It consisted of central

Syria from Aleppo to Damascus, to which the Eastern district of Dayr al-Zur was linked. The Alawite region in the Northwest around the coastal city of Latakia was a separate entity, as well as the Druse region in the Southern parts of the mandate around the Jabal al-Arab (also known as Jabal Druse) with Suwayda as its capital. The fourth unit was the former district of Alexandretta, which was cut off from the province of Aleppo and administered autonomously. This internal fragmentation of what was left of Syria existed until the French-Syrian Treaty of 1936, when the reintegration of the Alawite and Druse regions into the Syrian state was envisaged; only during World War II, however, did the composition of the Syrian state in its present borders come into effect³⁴.

The boundaries of Syria with its neighbouring states were drawn by France as well. With the treaty of 1936, the Syrian government had consented to the sovereign existence of a separate Lebanon, although until today the relationship between these two states is officially of a special nature. The Southern and Eastern neighbours of Syria, Palestine and Iraq, were both under British mandate. It was not until 1932 that the Syrian — Iraqi border was finally demarcated, because the respective area was inhabited by tribal federations to whom the idea of belonging to different states was totally alien.

The demarcation of the border between the French mandates of Lebanon and Syria and the British mandate of Palestine was a difficult process as well. It involved not only the two European powers but also their respective clients, Zionists and Lebanese Nationalists. The issue at stake was the control of the river systems of Upper Galilee, namely the Litani River and the tributaries of the Jordan, i.e. Hasbani, Banias and Dan. Various Zionist plans claimed that the whole of Northern Galilee, which today is South Lebanon, was to be included into Palestine. The final agreements of 1922/23 divided Galilee, leaving the Jabal Amil south of the Litani River to the French mandate of Lebanon. In the Eastern parts, the French claims to the Hule Basin and the Sea of Galilee were abandoned, but the Western parts of the Golan Heights remained under their control as part of the mandate of Syria³⁵.

French arbitrariness in dealing with Syrian affairs was especially obvious when it came to the demarcation of the Northern boundary. In 1921, France gave in to Turkish claims in Cilicia and Southern Anatolia, seceding an area West of the city of Adana and the whole Northern parts of the Syrian mandate, including the cities of Gaziantep and Urfa, to the Turkish nationalists. The former Aleppan district of Alexandretta was administered autonomously. In 1939, prior to the outbreak of World War II, France handed that Syrian district over to Turkey, which incorporated it into its territory as the Province of Hatay. Up to this day, this secession has never been accepted by Syria, which officially regards Alexandretta as a Syrian province (*muhafaza*)³⁶.

When the Arab Republic of Syria received its independence in 1943/46³⁷, the idea of a territorial state in what was traditionally understood under the concept of Syria, had not been realized. Lesser Syria was reality, which was further minimized through the loss of the Golan-Heights to Israel during the June War of 1967.

However, the Greater Syria-scheme never disappeared from political thinking in the Syrian lands. The present Ba'th government of Syria under President Hafiz al-Asad takes special care to emphasize the close historical connections between the countries of Greater Syria. It feels legitimized in its claim for ultimate control over

the affairs of Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan. As a result of the special relationship between Syria and Lebanon, for instance, the Syrian government never consented to an exchange of ambassadors³⁸. With regard to the Palestinian problem and apart from the fundamental conflict with Israel about the latter's right to exist, Hafiz al-Asad views Syria as responsible for the future of Palestine. His claim is that Palestine — and Jordan, for that matter — constitute Southern Syria.

Thus, the territorial aspects of a Syrian state must be interpreted as a very complex problem. Syria, in its present borders, is unnatural. Despite the doubtless development of state nationalisms in the area, especially Lebanese and Palestinian nationalism, the notion of Greater Syria determines politics in the region to a considerable extent.

