

A Nation Called the Middle East: In Middle Eastern Internationalism

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Abstract

The Middle East, historically encompassing territories from Palestine to the regions near India, includes vast lands such as Lebanon and Syria, once integral to the Roman Empire. The remnants of Aladdin Keykubat's castle in Alanya and the Achaemenid ruins in Cappadocia, now in modern-day Turkey, underscore the region's deep historical significance, marked by a cohesive genetic, cultural, and historical identity. Yet, despite this unity, the Middle East remains one of the most politically fragmented and sectarian regions globally, plagued by internal conflicts and external interventions. This article examines the historical unity and subsequent political fragmentation of the Middle East, with a focus on religious sectarianism, colonialism, modern nationalism, and genetic commonalities. It also discusses the potential for fostering Internationalist ideology in the region, starting with economic, trade, and tourism cooperation.

Keywords: Internationalism, Middle East, Terrorism

Introduction

The Middle East is often described as a historically unified entity, stretching from Palestine to parts of India. The inclusion of regions like Lebanon and Syria, which were once under Roman rule, in the concept of Greater Middle East underscores the region's extensive historical and cultural continuity (Hourani, 1991). Archaeological sites such as the ruins of the Aladdin Keykubat castle in Alanya and the remains of the Achaemenid Empire in Cappadocia serve as testaments to this vast historical expanse (Curtis, 2005; Berrett, 2015).

The genetic and cultural similarities across the Middle Eastern region further reinforce this unity. Genetic studies have shown that the populations of the Middle East share significant ancestral ties, with a large proportion of genetic markers being common across diverse ethnic and national groups (Yehuda et al., 2019). For example, studies on mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) and Y-chromosome data have demonstrated a relatively homogenous genetic landscape across the Middle East, suggesting that despite historical migrations and invasions, the genetic pool has remained remarkably consistent (Cavalli-Sforza et al., 1994; Nebel et al., 2001). This genetic continuity is accompanied by the shared linguistic, religious, and cultural practices that have persisted over millennia, despite political boundaries (Lewis, 2002; Wells, 2007).

The creation of a genetic map of the Middle East reveals a complex yet interconnected web of relationships among the region's populations. This map highlights the close genetic affinities between groups traditionally seen as distinct, such as Arabs, Persians, Kurds, and Jews, suggesting a shared ancient ancestry that predates the rise of contemporary national identities (Abu-Amero et al., 2009; Behar et al., 2010). This genetic continuity, alongside the region's rich cultural and historical legacy, underscores the deep-rooted unity that has often been obscured by modern political divisions.

With an ongoing crisis in the Middle East especially in Gaza and Palestine, and discriminative and multiple standards by the international organizations (Davoudpour, A.R., 2024a,b) , while the

axis of Western countries often tend to ignore or justify the violence in the Middle East by abusing the good words like “Democracy” (Davoudpour, A.R., 2024c) , there is a necessity to broaden the borders of national interests and to create outlines as well as markets for the economic growth in the region.

Such regional interest are often met by internal, external and terrorist challenges, which needs to be analyzed clearly before the empirical expansion of the idea to the real world.

Political Fragmentation and Sectarianism

Despite its historical unity, the Middle East is politically one of the most fragmented regions in the world. Sectarianism, particularly the Sunni-Shia divide, has played a significant role in exacerbating these divisions (Nasr, 2006). The political fragmentation of the Middle East can be traced back to the early Islamic period when the caliphates were divided along sectarian lines. This division was further entrenched by colonial powers, which exploited these sectarian differences to establish control over the region (Hinnebusch, 2014; Houry, 2013).

The creation of artificial borders by colonial powers in the early 20th century further fragmented the Middle East, dividing ethnic and religious communities across new national boundaries. The imposition of these borders often ignored the historical, cultural, and linguistic ties that bound the people of the region together, leading to conflicts that persist to this day (Fawcett, 2016).07:43

The Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 is a prime example of this, where arbitrary lines were drawn by Britain and France, setting the stage for a century of strife (Fromkin, 1989).

The Role of Modern Nationalism

Modern nationalism in the Middle East has often been at odds with the region’s historical and cultural unity. For example, Turkey’s emphasis on its Turkic (Mongolic) roots and its rejection of its Eastern Roman heritage is a case in point. This form of nationalism, which prioritizes ethnic identity over historical continuity, has

contributed to the fragmentation of the region (Keyder, 1987; Zürcher, 2004).

