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Chapter 1.5

The Establishment of Contemporary Arab States

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Currently, the legal and widely-accepted definition of an Arab state (in the contemporary era) is that of membership in the Arab League. In fact, this has generally been the case for the past four decades, and there is little reason to doubt that it will hold true for the foreseeable future. There is more consensus on the definition of an Arab state than on an Arab nation or an Arab nation-state.

The war-torn years of 1944 and 1945 had witnessed prolonged consultations between the delegates of seven Arab states seeking to formulate the aims, structure, and constitution for a League of Arab States. On March 22, 1945 the founder members signed the League's Pact which was designed to emphasize and preserve their individual independence and sovereignties, to assist other Arab countries in their struggle to attain political independence from colonialism as prelude to their becoming member states of the League, and generally to act as co-ordinator and mediator in disputes. The League was essentially a forum for deliberation, and the member-states ensured that the powers and attributes of sovereignty remained firmly in their individual hands: or, in the words of Fayez Sayegh, "the League was created by a conference of accredited representatives of sovereign states, acting exclusively

in this capacity; it was created by states, not by peoples... and the states neither endowed the League with powers of its own,nor delegated to it certain categories of power which would have enabled it to act on their behalf."(1) Far from conforming to the ideals of Arab or Islamic nationalism, the modern Arab state system resembled the European state system, and the Concert of Europe model,in which a large number of mutually-recognized sovereign states of unequal size and strength behaved in accordance with the concepts of the balance of power, ephemeral alliances, and the coalition against the threatening hegemonious power of the moment.

It would be a mistake, however, to minimize, as many have done, the importance of the centripetal factors which brought the founder states together in the first place, and attracted new members to the League in the years to come. Similarly, the magnitude of this initial accomplishment in 1945 is not to be denigrated. The record indicates that many British Foreign Office observers were surprised by the event. Writing to Anthony Eden from Cairo in October 1944, Lord Moyne remarked that these states had quickly learnt "the new technique of internationa co-operation developed in war-time United Nations conferences such as those at Bretton Woods and Dumbarton Oaks; regionalism was in the air and it is noteworthy that it should be the newly-developed States of the Middle East who have taken the lead in attempting to work out a practical scheme of regional co-operation."(2) Another British evaluation from Egypt on the League's preparatory conference in Alexandria (1944) observed: "a document (the Pact) drafted with considerable skill and

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(1) Fayez Sayegh, Arab Unity: Hope and Fulfillment(New York: Devin-Adai 1958) p.122

(2) Great Britain, Foreign Office (FO), FO 371/39991, E 6697/41/65, Moyne to Eden, October 19, 1944

statesmanship has been produced, (and) while the rest of the world has been talking for a number of years of regional councils and federation, the Arabs have been the first to get down to work and produce a concrete plan."(3) In London, Robert Hankey, a senior official of the Foreign Office remarked: "a collection of European states would hardly have produced anything more impressive."(4)

Perhaps not. Yet in failing to establish a more unitary or federative machinery the founder states had fallen far short of the traditional aspirations of Arab nationalism. And the bitter debate was on as to whether 1) this was primarily a function of politics-as-the art-of-the possible (i.e. that given the enormity of the task and the interests of the victorious powers,to have attempted anything more ambitious would have been utopian), 2) that the dynasties and elites at the helm of the founder states had a vested interest in maintaining the existing arrangement, 3) that,indeed, priority had to be accorded to the struggle for liberation and political independence over that of unity, and that to combine the two at this most delicate stage would have jeopardized the attainment of liberation. Be that as it may, despite the presence of several positive unifying elements - a common historical experience, a special pride in the Prophet Muhammad's mission, a commonality of language and symbolism, a cherished cultural heritage, the sharing of a sense of territorial definition, and a will to political unity enhanced by the Arab nahda, Arab nationalism, and the frustrating experience of two world wars - the stark reality in

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(3) ibid., PIC/71

(4) As quoted in Ahmad Gomaa, The Foundation of the League of Arab States (London: Longman, 1977) p. 264

this mid-century watershed was that the Arabs "had not been politically united for a thousand years."(5) In particular, their more recent past, whether under the domination of the Ottoman Sultanate or of rival European colonialisms, did not offer the proper ground for the germination of a unitary Arab state.

From an original seven founder states (and one state-in-the-making the Palestinian) the membership of the Arab League has grown to 21 (plus the same state-in the-making) in four decades. It is the establishment of these contemporary Arab states that this paper will attempt to place in some sort of analytical perspective, bearing in mind the determining influences of 1) an Ottoman Empire in rapid decline, 2) the Arab nahda and the Arab nationalist movement, 3) colonialism and the struggle for decolonization.

