

# Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Asia, & Africa: An Encyclopedia

## Nationalism: 1920 to Present: Middle East

Contributors: Andrea L. Stanton & Edward Ramsamy & Peter J. Seybolt & Carolyn M. Elliott

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University of Denver Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey University of Vermont University of Vermont  
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The common understanding of nationalism, which is sometimes synonymous with patriotism, is the sense of belonging and strong identification of an individual to a group of people or community within a polity such as nation or state. According to Ernest Gellner, it is primarily a political principle that considers that the political and national unit should be congruent. On the other hand, Liah Greenfeld regarded it as an essentially secular form of consciousness. All core players (Arabs, Israelis, Iranians, Turks, and minorities) have different nationalistic experiences based on how they utilized the concept for their own advantage.

## Roots of Nationalism

The historical beginning and material manifestation of nationalistic experiences in the Middle East can be traced from the implementation of the millet system of the Ottoman Empire after the Tanzimat (meaning “reorganization” to foster unity and oneness) reforms from 1839 to 1876. The term *millet* comes from the Arabic word *Millah*, which literally means “nation.” This system recognized the autonomous legal system of every religious community (Christians, Jews, and Muslims) during the Ottoman regime with an aim to integrate them thoroughly into Ottoman society and to maintain territorial integrity.

According to Marian Kent, the millet system dates back to the reign of Mehmed II, known as the Conqueror (1451–81), who, having conquered Constantinople in 1453, guaranteed the Greek church religious freedom, and to its appointed head, the patriarch, granted full religious and civil authority over the Greek Orthodox community of the empire. That bound the patriarch to the sultan since the former's authority over his millet was entirely dependent on the support of the latter.

However, despite efforts to give minorities some autonomy in their practices, beliefs, and traditions, the millet system strengthened and increased the solidarity of Ottoman millets and subjects to group themselves based on ethnic origins, cultural similarities, and religious affinities, and, subsequently, to aspire to independence, self-rule, and nationhood. These Tanzimat reforms were also an indirect result of Western (Great Britain, France, Italy, and Russia) pressures when they saw the opportunity to intervene in Ottoman domestic affairs at the empire's twilight period of decline and vulnerability.

## The Arab Experience

Arab nationalism constitutes the belief in one nation with common language, traditions, culture, and, oftentimes, a debate about whether it should be Islamic or secular in its nature. In addition, it may also refer to pan-Arabism, which is the unification of all Arab states under a single government recognizing one sovereign authority.

This concept has materialized through the formation of some Arab federations, although most of their existences were short-lived, for example, the Arab Federation, a confederation between Iraq and Jordan in 1958; the United Arab Emirates, a union of seven Arab states (1971–present); the Federation of Arab Republics, with Egypt, Libya, and Syria (1972–77); and the United Arab Republic, a federation between Egypt and Syria (1958–61).

Nationalism started with the Arab Revolt during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century, which was led by the sharif of Mecca, Husayn ibn Ali of the Hashemite family, who negotiated with the British in order to create a vast Arab kingdom. The plan failed when the British did not fulfill the terms of the agreement and instead unilaterally supported the Balfour Declaration.

Another manifestation of Arab nationalism was during the reign of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the president of Egypt who nationalized the Suez Canal and led the Arab armies during the Six-Day War against Israel. The Arab defeat in the war instigated the revival of Islamic resurgent movements and started the decline [p. 1319 ↓ ] of pan-Arabism. Arab states started to form their statist policies, such as the “Iraq first” policy, and no longer upheld the idea of regional security integration.

*A banknote of 500 mils (half a Palestine pound) issued by the Anglo-Palestine Bank, which was affiliated with the World Zionist Organization. The notes served as temporary currency for the State of Israel before a national one was introduced (August 1948–June 1952).*



## The Israeli Experience of Nationalism

Israeli nationalism constitutes the belief in the establishment of a Jewish national homeland under the pretext of Zionism. Theodor Herzl, who wrote *The Jewish State* in 1896, called for the formation of a Jewish nation-state as a solution to the Diaspora and to anti-Semitism. Zionists, although pluralistic in orientation (religious vis-à-vis secular), had a single overarching goal and that was to build a Jewish state.

Their dream materialized when the British Empire supported the Balfour Declaration, giving formal support to the aspirations of the World Zionist Organization to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine. A majority of the members of the United Nations voted for the partition of Palestine, expressing recognition of both Jewish and Palestinian sovereign states. The Jews, with arms wide open, accepted the UN partition plan, but the Palestinians vehemently opposed the decision.

In 1948, the State of Israel was proclaimed under the titular authority of its first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion. The uniqueness of the Israelis' concept of nationalism was, in fact, its reference to the religion of Judaism and its relevant modern usage related to policies on protection and security matters. Moreover, the utilization of their concept leads to favorable consequences on their side concomitant with their special

relationship with the United States and unfavorable consequences in the eyes of the world, particularly Israel's neighbors.

## The Iranian Experience of Nationalism

Iranian nationalism stems from its historical experiences and interests. For example, it was rejuvenated under the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–79) through the efforts of Reza Shah in helping to infuse secularism and to diminish the strong influence of Islam. In addition, the shah revived the glory of the Persian civilization before the Safavid dynasty, the regime that established Shia Islam as the official religion of the empire, by incorporating terms from the mystical Persian characters in changing the names of major institutions and infrastructures. Another example was the Majlis, headed by democratically elected prime minister Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq, and their attempt to nationalize the Iranian oil industry in the 1950s.

Reza Shah also modified the structure of the government with the aim of reducing or even eliminating [p. 1320 ↓ ] the power of the *mullahs* (Islamic authorities) in state affairs. Everything changed with the Islamic Revolution in 1979 under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who powerfully resurrected the importance of Islam in the country; however, the recent national protest, especially from the Iranian youth and students, in the 2009 Iranian election, reflected a new revival of secular Iranian nationalism.

## The Turkish Experience of Nationalism

Turkish nationalism is similar to Iranian nationalism in the sense of giving primacy and importance to the power of a secular state over ethnic minorities and religious influences. It may also refer to pan-Turkism, which is relatively similar to pan-Arabism but differs in the sense that the assimilation of diverse ethnical, cultural, and social origins and practices from central Asia to eastern Europe is probable.

Turkish nationalism began as transition from Ottomanism (a belief driven by the Young Ottomans, a secret organization of Ottoman nationalist intellectuals formed in 1865

that believed all subjects or millets should be treated equally and secular policies must be applied to Muslims and non-Muslims alike) to pan-Islamism (a political movement promoting the unity of Muslims under a single Islamic state) to Turkishness (a patriotic idea advocating primacy of Turkish language and culture over other elements within a state).

The heights of Turkish nationalism are traced from the national projects that reformed Turkish society from the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, spearheaded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the father of the modern Turkish republic. Actions ranging from changing the alphabet of Ottoman Turkish to Latin to banning women from wearing headscarves in the government and public universities were all part of the reformation era and intended to instill patriotism.

## Nationalism and Minorities

Kurdish nationalism is characterized by the cause of creating an independent Kurdistan, the aspired national nomenclature, for the Kurds living in Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Syria, and elsewhere. This is also similar to the Jewish case but the difference stems from ethnic-bounded culture, language, literature, and is not specifically a religious-based movement. Other minorities who also aspire to a nationalistic objective or simply “autonomy” are the Druze, Copts of Egypt, Palestinians, and Maronites of Lebanon.

Nassef M. Adiong *Middle East Technical University*

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