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Government and Politics of the Middle East

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Question One

Egypt, Iran, and Palestine all experienced a rise in political Islam when leaders’ legitimacy was undermined resulting in a loss of political efficacy for the public. Today, political Islam in all three groups presents itself differently in society.

Political Islam in Egypt was an anti-Western vehicle to counteract foreign intervention in government. Egypt’s first post-independence party, the Wafd party, was subject to indirect rule by the British which undermined the Wafd party’s legitimacy in Egypt. People looked to the Muslim Brotherhood to fill this legitimacy gap and regain their political efficacy. The Muslim Brotherhood had been a fringe group for many years, but the decreasing levels of political efficacy combined with increasing political awareness gave the group an opening into Egyptian politics. Political Islam also flourished because it was able to coopt nationalists into its group by presenting itself as a pure, anti-Western party. When Nasser and the Free Officers Party enacted a coup, Nasser tried to coopt the Muslim Brotherhood into a new government because he knew the political power and efficacy it provided to people, but he failed (Harrison, “Egypt”). Since then, leaders of Egypt have seen political Islam as a threat, and the party has been outlawed. Morsi briefly led Egypt as a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, but he was ousted by el-Sisi and the marginalization of political Islam has continued in Egypt (Lynch 140).

Similarly, the rise of political Islam in Iran was in reaction to Western interference in Iran’s government. Low levels of political awareness until the 1950s allowed Great Britain and Russia to maintain a sphere of influence in Iran. Political awareness increased and leaders such as Mossadegh capitalized on this increasing political awareness to regain political legitimacy by standing up to Western powers through nationalizing oil and promoting democracy (Gasiorowski 55). The U.S. and Great Britain felt their influence and interests were threatened by this emerging Iranian nationalist identity and crafted a coup to reimpose the shah as a Western supporter which created a political legitimacy crisis. Like the Wafd party was seen as illegitimate, the Shah was seen as a British-American puppet which led people to lose political efficacy in the government. Iranians turned to clerics who had played an active role in politics and could mobilize people around a political Islamic identity instead of a nationalist identity. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 solidified political Islam in politics by using the grievances of both secular nationalists as well as political Islamists to create a government around Islam (Harrison, “Iran”).

Palestine has a much different experience in political efficacy, legitimacy, and the rise of political Islam. Palestinian identity has gone through multiple stages starting with Arab nationalism morphing into Palestinian nationalism and finally ending in an Islamic identity. This group has experienced so many identity shifts because it is a nonstate actor with high political awareness but low efficacy and legitimacy. Palestinians originally identified with Arab nationalism because this identity offered them political efficacy and legitimacy by being associated with state actors. Nasser and other Arab countries used political rhetoric to indicate Palestinian rights and return to land were of high importance (Harrison, “Israel and the Palestinians”). Nasser and the Arab League created the Palestine Liberation Organization to further Palestinian rights (Robinson 348). After the 1967 War, Palestinian nationalism took over Arab nationalism because Israel gained more territory resulting in more refugees therefore, Palestinians no longer had political efficacy from primarily identifying as Arabs. They looked inward and built organizations as well as attacked Israel to gain some legitimacy as a group to be reckoned with (Robinson 347).

Islamic identity in 1982 emerged in Palestinian society when the Iranian Revolution succeeded in throwing off an entrenched government supported by the United States. Palestinians looked to political Islam as an agent of change, and the most obvious manifestation of political Islam in Palestine is Hamas. This party is considered a terrorist organization by many countries, but it uses Islam as a vehicle to change the Palestinian situation to a more favorable one. As Robinson explains, “Hamas brought to Palestinian resistance a level of operational violence against Israeli targets that the PLO in the East Bank and Gaza had never employed, gaining converts and splitting Palestinian society” (354). Palestinians regained efficacy by identifying more with Islam than they had as identifying as Arab or Palestinian first. Hamas has won a majority in the Palestinian government showing that their strategy of using Islam and violent resistance appeals to Palestinians more than a secular route (Robinson 364).

