

Book Reviews

State formation and identity in the Middle East and North Africa. Edited by Kenneth Christie and Mohammad Masad. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 212. ISBN: 978-1-137-36959-8.

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How can we think about the role of identity in state formation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region? Christie and Masad bring together a collection of chapters by experts on particular contexts from the MENA region to address this question of how identity and state formation interact. The research focuses on the particular contexts of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, Algeria and Lebanon, in addition to general remarks and discussions on the region as a whole. Identity, in the context of the collection, covers the different aspects of religious and ethnic identities, and how they have performed effective roles in shaping state formation processes, from both historical and contemporary perspectives. Given the complexities of the socio-political processes in the states in the MENA region, which have always commanded the scrutiny and attention of the academic as well as the policy-making audience, this book is a timely addition to literature. In addition, despite the fervent interest that the region has commanded academically and practically, an intimate understanding of a more hermeneutical aspect of the inner workings of its societies have somehow escaped attention. What is more prevalent is a massive body of literature that considers the various aspects of the MENA region's affairs from a more 'mainstream' perspective, the tone of which is often set by the international relations paradigm, with strong emphasis on considerations of geopolitics, regional security and democratisation. In light of the recent and ongoing upheavals within the region, popularly known as the Arab Spring or Arab Awakening,

which have seen massive and radical political shifts in several countries and the region as a whole, the book rather aptly “demystifies” (p. 3) the role of the state while questioning its role in relation to religious and ethnic identities.

In setting the tone of the book, Christie and Masad highlight the dearth of research on how religious and ethnic identities have “played themselves out in state formation” (p. 1) in the MENA region. The objective is three-fold: first, to theorise the different ways religion and ethnicity interact, compete and complement state formation processes from a historical perspective; second, to theorise the “ideological substance and biases” (p. 2) of the state, to uncover the different approaches of the states in dealing with questions of religion and ethnicity; and third, to theorise “the complex relationship between globalization and states in the MENA” (p. 2).

In addition, Christie and Masad walk the reader through an overview of the existing literature that deals with the question of state formation in the MENA region (See Chapter One). The authors highlight several approaches that inform these works. In an otherwise radically heterogeneous region, with a different set of core political values, informed by religion and customs, Abbas Kelidar, for example, argues that the “cultural” aspect of state formation in the MENA countries manifests in the imposition of ideas related to the modern state and nationalism has presented these societies with alien political structures, which demand homogeneity and unity as their core features. There is also the consideration of ethnicity from the perspective of the different approaches of state dealings with ethnic minorities within the MENA states. P. R. Kumaraswamy argues that one reason why the MENA states have seemingly failed to consolidate their nation-building efforts lies in their failure to respect ethnic diversity within their particular societies. The anthropological approach of Ofra Bengio and Gabriel Ben Dor, on the other hand, argues that rather than look at state formation through the perspective of nationalism as the normative key to consolidation, the process must consider the complexities of the micro interactions of ethnicities, in the face of totalising nationalist projects, which essentially hegemonise the process of defining the majority/minority dichotomy. From the perspective of religion, much has been said in relation to the “return of Islam phenomenon” (p. 26) in the MENA politics, which today is

playing an effective role in shaping the outcome of state-building post Arab Spring. Whatever the case may be, Christie and Masad point out the dependence of the understanding of the interaction between ethnicity, religion and state formation approached “in terms of the nation-state as a European development” (p. 28). The result of this would be a less than generous treatment of the interaction of Islam with the ideals of Western nation-states.

Drawing on dependency theory, Marion Boulby (Chapter Two) considers the complexities and intricacies of the interaction between identity and state formation in relation to the development of the world market and the influence of extra regional powers. Boulby provides a narrative of state development in the Arab world, and traces how, on a general level, the Arab historical trajectories have been shaped by factors such as European colonialism and capitalism, the two World Wars, and now, the Arab Spring. Underlying these junctures is the hand-in-hand development of the state and political elites, with the latter constantly attempting to impose identity from above, depending on the particular religious, ethnic, or sectarian legacies as imposed, defined and articulated by different European colonial powers.

The role and impact of the Palestinian identity in shaping the processes of Jordanian nation-building is explored by Nur Köprülü (Chapter Three). She shows how the interplay between pan-Arabist, Palestinian and tribal identities has helped mould the Hashemite Kingdom’s identity in contemporary times, especially after its annexation of the West Bank in 1950. As a result, the presence of Jordanians of Palestinian origin has given rise to a multifaceted dilemma within the Jordanian nation-building discourse, for while there has historically been an urge to create unity of all Jordanian citizens under the banner of the monarchy and an Arabist identity, this was further complicated by the loss of the West Bank in 1967 and King Abdullah’s decision to give up Jordanian claims on Palestinian territories in 1988. In recent times, the Arab Spring has presented the Kingdom with further issues that brings the question of identity back to the fore to contend with, including dealing with renewed questions over the monarchy’s legitimacy, Palestinians’ discontent with the Kingdom’s normalisation of relations with Israel, as well as dealing with the opposition Muslim Brotherhood Society and its political wing, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), whose cause is shaped by its large Palestinian membership.

