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Essay 1: Egypt and Iran

Egypt and Iran’s political development were heavily influenced by their colonial phases in history. Both countries had long, historical identities, but it was not until the international system imposed itself on these countries that they began to rapidly develop politically within a regional and national context. The international imperialist system caused Egypt and Iran to develop their politics reactively which created legitimacy concerns and the rise of political Islam. These two countries diverge on how far Islam was incorporated into the political system but religion plays a key role in efficacy in both countries.

Egypt has a long history rooted in established borders and an impressive dynasty which creates legitimacy in the country itself because it does not have artificial boundaries. Even so, Egyptian nationalism did not really begin to develop until Great Britain established direct rule. During this time the Wafd party formed and mobilized opposition to British rule through students, landowners, and religious figures. After Egypt received independence, it was still subject to indirect rule from the British which fueled a legitimacy and efficacy crisis with these newly politically aware and mobilized citizens. The Wafd party came into power at the beginning of the independence, but it was perceived as a British puppet because Britain still controlled many aspects of Egyptian governance. People looked to other sources of legitimacy to regain the political efficacy they did not get from the Wafd party, and this other source was the Muslim Brotherhood. While the Brotherhood began as a fringe movement, over many decades it gained legitimacy and power because it was not subject to external influence. They preached political Islam was a pure, anti-British agenda. Political Islam coopted people who identified as nationalists as well because the nationalist identity was driven by grievances against the British during direct rule and political Islam latched onto those grievances that were still present under indirect rule (Harrison, “Egypt”).

Political awareness reached a critical point where Egyptians had the capacity to throw off British influence which allowed Nasser’s party, the Free Officers, to spearhead a coup. Afterwards, Nasser nationalized “the Suez Canal…a move that is still the single most important event in Egypt’s contemporary history” (Stacher 375). This move established Egypt as a fully independent nation that could stand up to imperialist powers, but then a control system had to be implemented considering multiple parties and interests to replace indirect rule. The Muslim Brotherhood had considerable legitimacy and power, so Nasser attempted to coopt political Islam. Unlike in Iran, he failed in this endeavor and outlawed the group relying instead on coercion and normative active symbols of the Egyptian nation which set a precedent of the military, not Islam, providing security and legitimacy. He mobilized the population that was not yet politically aware through land reform and the Aswan dam project, and he gained legitimacy by refusing an American bribe and defeating the British, French, Israeli efforts to seize the Suez Canal. Nasser focused on a regional agenda to fully develop Egypt’s political identity by promoting an Arab identity. He funded Palestinian groups, participated in the Yemeni Civil War, and established the United Arab Republic with Syria for three years. During this era, Egypt focused on promoting and spreading an Arab identity without international interference (Harrison, “Egypt”).

Sadat continued the development of Egypt’s political identity by launching a surprise attack on Israel which provided him great respect in the region and opened up the opportunity for Egypt to regain lost territory. The United States facilitated peace negotiations between Egypt and Israel which was one of the first times Egypt returned to allowing international powers to influence its politics. Regionally, Sadat and Egypt lost respect after the Camp David Accords because Sadat focused on Egypt’s territory instead of advocating for all Arab lands to be returned and addressing the Palestinian question. Egypt removed itself from regional politics in many ways after being kicked out of the Arab League, and its leaders lost regional legitimacy. Sadat was assassinated, and when Mubarak took over and got rid of secular political opposition groups, the Muslim Brotherhood gained power (Harrison, “Egypt”). “As politically divided as Egypt seems today, and as isolated from regional politics as the country was under former President Hosni Mubarak, Egyptians are fiercely nationalistic when it comes to both domestic and regional issues” (“Egypt Will Rise Again”). This statement indicates that while Egypt has been disengaged recently, Arab identity is still highly important especially in light of the increasing participation of Iran and Saudi Arabia in Arab politics. The identity Nasser mobilized is still relevant today, but Egypt must reinstitute an effective control system before it can return to its regional leading role.