In Egypt and Iran, their governments were perceived as being controlled by Western powers creating a legitimacy crisis. People regained political efficacy by looking towards political Islam which in both countries was an anti-Western party. Palestinians have only recently turned to political Islam to regain political efficacy that an Arab and Palestinian identity was unable to provide.

Question Four

Al-Qaeda and ISIS have risen to power in the Middle East as the international order has transformed and created gaps. Al-Qaeda’s strategies to infiltrate societies has changed over the years, but both al-Qaeda and ISIS’s goal is to establish a caliphate. These organizations thrive in weak states and states in which the citizens lack political efficacy.

Nonstate actors came to the forefront with the end of the Cold War because superpower interest decreased significantly in weak countries like Afghanistan which created an environment conducive to harbor terrorist groups. In general, as globalization increases governments lose power to nonstate actors like corporations or disruptive groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS because the world is more connected now than ever. Most importantly, the world is connected economically which allows these non-state actors to grow and gain power. The post-Cold War environment of many weak states has combined with a highly globalized world giving non-state actors the geographic area to operate as well as the economic means to sustain themselves (Harrison, “Non-State Actors”).

Al-Qaeda’s strategy before 9/11 focused on exploiting and creating gaps in society. Al-Qaeda exploited gaps by establishing groups and penetrating countries like Somalia and Afghanistan which were failing states with weak governments. These states were largely ignored by the U.S. and therefore offered Al-Qaeda the opportunity to flourish. They also used terrorist tactics to create gaps in society by degrading U.S. alliances in the Middle East because it was known that U.S. alliances was one of that country’s main strengths. Al-Qaeda attacked near enemies such as Saudi Arabia which has a strong alliance with the U.S. to hurt its far enemy: the U.S. After 9/11 al-Qaeda’s strategy evolved into a franchise model which capitalized on local groups in each country that allied themselves with al-Qaeda compared to the previous top-down model they used. This was especially apparent during the Arab Spring because the increase in failing states allowed the Nusra Front to form which has deep roots in Syria to function as an Al-Qaeda group. In general, Al-Qaeda wants to create a caliphate like ISIS, but it has stages in which to realize this goal. They believe that Muslims may have nationalist political awareness, but their political Islamic awareness is very low. It is difficult to create this awareness; therefore, certain stages are established to create a caliphate including exhausting governments through violence and using chaos to create this awareness (Lister 4).

ISIS does not believe in these stages but rather believes the current environment in Iraq and Syria is conducive to creating a caliphate now (Lister 10). They use imagery like driving a car across the Sykes-Picot boundary to make the point that the lines established by Western colonial powers are arbitrary. ISIS and Al-Qaeda’s strategy diverge as Lister explains, “Al-Qaeda in Iraq and later I.S.I. embraced a particularly sectarian strategic vision based on utilizing mass violence that, in al-Qaeda’s mind, risked damaging its ability to gain traction elsewhere in the world” (4). ISIS uses brutal techniques and mass murder to create chaos in order to undermine the West and purify communities from nonbelievers (Lister 10). ISIS focuses on creating local institutions to provide the same services a local government provides like a judicial system, and these techniques are focused on to make the idea of a caliphate more tangible. ISIS’s strategy and fast-paced success from 2011 to 2014 attracts the younger generation whereas al-Qaeda’s strategy does not attract the younger generation because it is perceived as traditional (Lister 11).

The countries most susceptible to ISIS and Al-Qaeda are those that are failing such as Libya and Yemen as well as those with disaffected populations such as Egypt which almost experienced a revolution but has reverted to an authoritarian government (Harrison, “Towards a Regional Strategy Contra ISIS” 37). Terrorist organizations are most likely to be in these countries because, while strategies have changed post 9/11, it is still easy to target failing states to create terrorist enclaves. In Libya both ISIS and al-Qaeda have groups across the country because there is not a unitary government to engage in effective counter-terrorism. One of the most violent branches of Al-Qaeda, AQAP, is active in Yemen; therefore, terrorist groups are continuing to exploit gaps in failing states by setting up branch organizations. I expect Egypt would also be susceptible to terrorist organizations as well because when people feel a loss of political efficacy they look to other outlets to regain this efficacy. Many Egyptians expected a more democratic government to be formed after the uprising, but they are back to a military dictator. ISIS and al-Qaeda will find this country easy to penetrate because Egyptians will potentially turn to political Islam especially since the Muslim Brotherhood is being aggressively target by el-Sisi.

