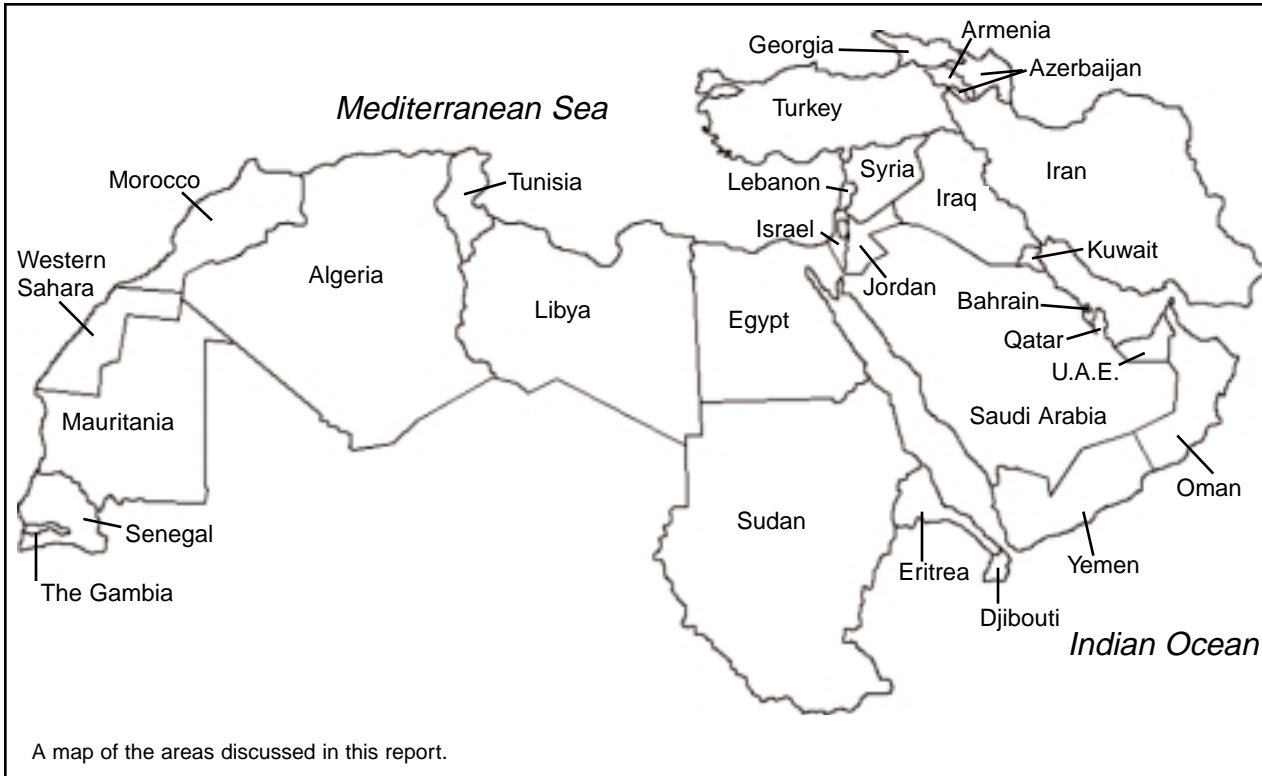


Special Report

Overview of Self-Determination Issues in the Middle East

By Stephen Zunes



As in much of the third world, many of the national boundaries of the Middle East and North Africa are artificial creations of the colonial era. Because most of the region's inhabitants are Muslim Arabs and thanks to relatively high tolerance levels for minorities in traditional Islamic societies, the denial of self-determination has not been as widespread as in many parts of the world. Still, disputes in the Middle East involving people struggling for the right of self-determination remain some of the most dangerous and intractable conflicts in the world today.

The Ottoman Empire ruled most of the Middle East for nearly five centuries. Religious minorities were granted a high level of self-governance, including their own court systems. In some of the farther reaches of the empire, the Ottoman presence was little more than a customs house, so traditional patterns of self-governance remained, despite nominal Ottoman rule. The decline of the empire resulted

more from its own internal weaknesses and from pressures by Western powers than from demands by Arab nationalists and others for self-determination.