Iran similarly has its identity rooted in historical, established boundaries related to the Persian Empire which increased stability and legitimacy as the nation developed politically. Unlike Egypt, Iran never experienced direct rule, but low political awareness until the 1950s allowed Russia and Great Britain to maintain spheres of influence and exploit natural resources. Reza Khan was the first leader to use normative active symbols similar to Nasser to coopt tribes and create a nationalist, anti-Western narrative. Mossadegh continued his work by using secular nationalist symbols to mobilize the public while Prime Minister with the backing of the three political parties: communist, National Front, and the clerics (Harrison, “Iran”). Mossadegh’s nationalist agenda presented a threat to Great Britain as well as the upper-class in Iran by nationalizing the oil industry and advocating for democracy which undermined the power of these groups (Gasiorowski 55). Iran’s government transitioned from secular politics to political Islam after a British-American coup to depose Mossadegh. The Shah was reimposed by the British and Americans, but this created a legitimacy crisis. As the Wafd Party was seen as illegitimate in Egypt, the Shah was seen as a Western puppet. People looked to other sources for political efficacy, and the clerics filled this efficacy and legitimacy gap. They coopted the nationalist agenda to end Western interference and depose the Shah which created an identity shift from a secular nationalist one to a political Islamic one. The Shah struggled to create an effective control system because he could not use normative active symbols as he was not seen as a true Iranian representing Iranian beliefs. He employed utilitarian coercion and suppressed groups such as the clerics and secular groups which fueled opposition to his regime. In this way he united his enemies, and secular groups supported political Islam during the Iranian Revolution. A new control system relying on normative active symbols and coercion was formed using political Islam (Harrison, “Iran”).

Today, Iran’s identity is still steeped in injustices Western nations perpetrated in the country, while the current religious regime suppresses symbols of Mossadegh “They take his defeat as proof of their view that Iran is the eternal victim of cruel foreigners” (Kinzer 224). Regionally, Iran’s political development was influenced by Iraq engaging in war with Iran for eight years which prevented Iran from focusing on domestic issues. Furthermore, the revolution resulted in Iran supporting Islamist political groups in the region such as Hamas (Harrison, “Iran”). Iran continues to shape its identity today in the region by participating in the Syrian civil war peace talks and supporting Assad’s regime. Furthermore “the current conflict in the region is part of a three-tiered contest for power, involving local, regional and international actors” where Iran and Saudi Arabia’s relationship affects how the United States and Russia can engage in diplomacy in Syria, the number of soldiers and weapons in Syria, as well as regional polarization (“Too Big to Fail”). Iran’s political development in the region as a reaction against foreign influence with a strong nation-state identity has set it up as a powerful player in the Middle East.

Egypt and Iran developed similarly because they created nationalist identities facilitated by historical borders. Both countries were agitated to mobilize these identities in reaction to external influences, and both saw political Islam fill legitimacy gaps. Iran utilized this religious identity whereas Egypt suppressed it to create effective control systems.

Essay 2: Syria and Egypt

Syria and Egypt have developed differently because they faced different legitimacy challenges which in Egypt facilitated the creation of Arab and nationalist identities and in Syria prevented the development of a cohesive identity. While both states faced instability from being authoritarian states, they faced different challenges from neighbors and borders.

Syria experienced legitimacy issues because it was originally part of the Ottoman Empire and, after its disintegration, France and Britain created Syria’s borders for France to rule. Syria has never had historical borders like Egypt, and after World War II, the Hussaini family attempted to create a Greater Syria which has a historical context and includes Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq. Instead, the British gave Jordan and Iraq to the Hussaini family’s sons so Britain and France could maintain their imperialist influence and the Hussaini family could rule over both countries. The idea of Greater Syria remained part of Syria’s identity and legitimacy issues because one of its goals was to reunite. After the establishment of Israel, it became obvious this goal was infeasible which further undermined its legitimacy based on a Greater Syria identity. Furthermore, many argued Syria should join with Iraq to further the goal of creating a Greater Syria, so Syria also faced a legitimacy issue in that leaders worried the concept of Greater Syria would undermine sovereignty (Harrison, “Syria”). Syria’s artificial boundaries are integral to today’s politics as is seen in “…ISIS is trying to smash the idea of Syria and a Syrian national identity. The idea that they are trying to propagate is not just that Syria has ceased to be a viable going concern, but also that it is illegitimate.” (Crocker and Harrison 2). This is accomplished by driving between Iraq and Syria’s borders to show how artificial borders were created by imperialist powers.

Syria’s legitimacy also suffered because it experienced multiple coups because there was nothing to mobilize the citizens around to create a stable regime like Nasser did in Egypt around both a nationalist and Arab identity. Historically this is surprising because “Syria became a focus of proto-Arab nationalist response to European encroachment” (Hinnebusch and Lesch 255). Egypt in fact borrowed Arab nationalism from Syria, so it should be expected that Syria would have stronger normative active symbols. There is an inherent contest between Arab nationalism and statism because leaders in Syria want to maintain the state, otherwise they would have no power. They cannot invoke Arab nationalism to keep the state together because Arab nationalism says Greater Syria, not Syria the state, is the legitimate entity that should exist. Hafez al-Assad balanced these competing ideas by aligning with the PLO and Lebanon against Israel to express Arab nationalism but never took the extra step to mobilize citizens with Arab nationalism lest the integrity of the state was undermined (Harrison, “Syria”). The lack of a cohesive identity fueled instability because it prevented an effective control system.