3.2 *Is there a Syrian Nation?*

The territorial peculiarities of Syria/Greater Syria have its repercussions upon the question as to whether a Syrian nation exists, or, if modern Syria is a nation-state. There are some groups in the realm of Greater Syria which have developed a specific sense of *national identity* — e.g. the Jews in Israel on the basis of Zionism; the Lebanese Maronites; the Palestinians, in so far as they regard themselves as a distinct 'people'. Yet, the present Syrian Ba'th regime has traditionally encouraged Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism; and we have already discussed that pan-Syrianism is a viable notion, at least as a basis for regional political strategies. But there is no popular political ideology that operates on the basis of a specific Syrian state-nationalism. This is the first indicator of the fact that the situation in the Arab Republic of Syria is again more complex.

The traditional socio-economic and ethno-religious structures of Syria prevented an integration on a nation-state basis. Syrian society is a classic example of the predominance of regionalist structures in the Arab world. Its socio-economic foundations can best be understood by a short elaboration of the concept of 'agro-city':

"First, (the concept) defines the economic units of a predominantly agricultural economy: the city provides a vital marketing center for the surrounding villages. Second, it indicates a basic interdependence between the city and the surrounding agricultural lands: traditionally the villages depended on the city for protection, social services and economic facilities; the city, in turn, could not survive without the economic input of the villages. Third, the regional cities have traditionally been the focus of political activity: in the independence period, this has meant that national politics is often defined in terms of sub-national, regional interests."³⁹

There are indeed nine different agro-cities which still shape modern Syrian society and politics considerably. Although the ideology of Ba'thism, which has served as the basis of legitimacy for the Syrian regimes since 1963, is, among other aspects, oriented at the destruction of traditional social structures, the necessity for regime stabilization has revived and strengthened regionalism in Syria.

Regional cleavages are reinforced by the ethno-religious structure. Syria — and Lebanon — have been, in the past, the traditional places of retreat for various heterodox Muslim and Christian communities. In a society, which is traditionally

characterized by a dominant role of religion in public life and which is predominantly Arab in ethnicity, primordial ethno-religious identities are of great importance. However, it was the orthodox Sunni interpretation of Islam that dominated Arab, and much of the whole Islamic, history; the Ottoman Empire, for instance, was a Sunni empire. Sunni Arabs traditionally regard Non-Sunnis as "not perfect Arabs". This led, consequently, to a situation in traditional Syrian society, in which the different sects remained secluded from one another and subordinated to the Sunni Arabs. As A. Hourani put it, describing the situation in the Ottoman Empire:

"On the whole, these groups formed closed communities. Each was a 'world', sufficient to its members and exacting their ultimate loyalty. The worlds touched but did not mingle with each other; each looked at the rest with suspicion and even hatred. Almost all were stagnant, unchanging and limited; but the Sunni world, although torn by every sort of internal dissension, had something universal, a self-confidence and sense of responsibility which the others lacked. They were all marginal, shut out from power and historic decision."⁴⁰

The processes of social modernization and political development which the Middle East has experienced over the last decades have by no means destroyed the sectarian bases of collective identity. Some of the described minorities, such as the Kurds or the Maronites, consider themselves not only as distinct in terms of religion, sect, ethnicity or language, but as a separate nation. The Lebanese civil war, for instance, is basically fought over different conceptions of nationalism, either Christian-Maronite or various forms of Arab nationalism.

Although it would be too easy to conclude that the relationship between different ethno-religious groups is hostile in each and every case, the role of primordial affiliations is a significant impediment in the evolution of an integrated national identity, understood as "... a collective awareness of a common future and a collective motivation to build an ideal community through cooperative effort."⁴¹ Nevertheless, in regional perspective, the examples of a cooperative, even harmonious coexistence of the Arab Sunni majority and the various minority groups far outnumber the conflicting relationships. Geographic and demographic variables are the determinant factors in explaining why in specific cases conflicts on the basis of ethno-religious differences — or, because of lacking national integration — do occur.