On the other hand, the Islamic Republic of Iran has sought to expand its influence in the Middle East through a form of Islamic internationalism, which paradoxically both unites and divides the region. The Shia-Sunni divide, which is central to Iran's political strategy, has further deepened the sectarian rift in the region, preventing the emergence of a unified Middle Eastern identity (Takeyh, 2009; Cole, 2002). Additionally, Iran's use of proxy groups in countries like Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq exemplifies how modern political strategies exploit historical sectarian divisions to further national interests (Wehrey, 2018).

The Impact of Sectarianism on Identity

The sectarian divisions within Islam have not only shaped the political landscape of the Middle East but have also had a profound impact on the region's identity. The existence of multiple caliphs and the theological differences between Sunni and Shia Islam have created a fragmented political and social system within a region that shares a common religious philosophy (Ayubi, 1995; Esposito, 2005). This fragmentation is reflected in the works of Islamic mystics like Rumi, who, despite advocating for unity and spiritual transcendence, acknowledged the inherent divisions within the religious and political systems of his time (Schimmel, 1993).

Rumi's famous line, "Die before you die; you are all kings and princes," illustrates the tension between the ideal of spiritual unity and the reality of political division. His gnostic approach, which emphasized the ultimate futility of worldly power and the transient nature of political systems, can be seen as both a critique of and a response to the fragmented nature of the Middle Eastern polity (Lewis, 2000).

Historical Context and Genetic Continuity

The Middle East is often described as a historically unified entity, stretching from Palestine to parts of India. The inclusion of regions like Lebanon and Syria, which were once under Roman rule, in the concept of Greater Middle East underscores the region's extensive historical and cultural continuity (Hourani, 1991). Archaeological

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Historical Maps of Ancient Empires and Middle Eastern Borders

The definition of the Middle East's borders has always been fluid, shaped by the rise and fall of ancient empires that dominated the region. Historical maps of empires such as the Sumerians, Achaemenids, Parthians, and Sasanians provide crucial insights into the geographical scope and political influence that have historically defined the region.

The Sumerian civilization (c. 4500–1900 BCE), considered one of the earliest known civilizations, was centered in the southern part of Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) and extended its influence over parts of the Levant and Persia. The Sumerians established city-states such as Ur and Uruk, laying the groundwork for subsequent empires in the region (Kramer, 1963).

The Achaemenid Empire (c. 550–330 BCE), founded by Cyrus the Great, represents one of the largest empires in history, stretching from the Balkans and Eastern Europe in the west to the Indus Valley in the east. The Achaemenid Empire's borders encompassed much of the modern Middle East, including Iran, Iraq, the Levant, Anatolia, and Egypt. This vast expanse helped unify diverse cultures under a centralized administration and contributed to the region's shared cultural and genetic heritage (Briant, 2002; Cook, 1983).

Following the Achaemenids, the Parthian Empire (c. 247 BCE–224 CE) controlled a vast territory stretching from the Euphrates River to eastern Iran. The Parthians were known for their semi-nomadic nature and their ability to maintain control over a large, culturally diverse region despite frequent conflicts with the Roman Empire. The Parthian Empire played a critical role in maintaining the continuity of Persian culture and governance in the Middle East (Daryaee, 2012).

The Sasanian Empire (c. 224–651 CE), which succeeded the Parthians, marked the last great Iranian empire before the rise of Islam. At its height, the Sasanian Empire controlled all of modern-

day Iran, Iraq, parts of the Caucasus, the Levant, and Central Asia. The Sasanian period is particularly significant for its influence on the cultural and religious landscape of the Middle East, as it was a time of significant Zoroastrian religious development and administrative sophistication (Frye, 1984; Shahbazi, 2002).

These empires' borders, as illustrated in historical maps, highlight the Middle East's role as a crossroads of civilizations, where various cultures, languages, and religions intermingled. The geographic span of these empires also underscores the historical continuity of the Middle East as a unified region, despite the modern political borders that now divide it.

The overlapping territories of these ancient empires reflect a shared historical and cultural space that transcends contemporary national boundaries. This historical perspective challenges the modern conception of the Middle East as a collection of fragmented nation-states, instead highlighting its legacy as a region defined by expansive, integrative empires (Curtis, 2005; Potts, 2012).

By studying these historical maps, scholars can better understand the long-standing connections among the peoples of the Middle East and how these connections have shaped the region's identity over millennia. The enduring legacy of these empires is still evident today, in the region's shared cultural practices, languages, and, as genetic studies show, its remarkably cohesive population (Cavalli-Sforza et al., 1994; Wells, 2007).