Partly as a result, the Middle East has historically experienced less ethnic strife than many parts of the world. For example, for centuries, Jews faced far less overt persecution in the Arab Islamic world than in the European Christian world. Displaced minorities from just beyond the region, suppressed in their struggles for self-determination—such as Armenians and Circassians—often found refuge in the Arab Middle East. Meanwhile, non-Arab or non-Muslim minorities indigenous to the Middle East, such as the Berbers of the Maghreb and the Maronite Christians and Druzes of the Levant, were often able to create their own sanctuaries in mountainous regions.

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ARAB SELF-DETERMINATION

Arab nationalism, from its origins in the late 19th century through today, has been based on the ideal that true self-determination can come only through Arab unity. This has been a decidedly secular vision that has included both Muslims and Christians. The individual Arab nation-states were perceived as attempts by Western colonial powers to divide and rule. Several Pan-Arabist endeavors, such as the Baath movement, surfaced during the twentieth century in pursuit of the goal of one united Arab nation-state. Pan-Arabism reached its zenith between the mid-1950s and early 1970s under the leadership of Gamal Abdul-Nasser of Egypt. Nasser created the United Arab Republic, which joined Egypt and Syria into one country in 1957. Perceived Egyptian domination led Syria to withdraw within a few years. Subsequent attempts by Nasser, and later by Muammar Qaddafi of Libya, to unify their countries with various Arab neighbors also failed to materialize.

Many Arabs felt Nasser's megalomania may have compromised his vision, yet he remains an icon for many in the region who are bitter at the division of what is still widely viewed as the once-unified Arab nation. Israel and the West have been openly fearful of such Arab unity and have been accused of undermining Arab leaders and popular

movements that support Pan-Arabism, which many still see as the most authentic form of Arab self-determination. Indeed, Israel and some Western powers have used their influence not just to maintain the division of the Arab world into the current states carved out by the old colonial administrations but also to encourage subnationalist movements—such as the Maronite Christians in Lebanon—to form their own de facto statelets in an effort to subdivide the Arab world still further.

Though strong Arab identity has been promoted as a progressive act of self-determination against colonialism and its agents in the region, Arabism has often run counter to the interests of non-Arab minorities. The Berber peoples of Morocco and Algeria have had to resist the Arabization of their language, culture, and school curricula; occasional violent clashes continue in Algeria to this day. In southern Algeria, the Tuaregs and other non-Arab nomadic tribes have periodically launched armed revolts against overly centralized control by Algiers. The once-tolerant attitude toward the region's large Jewish community was dramatically reversed in reaction to the creation of the Jewish state of Israel in 1948 in what was seen as the Arab heartland; the vast majority of Middle Eastern Jews emigrated—under varying degrees of duress—in subsequent years, most ending up in Israel.



ISLAM

The vacuum created by the failure of Pan-Arabism occasioned the rise of Pan-Islamic move-

ments in the Middle East. Though some of these movements have constrained non-Muslim populations,

such as the six-million-strong Coptic Christian community in Egypt, their emphasis on religious solidarity over ethnic divisions has actually eased pressure on certain Muslim ethnic minorities. Nonetheless, there have been splits within Islam that have raised serious issues affecting self-determination.

There has been some opposition, for example, by Shi'ite populations in Kuwait, Yemen, and northeastern Saudi Arabia resisting domination by Sunni Muslims. Shiites are actually the majority of the Arab populations of Sunni-ruled Iraq and Bahrain. Their demands for greater autonomy—or even simply greater democracy—have

been severely repressed. In Iraq, an armed uprising by Shi'ite Muslims in March 1991 in the aftermath of the Gulf War succeeded in temporarily forcing out Iraqi government troops, yet the rebellion was soon crushed, with the apparent acquiescence of the victorious Gulf War allies. The United States and Great Britain have imposed a no-fly zone in the south, ostensibly to protect the civilian population from government air strikes, though Western countries strongly oppose any independent Shi'ite state in southern Iraq. Severe repression by the Iraqi government, including the forced dislocation of the “marsh Arabs” by drying up their wetlands, continues.