The pattern of contemporary Syrian society is characterized by approximately half a dozen different Muslim sects and some ten different Christian communities. Sunni Arabs are the vast majority, but they do not number more than some 60-65% of the Syrian population. Some 10-12% of the Syrians belong to the different Christian communities, of which the Greek Orthodox represents the biggest group in size. The peculiar heterodox Islamic groups of the Alawites, Druzes, and Ismailis count for some 11%, 4%, and 1.5%, respectively. The largest ethnic minority in the Arab Republic of Syria are the Kurds who, according to different sources, number some 4 — 8%⁴².

In the Syrian case, Alawites, Druzes, and Ismailies are compact minorities, i.e. these groups represent a majority of the population in certain areas. This situation, which is reinforced through the particular socio-economic ('agro-city') structure of Syria, prevented their economic assimilation and political integration into the dominant features of Syrian society, which are Sunni Arab. Unlike, for instance, the Syrian

Christians, especially of the Greek Orthodox rite, these groups were traditionally excluded from public life, including political participation. Thus, it is not only the sectarian affiliation which defines social conflict groups in Syrian society but also the aspect of compact minority; regional and sectarian cleavages are mutually reinforcing⁴³.

This phenomenon is reflected in the structure of the current Ba'th-regime. The clique around Hafiz al-Asad that has dominated Syrian politics since 1970 is often referred to as an Alawite regime. In the complex process that brought Hafiz al-Asad and the men around him to power, sectarian affiliation was indeed an important factor. The reliance on "old friends of the same region, of the same family, of the same tribe (and) sect" was, as stated earlier, imperative in order to seize and to stay in power. Thus, the power struggle within the army — the core element of the Ba'th-regime, which has run Syria since 1963 — can be interpreted as one fought along ethno-religious and tribal lines; directional and ideological issues, although important for the Syrian political discourse and the political objectives of the contending groups, are of secondary importance in order to explain the actual coalition of forces involved in the power struggle. In the first stage, a combination of minority groups within the military apparatus, consisting of Alawites, Druzes, and Ismailies, ousted most of the Sunnis from the central power positions. In the second phase, the Alawites turned against the prominent Druzes, Ismailies, and the remaining Sunnis, leaving the Alawite officer faction as the single dominant bloc in the army. Only after the third stage of conflicts within the Alawite elite did Hafiz al-Asad prevail. The analysis of the coalition of forces that brought him to power, and on which he has since had to rely in order to maintain the position of the Syrian leader, leads to family and tribal affiliations as the decisive factors.

Thus, it is a combination of regionalism, sectarianism, and tribalism which explains the actual structure of the current regime in Damascus. The Alawites are a distinct sectarian group with special features of common identity. The fact that they are a compact minority reinforced their cohesiveness and the durability of the bonds within the community, which was the basis for their political virulence; and their family, clan and tribe structures explain the actual forces behind their politically relevant — and successful — groups⁴⁴. This means, however, that there is no specific *religious* connotation if one defines the current Syrian regime as 'Alawite'. The sectarian and tribal affiliations are solely of instrumental importance; they help in explaining who was successful in the power struggle and why, but they do not explain the political strategies and objectives of the regime in power in any way⁴⁵.

In other words, the Syrian power elite is a cohesive, exclusive, and hardly permeable group, defined primarily by regional, sectarian, and tribal elements. Individual members of the power elite who do not share these specific features owe absolute personal loyalty to Hafiz al-Asad. It is clear that this situation does not provide for a stable basis for legitimacy of the political system in power: whoever does not belong to the wider Asad-clan cannot belong to the power elite; every politically relevant group, however defined, must be controlled by the power elite; all alternative political groups constitute a potential threat to the regime⁴⁶.