The Founder States in Perspective

The founder states - Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Transjordan, and Yemen - who ratified the Pact or Covenant of the Arab League in 1945 represented, in some form or another, virtually the whole range of types of states: 1) The Traditional Monarchy, 2) The Imamate, 3) The Emirate and Sultanate, 4) The Secular Military Regime, and, 5) The Republic.

a) The Traditional Monarchy, wherein reigned a King with some lineage (or genealogical) connection to the traditional source of Arab Muslim authority - the community established by the Prophet Muhammad and his lawful succession. There were two variants: the House of Saud in Arabia and that of Hashim in Iraq. Rising in the desert frontier region of Central Arabia, founded on the principles of the Hanbalite school of thought and reform, and drawing its strength from a vigorous

(5) H.A.R. Gibb,"Toward Arab Unity",Foreign Affairs,24,Oct.1945,p.121

and imaginative interaction with the 'asabiyya of the Najdi tribes, the order founded by Muhammad ibn Sa'ud and Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab in 1744 has proved its staying power. In the words of George Rentz: "The Wahhabite state did not officially adopt the name Saudi Arabia until 1932, but, ...a state that was both Wahhabite and Saudi existed, with brief interruptions, from 1744 on"(6) To account for this phenomenon one must keep in mind the relative decline of the Ottoman State and the daunting terrain of the Najd situated far from the effective regional centers of the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, as Ghassan Salameh has demonstrated so well, Ibn Khaldun is the guide to a proper understanding of the rise and maintenance of traditional kingship in the religious and ecological environment of the Peninsula. In the Saudi case the power of the state lay in the militant religious call - the da'wa ila al-tawhid, the harnessing of 'asabiyya, and a measure of 'umran .(7) Crucial also was the dimension of consciousness or self-awareness of one's own worth and the uncompromising rejection of the legitimacy of the Ottoman Sultanate As Faysal ibn Turki had it put to Lewis Pelly during the latter's visit to Riyad in 1865:

> "... be Arabia what it may, it is ours. We dare say you wonder how we can remain here thus cut off from the rest of the world. Yet we are content. We are princes according to our degree. We feel ourselves a king every inch."(8)

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(6) George Rentz, "Wahhabism and Saudi Arabia", in Derek Hopwood,ed., The Arabian Peninsula (London: George Allen and Unwin,1972) p.54

(7) Ghassan Salameh, "Strong and Weak States". Paper circulated at the "Nation, State, Integration in the Arab World" Conference,1985

(8) Rentz, "Wahhabism and Saudi Arabia", p.62

Later, under the firm leadership of 'Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud, Wahhabi military power was re-organized in the Najd, and gradually extended to 'Asir, then to Jabal Shammar, and finally to the Hijaz where King Husain, the former Sharif of Mecca, was defeated in 1925. Having thus united Najd and Hijaz, Ibn Saud took on the title of king.

The House of Saud was perhaps fortunate in that the consolidation of their monarchy predated the discovery of petroleum in Saudi Arabia and the sudden thrust from a peripheral to a central position in world affairs.

The second variant of the Traditional Monarchy, that of the House of Hashim in Iraq, had its roots in the Sharifate of Mecca and the Arab Revolt of 1916 which the Allies, particularly Britain, had actively sponsored during the First World War. It symbolized the powerful combination and converging vested interests of the ashraf (descendants of the Prophet), the mallaks (the landowners), and the rising urban merchant notables, middle class intellectuals, and Arab officers in the Turkish army, who collectively formed the vanguard of the nascent Arab nationalist movement in various parts of the Eastern Arab homeland. Their social diversity, secular ideology, and foreign connections contrasted sharply with the more austere, homogeneous, and tribally-based militancy of the Wahhabi da'wa, with its emphasis on self-reliance. Their ambition was to create a unified Arab state in diversity: an aspiration which was clearly reflected in the memorandum submitted by the Amir Faysal to the Paris Peace Conference in January 1919, and which clashed headlong with the partitionist designs of French and British colonialism:

> "The aim of the Arab nationalist movements, of which my father(the Sharif Husain) became the leader in war after combined appeals from the Syrian and Mesopotamian

> branches, is to unite the Arabs eventually into one nation. As an old member of the Syrian Committee I commanded the Syrian revolt, and had under me Syrians, Mesopotamians, and Arabians.
> We believe that our ideal of Arab unity in Asia is justified beyond need of argument. If argument is required, we would point to the general principles accepted by the Allies when the United States joined them (Wilson's Fourteen Points), to our splendid past, to the tenacity with which our race has for 600 years resisted Turkish attempts to absorb us, and, in a lesser degree, to what we tried our best to do in this war as one of the Allies."(9)

In support of his case, Faysal also used the argument of modernization. The task of establishing this unified state had been facilitated by the recent development of modern communications, and he specifically cited "railways, telegraphs, and air-roads". He was confident of its success if no attempt were made "to divide the area as spoils of war among the great Powers."(10) Needless to say, the fears expressed by Faysal and his supporters in the Fertile Crescent materialized in brutal fashion. Arab hopes that the Allies would honor their wartime promises were dashed and they were denied the opportunity to draw the outlines of their own unitary state at a crucial moment in world history.

