Nainita Madurai

Politics of the European Union

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Introduction

The European Union has succeeded in creating a political, economic, and peaceful entity that crosses borders and unites the twenty-seven member nations in Europe. Though it is not free of problems and issues such as sovereignty, external and internal efficacy, as well as international potency, the EU is an unprecedented sign of hope to the international community that countries are able to join together and form a peaceful and comprehensive institution if their economic and political interests coincide.

Historians and political scientists today constantly question and attempt to answer if (and if so, then why) the unification in Europe is a success. From this debate spawns another question: why is a unified political and institution seemingly impossible in other regions of the world, such as the Middle East? Why, despite multiple efforts, have regional projects in the Middle East not yielded the kind of integration and harmonization that one finds in Europe?

Both regions have a long and crushing history of violence; there have been civil wars, border disputes, world wars, military coups and countless other internal problems for all of the regions. Many of the nations in the respective regions have important commonalities, such as religion (not sect), language (not dialect), political systems, and economic systems. Economically, a system like the EU’s would benefit many of the developing nations in the Middle East. Also, from an international viewpoint, a conjoined and peaceful political institution would give the infamously volatile region more international recognition and power; this is something for which they both strive. The idea of unification is not a new one to the nations in the Middle East, but the possibility of it happening is almost unimaginable to the international community. The concept of a polity is far different from implementation in the Middle East for many economic, political, and socio-cultural reasons.

Essentially, most political scientists agree that the inability to form a polity in the Middle East is largely affected by the lack of democratic institutions in the regions. There are many more subtle and highly important reasons attributing to the continued failure of unification and integration; some of these reasons are incidentally explanations for the absence of democracy as well. These reasons include the political economy that exists, the importance and influence of religion and theology, and the power of the United Sates in the Middle East. Although the following research leads to the conclusion that regional projects to integrate and harmonize in the Middle East are incredibly unlikely, there are some political scientists who believe that in the future and under certain conditions, the Middle East will be able to settle its differences and form a joint institution. However, this future outcome is hard to imagine when the following evidence is taken into account.

Brief History

The Middle East stretches across three continents: Asia, Europe, and Africa. Instead of basing the definition of the region solely on geographic boundaries, it will be far easier to name the individual countries. The countries that are considered part of the Middle East are: Israel, Jordan, Turkey, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Syria, and Cyprus, and Egypt. The countries that are considered part of the Greater Middle East are: Morocco, Algeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Mauritania, Western Sahara, Libya, Tunisia, Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea, and Djibouti.

The Middle East is known as the cradle of civilization. Its territories have been fought and disputed over since the beginning of modern history. Over ten empires have controlled various parts of the Middle East since 1340 BC. Most countries of the Middle East were colonized by the Europeans in the early twentieth century and some did not gain independence until after the First World War. Most countries gained independence only after the Second World War.

When the western Europeans came to the Middle East they knew very little about its ethnic composition. Much like in Africa, they did not take into account the ethnic make-up of the regions before creating national boundaries. Prior to the creation of these national boundaries the people of the Middle East had a limited concept of national identity. This created many internal problems for countries in the Middle East after independence. Additionally, independence came at a price for many of the countries. Europe had high stakes in the Middle East and they did not leave without implementing monarchs and dictators whose loyalties were still with the Europeans. Consequently, revolutions, civil wars, and constant government restructuring have plagued most of the Middle East and are still cause problems for them today. The European colonization of the Middle East essentially caused the region countless years of regression. Since after World War II, Europe has played a diminished role in the politics of the Middle East. Most of the western influence now comes from the United States and its questionable goals and objectives in the Middle East.

Pan-Arabism and the Arab-League

Unification is not a new concept to the states in the Middle East. In fact, unification has been an idea in the minds of leaders of many Arab states in the past. Pan-Arabism was a movement for the unification of Arab nations into one giant Arab state based on a common cultural heritage. However, the few attempts at any sort of unification failed and did not capture enough interest from many key players in the Middle East. Pan-Arabism is not to be confused with Arab nationalism. Advocates for Pan-Arabism want to create a single Arab state, where as Arab nationalists want to create an entity like the European Union for Arab countries (this, of course, excludes Israel). Now, the idea of Pan-Arabism has been generating less and less interest among Arab states. The reason for the decline in Pan-Arabism is largely attributed to the failure of the Six-Day War (Ajami, 1978). The attempt by Egypt, Jordan, and Syria to take back the land that was taken from Palestinians at the end of World War II (used to establish the Israeli state), was a complete failure. Israel dealt a crushing blow to the armies of the three nations and thus Pan-Arabism and joint Arab projects, lost their appeal and glory. Pan-Arabism was shamed militarily in a region where having a strong military is very important.