4. Conclusions

4.1 State and Nation-State in Syria

Throughout this paper the structural impediments for state-building and nation-building in the Arab Middle East have been dwelled upon. On the other hand, the persistence of the artificial Arab state system is surprising, given the manifold internal and external pressures they face. One of the structural reasons behind this phenomenon has been stated in passing: the Arab states have developed a reasonably well established state bureaucracy, and — with the notable exception of Lebanon — central state authorities have been able to uphold the extractive and distributive capacities necessary for state survival, although only few Arab state administrations score highly in this respect⁴⁷. It is sensible to argue, then, that the development of military and police capacities, “the whole modern apparatus of surveillance and repression”⁴⁸, is ultimately responsible for securing the single state's viability, and that the state's monopoly of the means of coercion is indeed the one element of the Western state concept that has taken root in the Arab world. But, these are mere technical instruments, which may keep a regime in power and ultimately the state together. They do not, however, solve the structural causes of internal and external conflicts with respect to territoriality and nationness that disturb the Arab state system. How, then, are these vital issues being dealt with by the Arab states? Again, the Syrian example is illustrative.

Pan-Arabism, in its Ba'th-version, is the main instrument for the Syrian regime's strategies of nation- and state-building, and thus ultimately for its survival. Since the regime regards itself as progressive in socio-economic terms, it is ideologically committed to overcoming the traditional political structures based on sectarian and kinship relations, although it actually relies on them. Theoretically, the secular notion of the wider Arab nation tears down the societal barriers of sectarian affiliation, which is imperative for the Syrian regime's attempts to cover its minoritarian character and to establish a wider basis of legitimacy. The secular notions of Ba'thism are very important in this respect because the secretive Alawite religion, originally an offspring of Twelver Shi'ism, has been blamed continuously by the Sunnis for being un-Islamic in creed and practice⁴⁹. Secularism as a central aspect of Ba'thism excludes the Islamic *umma* as the basis of solidarity and integration. Thus, Arabism remains the only indigenous concept of collective identity with a chance to establish some basis of legitimacy for the regime in power.

In terms of state-building, the revisionist appeal of pan-Arabism is attractive for the majority of the population. Arab nationalism has traditionally been supported fervently by Sunni Muslims in the Levant because the establishment of the single states along ethno-religious lines during the French mandate was considered unacceptable by them. Their predominant aspiration in territorial terms has thus been the revision of the established borders in Greater Syria, especially regarding the Syrian-Lebanese border. In terms of building legitimacy for his rule, Hafiz al-Asad therefore encourages Ba'thist pan-Arabism. In practice, however, the focus of his pan-Arabism is very much restricted to the area of Greater Syria and thus related to pan-Syrianism. The disastrous experience of unity with Egypt, the United Arab Republic from 1958 -1961,

was the turning point for the Syrian Ba'thists in this respect⁵⁰. Moreover, a more thorough analysis of Syria's foreign policy would conclude that the aspect of *controlling* politics in Greater Syria is much more important for Hafiz al-Asad than actually redrawing certain boundaries.

The Arab Republic of Syria is thus characterized by subnational structures, which fundamentally shape the state's political forces, and supranational concepts, which provide for the necessary strategies of legitimacy. The Syrian state is caught in between, its institutional structure — aptly defined as a 'Party-Military Symbiosis'⁵¹ — is monopolized by Hafiz al-Asad and the clique around him. There is no Syrian nation-state; as for the Syrian state, its *raison d'être* as only a part of Greater Syria is still open to interpretation, thus representing one more source of conflict and instability in the Arab State system.

4.2 The Future of the Arab State System

Since the war between Iraq and the alliance forces over the Kuwait issue has stopped, there is much talk about a new regional order in the Arab world and the whole Middle East. The central international problems of the region refer to the future of Iraq, the Palestinian problem and the prospects of Arab-Israeli peace, and the Lebanese conflict. Other issues, such as the Sudanese civil war and the conflicts over the future of the West-Sahara and the Horn of Africa, are but a few additional international conflicts which have disrupted the Arab world over the last decade. Moreover, a quest for a regional redistribution of the oil wealth is at stake, referring to the relationship between rich and poor states in the Arab world.

One of the lessons that can be drawn from the recent political developments is that a change of the Arab state order *by force* will not be accepted, either by the Arab League or by the international community at large. The example of the unification of North Yemen and South Yemen shows, however, that a peaceful merger is possible.