In Bahrain, the Shi'ite majority has long been restive toward the Sunni monarchy, which has cracked down on demands for a more representative system. In this island sheikdom, as elsewhere in the region, the ruling elites and their American allies fear Iranian interference. Although Iran, particularly in the years immediately following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, did support dissident Shi'ite groups in Bahrain and other countries, U.S. charges of Iranian subversion have often been exaggerated in an effort to distract attention from legitimate internal grievances by the Shi'ite population against Washington's autocratic Sunni allies.



THE TRIUMPH OF THE NATION-STATE

Ironically, the nation-state proved surprisingly resilient during the Iran-Iraq War. In the earlier phase of the war, when Iraq occupied parts of western Iran, the invading Iraqis hoped that the region's ethnic Arabs would side with Iraq's Arab government. Similarly, later in the war when Iran occupied parts of southeastern Iraq, there were hopes that the Shi'ite Arabs would side with their co-religionists in Teheran. Both peoples, however, tended to remain loyal to their respective governments in the face of foreign invaders.

Another example of nationalist loyalty is seen among the Druzes of the Levant, who practice an offshoot of Islam. The Druzes in Lebanon have been leaders in the nationalist resis-

tance to foreign domination of their country. The Druzes in both Syria and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights have strongly identified with Syrians. And the Druzes in Israel have largely remained loyal to the Jewish state and are the only Muslim people allowed in the Israeli armed forces.

As in many parts of the world, popular consciousness and support of a national identity in the Middle East has been surprisingly strong, no matter how recent or artificial the modern nation-state might be. Jordan, for example, was carved out of the Syrian desert by the British to appease an Arabian tribal chief who had sided with the allies in World War I by giving him a country to rule. Yet the Arabs of this colonially imposed entity have

embraced their Jordanian identity strongly, in part as a response to the influx of Palestinian refugees expelled during the creation of Israel in 1948, who—along with their descendants—now form the majority of Jordan's inhabitants. The close family and historical linkages between Jordanians and Palestinians have afforded the refugees far greater incorporation into Jordanian society than has occurred in other Arab states with Palestinian refugee populations, yet the Jordanian monarchy has cracked down quite decisively against Palestinian nationalist aspirations when they were perceived to threaten the throne and its pro-Western orientation. Such repression occurred, for example, during a bloody civil war in 1970-71.



ISRAELI-OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

The most contentious area of self-determination in the Middle East involves the

Palestinian Arabs, whose denial of national rights came as a direct result of the creation of the state of Israel.

Zionism, or Jewish nationalism, grew out of the desire for national self-determination by Jews, who had been living

in a diaspora for centuries. However, since the Zionist movement was backed by Western powers and had originally been an almost exclusively European movement, many Arabs viewed Israel not as a legitimate manifestation of self-determination, but as a colonial-settler state.

A 1947 UN plan that would have partitioned Palestine in half, granting both Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs their own states, resulted in a war that led to Israeli control of 78% of the country. The remaining Palestinian areas, which became known as the West Bank and Gaza Strip, came under Jordanian and Egyptian control. The majority of the Palestinian population of Israel was expelled and remain refugees to this day, often being used as political pawns by various Arab regimes. Israel seized the remaining Arab areas of Palestine in the 1967 war.

