3.7: Nation States and Stateless Nations

It is important to understand the dynamics of national identity for two main reasons:

1) to understand the immense cultural diversity of the Middle East,

2) to understand issues of inequity and power imbalances,

3) to acknowledge that many of the conflicts of the Middle East are better understood with an accounting of national identity issues

The map of the Middle East is diverse already with Arabic, Hebrew, Turkish and Persian linguistically defining the political borders – not the monolithic image most people have of the Middle East as a location exclusively Arabic-speaking place. However, within those political boundaries, there is even more diversity to be grappled with, and understood. This section gives an overview of national identities and how they formed in the Middle East, and how they differ with European and global views on national identity. It also touches upon the issues of inequity that national identity formation often creates.

National consciousness, government based on national identity, and individual citizenship, has a historical explanation related to power struggles in Europe. The Pope became equivalent to an emperor in Western Europe, because when the Western Roman Empire fell to the Germanic invaders, there was a power vacuum which the Bishop of Rome (now known as the Pope) came to fill. One result of this was a power struggle between "secular" forces, i.e., princes and local rulers, and the Church. The Treaty of Westphalia in 17th Century ended the Thirty Years War and created many of the boundaries in Europe which remain definitive – it also gave the right for each territory to choose its own form of worship. It was a defeat for the Church, but a victory for increased individualism in regard to spirituality and group belonging. Print media played a critical role in the formation of national consciousness as a form of group belonging: reading literature in one's own vernacular had a powerful effect (Anderson, 2006).
In the Middle East the history of national consciousness differs a great deal from that of Europe. There were always concepts of cultural community, somewhat synonymous with nation, or people, but national identities were not defined by a particular state. To take an example from Arabic speaking communities of the Middle East. A nation, or a people, is usually referred to as qawm in Arabic. Thus, qawmia is usually how the word nationalism is translated.

Likewise, the word umma, which means community and is used by Muslims to refer to their global community, is also sometimes translated as "nation". Traditionally, cultural communities were also based on a particular religious tradition. National identity is therefore a complicated topic in the context of the Middle East. For the sake of this discussion, however, it is important to know that various cultural communities, whether they called themselves qawm or umum (plural for umma), came to consider themselves nations. At the same time, many of those, did not possess a state of their own, and some continue to be without a state. They are thus “stateless nations”.

Examples of stateless nations:

- The Kurds currently reside in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey, but they have not established an internationally-recognized state based on their national identity.
- The Jews were a stateless nation until 1948 when they declared Israel a state, and immediately gained recognition from the U.S., followed by the rest of the world.
- Palestinians are currently members of a stateless nation, although the sovereignty of Palestine has been recognized by 135 member countries of the U.N. The term “State of Palestine” is only used officially by Sweden.

**Key Concept:**

Stateless Nation Various cultural communities came to consider themselves nations and were also able to establish a modern nation-state based on that identity. Many, however, never established their own nation state. They are thus called “stateless nations”.

Many of the nation states of the Middle East formed their national consciousness after the establishment of their state, however. The national identity in that case is formed based on a recent institution, rather than one which organically developed over a long period of time. States that developed their national consciousness after the formation of the state do not have a national history that ties to a unique cultural community. For example, Arab-majority countries of the Middle East all share Arab identity, language and heritage, although they have very different national identities.

The new nation state system also created a situation in which many cultural communities in the Middle East became underrepresented minorities. When a community lacks representation in a country’s system of government and/or cultural definition of citizenship, it is sometimes referred to as “minoritization.” “Minoritize” is a verb used in the social sciences to critically describe the process which creates inequity between groups in a given country (see “Key Concept” below).

**Key Concept: Minoritization**

“Minoritize” is a verb used in the social sciences to critically describe the processes which create inequity between
groups in a given country. As a verb it emphasizes the historical nature of inequity, and as a phenomenon which is continually reinforced in a country. It is the culmination of laws, educational practices and popular culture which favor the perspectives and interests of the more powerful group. It refers to the relationship between the dominant group which identifies with national identity is more supported by the country’s political, social and economic systems, and less powerful communities whose interests are not as well-served by them. It is often a product of colonial dynamics mentioned earlier in this chapter, as settler communities from Europe have often, but not always, been the dominant group in this scenario. For a more detailed explanation, see: Sensoy & Diangelo (2012).

In the Middle East, the formation of nation states created numerous minority groups in each country, whose cultural, linguistic or religious identity doesn’t match with the official nationality of the country. The examples are too numerous to list. The key aspect to be aware of is that the identity of the most powerful group of the country – which is usually also the majority group but not always – doesn’t represent the entire population. For example in Iran the majority identity is Persian-speaking, Shi'i Muslim. There are numerous Kurdish, Arab, Azeri, Assyrian, Jewish, Iranians, among others, and each may be speakers of a different language, and/or adherents to a different religious tradition.