The conflict structures in the Arab state system can only be reduced if the dialectical relationship of the Arab nation and the Arab states is handled in a way that does not endanger the latter's existence. Thus, loyalty to the established states has to be developed, even though the ideal of the greater Arab nation will probably be upheld. The acceptance of the individual states is imperative in order to reduce the structural sources of external pressures on them which are based on pan-Arabism.

By the same token, Islamic fundamentalism is destabilizing in regional terms foremost through its pan-Islamic aspects. The trans-state alliances of certain fundamentalist groups (e.g. the Muslim Brotherhood) or states (e.g. Iran) challenge the status quo of the Arab state system in the same way as pan-Arabism⁵². Moreover, fundamentalist groups and parties of the anti-status quo type constitute the major opposition to the political systems in most Arab states, which makes them the prime factor for internal pressures on the existing states.

The acceptance of the established state order would have to include the recognition of the state of Israel, if only because the international community would never consent to Israel's annihilation. The Egyptian example shows that the recognition of the state of Israel reduces the potential for regional conflict considerably. The abandonment of the false interpretation of pan-Arabism and Islamic fundamentalism

that Israel's existence is responsible for the manifold conflicts and cleavages in the Arab world — the one element that links all interpretations of either ideology — is a precondition for any scenario of a peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, including the problem of the Palestinians' future.

Moreover, neither pan-Arabism nor Islamic fundamentalism provides a basis for the solution of the other conflicts mentioned above, which all focus on the very nature of the states involved. Iraq's future, for instance, depends fundamentally on the question as to whether the Kurdish minority will be further oppressed or whether it can be integrated into the state's society. The hope that the Lebanese civil war could ultimately be solved by a tacit incorporation of Lebanon into Syria, a consequence of Hafiz al-Asad's participation in the anti-Iraq coalition, is doomed to failure.

Altogether, the revisionist elements of pan-Arabism and Islamic fundamentalism, referring to the status quo of the Arab state system, have to be interpreted as the central obstacles for regional stability. There will be no peace in the Middle East if the revisionist dreams of either ideology are not abandoned as viable political strategies for the future of the Arab world. But both ideologies will continue to be attractive among the Arab population, and indeed grow in attractiveness, as long as the regimes in power do not provide for social justice and political participation on the basis of equality, i.e. as long as they fail to provide for a solid basis of legitimacy. In the meantime, Islamic fundamentalism and pan-Arabism, formulated on the concepts of the indigenous political culture, will be considered as the only political alternatives. In other words, the existing states will continue not to be considered as the legitimate authoritative political institutions sovereign over recognized territories, and the societies will not be characterized by a common national identity as well as a common political loyalty⁵³. Thus, the structural reasons for regional conflicts and cleavages will remain. The individual Arab state will continue to suffer from a lack of legitimacy; there will be no prospects for the development of integrated nation-states. This means that the Arab state system will further be characterized by instability and disorder.

NOTES

¹ Cf. T. Skopcol/P. Evans/D. Rueschemeyer (eds.): *Bringing the State Back In*, New York 1985; a critical discussion of the concept by G. Almond: *The Return to the State*, in: *American Political Science Review*, vol. 82, no. 3, September 1988, pp. 853 — 874.

² Notable exceptions in the regard: G. Ben-Dor: *State and Conflict in the Middle East. Emergence of the Postcolonial State*, New York 1983; the 4-vol. edition "*Nation, State, and Integration in the Arab World*", by the Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome 1987/88 (Series Editor: G. Luciani).

³ Cf. B. Korany: *Alien and Besieged Yet Here to Stay: The Contradictions of the Arab Territorial State*, in: G. Salamé: *The Foundations of the Arab State*, New York/London/Sydney 1987, pp. 47 — 74.

⁴ Cf. C. Tilly (ed.): *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, Princeton 1975.

⁵ I. W. Zartman: Introduction, in: A. Dawisha/I. W. Zartman (eds.): *Beyond Coercion. The Durability of the Arab State*, London et al., 1988, pp. 1 — 13, p. 6 f.