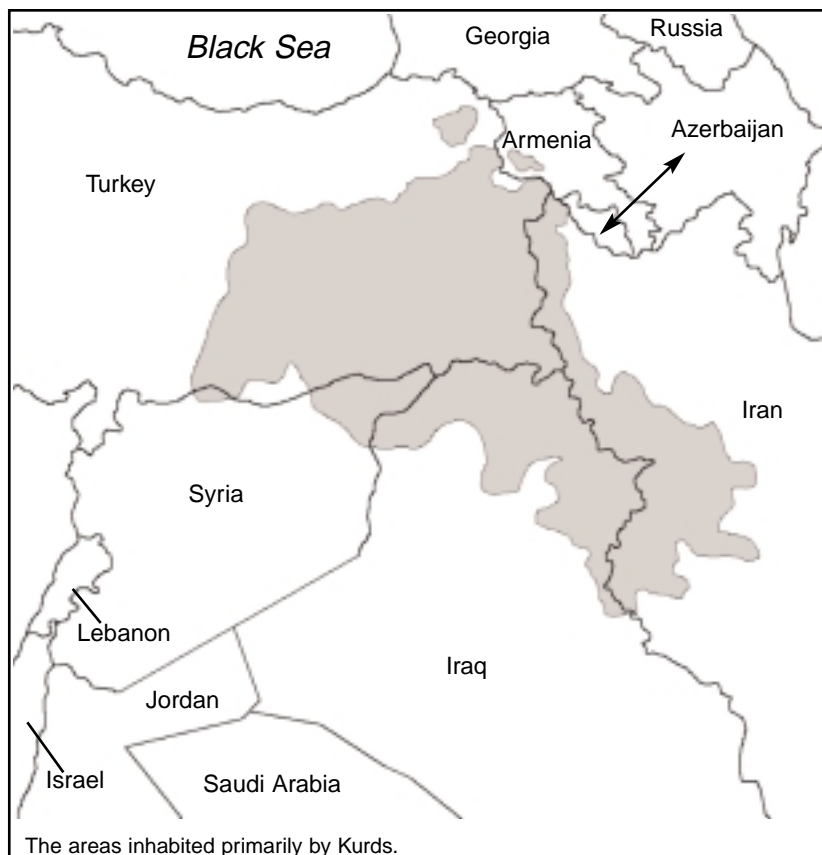
Although long-determined to reclaim all of historical Palestine, in more recent years the Palestinian leadership has simply demanded statehood for the 22% of Palestine outside Israel's internationally recognized borders. However, Israel—with U.S. approval—has offered the Palestinians only part of that land in a patchwork arrangement amid large Israeli settlements and military outposts. Furthermore, the U.S. and Israel refuse to recognize the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes.

Although international legal conventions and a series of UN Security Council resolutions support Palestinian claims for a full Israeli withdrawal and repatriation of refugees, strong U.S. support of Israel and a corrupt and inept Palestinian leadership have resulted in a violent stalemate. An autonomous Palestinian Authority cur-

rently controls many of the urban areas of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, though Palestinian-Israeli fighting has been ongoing since September 2000, amid severe repression by Israeli occupation forces.

In the Golan Heights, the southwestern corner of Syria occupied by Israel since 1967, most of the Arab population was forcibly expelled at the end of the war. However, the Druzes—many of whom are separated from family members—have engaged in periodic nonviolent resistance against Israeli occupation forces and demand to be reunited with Syria. Neither Israel nor the United States—the principal broker in the Israeli-Syrian peace talks—considers the Druzes' desire for self-determination to be a relevant factor in the negotiations.

KURDISTAN



The Kurds are the world's largest national ethnic group without its own state. More than twenty million Kurds—who constitute the majority of the population in southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq, the far northeastern corner of Syria, and the far northwestern corner of Iran—have been denied basic political rights and, in the case of Turkey, even basic cultural rights. The divisions within the Kurdish nationalist movement have been exacerbated by the manipulation of outside powers. In Turkey, which hosts the largest Kurdish population, the U.S.-backed Turkish military—until a recent cease-fire—has engaged in severe repression against Kurdish nationalists. A radical nationalist guerilla group known as the PKK has suspended its armed struggle and has been negotiating a cease-fire and greater cultural and political rights. Despite the desire of many Turkish Kurds for an independent state, most Kurds are now scattered throughout the country to such a degree that carving out a separate Kurdish entity would be highly problematic.

The Kurds of Iraq constitute the largest percentage of the population of any Kurdish-populated country and were subject to severe repression, including widespread massacres and forced relocation by the Iraqi government, particularly in the late 1980s.

Over the past ten years, autonomy for part of Iraqi Kurdistan has been preserved through an internationally enforced safe haven, established in response to an Iraqi crackdown on an almost-successful Kurdish uprising in March 1991. Internal divisions, along

with efforts by the United States and other countries to use the Kurds in their fight against Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, have weakened the Kurdish movement for autonomy or independence.