Al-Qaeda and ISIS have taken advantage of the gaps created by weak and failing states which have increased since the end of the Cold War. Therefore, states like Syria and Yemen are most susceptible to these terrorist organizations. Both groups have different strategies and attract different recruits but they have the same goal of establishing a caliphate.

Question Five

Political awareness is directly related to political power which is evident in the history of Iraq. Iraq is a country whose borders was created by an external country and therefore struggles with legitimacy and identity. Even so, Iraq’s early political history shows how rising political awareness results in political power and independence.

Iraq was part of the Ottoman Empire for hundreds of years as three distinct provinces, the Basra, Mosul, and Baghdad provinces. Each province was composed heavily of Shia, Kurds, and Sunnis respectively, and Iraq the country did not exist (Yaphe 123). In 1920, the British Mandate of Mesopotamia was established creating Iraq but carving out Kuwait. At this time in Iraq’s history there was no political awareness because previously this state did not even exist, therefore there was no pushback against this mandate or creation of this state. The Hussein family under Faisal was given partial control of Iraq with Britain still playing a major role in the everyday issues of the country, and, in 1922, this system was codified in the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty. This treaty created a system of self-governance with Britain controlling foreign and military affairs (125). Rising political awareness during this time resulted in all groups, Shia, Kurds, and Sunnis, protesting the treaty and the obvious imperialist aspects of it (126). What prevented these groups from gaining true political power and control over their state was the fact that there was no underlying community to support increasing political awareness. Iraq was a very new state comprised of different groups of people, and the Sunnis worried the Shias were more loyal to Iran than Iraq. Without a common narrative or trust between the groups it was unlikely political awareness would translate into political power.

The Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of the 1930s illuminated the increasing political awareness in Iraq, and how two different groups saw how it could be translated into political power. Iraqi nationalists under Nuri Said saw Iraq as weak, and if it worked with the U.S. or Great Britain, their sovereignty would be protected. Therefore, Iraqis could translate their new political awareness into political power and legitimacy by establishing a functioning state with the help of outside powers. Nuri Said believed Western powers were not trying to undermine Iraq’s legitimacy as many Arab states were seen as trying to do to advance a Greater Syria agenda. The Arabist view under Rashid Ali called for Arab help to establish a legitimate Iraq. This view was anti-Western and anti-Israeli and used the ideas of Nasser who spoke out against the Baghdad Pact to create an underlying identity for all three major groups in Iraq to latch onto (Yaphe 127).

In the 1950s, political awareness reached almost every person which created an environment conducive to a revolution. In 1958, the Arabist viewpoint won out as the way forward for Iraqis to translate their political awareness into political power. They withdrew from the Baghdad Pact and Nuri Said as well as Faisal II were killed to completely separate Iraq from Western powers. Iraq also pursued a relationship with the Soviet Union, and “This orientation toward the Communist bloc and the break in treaty relations with the West began a period of increasingly tense relations with the West” (Yaphe 128). This was another way in which Iraq advanced its new nationalist, anti-Western interests and political power that came with increased political awareness. Furthermore, Iraq made claims on Kuwait as it used to be part of the three provinces during the Ottoman Empire. While these three provinces had no historical basis for being unified and they all contained three different kinds of groups, rising political awareness allowed these groups to work together to create a nation. Consequently, this state has struggled to maintain legitimacy and control which led to the Iran-Iraq War as well as the invasion of Kuwait (Harrison, “Iraq”). To maintain a state that does not have a common narrative one had to be created by attacking Iran which had antagonized Iraq in the past and invading Kuwait to try to regain all territory that was part of the Basra province.

Increasing levels of political awareness made the creation of Iraq possible even though these three Ottoman provinces were never historically one state and comprised of different groups. These levels of political awareness created the political power necessary to establish a state, but it also created a legitimacy crisis that had to be filled with the creation of a nationalist identity.