Prior to this, in March of 1945, six nations in the Middle East formed the Arab League. These six nations were Egypt, Iraq, Transjordan (renamed Jordan after 1946), Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. The Arab League was formed at roughly around the same time that the first six members of the EU came together. However, the regional projects took very different paths. Like the EU, the Arab League has expanded and now has twenty-two members (including Palestine), but the legitimacy and authority of the Arab League is essentially non-existent. The main goals of the Arab League include the rejection of westernization and the downfall of the Israeli state. Though they claim that their interests are to strengthen ties between member states and coordinate policies, the member states lack the truly binding common goals that are needed for interstate cooperation, like in the EU.

The Arab League and its minimal legitimacy have not been able to implement collective security and peace for its member states either. Since the inception of the Arab League, the Suez Crisis has occurred, Iraq has invaded Kuwait, Iraq and Iran have fought a war against each other, a few of the nations have declared war on Israel and have failed (particularly in the Six-Day War), multiple assassinations have occurred, including the infamous murder of Anwar Sadat, and United States has fought wars on their territory. To top it all off, the threat and successes of terrorism (Hamas, Hezbollah, Al Qaida etc.) are a constant hindrance to progress and international legitimacy. In comparison, since the inception of the European Union its member states have had no armed conflict with other member states and there have been little to no changes in the member states’ governments caused by revolutions or civil wars. Unlike Europe after World War II, the Arab states did not form a peace-keeping institution. This is mainly because of divisions between its member states. In addition, the Arab League as an organization has no military force, unlike the EU. Because of these issues, the Arab League has failed to coordinate foreign, defense or economic policies (BBC NEWS, 2009). Instead their attempts to form the unified institution began to fail. This can be largely attributed to the fact that democracy and democratic tradition is absent in Middle Eastern States.

Lack of Democracy

Democracy triumphed in Europe during World War II and with the help of the United States the founding members of the EU created their own partially, if not wholly, democratic governments. These six nations then came together and formed the EU, ensuring peace and facilitating cooperation among them. So why does democracy facilitate cooperation and peace between states? Democratic governments cannot go to war as easily as governments without citizen participation. If democratic governments do not uphold the laws that their people want and ensure peace and security for them, democratic politicians will not be reelected.

The dictatorships, Islamic regimes, monarchies that have existed in the Middle East do not necessarily need support from their citizens; they just cannot have overwhelming opposition or they risk rebellion. There is no system of checks and balances in these governments and corruption is inevitable. These exclusionary systems in the Middle East use their military force to suppress the people. This use of military is referred to as mukhabarat, and it effectively creates fear and ensures power for the regimes (Kamrava, 1998). The lack of democracy in the Middle East is coupled with democracies that are so corrupted that they are practically authoritarian. Elections in those “democratic nations” are almost always rigged and there are constant suspicions of fraud.

The United States has attempted to implement and promote democracy but the problem is that the Middle East has little to no history of democracy. Middle Eastern governments associate democracy with western ideals, so only those rare politicians who support westernization are also for political liberalization (and even this does not necessarily mean democracy).

Behind all of this, a larger issue remains: not only is there a lack of democracy, but there is also a lack of political stability. Regimes are constantly changing and the political atmosphere of most Middle Eastern states is a constant power struggle. The military also has an incredibly powerful role in most of the governments in the Middle East, which results in regime changes occurring very suddenly at times. This is a main reason why Turkey has not been able to join the EU. Another reason for the lack of democracy is the issue of Rentier states and how they affect the economy and politics of the Middle East.

Economic Issues: Rentier States

The economy in the Middle East is largely different than the economy in Europe ever was. This is mainly because many of the countries in the Middle East have oil-based economies. Rentier states essentially receive large amounts of their revenue from foreign oil sales and become autonomous from their societies, unaccountable to their people, and dictatorial (Yates, 1996). Because the governments of these Rentier states provide benefits for their citizens without taxing them and without using the citizen’s money, they believe that the general public is not entitled to have an influential role in the government. An economy based on Rentier states does not facilitate democracy or cooperation on any level. Rentier states prevent joint cooperation for the same reason that Norway did not join the EU: oil, being the most valuable resource, produces revenues that countries do not want to share with one another. Though not all countries in the Middle East are Rentier states, these states happen to be some of the countries with the most power, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and United Arab Emirates. These nations would not be willing to risk their power, money, and sovereignty for the “common good” of all Arab states. And if an organization like the EU were to form in the Middle East, these Rentier states would essentially control it to benefit their own nations.