Sectarian and Ideological Fragmentation of the Middle East After Islam

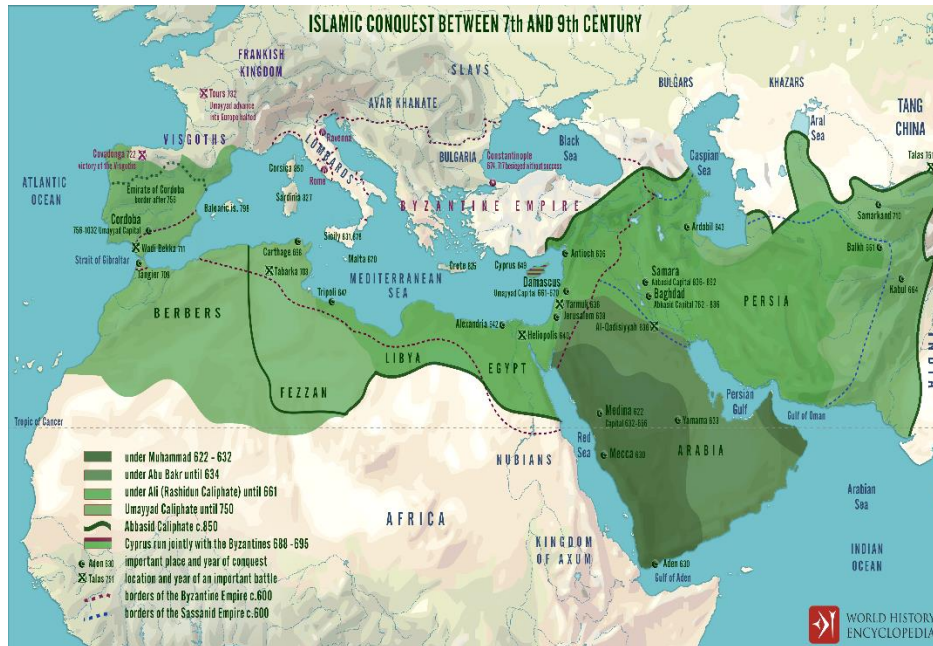


Figure 1 A map illustrating the rise and expansion of early Islamic caliphates from the Prophet Muhammad until the 9th century.

The advent of Islam in the 7th century (Fig. 1) profoundly transformed the Middle East, unifying vast territories under a single religious and political framework. However, the initial unity established under the Rashidun and subsequent Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates gradually gave way to significant sectarian and ideological fragmentation, laying the groundwork for the divisions that continue to define the region today.

The Sunni-Shia Divide

One of the most consequential rifts in the Islamic world emerged shortly after the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632 CE, centering on the question of rightful leadership of the Muslim community. This dispute led to the formation of two major sects: Sunnis, who

supported the election of caliphs from among the Prophet's companions, and Shias, who believed that leadership should remain within the Prophet's family, specifically with his cousin and son-in-law, Ali (Halm, 1997).

The Sunni-Shia divide became not just a religious difference but a deeply ingrained political and social fault line that has shaped the power dynamics in the Middle East for centuries. The early Islamic period saw the establishment of Shia dynasties, such as the Fatimids in North Africa and the Safavids in Persia, which often found themselves in opposition to the Sunni-dominated Caliphates of the Umayyads and Abbasids (Hodgson, 1974; Marshall, 2017). These sectarian divides were further compounded by theological differences, particularly in the interpretation of Islamic law and the role of religious authority.

The Safavid Empire's (1501–1736) adoption of Twelver Shia Islam as the state religion was a significant turning point in the sectarian landscape of the Middle East. This move not only solidified the Shia identity within Persia (modern-day Iran) but also set the stage for enduring rivalry with the Sunni Ottoman Empire, which dominated much of the rest of the region (Ruthven, 2012). This sectarian rivalry often manifested in military conflicts and political alliances that sought to leverage religious differences to gain strategic advantages (Mathee, 1999).

Ideological Fragmentation

In addition to sectarian divisions, the Middle East has also experienced significant ideological fragmentation, particularly in the post-colonial era. The rise of various nationalist, socialist, and Islamist ideologies throughout the 20th century further fragmented the region's political landscape.

Arab nationalism, which emerged in the early 20th century as a response to Ottoman rule and Western colonialism, sought to unite Arab-speaking populations under a common identity. However, this movement was often at odds with the realities of political power, leading to tensions between different Arab states, as well as between Arab nationalists and other ethnic and religious groups within the

Middle East (Dawisha, 2005). The failure of Arab nationalist projects, such as the United Arab Republic (a political union between Egypt and Syria from 1958 to 1961), exemplifies the challenges of creating a unified ideological front in a region marked by deep-seated divisions (Hinnebusch, 2003).