Question Six

For decades U.S. foreign policy was driven by Cold War dynamics which led to the U.S. supporting countries and leaders that maintained the status quo. The U.S. has had trouble redefining its foreign policy in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War which has created a perception of the U.S. as an unreliable ally. This has given other countries like Russia an opening to fill a power vacuum the U.S. has left open.

During the Cold War the U.S. pursued a foreign policy strategy of supporting countries and regimes that would not challenge the status quo. Revisionist leaders scared the U.S. because they saw any type of chaos as an opportunity for the Soviet Union to exploit and increase their sphere of influence. This is why the U.S. created strong alliances with Saudi Arabia and Jordan as well as Egypt after the Camp David Accords. Beyond containment of the Soviet Union, the U.S. also prioritized Israel and oil. Israel was seen as a solidly non-communist ally and oil was prioritized because it was a national interest. Stable states that advanced the status quo also kept their threats towards Israel at the verbal level, therefore U.S. foreign policy protected its allies and preserved its oil interests. With the collapse of the Soviet Union the U.S. had to redefine its foreign policy, but the U.S. as the only superpower created unintended consequences (Harrison, “U.S. Foreign Policy (Strategy) Towards the Middle East”).

The U.S. supported regimes that advanced the status quo which was unacceptable to countries that wanted to be revisionist powers. After Iran’s revolution, the country did not turn to the Soviet Union or the U.S. but rather looked inward and to the region to advance its interests in order to pushback against the U.S.’s status quo. Iraq was another state pursuing a revisionist agenda to pushback against the U.S.’s presence by invading Kuwait for nationalist reasons. The U.S. continued its support of the status quo by freeing Kuwait in the first Gulf War. Nonstate actors like al-Qaeda also rose to prominence as a revisionist power to counter the status quo and, in many ways, has succeeded in challenging the status quo by populating political Islam. By focusing on the status quo, the U.S. has unintentionally created regimes and nonstate actors that currently threaten U.S. interests. Consequences of this rise in nonstate actors pursuing a revisionist agenda include the attacks on the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya as well as 9/11 (Harrison, “U.S. Foreign Policy (Strategy) Towards the Middle East”).

The U.S. has tried recently to change its foreign policy strategy while still maintaining support for some of its allies that maintain the status quo. For instance, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel continue to be important allies to the U.S. even though Saudi Arabia’s record of human rights is severely lacking and many Jordanians have called for more democratic mechanisms. The U.S. continues to support Israel even though they are increasingly looking to Russia for help. The U.S. has supported some revisionist changes over regimes that advance the status quo such as when Morsi was elected and Mubarak deposed. Morsi was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood which historically is a revisionist, anti-Western party, but instead of members of the Middle East appreciating this pivot in U.S. foreign policy, it was seen as a move of an unreliable ally. This makes status quo leaders uncomfortable because they may not have the support of the U.S. in the future therefore making Russia and other countries like China more appealing allies than the U.S. As Harrison and Fardoust explain “U.S. allies in the Middle East are looking for signs of American leadership” (2). This problem is also obvious in Syria because the U.S. established multiple “red-lines” about Assad and chemical weapons, and they have not enforced these “red-lines”. Furthermore, the U.S. was using the Kurds as fighters against ISIS, and now that Turkey is fighting the Kurds, the U.S. has rescinded its support. The U.S.’s actions in Syria also show to its Middle Eastern allies that the U.S. does not have a coherent foreign policy. It is straddling the line between supporting its allies that advance the status quo in the region while also trying to disengage from the region in general by recognizing revisionist powers. “But part of the problem comes from the fact that the United States is operating with a tired, anachronistic strategy cast at the wrong strategic level.” (Harrison and Fardoust 8). The U.S. must transform its foreign policy to reflect the new regional dynamics in the Middle East instead of using Cold War tactics.

Cold War dynamics led the U.S. to support countries that advanced the status quo in the Middle East inadvertently creating threats to national security through revisionist powers like al-Qaeda. The U.S. has struggled to redefine its foreign policy since the end of the Cold War pushing many countries to other avenues of influence such as Russia.

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