Control systems were difficult to create in Syria because normative active symbols could not be used because their goals of a Greater Syria were unobtainable as this required the defeat of Israel and the unification of multiple countries. This was further compounded by the loss of territory to Israel in the 1967 war. Syria did not have oil making economic cooptation impossible, so the only control system available to Syrian leaders was coercion which is not a stable method of maintaining a regime (Harrison, “Syria”). As soon as a regime cannot suppress opposition or provide basic human needs to its citizens, the regime is in danger of collapse from public opposition. Egypt, on the other hand, used normative active symbols to bolster its coercion. Therefore, it was more stable which can explain how it survived the Arab Spring without a true revolution whereas Syria is engulfed in a civil war.

Hafez al-Assad’s military regime was weak as soon as it was created because he represented a minority of the population, so Sunni Muslims were denied political efficacy. Bashar al-Assad took over and many hoped he would reform the government, but he continued with a coercive control system. This is because he lacked the economic capacity to coopt individuals, and he lacked any normative active symbols. Reform would most likely lead to his removal from office because his regime was so precarious to begin with. Regionally, Lebanon threatened Syria’s stability because it is war prone and unstable. Syria has made Lebanon’s stability a high priority to prevent a spillover effect into its own country (Harrison, “Syria”). In the face of instability, Syria turned to the Soviet Union to counter Israel’s military strength, and then Iran to balance against Israel which is most obvious today in the military support Russia and Iran are lending Assad (“Is a Strategy for Syria Possible?”). Syria today plays an important geopolitical role in the region.

Egypt’s instability differs in origin from Syria’s because it is a result of external influence during its colonial period rather than a crisis of identity or borders. Egyptian identity is rooted in a long history with well-established borders, so it did not experience a legitimacy crisis like Syria did with the concept of a Greater Syria. Egyptians expressed both a nationalist identity as well as an Arab identity without compromising the integrity of their state through Nasser’s normative active symbols. Syria could not do this because their competing identities had the potential to destabilize the government. Egyptian legitimacy crises resulted from Britain’s indirect rule making the Wafd party complicit with external influences. The Muslim Brotherhood filled this legitimacy gap, and political Islam entered Egyptian politics. Today, Sisi actively discredits the Brotherhood because it has legitimacy and power, and similar to how Syria contended with the Brotherhood’s influence in politics during the 1980s. Both countries suppressed the movements to maintain their military dictatorships (Hinnebusch and Lesch 261).

Egypt and Syria suffered instability because they are military dictatorships with no economic capacity to engage in cooptation, but Egypt was and is more stable because it uses normative active symbols. Military coercion was used in Egypt because Nasser “felt that democracy was too cumbersome and the military was best positioned to modernize the country” (Stacher 375). In many ways the military contained legitimacy in Egypt as is evident in 2011 when the military forced Mubarak to step down, and Egyptians trusted the military to follow some democratic procedures in replacing him. Even so, dictatorships are unstable because they rely on suppressing the public, so when grievances reach a certain level if the government does not have the economic capacity to increase oppression it topples. Syrian leaders were more disadvantaged though than Egyptian leaders in that they could not utilize normative active symbols when coercion failed.

Egypt’s relationship with its neighbors increased its stability as compared to Syria. Whereas Syria concerned itself with stability in Iraq and Lebanon as well as balancing Israel by aligning itself with the Soviet Union and Iran, Egypt has maintained relative peace with its neighbors since the Camp David Accords and its disengagement with the region. The Camp David Accords created a relatively peaceful relationship between Egypt and Israel, so it has not had to build up arms or ally with any particular nation since the 1970s to protect itself from Israel (Harrison, “Egypt”). In fact, recently Egypt allowed Israel to conduct airstrikes in its territory which shows the level of comfort Egypt has with its neighbor (Kirkpatrick).

These differences make it evident why both Assad’s engaged in repressive authoritarian coercion. Syria faces internal threats from lacking a cohesive identity it can mobilize its people around, and it lacks economic cooptation like Saudi Arabia uses to pacify its citizens. Furthermore, it only politically coopted a small fraction of society in its military dictatorship and denied Sunnis a role in government. It also faced threats from the region in that Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon can challenge its artificial borders in order to realize a Greater Syria. Israel posed a military threat as a nuclear power supported by the United States, and by allying with Iran the United States and Israel saw this as a threat to regional stability. In the face of a multitude of threats, severe repression appeared to be the safest option to maintain the regime.

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