Culture and Religion

Leaving Israel aside, there is an argument for the plausibility of unification in the Middle East that claims that the region’s countries have a similar culture, religion and language. However, this claim is largely unsubstantiated and does not take into account the true make-up of Middle Eastern society. Though most Arab states share a similar cultural *heritage*, many external factors have diversified the cultures in the Middle East. Colonization, for example, has integrated French, Spanish, and British cultural aspects into many of the countries and has also altered their languages. There are over thirty dialects of Arabic in the Middle East, some that sound completely different from one another. On top of that, there are many countries in the Middle East that have a language other than Arabic as their official language.

From an international standpoint, the Arab states are known for their distinct culture; a culture that shows strong male dominance, strict rules of society and a nearly universal religion among others aspects. Though there are a lot of non-Muslims living in the region, it is predominantly Islam. However, it is a misconception that all Islamic people agree with one way of teaching their religion. It is much like the different sects of Christianity; Islam has different sects and these differing sects cause a lot of internal problems. Take for example the conflict between Shi’as and Sunnis. Genocide has occurred over religious disputes as well as ethnic conflicts (i.e. the displacement of the Kurds).

Much like in Europe there is a diversity of culture, language, and religious idiosyncrasies. However, for some reason, the culture and society in the Middle East does not facilitate cooperation among states. The main reason why is because religion plays a much more important role in government in the Middle East. Most Middle Eastern states have governments that are non-secular. These strong religious ideals have stopped many countries from supporting other nations For example, extremists in Saudi Arabia believe that it is against the law to support any nations that do not follow strict Islamic law, and to some extent it is. Religion is also another reason that Turkey has been unable to join the EU. Though they are no longer a Muslim state, their society and culture is still heavily dominated by Islamic law.

United States Intervention

The United States has increased investment in the Middle East since the end of World War II. The US has a played a big role in influencing both the European Union and the Middle East. However, there is big difference between the aid and support that was given to Europe, than the aid that is being given to the Middle Eastern states. The United States is looking to exploit the Middle East, not ally with it. They are also looking to support and at times impose democracy in other regions of the world. For example, the neoconservatives of the former Bush Administration tried to impose democracy on Iraq in 2002 by declaring war on Saddam Hussein’s regime.

As mentioned before, military takes a strong role in Middle Eastern governments. In Europe, the EU has NATO to protect them; they are under the umbrella of protection by the United States. Thus, individual countries in Europe do not necessarily need strong militaries. The Middle East has so much internal and external conflict that having a large and strong military is a necessity for survival.

The United States, even before the War in Iraq, was constantly getting involved in Middle Eastern affairs. United States supported Israel in the Six-Day War, thus making enemies with most Arab states. US established democracy in Europe after World War II, but it could not do the same in the Middle East. This is because US continually displays double standards in its dealings with the Middle East. Arab states do not trust the United States and therefore do not trust democracy. With continued western intervention, it is very unlikely that the Middle East will be able to unify to form a polity like the EU; the United States is only hindering them further.

Conclusion

The lack of cooperation essentially comes down to the fact that no state in the Middle East is willing to give up any amount of sovereignty or share any amount of power, whether it is because of the democratic deficit, religious restraints, or economic reasons. The EU is an unprecedented example of collective security, but for Europe it was a matter of time and consequence. The six founding members of the EU did not have any other trustable and feasible option after the decimation of the war, and with the support of the Americans they formed the European Union. There was a need for a peace-keeping institution after the war. There is not as strong of a need in the Middle East, and perhaps in the future there will be a need, but for now it is every country for itself.

The importance in answering this question of why such regional projects do not function in the Middle East is incredibly relevant to securing international peace. The Middle East is an incredibly volatile region and securing any amount of peace there would be an extraordinary feat. Being able to explain why polities cannot and do not function in the Middle East could provide solutions that would allow those peaceful institutions to form in the future. It can be argued that because of colonization these regions are relatively new and that it is only a matter of time until they join forces. Some political scientists argue that the hatred of the west will truly unify the Arab states. However, as of now, there are far too many regional problems (whether they are intrastate or interstate) for an expanding polity like the European Union to form in the Middle East.