Sebastiano Andreotti (Chapter Four) brings us to Saudi Arabia, and examines the role of the *Ikhwān* movement, a “movement of sedentarisation and militarisation of the Bedoiuns, with a strong religious connotation” (p. 87), in the Saudi state-building processes from a historical and contemporary perspective. Addressing the question of why Saudi Arabia has remained relatively unaffected by the Arab Spring, Andreotti makes the case that the state-building processes in the Kingdom owed much to the way in which al-Saud family have used religion as an ideological unifying glue to bring the several fragmented segments of society together. In part, the success of this state-building process owes much to Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud’s ability to stifle the tribal nature of political and military movements around what was to become the Saudi state, and during its early days. In this sense, Ibn Saud, through the founding of modern and centralised political institutions, managed to put an end to the *Ikhwān*’s political and military autonomy, and co-opted the movement in the modern Saudi state.

Magdalena Karolak’s analysis (Chapter Five) of the political situation in Bahrain, in light of recent protests against the al-Khalifa Sunni dynasty, looks into why political liberalisation reforms in the Kingdom has not managed to appease the discontent amongst its majority *Shi’a* population. Karolak examines the interaction between identity and legitimacy in Bahrain, and highlights the complexities of political activism and alliances unique to the context of this multi-ethnic, multi-national and largely bi-sectarian state. Karolak’s rich account looks at the problem of legitimacy-building in Bahrain from a historical perspective, highlighting the different methods that were deployed at different historical junctures and the problems surrounding them. Its attempt to transit towards becoming a modern state, argues Karolak, has been stunted by the recent rather glaring sectarian split.

Egypt, which is central to the events surrounding the Arab Spring, features in Sebastian Elsässer’s analysis (Chapter Six). The author discusses the ways in which the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Egypt has affected state formation, in light of the political and social upheavals that took place since the 2011 revolution. Elsässer argues that the current climate of sectarianism between the Coptic Christians and Muslims in Egypt “go back to the early days of Egyptian nation-building around the beginning of the twentieth century” (p. 139). While on the constitutional level there has always been a proclamation

of unity between both Christians and Muslims, practices below the threshold of this formal level have been marked by divisions, intolerance and distrust. As such, Elsässer considers the different issues related to the Egyptian nation-building in their historical and contemporary sense, and relates them to the treatment of the Christian community. In the context of the Egypt after the 2011 revolution, Elsässer also considers the challenges and prospects of a more inclusive state, in which the Coptic Christians “could express their concerns (more) openly, and for all Egyptians to engage into serious discussions about the future of national unity and look for political solutions” (p. 155).

Lisa Watanabe considers (Chapter Seven) the role of Berbers in the politics of the Algerian society, specifically in the context of the community’s rising activism in North Africa and a big protest in Tizi Ouzou in Algeria in April 2012. For a community with supranational ties like the Berbers, the challenge lies in affecting reforms within country-specific contexts that accommodate their rights and demands. Watanabe examines the historical developments surrounding the emergence of the demand to create a “unified” Algerian nation, driven by the Arab-Islamic identity, which resulted in the marginalisation of the Berber identity in state formation in Algeria. Those historical developments include French colonialism, the emergence of the Algerian nationalist movement, and the rise of the nation-state. The Berber question still lingers in the Algerian political discourse, and has become a terrain of contestation amongst the different political actors in the country, with the Berbers themselves asserting their particular vision of statehood, which is in contrast to the hegemonic vision of the totalising Arab-nationalist project.

Finally, Bouchra Bouyoub explores (Chapter Eight) the paradoxical political entente between Hizbullah, a Muslim Shia political party with a military wing, and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), a secular movement with a Christian Maronite base within the context of the Lebanese confessional state. She investigates events surrounding the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between both parties, including the negotiation process and the content of the agreement. Bouyoub highlights the intricacies of Lebanon’s political situation, given the prevalence of regional and external influences. Aptly, as noted by Christie and Masad, Bouyoub’s chapter, being the final one in the collection, highlights “the nuances and difficulties in the

contested categorisation of religion and ethnicity and state formation” in the MENA region.

When all is said and done, it is worth noting that the chapters in this collection have fulfilled the objectives that the editors have set at the beginning of the book. What we see is a collection of rich and in-depth analyses and explorations of the different social and political contexts and development within the framework of identity politics. This collection, as put by Ishtiaq Hossain in his blurb, is “(g)eared toward experts and ordinary readers”. In addition, from the perspective of the “ordinary reader”, the collection is one that has enriched our knowledge about a region that is known, yet still so difficult to grasp for many. However, while no obvious complaints are registered in light of what has been presented within this collection itself, readers would benefit from contributions from other contexts within the MENA region – perhaps in later editions – owing to the interesting developments that are taking place in places like Tunisia, which itself is currently undergoing a rebuilding process post-Arab Spring, Iran, with its unique ethnic and religious features and its growing influence in regional politics, and others.

The red minaret: Memoirs of Ibrahim Ghushah (ex-spokesman of Hamas). By Ibrahim Ghushah. Beirut: Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations, 2013, pp. 288, ISBN: 978-9953-572-24-6.

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The Red Minaret: Memoirs of Ibrahim Ghushah is the autobiography of Ibrahim Ghushah, the official spokesman of Hamas during 1991-1999. Originally written in Arabic, the work was translated into English by Hassan Ibrahim and Salma al-Houry. Since it is an autobiography, the volume should be considered against the general aims and objectives, and the main features of an autobiography. Freeman defines an autobiography as the specific kind of text that results from the first-person interpretive reconstruction of either a life in its entirety, or a significant portion of it with the aim of not merely recounting what happened but also of