⁶ B. Lewis: *Loyalties to Community, Nation, and State*, in: G. S. Wise/C. Issawi (eds.): *Middle East Perspectives: The Next Twenty Years*, Princeton 1981, pp. 13 — 33, p. 18.

- 7 J. P. Nettl holds that it takes "a cultural disposition to allot recognition to the conceptual existence of a state at all", in: *The State as a Conceptual Variable*, in: *World Politics*, 20 (July 1968), pp. 559 — 592, p. 566.
- 8 The literature on the history and politics of Islam is voluminous; cf. e.g. T. Nagel: *Staat und Glaubensgemeinschaft im Islam. Geschichte der politischen Ordnungsvorstellungen der Muslime*, 2 Bde., Zürich/München 1981; W. M. Watt: *Islamic Political Thought*, Edinburgh 1968.
- 9 Cf. J. P. Piscatori: *Islam in a World of Nation-States*, Cambridge et al., 1986, for a detailed analysis and a more elaborated conclusion concerning the different trends of modern Islam.
- 10 Cf. T. Nagel, op. cit., Bd. 1: *Von den Anfängen bis ins 13. Jahrhundert*, p. 13.
- 11 Cf. E. Kedourie: *The Nation-State in the Middle East*, in: *The Jerusalem Journal of International Relations*, vol. 9, No. 3, 1987, pp. 1 — 9, p. 3.
- 12 Lewis, op. cit., p. 15.
- 13 G. Antonius: *The Arab Awakening. The Story of the Arab National Movement*, Beirut 1969 (Reprint).
- 14 Cf. B. Tibi: *Arab nationalism. A Critical Enquiry*, London/Basingstoke 1981; and T. E. Farah (ed.): *Pan-Arabism and Arab Nationalism. The Continuing Debate*, Boulder/London 1987.
- 15 Cf. S. Bensaid: *Al-Watan and Al-Umma in Contemporary Arab Use*, in: G. Salamé, op. cit., pp. 149 — 174.
- 16 Cf. P. C. Noble: *The Arab System: Opportunities, Constraints, and Pressures*, in: B. Koronay/A. E. H. Dessouki (eds.): *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*, Boulder 1984, pp. 41 — 77.
- 17 L. Anderson: *The State in the Middle East and North Africa*, in: *Comparative Politics*, vol. 20, No. 1, October 1987, pp. 118, p. 6.
- 18 Cf. Ralph Glänzel: *Ägypten und die Stabilität des Mittleren Ostens*, Herford/Bonn 1988.
- 19 Anderson, op. cit., p. 13.
- 20 C. Geertz: *The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States*, in: C. Geertz (ed.): *Old Societies and New States*, New York 1963, pp. 105 — 157.
- 21 Cf. M. Hudson: *Arab Politics. The Search for Legitimacy*, New Haven/London 1979.
- 22 Lewis, op. cit., p. 18.
- 23 For the special problems of certain Lebanese Maronite groups in this respect cf. S. K. Faroun: *E Pluribus Plura or E Pluribus Unum? Cultural Pluralism and Social Class in Lebanon*, in: H. Barakat (ed.): *Toward a Viable Lebanon*, Washington, D.C., 1988, pp. 99 — 130.
- 24 Hudson, op. cit., p. 37.
- 25 Cf. R. Büren: *Zur Rationalität arabischer Politik. Die Dialektik der Machterhaltung und der Primat der Innenpolitik*, Ebenhausen 1987.
- 26 For a theoretical discussion of the phenomena described cf. J. Rosenau: *Linkage Politics*, New York 1969; also Y. Bar-Siman-Tov: *Linkage Politics in the Middle East. Syria Between Domestic and External Conflict 1961 — 1970*, Boulder 1983.
- 27 For a discussion of boundary conflicts cf. A. Drysdale/G. Blake: *The Middle East and North Africa. A Political Geography*, New York/Oxford 1985, Part II, esp. p. 75 ff.
- 28 Cf. D. Pipes: *Greater Syria. The History of an Ambition*, New York/Oxford 1990, esp. chap. 1.
- 29 Cf. *ibid.*, *passim*; L. Z. Yamak: *The Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party: An Ideological Analysis*, Cambridge, Mass., 1969.
- 30 Cf. G. Lenczowski: *The Middle East in World Affairs*, 4th ed., Ithaca/London 1980, p. 88 ff.