OTHER CONFLICTS

Lebanon's unique experiment in maintaining the distinct identity of its diverse ethnic and religious communities ended in a disastrous civil war from 1975 to 1990. Rather than encouraging political pluralism and authentic self-determination, the representation system imposed by the departing French colonialists created competing fiefdoms between the elites of each community and with effective domination by the Maronite minority. Foreign powers—including Israel, Syria, Iraq, Iran, France, and the United States as well as the exiled Palestinian community within Lebanon—manipulated these divisions in an attempt to advance their own interests. Such foreign meddling included full-scale invasions by Syria in 1976 and Israel in 1982 as well as U.S. military intervention on the side of a right-wing Maronite government in 1983-84. Israel maintained a violent occupation of southern Lebanon until 2000. Syrian forces today remain in Lebanon, exerting strong influence on the policies of the Lebanese government, resulting in growing demands for greater self-determination by Lebanese from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds. The Syrians justify their role by explaining that Lebanon was carved out of Syria by the French in an effort to take advantage of the country's potentially Francophile minorities.

In Iran, the dominant Persians are actually outnumbered by non-Persian peoples, which include Kurds, Azeris, Baluchis, and Arabs. Attempts at the creation of Azeri and Kurdish vassal states by the Soviet Union at the end of World War II were aborted at U.S. insistence. Resentment at Persian domination and theocratic rule from Teheran persists, though—except for the Kurds—there are currently no major movements for self-determination.

The peoples of the country of Western Sahara have been battling for self-determination for over thirty years, initially against Spanish colonialists and, since Morocco's 1975 invasion, against Moroccan occupation forces. Backed by France and the United States, Morocco has refused to proceed with a UN-mandated referendum on the fate of the territory, fearing the likely vote in favor of independence. The Sahrawis, through the Algerian-supported Polisario Front, engaged in a guerilla war against the Moroccans until a cease-fire was declared in 1991. Most Sahrawis live in Polisario-controlled refugee camps in western Algeria. Meanwhile, Morocco has colonized Western Sahara with tens of thousands of its own citizens. As with Palestine, the right of self-determination has been blocked partly

because the occupying power has powerful friends and partly because the occupying power has colonized the territory with its own citizens in violation of international law.

The artificiality of colonial boundaries is particularly pronounced in peripheral areas of the Middle East, as exemplified by the extreme tensions and violence in the states of the Sahel: Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, and—most tragically—Sudan. In these countries, the Muslim Arab peoples of the north have often fought with the black peoples of the south, many of whom are non-Muslim. In Mauritania and Sudan, incidents of slavery are not uncommon to this day. Discrimination and repression against black Christians and animists in the south by the Arab-dominated Sudanese government have varied in severity during the nearly fifty years of that country's independence, with civil wars raging periodically for greater southern autonomy or independence. The repression by Khartoum's extremist Islamic military government in recent years has been particularly severe, and pro-independence rebel groups control much of the southern part of the country. The death toll in Sudan from war and war-related shortages of food and medicine has reached the hundreds of thousands.



CONCLUSION

Much of the ongoing violence in the Middle East is related to aborted struggles for self-determination and is rooted in the colonial legacy. These conflicts are exacerbated by Western powers taking advantage of ethnic and cultural divisions to maintain their influence in the region. Indeed, the region's ongoing strategic importance and its role as the world's largest consumer of Western arms exports magnify even local and regional struggles to international importance.

Even though the Gulf War was fought ostensibly in the name of self-determination—freeing Kuwait from its Iraqi occupiers—few people in the region believe that the United States and its allies actually fought the war primarily for such an ideal. If the United States is truly interested in promoting peace, Washington must suspend military and economic aid to regimes that deny self-determination to captive peoples, and the Bush administration must pursue arms control for the region. The United States should

encourage enforcement of UN Security Council resolutions not just regarding adversaries but allies as well. Peace negotiations should be facilitated by the United Nations, or another party without strong strategic and economic interests in the region, based on the recognition that self-determination is a fundamental right. Otherwise, the continued denial of self-determination for Palestinians, Kurds, and others will spark further violence that could engulf the entire region.

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