Others had taken up the task, notably at the conference of San Remo which consecrated the division of the Fertile Crescent into five Mandated units: for France, a Syrian state (further subdivided into a number of "states") and a Greater Lebanon state; for Britain, Iraq, Palestine (with a promised Jewish Homeland), and Transjordan. To be sure, these arrangements did not accord with the wishes of vast portions of the population; the revolutionary insurrections

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(9) FO 371/52343, "Memorandum by the Emir Feisal", Paris, 1 January 1919

(10) ibid.

in Iraq, Syria, and Palestine in the Twenties were principally in response to the new European hegemony which had merely replaced the older, more familiar, Ottoman variety.

By placing the Hashemite Amirs Faysal and Abdullah in Iraq and Transjordan, Britain mitigated as it were "the sense of guilt about letting down the Sharif"(11), the Hashimite party, and their numerous Arab nationalist supporters. Nonetheless, in the succeeding years these Arab constituencies partially succumbed to the logic of sovereignties, particularly in the general context of bitter dynastic quarrels and state cabinets. A perceptive study of Arab nationalism and the "National State versus Universal State" problem composed by H.A.R. Gibb for the Foreign Office in late 1943 brought this development into sharp focus:

> "The facts of history determined that the Nationalists were called upon to create, not a political organisation for the whole Arab nation, but local administrations in separate regions of the Arab world. In each they endeavoured to put into operation the political principles of Western liberalism. But because they implicitly accepted European doctrines of sovereignty and the State their policies inevitably tended to build up separate and self-contained national communities; and although they continued to pay homage to the universalist aspirations of Arab Nationalism, the nascent national states threatened to become not its allies, but its rivals for the allegiance of their peoples. ... In Egypt the national state, which emerged before Arab Nationalism became a political force, still commands a qualified allegiance; but the cynicism of its political leaders has discredited Western institutions, and the symbol of the monarchy has been a more powerful factor in maintaining a separate national consciousness than the concept or the legislation of the 'sovereign state'. In Iraq the failure

(11) Elizabeth Monroe, Britain's Moment in the Middle East,1914-71 (London:Chatto and Windus, 1981), 2nd edition, p.66

> of constitutional leadership paved the way for governments which drew their inspiration from the still more exclusive nationalism of Kemal Ataturk. But even these governments found it necessary to base their claim to the allegiance of the people of Iraq not upon loyalty to the Iraqi national state in itself, but to the Iraqi state as the embryo of the universal Arab state."(12)

In addition to the Saudi and Iraqi examples of the Traditional Monarchy there is, to be sure, a third example - the Moroccan. This special case in the annals of state establishment will be dealt with later in the context of the colonialism-decolonization process.

b) The Imamate

Remoteness from the centres of power - in the classical Muslim period as well as under the Ottomans - together with the formidable nature of the mountainous terrain have placed the Imams of the Zaydi branch of Shi'ism in a rare position to develop a pronouced sense of their own separate ideology and polity. However, the familiar theme of "isolation" has been overstressed in the literature on Yemen. The Yemeni state originated as early as the tenth century A.D., and has managed to retain a fiercely guarded autonomy with only a few interruptions. But since it is a unique case, and, moreover, has given way to a republic, it will be given brief attention.

The establishment of the contemporary Yemeni state is due above all to the combined efforts of Imam Mansur Hamid al-Din (1890-1904) and his son Imam Yahya (1904-1948), the 64th and 65th imams respectively. Gerald Obermeyer, who studied the state-building process of Imam Yahya as reflected in his newspaper al-Iman, saw the Imam's dilemma as "the need to integrate the community of believers and at the same time formulate strategies to circumvent

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(12) FO 371/39988; E2768, H.A.R. Gibb, "Arab Nationalism", 5 Nov. 1943.

their growing demand for participation in power."(13) This political activity had to be conducted against a backdrop of British and Ottoman encroachment in the southern and western areas of the country and in a traditional Zaydi context which considered as legitimate the presence of more than one ruling imam in the land. The central problem for the Yemeni polity had always been its fragmentary and volatile nature: constant tribal conflict and the struggles of rival imams hindered the development of orderly and stable government in a recognized center. The achievements of the 64th and 65th imams is all the more impressive. Even before the First World War, the de facto independence of the Yemen had been secured by Yahya; and in 1919 its sovereignty was recognized by the international community.

The three pillars of Yahya's state were the law, the bureaucracy, and the army; and the Imam displayed much skill in getting his message across in central as well as in peripheral regions:

> "Imam Yahya used law to define the borders between the ranks of the society and to integrate them at the same time. In the columns of al-Iman, the relations between the Imam, his sayyids(ashraf) and qadis, tribesmen and urbanites, and those of the lower castes are enacted on the political, economic and ritual levels of society defined by the shari'a. Al-Iman celebrates this very hierarchical arrangement in order to guarantee it as the perceived basis of order in the imamate."(14)

Also, by creating a modern regular army, and investing it with much prestige as Yemen's protector, Yahya was no longer a prisoner of tribal power.

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(13) Gerald Obermeyer,"Al-Iman and Al-Imam: Ideology and State in the Yemen, 1900-1948" in Marwan Buheiry, ed., Intellectual Life in the Arab East,1890-1939(Beirut: AUB,1981) p.176

(14) ibid., p.181