- 31 Cf. Z. N. Zeine: *The Struggle for Arab Independence. Western Diplomacy and the Rise and Fall of Faisal's Kingdom*, Delmare 1977.
- 32 For a historical analysis cf. S. H. Longrigg: *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate*, London et al., 1958.
- 33 For the stipulations of the new Syrian-Lebanese treaty, signed 22 May 1991 in Damascus, cf. *Le Monde*, 24.5.1991.
- 34 Cf. Longrigg, op. cit., pp. 109 ff.
- 35 Cf. F. C. Hof: *Galilee Divided. The Israel-Lebanon Frontier, 1916 — 1984*, Boulder/London 1985, pp. 3 ff.
- 36 A detailed analysis in W. C. Bandazian: *The Crisis of Alexandretta*, Diss., The American University, Washington, D.C., 1967.
- 37 French politics in Syria during World War II is analyzed by Longrigg, op. cit., pp. 334 ff.
- 38 Cf. Pipes, op. cit., p. 121.
- 39 M. H. van Dusen: *Political Integration and Regionalism in Syria*, in: *Middle East Journal*, vol. 26, no. 2 (Spring 1972), pp. 123 — 136, p. 124.
- 40 A. Hourani: *Minorities in the Arab World*, London 1947, p. 22.
- 41 Hudson, op. cit., p. 35.
- 42 Other ethnic minorities are Armenians and Aramaen Christians; cf. for a short overview: n. L. Lewis: *Syria: Land and People*, in: J. A. Allan (ed.): *Politics and the Economy in Syria*, London 1987, pp. 1 — 19.
- 43 Cf. N. van Dam: *The Struggle for Power in Styria. Sectarianism, Regionalism, and Tribalism in Politics, 1961 — 1978*, London 1979; also I. Rabinovich: *The Compact Minorities and the Syrian State, 1918 — 45*, in: *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 14, no. 4 (1979), pp. 693 — 712.
- 44 Cf. van Dam, op. cit., passim; and van Dam: *Sectarian and Regional Factionalism in the Syrian Political Elite*, in: *Trade Middle East Journal*, vol. 32, Spring 1978, no. 2, pp. 201 — 210.
- 45 For a discussion of these issues cf. Volker Perthes: *Staat und Gesellschaft in Syrien 1970 — 1989*, Hamburg 1990, esp. pp. 63 ff.
- 46 Cf. M. Ma'oz: *Asad — The Sphinx of Damascus. A Political Biography*, New York 1988; P. Seale: *Asad of Syria. The Struggle for the Middle East*, London 1988.
- 47 Cf. N. Ayubi: *Arab Bureaucracies: Expanding Size, Changing Role*, in: A. Dawisha/I. W. Zartman, op. cit., pp. 14 — 34; Anderson, op. cit., p. 12 ff.
- 48 Lewis, op. cit., p. 16.
- 49 Cf. M. Kramer: *Syria's Alwis and Shi'ism*, in: M. Kramer (ed.): *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, Boulder 1987, pp. 237 — 254.
- 50 Cf. M. Kerr: *The Arab Cold War. Gamal Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958 — 1970*, London et al., 1971.
- 51 I. Rabinovich: *Syria Under the Ba'th. The Army-Party Symbiosis*, Jerusalem 1972.
- 52 The contribution of the Saudi-Arabian fundamentalist ideology of Wahhabism to regional disorder, on the other hand, is on the whole limited; the Saudi government is committed to the regional status quo based on the acceptance of the established state system. This general attitude is somewhat compromised by the fact that the Saudis encourage wahhabist opposition groups in the other states of the Arab Peninsula.
- 53 Cf. footnotes 5 and 6 above.