The rise of political Islam in the latter half of the 20th century introduced another layer of ideological complexity. Movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Iranian Revolution of 1979 reflected a turn towards Islamism as a political ideology, seeking to establish governance based on Islamic principles. These movements often clashed with both secular nationalist regimes and each other, further deepening ideological divisions in the region (Esposito, 1997; Roy, 1994).

In the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, the Middle East saw a significant increase in sectarian tensions, particularly between Sunni and Shia communities. Iran's attempt to export its revolutionary ideology to other parts of the Middle East exacerbated sectarian conflicts in countries like Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain.07:48

The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), in particular, was fueled by sectarian rhetoric, with Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated regime framing the conflict as a defense against Shia expansionism (Takeyh, 2009).

The ideological landscape of the Middle East today is a complex tapestry of competing visions for the region's future. From secular Arab nationalism to Sunni and Shia Islamism, and from theocratic governance models to secular liberalism, the Middle East is characterized by a multiplicity of ideologies that often conflict with one another. These ideological divisions are not just confined to state actors but are also reflected in the region's many non-state actors, including militias, political movements, and terrorist organizations, each promoting their own vision for the region (Gerges, 2016).

The Challenges of Middle Eastern Internationalism

The concept of Middle Eastern internationalism, or a unified regional identity, poses a significant challenge to the traditional

power structures of Arab sheikhs, caliphs, and monarchs. These rulers, deeply invested in maintaining their internal sovereignty, view the strict control of borders as essential to preserving their authority. This perspective is echoed in the Quran, where the Bedouin Arabs are described as being "more hard in disbelief and hypocrisy" (Quran 9:97), indicating a resistance to broader unification and the potential loss of local power (Ibn Kathir, 2003).

This ideology of fragmentation has other formidable adversaries, notably terrorism, which exploits these divisions to further destabilize the region. The Islamic Republic of Iran has attempted to counteract this fragmentation by establishing what is often referred to as the "Shia Crescent," a sphere of influence stretching from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. This strategic move is seen as an effort to overcome Arab disunity, though it simultaneously exacerbates sectarian tensions within the region (Nasr, 2007).

While both Shia and Sunni branches of Islam inherently possess sectarian and separatist tendencies, the issue of Palestine reveals the depth of division among Arab nations and other Middle Eastern peoples. Despite the shared plight of Palestinian occupation and the collective suffering under external aggression, internal divisions, such as those between Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Fatah, prevent the formation of a unified policy or approach (Hroub, 2006).

Further complicating the regional landscape are the Kurdish celebrations amidst the broader context of genocide, where Kurdish leaders seek alignment with Israel as a path to independence from Middle Eastern ties. This situation reflects both public ignorance and the influence of external powers in shaping the collective consciousness of Middle Eastern nations. Many in the region fail to recognize what might be lost in this process of alignment with global capitalism, a trend that threatens to erode regional identities and autonomy (Gunter, 2008).

Even within Palestine, a land marked by the shared experience of occupation and violence, sectarian conflicts and political factionalism, such as those among Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Fatah, hinder the development of a cohesive strategy for resistance and governance (Hroub, 2006). The ongoing disunity underscores the broader challenges facing Middle Eastern internationalism, where

internal divisions continue to thwart efforts toward regional solidarity.

Ultimately, the vision of Middle Eastern internationalism remains tied to a messianic hope, symbolized by the awaited return of the Mahdi or the Messiah, who is expected to heal the hearts of the people and bring their thoughts closer together. This millennia-old Arab aspiration reflects a deep-seated desire for unity and peace, a vision that remains elusive in the face of the region's enduring divisions (Khatab, 2007).

Conclusion

The Middle East, despite its historical and cultural unity, remains one of the most politically fragmented regions in the world. The region's genetic and cultural continuity, evident in its shared linguistic and religious practices, stands in stark contrast to the political divisions that have been exacerbated by sectarianism, colonialism, and modern nationalism.

The Sunni-Shia divide, rooted in early Islamic history, remains one of the most enduring sources of conflict in the region. Meanwhile, the proliferation of competing ideological movements in the 20th and 21st centuries has further fragmented the Middle East, making the dream of regional unity increasingly elusive. Understanding these deep-seated divisions is crucial for any attempt to navigate or resolve the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East.

With an ongoing crisis in Gaza and ignorance by the western and international media, there is an increasing need to pursue a uniting action for a harmonious growth and competitive economy in the Middle Eastern countries based on the ease of trade, tourism and economic factors. Such an Ideal despite having practical challenges, stands as a hope for the decades to come.

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